

Lock, Stock and McCullen (The Heroes of Horseshoe Creek)

By Rita Herron

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Don't miss USA TODAY bestselling author Rita Heron's new miniseries, The Heroes of Horseshoe Creek…

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The deeper Maddox probes, the more questions arise, revealing a mysterious past that shatters all Rose has ever known. Caught in the crosshairs of escalating danger—and his powerful desire for Rose—Maddox vows to protect her. He'll risk his life to find a desperate enemy who will stop at nothing to keep the past buried.

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Editorial Review

About the Author
Award-winning author Rita Herron wrote her first book when she was twelve, but didn't think real people grew up to be writers. Now she writes so she doesn't have to get a real job. A former kindergarten teacher and workshop leader, she traded storytelling to kids for writing romance. She lives in Georgia with her own romance hero. She loves to hear from readers, so please visit her website, www.ritaherron.com.

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Sheriff Maddox McCullen did not want his father to die.

But he was dying anyway, and Maddox couldn't do a damn thing to stop it.

He clenched the doorknob to his father's bedroom door, his stomach fisted into a cold hard knot.

He'd looked up to Joe McCullen his whole life, admired his father's love of the land and the way he'd run the family ranch, Horseshoe Creek. It had been passed down from one McCullen to the next for generations and had made men out of all of them.

His father was as tough as steel and had worked hard. He'd bred thoroughbreds and raised cattle and treated his ranch hands with respect and authority.

But he would be gone soon, and Maddox had to take over. Not that he wasn't prepared. The ranch was in his blood. Taking care of it and the town gave him a purpose.

Mama Mary, the housekeeper and cook who'd practically raised him, met him at his father's door. Short, plump and sturdy, she'd squished him in her big loving arms since he was a child.

"How is he?"

"Resting," she said, her hands gripping a tray holding a teapot and empty cup. "But he wants to see you."

Maddox rapped gently on the door, then pushed it open, forcing himself not to react to the changes in the big, strong man who'd taught him how to shoot a rifle, ride a horse and rope a calf. His father had lost more weight, his eyes looked sunken and his hand shook as he raised it to cover a cough.

Dammit. Maddox was a take-charge man, a doer. He fixed people's problems. He didn't like this feeling of being helpless.

But his father needed him to be strong. He sure as hell didn't need to see his oldest son break down. "Dad?"

"Come on in, Maddox. We need to talk."

God, not another discussion of his will and how and where he wanted to be buried.

"What is it? Can I get you something?"

A sheen of sweat coated his father's pale forehead. "No, but there is something you can do for me."

His dad waved him over, and Maddox crossed the room, his boots pounding the wood floor. He dragged the straight chair in the corner next to the bed, straddled it, then removed his Stetson.

"Anything, Dad. You name it."

His father pushed himself to a sitting position, then raked what little hair he had left back from his forehead. "It won't be long now—"

"Don't say that, Dad."

His father's hand shot up to cut him off. "Let me finish. It won't be long, but before I die, I need to see your brothers. There's something I have to talk to each of you about." He coughed again, then struggled for a breath, making Maddox's own chest ache.

"I know you all don't get along," his dad continued, "and that's partly my fault, but it's important I see Brett and Ray."

Maddox swallowed to temper his anger. How could he deny his father's last request? He had a right to say goodbye to each of his sons.

But resentment made him seethe inside. Brett, two years younger than him, had always been irresponsible, a love-'em-and-leave-'em womanizer who'd left home seven years ago chasing his dreams of fame on the rodeo circuit.

And Ray…hell, Ray was the rebellious son. Ever since he turned thirteen, he'd clashed with their father. Maddox had no idea what Ray was up to now, although his youngest brother had skirted the law a few times.

Neither Brett nor Ray had been home to see his father since…well, he couldn't remember when.

That had suited Maddox just fine.

"Will you call them, son?"

Maddox gave a clipped nod.

A weak smile tilted the corner of his dad's mouth. "Families need to stick together. Try to bridge the gap between you and your brothers, son. You all need each other."

Maddox gritted his teeth. He might just be asking the impossible.

"Maddox?"

Words hung in his throat, but he forced them out. "All right, I'll try."

Relief softened the harsh planes of his father's face, and Joe visibly relaxed and closed his eyes. "Just let me know when they get here."

"I will." Maddox strode to the door, but his father's request haunted him.

He would track down Brett and Ray—at least they owed his father the courtesy of a goodbye.

But he didn't expect them to stay. And he didn't need them. He didn't need anyone.

Hell, he'd assure them they could go their separate ways as soon as they paid their visit.

Rose Worthington had been alone for so long that she couldn't believe she was finally getting married.

She inhaled the lavender scent of the bubble bath, laid her head back and soaked in the decadent claw-foot tub.

Her fiancé, Thad Thoreau, was on the other side of the door putting together a romantic midnight picnic for the two of them to eat in bed. Since neither of them had family to speak of, they'd opted to save money and elope. Pistol Whip, Wyoming, was small-town, a blip on the radar of Wyoming, and was reminiscent of an old Western movie set—not exactly the setting Rose had envisioned for her nuptials.

So they were on their way to Cheyenne for the ceremony. But Thad had pulled off the highway and driven to a cabin off the beaten path, saying they'd have a romantic night before the wedding.

She opened her eyes and glanced at the vintage ivory dress she'd bought for the special occasion tomorrow, her heart fluttering with excitement. The string of pearls Thad had given her lay in the velvet box beside the pearl comb she'd bought for her hair.

She held her hand up and splayed her fingers, admiring the way her French-cut halo diamond sparkled in the candlelight.

Tomorrow she would become Mrs. Thad Thoreau.

Not only would she have a husband to hold her and love her every night, but one day they'd also have a family.

A pang of regret nagged at her for not calling her parents and telling them about her engagement. But they hadn't gotten along since she was a teenager. For some odd reason, ever since she was little, she'd sensed she didn't belong with them. That they were a wrong fit. That she was a problem they didn't know how to get rid of.

And then there had been the awkward conversations she'd overheard, the whispered comments, the *looks*…

The secrets.

They'd wanted to send her away. She'd heard them plotting that one night.

So as soon as she'd turned eighteen, she'd packed and left. Her parents hadn't stopped her. In fact, they'd said it was probably for the best.

Who thought it was best not to talk to your own child?

When she had a baby, she'd make sure her little one knew he or she was loved, that she'd do anything for her child.

The water turned chilly, and she climbed out and dried off, then pulled on her robe. Footsteps sounded from the master bedroom, and she eased open the door.

Thad's voice echoed from where he stood by the window, and she realized he was on the phone.

"Yes, she's the one. I'm positive."

Her heart swelled with gratitude to have found Thad. For so long she'd built walls and kept herself from loving anyone, too afraid to get hurt. But then Thad had walked into her antiques store, Vintage Treasures, and stolen her heart.

Just last week he'd shown her a photograph of the estate he owned in Cheyenne. They were headed there the day after their wedding. Apparently he had inherited family money, which he'd invested, and he'd accumulated his own fortune.

Not that she cared about the money. She wanted companionship, love, a real family.

She started to slip into the room, to inch up behind him and surprise him with a kiss, but he lifted a flyer of a picture of a little girl on a milk carton, a child of about five years old.

"Yes, I'm certain it's her," Thad said. "The woman I'm with is the little girl on the milk carton."

Rose frowned. What was he talking about? How could she be the child? Those ads were placed for missing children.

Thad walked over to the side table, opened his briefcase and removed a pistol. Rose tensed, her heart tripping into double time. Why did he have a gun?

"Don't worry," Thad said, his voice low, as he loaded the weapon. "Your problems will soon be over. She'll be dead by morning."

Maddox muttered a curse as his brother's voice mail clicked on. The first time he'd called, he'd gotten Brett's publicist, but he refused to go through a third party with such a personal matter, so he'd dialed the number again.

Did Brett even answer his own calls?

"Brett, it's me, Maddox. I know we haven't talked in a while—" *two years to be exact,* but he bit back a snide comment "—but it's important. Dad is sick, really sick… He's dying, Brett, and he needs to see you. Call me."

Maddox paced to the fireplace, his gaze drawn to the photograph of him and his brothers when they were young. He was about ten, Brett eight, Ray six. Close in age, they'd wrestled and fought and raced on horseback as kids.

But they'd grown apart after their mother's death and were as different as night and day.

What the hell would he say to them if they did return?

Upstairs, the house seemed quiet and he hoped his father was resting. But his request nagged at Maddox. He didn't especially want his brothers here. He and his father got along great.

He had no idea how he'd live without him.

But…he had to honor his dying request, so he searched for Ray's number. It took him a half dozen calls through various sources he'd had over the past years to track down his youngest brother's current location.

While he punched in Ray's number, he strode to the bar in the den and poured himself a whiskey. Brett had been irresponsible and wild, but he hadn't possessed Ray's anger and temper.

The phone rang and rang. No answer. *Dammit.*

He left Ray a voice mail, then carried his drink outside to the front porch. The night air filled his lungs, the heat nearly oppressive as he sank onto the porch swing and looked out at the McCullen land. Acres and acres of farm and ranch land that bordered on the mountains and held elk, deer, antelope and other wildlife.

He loved Horseshoe Creek and would keep it up when his father was gone.

But what would he do if Brett or Ray actually wanted to stay and help run it?

Cold fear washed over Rose. Had she misunderstood Thad?

Had he really said she'd be dead by morning?

"Trust me, no one will find her body."

Rose struggled against the urge to scream. Why would Thad or the person on the other end of the line want her dead?

Was that the reason he'd insisted on them eloping? So he could dump her body in the miles and miles of wilderness around Pistol Whip?

Terror seized her, and she stumbled backward. She caught herself by grabbing the counter, but her hand hit the hair dryer and knocked it to the floor. Suddenly footsteps clattered, and Thad stood in the doorway with the gun in his hand.

The cold look of a seasoned killer greeted her. "Eavesdropping, Rose?"

She shook her head in denial, then glanced around for a weapon, but the bathroom held nothing. Except for her hairspray.

Desperate, she reached for it, but Thad pounced toward her. She jerked up the can and sprayed it at his face. Thad cursed and rubbed at his eyes, then tried to grab her. "You won't get away, Rose."

Taking advantage of the moment, she shoved him and ran. He bellowed and chased after her, waving the gun at her.

A bullet pinged off the wall beside her. Hands shaking, she grabbed her purse and fumbled for Thad's keys on the table.

Suddenly Thad yanked her by the hair and dragged her toward him. She screamed again, fighting him as he threw her to the floor. Her head hit the tile and pain ricocheted through her temple.

He straddled her, then lifted the gun and pointed it at her head.

Rose's vision blurred, death whispering her name. Another image came out of nowhere—another gun. Another man. The sound of a gunshot firing.

Blood spraying everywhere. The floor, the walls…

What was happening… ?

Thad's fingers closed around her wrists, tightening so painfully that a sob escaped her.

But reality surfaced and the blurred image of the other shooting faded. The will to live kicked in, giving her a surge of adrenaline, and she used one hand to knock the gun upward. He cursed, and she slammed her fist into his crotch, causing him to double over and roll off her.

She lunged to get away, crawling on her hands and knees into the bedroom, but another gunshot pinged off the floor beside her. Her foot hit the lamp as she tried to get up, sending it crashing to the floor.

Terrified, she reached for the gun and managed to snag it. They struggled with it, both trying to gain control, but the gun went off. Thad grunted, then his eyes widened in shock and he looked down at his chest.

Blood oozed from his torso and soaked his shirt. Frantic, she pushed herself up, grabbed her purse and ran outside. The night sky was dark, void of stars, the endless sea of wilderness swallowing her as she raced to his sedan.

"You can't get away," Thad shouted as he staggered onto the porch after her.

She jumped in the car, keeping her eyes on Thad, her hand trembling as she fumbled with the keys. Three tries and finally the engine fired up.

Thad staggered down the steps, one hand to his bloody chest as he collapsed. She pressed the gas pedal, shifted into Reverse and sped backward, slinging dust in her wake. Thad managed to lift his head and raised the gun and fired again, but he was too far away and the bullet hit the dirt.

She swung the sedan around, stomped on the accelerator and roared down the graveled road to the highway. Nausea clogged her throat as she dug in her purse for her cell phone. *Dammit, she had no service!*

Tears streamed down her face as she drove back toward Pistol Whip. She repeatedly checked over her shoulder in case Thad found a way to follow her. But she didn't stop until she drove into the small town and parked at her rental house.

Fighting a sob, she careened into the drive, threw the car into park and dove out. She ran up the steps to the porch, the keys jangling as she let herself inside. Her phone was ringing as she entered. She flipped on a light

in the hallway, then raced to get it.

Whoever it was, she'd get rid of them and call the sheriff. Maddox McCullen would know what to do. He'd help her.

But a sinister voice echoed from the other side of the phone. "You can run, but you can't hide, Rose. I'll find you."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

James Sharpton:

Spent a free time to be fun activity to complete! A lot of people spent their sparetime with their family, or their particular friends. Usually they performing activity like watching television, likely to beach, or picnic inside the park. They actually doing ditto every week. Do you feel it? Do you want to something different to fill your own personal free time/ holiday? Might be reading a book might be option to fill your no cost time/ holiday. The first thing that you'll ask may be what kinds of e-book that you should read. If you want to try out look for book, may be the publication untitled Lock, Stock and McCullen (The Heroes of Horseshoe Creek) can be great book to read. May be it is usually best activity to you.

Margaret Walker:

Why? Because this Lock, Stock and McCullen (The Heroes of Horseshoe Creek) is an unordinary book that the inside of the e-book waiting for you to snap it but latter it will shock you with the secret it inside. Reading this book adjacent to it was fantastic author who have write the book in such amazing way makes the content inside easier to understand, entertaining technique but still convey the meaning completely. So , it is good for you because of not hesitating having this nowadays or you going to regret it. This book will give you a lot of positive aspects than the other book have got such as help improving your expertise and your critical thinking technique. So , still want to hold off having that book? If I have been you I will go to the book store hurriedly.

Anthony Callahan:

The book untitled Lock, Stock and McCullen (The Heroes of Horseshoe Creek) contain a lot of information on the idea. The writer explains your girlfriend idea with easy way. The language is very simple to implement all the people, so do definitely not worry, you can easy to read it. The book was authored by famous author. The author will bring you in the new period of literary works. You can actually read this book because you can please read on your smart phone, or program, so you can read the book in anywhere and anytime. If you want to buy the e-book, you can open up their official web-site as well as order it. Have a nice study.

Edward Donnelly:

Is it a person who having spare time and then spend it whole day simply by watching television programs or just lying down on the bed? Do you need something totally new? This Lock, Stock and McCullen (The Heroes of Horseshoe Creek) can be the answer, oh how comes? A book you know. You are thus out of date, spending your free time by reading in this new era is common not a geek activity. So what these publications have than the others?

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