

ENDORSEMENTS

A sweet western romance novel set in South Texas, 1880. I enjoyed the sassy and competent Maggie Gallagher who cares for two orphan children, relations of hers. The complication when Alex Lancaster is found wounded and with a memory loss pulls two strong-willed but likeable characters together. Struggles with witchcraft and intrigues combine with believable relationship conflicts. They must deal with suspicion and mistrust issues when secret, unhappy pasts clash. Good pacing of development of relationships. Appreciated the surprise twist.

— JANET CHESTER BLY, AUTHOR AND CO-AUTHOR OF 32
FICTION AND NONFICTION BOOKS

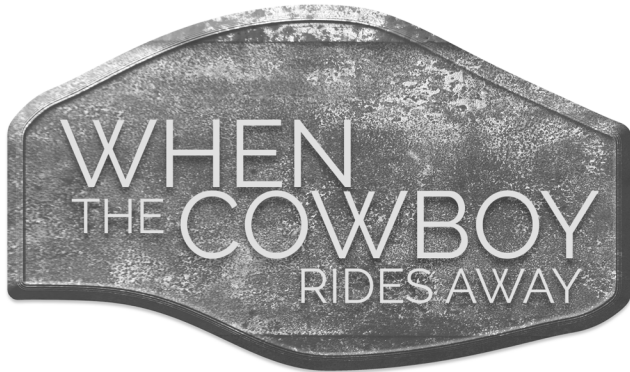
Molly Noble Bull produces another western novel that is so authentic I felt as if I were there in South Texas. I've been there a number of times, and she has the setting perfect. I loved the characters who tugged at my heartstrings throughout the story, and I kept turning pages to find out how it would all end.

— LENA NELSON DOOLEY, AWARD-WINNING, BEST-
SELLING AUTHOR OF OVER 30 BOOKS

*This book is dedicated to Charlie, Bret, Burt, Bren, Jana, Linda,
Angela, Bethanny, Dillard,
Hailey, Bryson, Grant and Grace, Carmen, Noe, Kathleen, and Kathi.
But to God give the glory.*

*And Laban had two daughters:
the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was
Rachel.*

Genesis 29:16, KJV



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AWARDS

When the Cowboy Rides Away won the 2016 Texas Association of Authors contest in the Christian western category.

In the same year, *When the Cowboy Rides Away* also placed in the Will Rogers Medallion Award in the Inspirational Western Fiction category.



Southern Texas
Early May 1880

Somebody was coming.

Maggie Gallagher slowed her sorrel mare. A small dust cloud hung over the north pasture like a puff of smoke. As she continued to eye the trail of sand and dust, it grew larger.

She glanced back at her younger sister. “Hurry up, Sarah. A rider’s headed this way. See if you can get ole Short Legs to trot.”

The little red-haired girl covered a yawn with the back of her hand. “I said I was coming.”

“Well, can you get that pony of yours to move a little faster? We need to go on out to the cemetery, leave our flowers, and rush right home. A caller will probably be waiting for us at the house when we get back.”

The main house was over a mile from the ranch cemetery and a mere twenty miles from the Gulf of Mexico—and it was almost always windy there. In fact wind and South Texas were like many married couples—together, but sometimes fighting.

The morning breeze felt cool on Maggie's face, but that wouldn't last long. By noon the temperature could reach 100 degrees. Her aunt often said that South Texas was the only spot on earth where the wind could be hot, even in the shade.

She loosened the bow under her chin and pushed back her blue-flowered bonnet. She might as well sit back in the saddle and enjoy herself. It was obvious Sarah was in no hurry.

Maggie thought about the dust cloud she'd seen. She wasn't expecting visitors. But since company appeared to be on the way, she hoped it was Roger. He'd said he might ride into town. On the way back to his place, he often stopped by the Gallagher Ranch to leave Maggie the mail he picked up for her, and she was hoping for a letter from Aunt Violet.

HE'D WATERED his horse in a creek with only a trickle of water in it and crossed a bridge. Now, Alex Lancaster guided his black stallion through thick brush, leaving a trail of dust and sand behind. He had to find Dee. Until he did, nothing else mattered.

But his horse needed rest. The animal wouldn't hold up much longer without it, and he'd pushed him relentlessly since he rode north from the border, stopping at creeks and lakes when he found them, sleeping and then moving on again.

Now he wasn't sure exactly where he was. The entry gate said Ranch Headquarters, One Mile, but it didn't include the name of the ranch.

He thought the ranch he was searching for was at least fifty or so miles north of here, but as long as he was in the area, he might as well stop and check. At the least he could water his horse again, and maybe the ranch owner would give him directions.

Alex could barely see the outline of a two-story house in the distance, but that was enough to keep him moving forward. He

would talk to the folks at the headquarters, cool off for a while, and then head out and keep going until he found her.

But would she let him explain what happened? Would Dee be able to forgive him?

Alex blinked, sucking in his breath. Would he ever forgive himself?

MAGGIE LOOKED BACK. Sarah kicked her pony with the heels of her black boots, and the paint horse broke into a light trot. At ten Sarah Ann Gallagher was eleven years younger than Maggie. Yet she still wasn't as comfortable on a horse as Maggie had been at six, nor was she as handy in the kitchen.

Maggie glanced at the clump of spring flowers clutched in Sarah's hand. The bouquet looked slightly wilted despite the colorful blossoms. "Sarah, don't drop your flowers."

"I won't."

"Good. We'll need them if we expect to put some on each of the graves."

Turning her attention from Sarah, Maggie saw that the dust cloud was bigger now. She squinted for a better look. Was she imagining things, or was that a rider on a black horse? Roger didn't own a black horse as far as she knew. Whoever was coming sure wasn't him.

ALEX WISHED he'd bought a straw hat before heading north; his felt one made his head feel even hotter. Sweat poured down his forehead. He pulled out a white cloth and wiped his face and neck, but it wasn't so easy to wipe away memories of what happened in Brownsville, Texas.

He could still see Dee in her white wedding dress and veil,

standing beside him in front of God, Pastor Garza, and a few other people. The joy he felt at Dee's cottage in Brownsville on their wedding day would have lasted a lifetime if the pastor had been a real one instead of a wolf in sheep's clothing. Joe Garza was no more a man of God than Alex was a millionaire.

Alex knew that common-law marriages were legal in Texas because of the lack of preachers on the frontier, so in the eyes of the law, Alex and Dee were married. But Dee would never be satisfied with anything less than a Christian marriage; neither would Alex.

Alex was no lawman, but he'd thought he was a good judge of character—until Garza robbed a bank in Brownsville the day after the wedding. That was when Alex learned the truth about Joe Garza. Alex got so riled up when he discovered that Joe only pretended to be a minister, the bank robbery was the last straw in the hat. Alex had to go after him—lawman or not—and bring the crook to justice.

Alex's jaws firmed just thinking about it. He'd trusted the man and encouraged Dee to trust him. But plainly their marriage wasn't legal in the true sense. Once he realized that, he'd followed the fake preacher-turned-outlaw across the Rio Grande River. Unknown to Garza, Alex hid in the brush while Garza buried the money. Later, after Alex reburied it, he searched the streets of the Mexican village for Garza. But he didn't find him until that night when the outlaw came out of a cantina.

Alex rubbed the small scar on his chin as he recalled that fateful night.

Lively music had blared from inside the Cantina. A soft glow came from the lamps that lined the front of the white structure. Garza, in ragged trousers and wearing a wide sombrero, held a bottle in one hand. He'd stumbled around, no doubt from too much whiskey. Then he turned, saw Alex, and threw the bottle at him. Alex ducked, and Garza pulled a knife from his belt. A

fight followed. Alex's nose was bloodied, but he avoided the knife except for a small cut on his chin.

The next thing Alex knew, he and Garza were incarcerated. Alex was thankful they were put in different cells and later in different prisons; otherwise, one or both of them might not have survived three years in a Mexican jail.

Alex had wanted to write to Dee while he was in prison, to explain everything and let her know he intended to return to her. But he wasn't allowed to write Dee so much as one letter. Inmates in Mexican jails had no rights, not even American prisoners who were innocent. Now more than ever he had to find Dee and make amends.

Alex squinted straight ahead. The house was a little closer now but still some distance away. It stood on a rise and looked shiny-white in the blinding Texas sun. He wanted it to be Dee's home, but it wasn't, not this far south. In any case, Alex sensed that he had another problem. Someone was watching him.

He gazed around and didn't see anybody. Still, he felt that somebody was out there. He knew ranchers didn't take kindly to strangers on their land; whoever owned the white house wouldn't either. He could get shot for trespassing, especially after nosing around that cabin.

Alex entered a plowed field. A feeling of foreboding shot through him. He pulled back slightly on his reins and looked over his shoulder. Had he seen something he shouldn't have when he rode over and took a look at the wire fence and then the cabin? Was he being followed now? Or was he just spooked from spending three long years behind bars?

THE BLACK HORSE and rider Maggie saw earlier seemed to vanish in a burst of cutting wind that whipped the sandy soil all around them. Blinded for a moment, Maggie wiped her eyes

and brushed away grains of the whitish sand sticking to her lips. As she opened her mouth to remind Sarah not to hold the stems so tightly, a gunshot reverberated off to their left.

Both horses shied. Sarah grabbed her saddle horn to keep from falling off.

“What was...what was that?” Sarah asked in a shaky voice.

Maggie jerked around in the saddle, gazing off in the direction from which the rifle blast came. Dust hovered just above the brush-line.

“Don’t worry.” Maggie tried to feign a calm response. “I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about.”

She wouldn’t tell her little sister they might have plenty to worry about. The shot came from the same direction as the dust cloud. If somebody was shooting on Gallagher land, Maggie wanted to know about it. It appeared the gun was fired from the other side of a group of small trees.

One of their ranch hands plowed that part of the ranch yesterday, but Maggie didn’t know who might be there now. The trees obstructed her view.

“It’s probably one of our cowboys shooting at a rattlesnake or something,” Maggie said after a long pause.

She couldn’t share with her little sister that the gunman couldn’t be any of their ranch hands. With the exception of an elderly cowboy they called Big Lupe, all their men were working cattle on a different part of the ranch now.

The dust cloud moved away at a rapid speed.

“What’s happening?” Sarah demanded in an unsteady voice.

“Don’t worry. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Maggie was tempted to grab hold of the reins Sarah held and lope back to the house, pulling her sister and the pony behind her. But someone could be hurt out there and in need of help. She couldn’t leave without knowing.

“Why don’t you stay here?” Maggie suggested. “I’ll ride over there and see what’s going on.”

Sarah's eyes widened and her face paled. "Please don't! Do you expect me to stay here all alone?"

"I thought you could for a minute while—"

Sarah shook her head. "No! Take me with you."

Maggie took a deep breath and released it. "All right, but stay behind me."

They hadn't traveled more than fifty feet through the tall grass when Sarah trotted Short Legs up beside her.

"Maggie," she whispered, "do you really think somebody shot a rattlesnake out there?"

Maggie hesitated then decided to speak the truth. "No, I don't. And don't you make a sound."

Sarah whimpered, but Maggie didn't have time to stop and comfort her.

They skirted the trees; then Maggie saw something, though she wasn't sure what. A dark object lay in the plowed field beyond the tall grass. It looked too big to be a coyote or a newborn calf.

"What is it?" Sarah whispered.

"I don't know yet."

The moment she said it, Maggie knew that what she saw was a man in dark-colored clothes.

Sarah gasped as if she came to the same realization. "Is he dead?"

"I'm not sure."

Maggie's heart pounded so loud she imagined Sarah could hear it. She knew better than to become involved in unknown situations, especially with her little sister at her side. Hadn't her late parents warned her time and again about something like this? But as a Christian she couldn't leave a wounded man out there in the open. Without attention the poor stranger could die.

Maggie dismounted slowly, handing her reins to Sarah. "You stay right here. And don't try to follow me over there when I'm

not looking, hear?"

Sarah nodded.

Maggie's hands shook so much she had difficulty unhooking her small quirt from her saddle horn. If only she'd thought to bring a rifle.

Taking control, she gripped the thin leather whip firmly. She'd only planned to be away from the ranch house for a short time, and her late father's pistol and rifle were heavy and burdensome. She'd left them behind. She would never leave the house unarmed again.

The braided leather quirt wasn't much, but it was the only weapon she had. She felt slightly more confident and crept forward then glanced back at her sister.

"If anything bad happens," Maggie said, "I mean real bad, I want you to hightail it back to the house and ring the bell. Promise?"

"I promise."

"I'm counting on you, Sarah Ann."

Terror rose in Maggie's throat at the thought of what she might find if she moved any closer. After what happened that day five years earlier, approaching any man she didn't know tied her insides in knots. And there was no way of knowing if this man was dead or alive—or dangerous.

Oh, she could play the part of a secure person; her role in life demanded it. She was responsible for rearing Sarah and Jon Anthony, her late sister's child. But inside where no one could see, Maggie was soft like melted butter.

She needed to lean on her faith and pray. Somehow, simply knowing that God had promised to be with her always gave her the courage to continue.

Maggie turned back toward the man on the ground and started walking toward him again. Her heart slammed against her ribs with each step. Out of the corner of her eye, she

combed the pasture for any strange movements that might indicate a gunman lurking in the area.

A flock of doves fed on the ground nearby. She took another step, and they scattered. Maggie jumped as if she hadn't expected it to happen. The rustle and white flash of their wings when they soared upward startled her a second time. She looked around cautiously before going on.

Blood. Maggie gasped, digesting the situation. The sight of blood always made her queasy, and the man's left shoulder was almost covered with it.