



FAST  
FICTION

*Hot*

ANY MAN  
OF MINE

Debbi Rawlins

**Any Man of Mine**

«HarperCollins»

## **Rawlins D.**

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Fast Fiction Hot - short, sexy reads Ever since the Sundance ranch became a destination for city girls seeking a romp in the hay with a bona-fide cowboy, ranch hand Josh Evans has had one rule: don't date the guests. But when a beautiful, soft-spoken woman named Haley checks in, Josh knows he's going to have trouble keeping his promise. Only Haley's more interested in sketching Montana's mountains than snagging one of its men. And after a few days of putting up with snooty, boy-crazy guests, Haley is ready to hop the next flight back to New York. Can Josh convince her that there's one cowboy who's worth an extended vacation?



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Josh Evans wasn't a coward. Hiding in the shadows of the barn just because he heard some female voices didn't count. Not at the Sundance ranch.

He tugged down the brim of his Stetson, pulled off his work gloves and rolled up his sleeves, waiting to see if the women were headed his way. It was too hot for May in northern Montana, though the mornings were still pleasant. When he'd left the bunkhouse at six to check on the calves, the air had been on the chilly side.

As much as he liked working for the McAllister family, the Sundance wasn't just about raising cattle these days. Hard times had forced them to extend their operation to dude ranching. If that

wasn't bad enough, the guests were all cowboy-crazy females. Baited, hooked and released right here to cause more trouble than a pack of hungry coyotes.

It had been Rachel's idea, one her three brothers hated. She was the only girl, and being the same age as Josh, they'd been classmates. So he knew once she got something in her head there was no use arguing with her.

Not that Josh had a say or was privy to family business. He'd still been a kid when they hired him, and even though Mrs. McAllister had treated him as one of her own, Josh knew his place. He never forgot he wasn't a McAllister, but he suspected opening to guests had pulled the family's bacon out of the fire. At least there had been no layoffs. The same couldn't be said for most other ranches around Blackfoot Falls.

After a few minutes of quiet, he figured it was okay to step out in the open. He wasn't going far, just to the bunkhouse for lunch.

He'd barely moved when he heard the McAllisters' kitchen door creak open. Immediately a bad feeling came over him...the feeling that he was about to get railroaded into doing something he didn't want to do. Something that likely involved the guests.

The door slammed. Yep. Had to be his buddy Trace coming out to do some arm-twisting. The ladies all loved him. He was the youngest brother, and one of those guys who could park his boots under a different bed every night and still have women knocking down his door.

Rachel had played it real smart in attracting young single women by plastering her three brothers' pictures on the website, then talking Trace into handling everything from horseback-riding lessons to kayaking. In the beginning he'd eaten up the attention. But lately, he'd been running in the other direction.

Josh didn't blame him. Some of those city gals were really something... Pretty, but bold and pushy. Even Josh had been spending too much of his time and paycheck at the bar in town trying to avoid them. Though the Watering Hole wasn't the best escape anymore. The women had started hanging out there, too, interrupting pool games and hogging the jukebox. Most of the guys didn't mind, as long as they got laid at some point. But those were the hired hands from other ranches, who were free to sleep with any guest that crooked her finger.

Different story for Josh. He already owed the McAllisters so much. And though Rachel hadn't said anything about the hands taking up with the guests, he wouldn't disrespect her or Mrs. M. by testing the water.

Before he looked to confirm that it was Trace, Josh heard a shrill feminine laugh. Two blondes came from the porch and walked with purpose toward the stable. He spotted a third woman several yards behind trying to catch up. He recognized her right off. In fact, he knew the blondes, too, but he didn't care for either of them. He did like the petite brunette. Enough to have found out her name was Haley and she was from New York City.

She'd arrived four days ago, by herself, and twice he'd seen her wandering around the place with a sketch pad. Yesterday she'd disappeared into a grove of aspens, and he'd been tempted to follow her. Haley seemed like a loner, or maybe she didn't have anything in common with the other women. They were a particularly silly bunch and it was sickeningly obvious that they'd come to Montana to have sex with a cowboy. Preferably a McAllister brother. Too bad for them Cole and Jesse were taken. That left Trace...

Josh glanced over his shoulder. But Trace must've heard the women, turned tail and run. The chickenshit.

He stayed in the shadow of the barn, waiting for the women to pass, wondering what business they had in the stables. Rachel might've sent them, but he doubted it. He just hoped they wouldn't do anything to spook the horses. Yesterday he'd had to say something to the taller one about staying away from Gypsy.

The blondes were so busy talking and giggling that they hadn't seen him, which suited him just fine. Haley had nearly caught up to them when she spotted him. Slowing down, she gave him a shy smile.

"Morning, Haley," he said, tipping his Stetson.

Her pretty brown eyes widened. "Hi. It's Josh, right?"

He nodded, pleased she remembered since they'd only met briefly her second day. "Anything I can do for you?"

"No." Her gaze darted to the other two, who'd heard them, and not only kept walking, but picked up their pace. "I'd better hurry. We're choosing our horses for this afternoon's ride."

No one in their right mind would've sent them to do any such thing. Only certain mares were available to the guests. But Trace or Rachel might've wanted to get the women out of their hair for a while so Josh didn't say anything. He watched as the blondes, then Haley, disappeared into the stables, and wondered who'd be leading the trail ride. Besides Trace, Josh and two other hands were routinely recruited to handle activities. He knew he hadn't drawn the short straw. Neither Kyle nor Bobby had grumbled about having to do it...that meant Trace was it.

Josh shook his head. Yep, he'd better go grab his lunch, then get out to the north pasture before Trace roped him into taking his place. If it was just Haley, Josh would've volunteered. But the other two? No way.

He hadn't made it but six feet when a ruckus broke out in the stable.

## Chapter Two

Josh hurried into the stable as the blondes rushed past him, whispering and trying to smother their laughs. Seeing that they weren't terrified or crying brought him some relief. But he didn't see Haley right off, and that he didn't like. Then he heard Tango nicker, low and deep, and that didn't sit well with Josh, either. Cole's chestnut gelding was normally even-tempered.

He stopped when he saw Haley standing still as a statue in front of Gypsy's stall. The mare was clearly agitated, and Haley just stared, her hand pressed to her throat.

"Oh, God, even the horses hate me," she murmured, then covered her mouth. Her whole body shuddered.

He knew she hadn't meant for anyone to hear. The break in her voice tugged at him. "Gypsy doesn't hate you."

Haley jumped and spun around. Her eyes were dark and glassy, as if she were fighting tears. She blinked a few times and turned her back to him.

He supposed he should take the hint and let her be, but he couldn't make himself do it. He had a fair idea as to what might've happened. Never in his life had it crossed his mind to harm a woman, but if those two mean-spirited hellcats hadn't already left the stable, he couldn't swear he wouldn't have tied them to a post.

"Haley?"

"I'll leave in a second," she murmured, still facing the other way, her shoulders hunched forward. "I promise."

"I don't want you to leave." Josh moved a little closer, his steps slow and quiet, approaching her like he would a skittish filly. "I want to show you something."

She stiffened, and he stopped in his tracks. She'd probably heard him closing in, and the last thing he wanted to do was upset her. Of all the guests who'd come and gone, Josh liked her the best by far.

"What?" she asked, her movements stilted as she swung a look at him. No tears stained her smooth flushed cheeks, and he was damn grateful. A crying woman tended to make him tongue-tied.

He met her eyes, remembered his manners and yanked his hat off.

Her lips lifted in a small smile, which disappeared when Gypsy blew short and hard through flared nostrils.

Haley stepped back another foot. “I should go. I don’t want to upset her. I really don’t.”

“She’s not upset. She’s curious.” Josh touched Haley’s elbow. She shot him a startled look, then went back to watching the mare. “That’s what I wanted to show you. As a matter of fact, I think Gypsy likes you.”

“No. She doesn’t.” Haley’s strangled laugh was about the saddest thing he’d ever heard. “You didn’t see her when I first walked up to the stall.”

“That wasn’t your fault.” Josh lowered his hand. If she wanted to bolt, he reckoned his fingers on her elbow wouldn’t stop her.

“You don’t—” She cut herself short and regarded him with a slight frown. “Why do you say that?”

“Those two you were with...” He jerked a thumb toward the door. “I don’t recall their names, but the tall one...she knows Gypsy doesn’t like her perfume. I asked her yesterday to keep her distance.”

Still frowning, Haley slowly shook her head as if trying to make sense of what he’d said. “But it was Courtney’s idea to come and— Oh.” Her voice dipped, and her shoulders sagged. “It is my fault. I’ve been trying too hard and I just...” Her eyes closed briefly, and when she opened them she stared at the mare again.

He was pretty sure he understood why she was down. She’d bubbled over with enthusiasm her first two days at the Sundance and seemed determined to fit in with the other guests. But she wasn’t like them. And glad as he was for that, he expected she didn’t want to hear it from him.

“You can move closer to her, if you like,” he said, and noticed the flash of alarm in Haley’s face. “See how Gypsy’s ears are pricked forward? She’s curious about you. She senses you could be her friend.”

Haley’s lips lifted in a tentative smile.

“Come.” Josh put out his hand. “Let me show you.”

She gazed down at his outstretched palm for a long uncomfortable moment. He had calluses, so many from mending fences, roping steers and all his other responsibilities. He’d seldom paid the patches of tough skin any mind. He did now. Seeing them through her eyes made him wince.

“Sorry,” he said gruffly, making a fist and pulling back. “I usually wear work gloves, but it doesn’t seem to help much.”

“No. Wait.” She grabbed a hold of his wrist, tugging at him until he gave in and let her peel open his fingers.

“I was only thinking about how kind you’re being.”

“Nah, not really, just trying to make things right.”

Dammit. His neck and face burned with embarrassment, but thankfully his olive skin wouldn’t give him away.

She moistened her pretty peach-tinted lips and laid her palm on his. “Show me.”

The contact gave him a small jolt, like an electrical charge that shot up his arm and ignited a spark that burned low in his belly. “Show you what?”

“I don’t know. You haven’t told me yet.”

“Yeah.” He roused himself from his momentary daze. “Right.”

He drew her closer to the stall, but she still tensed when Gypsy lowered her head. “Relax,” he said. “That means she likes you.”

Haley bit her bottom lip. At first he thought she was going to cry, but then he saw that she was trying to hold back a smile. “You’re just saying that to make me feel better. How could you possibly know?”

“You ever have a dog?”

“A cocker spaniel. A long time ago.”

“You mean to tell me you didn’t know when that hound was up to no good or was nosing around for some extra attention?”

She grinned. “Always.”

“It’s no different with horses. Once you get to know ‘em, you can tell when they’re mad or scared or plain bored. But this here, ears forward, blowing her breath at you, that’s not unique behavior. Those are things most horses do when they want to be friends. Go ahead, pet her neck if you want.”

“Really?”

He almost withdrew the offer when Haley took her hand from his. Why couldn’t she use her free hand to pet Gypsy?

“Oh.” She gasped at the blast of warm breath the mare blew in her face. Laughing, she stumbled back and wrapped her fingers around his forearm.

Josh understood horses a whole lot better than he did women, but he knew Haley had just made it clear she liked him. Maybe even trusted him. “Can you keep a secret?” he asked, moving his mouth close to her ear and inhaling her sweet feminine scent. After her nod, he said, “Horses don’t give a hoot about perfume. Gypsy can’t stand the sight of that Courtney woman.”

### Chapter Three

Haley let out a loud laugh that embarrassed her. She clamped a hand over her mouth, but it was too late. Her feelings toward Courtney were certainly no mystery at this point. Despite the fact that the wicked witch of San Diego deserved more than a snicker behind her back, Haley had been raised better.

She cleared her throat, realized that she was hanging on to Josh’s arm and promptly released him.

“Why did you tell her it was her perfume?”

“I didn’t want to hurt her feelings.” He shrugged, his hazel eyes lit with a hint of mischief. “Gypsy isn’t too fond of her voice, either.”

“Now you’re making stuff up.”

“No, ma’am. Horses are sensitive and smart. They can take a person’s measure faster than we can. And in my experience, they’re rarely wrong.”

Their gazes met and held. She knew exactly what he was doing, and she appreciated it more than she could express. She turned back to the mare, though she would’ve rather stared at Josh. He had a very masculine and symmetrical face that had appealed to the artist in her the first moment she saw him. Nice body, too. Broad shouldered, slim hiped.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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