

With
THIS
Ring?

A Novella Collection of Proposals Gone Awry

The Husband Maneuver

by Karen Witemeyer

Her Dearly Unintended

by Regina Jennings

Runaway Bride

by Mary Connealy

Engaging the Competition

by Melissa Jagears



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THE
Husband
MANEUVER



Karen Witemeyer

CHAPTER ONE

Dead-Eye Dan climbed the tall oak with the skill of a cougar. Jaw tight, he scaled the tree hand-over-hand, his gaze locked on the V-shaped branch above his head. He had one chance to slow his prey. One chance to gain the upper hand. He wouldn't squander it.

When he reached the branch he sought, Dan positioned himself in the cradle, bracing his legs against the sturdy trunk. In a single, smooth motion, he slid his Remington long-range rifle from the custom holster on his back and lifted the Vernier peep sight into position with a flick of his thumb. The walnut stock fit against his shoulder as if it were an extension of his body.

Dan leaned forward and rested the barrel against the branch in front of him, notching it against a broken twig's stub to keep it steady. He located his target. Four horses, 750 yards ahead. Four thieves and a woman. His woman. Taken when the desperados left the bank. They thought to use her as a shield to keep him at bay. A fatal error. The moment they'd touched Mary Ellen Watkins, they'd signed their death warrants.

—from *Dead-Eye Dan and the Outlaws of Devil's Canyon*

FREESTONE COUNTY, TEXAS
SPRING 1892

Absorbed in the book she held, Marietta Hawkins nibbled on her lower lip and burrowed more deeply into the hay piled near the loft window. She should slowly savor the story, she knew, seeing as how the cover advertised it as the final adventure of Dead-Eye Dan. But her eyes devoured the tale anyway. Like a glutton, she turned page after furious page, desperate for more of the rifleman's exploits, even as she wished it would never end. For the truth was, she was in love with Dead-Eye Dan.

Oh, not the romanticized version living on the pages of her newest dime novel. No, she was in love with the flesh-and-blood man who'd inspired the tales—one Daniel Barrett, former bounty hunter extraordinaire and current foreman at Hawk's Haven, her father's ranch.

A low hum of male voices drifted up to Marietta, but she ignored the sound, too wrapped up in her novel to care what her father's hands were discussing. This was the first story to mention a love interest for Dead-Eye Dan, and the fictitious woman filled Marietta's heart with hope. If Dead-Eye Dan, hardened bounty hunter, could fall in love, surely Daniel Barrett, hardworking ranch foreman, could, too. Right?

The voices grew louder and more distinct. Harder to ignore. Easier to recognize. Her father. And . . . Daniel!

Marietta slapped the cover closed and shoved the book into the hay. Daniel Barrett would be furious if he saw her reading such *claptrap*, as he called it. He hated the stories. Hated the way they glorified the violence of his past life. Said they were filled with exaggerations and outright lies. And if any man ever called him Dead-Eye Dan to his face . . . well, they came to

understand his preferences on the matter rather quickly. The only person she knew who had ever gotten away with it without any repercussions was Lily Dorchester, the adopted daughter of Daniel's former partner, Stone Hammond. She'd been only nine years old at the time and cute as a button. And the way she'd gazed up at Daniel with stark hero worship . . . he hadn't stood a chance.

Marietta smiled at the memory until the conversation below the loft window finally penetrated her daydreamer's haze.

"It's time for me to move on, Jonah. I purchased the old Thompkins spread just outside Steward's Mill last week. It's got good water and grass for my mules, and the outbuildings are sturdy. House is a bit small, but it'll do me."

Marietta froze. Not even her heart beat for a long minute. How could it, when it was being shred to pieces?

"I hate to lose you, Daniel," her father answered in a tone far too accepting to Marietta's way of thinking.

Force him to stay, Daddy. You're his boss. Tell him he can't leave. Not yet. I need more time!

Her father's heavy sigh withered her hope. He wasn't going to fight it. He was giving in. "You're the best ranch foreman I've ever had, son. The Double H won't be the same without you."

Marietta closed her eyes against the awful sound of fate slamming the door on her dreams.

"Ramirez is ready to take over. The men respect him. He'll lead them well." Daniel gave his recommendation without acknowledging his own worth. But then, that's the kind of man he was. Humble. Hardworking. Never one to seek praise. His satisfaction came in seeing a job well done.

Well, his job here wasn't well done. It wasn't done at all. Marietta had been waiting three years for him to admit he had

feelings for her, three years of catching glimpses of promise in his eyes only to have him shutter himself away again. Three years of patiently showing him how well-suited she would be to life as a rancher's wife. And now he was *leaving*?

Marietta inched forward until she could peer out the loft window to the men below. Her father, a large, stocky man, his graying hair hidden beneath his Stetson, held out a hand to his foreman. Daniel Barrett clasped it firmly, the determined set of his square jaw stirring an anger within Marietta's breast that stunned her with its ferocity.

How could he? She knew he cared for her. At least a little. He watched over her like a hawk whenever her father was away, and he was always scolding her whenever she did anything that entailed even the slightest risk. That proved he cared. Didn't it?

She'd put up with his overprotective nature despite the fact that it was downright stifling at times. He treated her like a china doll that needed to sit on a high shelf and be admired but never handled. Marietta didn't want to be admired from a distance. She wanted to be touched. Held. Embraced. By him. But she didn't want to appear the defiant shrew, either. So she abided by his dictates—well, most of them—all while showing him her skills. Running an efficient household. Making his favorite treats in the kitchen. Tending the injuries of the men. Saddling her own mount and riding with a level of expertise few women could claim. She thought to prove her worth to him as a helpmeet, a partner. But still he held himself apart from her. She'd assumed he did so because of her father's policy against employees fraternizing with his daughter. But what if that hadn't been what had kept Daniel from declaring himself? What if she'd only been a duty to him all this time?

"The Thompkins spread is a great location," her father was

saying, “With the growing demand for your mules, being so close to town will make it easier to connect with buyers. I hear you’ve had interest from a freight company all the way out in Tennessee. That’s impressive, son.” He thumped Daniel on the shoulder, his pride in his foreman readily apparent. “I always knew you had a special gift for training the stubborn creatures, but it seems your reputation has spread even farther than I’d imagined.”

Daniel dropped his gaze to the dirt, never one to accept a compliment with ease. He snatched his hat from his head and rubbed a sleeve across his brow. Sunlight gleamed off his hair, turning the burnished-auburn mass into a bed of fiery red coals.

Marietta drank in the sight. She loved his thick hair. Wavy, unruly, hinting at a wildness that lurked beneath his oh-so-controlled surface. A wildness he’d only revealed to her a handful of times. But a handful was all she needed. For she clasped those memories to her bosom as proof that he wasn’t indifferent to her. She *was* more than a duty. She just had to remind him of that fact. Before he left her behind.



Daniel Barrett fit his battered hat back onto his head and scratched at his short-cropped beard, the conversation even more difficult than he’d expected. Jonah Hawkins was a good man. A good boss. He’d turned a blind eye to Dan’s bounty-hunting past and given him a job based, for once, more on his skill with animals than a rifle. Leaving felt like a betrayal of the man’s trust. But it was time. He needed to be his own man, run his own spread.

Hawkins had allowed him to train his mules on Double H property during his off time, but now that demand for his stock had increased, he’d not be able to keep up unless he focused on

the business full-time. As much as he'd come to love Hawk's Haven, the men who worked with him day after day, and other . . . er . . . aspects of the ranch he preferred not to give name to, the time had come to take his leave.

"I told Ramirez he could head up the cattle drive next week," Dan said, diverting the conversation away from his success with his mule training. "He knows the routes as well as I do, and I trust him to keep the men in line. Besides, without me in the way, he'll be better able to show you his capabilities."

Jonah eyed him speculatively. "So you think to stay behind? You haven't missed a trail drive since you hired on five years ago."

Dan shrugged. "It'll give me the chance to move my stock to the new homestead while you're gone and make sure everything's in tip-top shape here before I leave." It also would allow him to slink out unnoticed by a certain petite brunette with wide brown eyes and a smile that could make him change his mind if he gave her half a chance.

Marietta always spent the two weeks of the spring trail drive with her aunt Ada in Richland. Leaving was going to be hard enough. Having to tell Etta good-bye would be near impossible. She wouldn't understand his reasons. Well, she'd understand about the business—she was a rancher's daughter, after all. But the deeper reasons, the ones he couldn't admit to her or her father—those were the ones he had to keep secret.

Jonah Hawkins let out a sigh and slapped Dan's back again. "Well, I can't think of anyone I would trust more with the care of Hawk's Haven while I'm gone. And I insist you take all the time you need to get things set up at your new place." He winked. "As long as you still give me first choice from this latest crop of mules. I've had my eye on that long-legged gray. I like the depth of his chest."

“Stormy.” Dan nodded. “His dam was a draft horse. He’ll be able to shoulder twice the load of the smaller mules. Ornerly cuss, though. He has yet to accept the pack without balking.”

“You’ll whip him into shape,” Jonah said with a chuckle over the ironic turn of phrase. They both knew Dan never used a whip on his animals. Trust, repetition, and patient communication were the tools of his trade. It took him longer to turn out a trained mount or freight animal than some, but the quality couldn’t be denied. His animals were known for their intelligence, compliance, and loyalty. Stormy would be no exception. He just needed a little more time.

“He’s yours when he’s ready, my friend.” Dan smiled for the first time since this conversation had begun. Hawkins was doing all he could to make this easy on him, and Dan appreciated the effort.

When Hawkins gave his back a final swat and moved off toward the house, Dan lingered beside the barn. He was going to miss the old man. This place, too. The men, the land—shoot, even the dumb-as-dirt cows he’d been riding herd over the past five years. His gaze drifted toward the big house against his will, to the reminder of what he’d miss most of all. Just as his eyes settled on the upstairs window at the far left, a light shower of hay fell over him, tapping against the brim of his hat.

Frowning, he turned and peered up at the open loft. A light scraping sound echoed softly above him, but he didn’t see anything unusual. A squirrel, maybe? Or a rat. He’d have to assign one of the younger hands to go through the hay stores tomorrow and check for nests and droppings. There wasn’t much of the old winter supply left, and he’d hate to lose what they had to vermin before the summer crop was ready.



Marietta held her breath until the echo of Daniel's footsteps told her he'd moved on. Slowly, she removed her hand from where it had slapped against her mouth to keep any unwanted sound from escaping. She settled it over her dancing stomach. A hundred acrobatic grasshoppers seemed to be turning flips inside her.

That had been close. Too close.

If Daniel had spotted her, she'd have lost her only advantage. Surprise. If she'd learned nothing else from her dime-novel reading, she'd learned the effectiveness of the unexpected. How many times had Dead-Eye Dan overcome impossible odds because he'd taken his quarry unawares?

If she had any hope of maneuvering her hardheaded mule of a man into a proposal before he left, she'd need every weapon at her disposal. And *surprise* would be the first cannon she'd light. With any luck, the strike would obliterate the shield he always wielded in her company and allow her to get close enough to employ more subtle tactics.

With a flood of resolve gushing through her veins, Marietta grabbed her novel and dashed down the loft ladder. Hesitating only long enough at the barn door to ensure the coast was clear, she glanced both ways and then ran to the house.

Her father was leaving on the cattle drive in four days. That left her precious little time to plan, but she'd find a way. She'd not allow Daniel Barrett to escape her so easily. She'd placed a bounty on his heart, and she intended to collect.