

Synopsis for *Stone's Heart* by Darby Karchut

Having left New Jersey with her horse in a trailer behind her and her proverbial tail tucked between her legs, Linley “Linney” Van Horn decides that the small town of Venture, Colorado is the perfect place to start over after a failed relationship. Since her new teaching job at the local elementary school won’t start until fall, she wonders what she is going to do to fill her summer days besides riding and caring for her beloved Prince, an Arabian gelding, with the moves of a gentleman and the manners of a roue.

She knows she needs to do something to help her get over her Titanic-sized (and just as disastrous) mistake. She had fallen in love with a divorced man with a young daughter. Just when Linney was sure the three of them would form a family, the man decided to go back to his ex-wife and try again, for the little girl’s sake. Vowing to never again fall in love with a man with a child in tow—to never again be the second woman—Linney decided to do what so many other Americans had done over the centuries to escape their problems: pack up their livestock and move West.

Within days of arriving in Venture, however, life takes an unexpected turn. Her neighbor, the frustratingly stubborn, but oh, so ruggedly attractive, Stonewall “Stone” Wheeler, and his seven year old son, Beau, find themselves reluctantly in need of a part-time nanny. Stone, a local farrier with the drive and workaholic nature that would put a Wall Street broker to shame, is determined to grow his business. But, as Linney is quick to point out, dragging his son along from job to job all summer long is not the best thing for an active boy who would rather ride his pony than sit in a truck cab all day.

Linney is pleased when Stone decides to hire her to watch over Beau. And Beau proves to be a cheerful companion to Linney as she is introduced to the delights and dangers of the Mile High state. Dangers which include a flash flood as well as the unwanted attention of the valley’s biggest horse’s rump.

As the days go by, Linney begins to see there is more to Stone than just a driven man. Old-time tough as well as old-time gallant, Stone is also a loving father to Beau, and in spite of her vow, Linney finds herself falling for the cowboy.

She is not the only one finding their heart changed. Stone's heart, too, begins to heal from the accidental death of his beloved wife three years ago as his friendship with his strong-willed—and pretty as a picture to boot—neighbor grows.

However, in spite of a magical dinner date-that-is-not-a-date, and Stone returning to church with her, Linney's initial insistence that they remain just friends keeps them from admitting their growing attraction to themselves as well as to each other.

It is going to take some Rocky Mountain-size Divine intervention to bring these two together.

Disaster strikes when a riding accident leaves Stone with a broken arm and busted ribs. Linney is determined to do whatever she can to help him with his farrier practice he has labored so hard to build. Working side by side brings them even closer together.

But then Linney's old flame arrives in Venture. Due to bad timing and wrong assumptions, Linney and Stone find themselves back where they started: just friends. Confused, Linney takes her pastor's advice and goes for a drive in the mountains to seek God's will. Unused to Colorado's steep roads, she rolls her truck off the side of the mountain. Uninjured, but trapped in a vehicle a hair's breath away from sliding further off the cliff, Linney can only pray for help.

Meanwhile, Stone realizes he has been unfair to the woman who has brought joy and love back into his and his son's life. He goes in search of her as the night falls. Discovering Linney's plight, Stone makes a bold move. He climbs down and chains the truck to a tree, then pulls Linney out of the wreckage just before the chain snaps and sends the truck plummeting the rest of the way down the mountainside.

The nearly deadly event wakes up both Stone and Linney to their true feelings. A month later, Stone asks Linney to accompany him on a moonlit ride. Stopping in the middle of prairie, with the sweet perfume of sage around them and a star filled sky above them, Stone removes his hat, kneels down, and proposes. As they ride back, full of hope and joy for the future, they both realize that, sometimes, second chances are worth taking.

### **Editor's Critique:**

Hi Darby,

Thanks so much for sending through your synopsis to Stone's Heart, which we enjoyed reading! You've got a very emotional, heart-warming premise here of a heroine needing a fresh start in life, and a single-parent family in need of her love and affection – we can see it being a real tear-jerker!

Just a couple of things to bear in mind when you start developing this story...

**Your heroine:** Linney's previous relationship experience sounds very difficult, but we'd love to know more about why Linney was so drawn to this man and his daughter to begin with. What is it about being part of a family that so desperately appeals to her? Perhaps she wasn't totally in love with her ex (although she adored his daughter), but she really wanted to be part of their family unit? For example, what was her own childhood like – was there some lack in her family life that means she yearns for a family of her own? More importantly, what actually is at the heart of her conflict – wanting a family, or not wanting to be second best? And how does falling for Stone (and his adorable son!) force her to confront and work through these issues? She seems to quite willingly embrace being a nanny, but perhaps we could also see her deep reservations about taking a job that will open her up to the very dynamic she's sworn herself off!

**Your hero:** Stone sounds gorgeous – what's not to love about a rugged, sexy, single dad cowboy with a heart of gold!? Discovering that he can find love again after his tragic widowhood is a very powerful journey, so don't be afraid to pull out all the stops here and wring out as much emotion as possible!

**Your hero and heroine's conflict:** You've given both Linney and Stone great reasons to be wary of acting on their attraction, so it seemed a bit of a shame to rely on external sources of conflict (specifically the return of Linney's ex) to create tension. Our recommendation would be to think about ways to use your characters' conflict to create this 'black moment' in their relationship – perhaps Linney confesses her love, and Stone isn't quite ready to accept he loves her yet? Does his little son tell Stone he wants Linney as his new mom, and he emotionally panics? These are just a couple of ideas to think about, but something along these lines might make for an even more heart-wrenching emotional finale.

Overall, we really enjoyed reading this synopsis, and bearing in mind the above thoughts, we're looking forward to reading your So You Think You Can Write submission in September!

With best wishes

Harlequin Editors