

That Dreaded Synopsis

Many people stress out over synopsis writing. I've found that for myself, the best way to learn was to see examples of real working synopses. So in the interests of sharing information, I've decided to make one of mine available.

Below is the synopsis of my Harlequin Duets comedy #60 HOW THE SHERIFF WAS WON. The book was nominated for two Romantic Times Reviewers' Choice Awards and won the award for Best First Series Romance.

Warning: if you haven't already read the book, there will obviously be spoilers in this synopsis.

Please note – this synopsis is by no means an orthodox one. It breaks some of the “rules” and there are faults – but I have included it, warts and all, because after all, it was the actual synopsis I used and I did sell the book. The other thing is that there are some differences between the synopsis and the final book. This is normal.

I've tried to explain the purpose of each section down the side...but really I wrote it much more organically, so it doesn't fit a mould very well.

Below it is a one page synopsis of the same book. You can compare the points common to each. After that I discuss what I was intending when I wrote it.

Please note that this synopsis is copyright, so if you wish to use it in any public way, please contact me first.

I hope you find this useful. The best of luck with your own synopsis writing. If you find this useful, let me know and I might think about putting some of my other synopses up.

How the Sheriff Was Won Synopsis by Anne Gracie

The French call it the *coup de foudre* — love at first sight. But not everyone recognizes love when it hits them...

Basic intro

Crime reporter Jassie McQuilty, 29, arrives in the small Montana town of Bear Claw to take up her inheritance, an old-fashioned small-town newspaper called The Globe. She's a career-minded big-city gal, but she's prepared stay a year — she figures that's long enough to whip the newspaper into shape, sell it for a good profit, and return to the city with the added title of Managing Editor on her C/V.

Intro. of heroine & opening situation. Plus **basic hook fish-out-of-water**

And then it happens. The *coup de foudre*. Love at first sight when she tumbles literally, into the arms of Sheriff John T. Stone. Jassie, reeling, finds herself behaving like a cross between Scarlett O'Hara and Melanie Griffith. Sheriff Stone, on the other hand sets her on her feet and walks away.

Opening conflict:
she's interested,
he's not...maybe.

Jassie, however, is not easily daunted. The handsome sheriff is her reward for a year in the sticks, whether he knows it or not, and Jassie has a reputation for not giving up. It's one reason she was such a good reporter.

Her motivation
leading to **basic**
conflict

But Sheriff Stone, 32, seemingly has no interest in Jassie – apart from the sizzling looks he sends her. He's been let down twice – by a fiancée and by a wife – and he has no intention of committing the same mistake a third time. He prefers his female companionship with no strings attached, and preferably in the next county. He thinks Jassie is a “keeper” sort of girl and he's not ready for that.

Intro of Sheriff and
his **motivation** for
basic conflict

However he can't seem to stay away and Jassie can't resist a man who brings fresh hot doughnuts to a starving woman wrestling with an ancient printing press at night, a man who watches her devour the doughnuts as if she's the sweetest thing he's ever seen. And when he kisses her, the world, and Jassie melt.

Showing continuing
“plot” and attraction
between them

On their first real date, arranged with the connivance of a local matchmaker, Jassie begins by inadvertently insulting his vehicle. Dinner is another bone of contention –cooked in the home of a local couple, the meal is a nightmare of vegetarian bad cooking. The Sheriff claims allergies which only allow him to eat delicious crusty bread and salad. Jassie has to contend with the ominously quivering gray fish mousse– she copes by surreptitiously feeding it to her purse. Afterwards he takes her for a hamburger and, one hunger assuaged, another begins to make itself felt.

Comedy scene +
developing
attraction between
hero & heroine

When passion overtakes them in a parked car, an accidental elbow on a horn gives her such a fright that her knee jerk reaction almost cripples Stone. After that he avoids her and Jassie's frustration builds — she knows why he's avoiding her — It's F.O.C — the dreaded genetic disorder, which attaches itself to the Y chromosome. The feral gene which crippled practically every man in the western world. F.O.C — Fear Of Commitment! And he won't come near enough for her to let him know she only wants an affair.

Comedy scene +
developing
attraction between
hero & heroine +
conflict

But if Mohammed won't come to the mountain..... Jassie prints a headline.
(HEADLINE) HANDSOME, VIRILE SHERIFF FOILS DAYLIGHT ROBBERY

Stakes are upped
as attraction goes
public. **Action...**

Stone takes issue with her over the report – He didn't prevent any daylight robbery ... just little Bobby Goetz slipping a candy bar into his pocket... yes it was in the daytime, and yes, he supposes shoplifting is robbery but the kid is only twelve ... In any case what the Hell has 'handsome' or 'virile' got to do with anything? – she knows nothing of his virility or otherwise! Jassie agrees. Her smile gives him an uneasy feeling.

...& reaction...
Build up of comedic anticipation (I hoped)... Action....

(HEADLINE) SHERIFF DENIES VIRILITY CLAIM – Globe TO INVESTIGATE
Jassie prints a retraction, admitting an error of judgment in describing Sheriff John T. Stone as 'virile' without doing extensive research. She will rectify the lack however, and keep her readers informed of the outcome.

...& reaction. This is a challenge, a sexy duel

From now on she dogs his every footstep, and with half the town betting huge sums on her, he finds it almost impossible to escape.(HEADLINE) TOWN HAS GAMBLING PROBLEM, SAYS SHERIFF.

Plot thickening

One night Jassie latches onto the story of the year –according to her tip-off there is a hunting society who dance naked around a phallic stone in the middle of the wilderness. Creeping around after her quarry, she is grabbed, and fights back desperately. It is Stone, but she doesn't know it. He's chasing poachers. In desperation he clamps his mouth over hers and poachers and naked hunters are forgotten. It's a thousand times better than every fantasy Jassie has had of him but when she finally opens her eyes, he's left her and is investigating the phallic stone, on which he can see writing — a heart with their initials in it. They realize both tip-offs were hoaxes — a way of throwing Jassie and Stone together, to win a bet.

New situation.
Comedy scene & intensification of the romance

As they leave to return home, a storm hits and at the same time, they hear a crash not too far away. They investigate. A bus has crashed — passengers injured, some trapped and it is pouring with rain. They call for help and work for hours, doing whatever is needed. Jassie ends up comforting a trapped little girl while the rescuers work to cut her out of the wreck.

Change of mood – more serious.
Reveals new aspects of heroine to hero.

By the time the child is on her way to hospital, Jassie is drenched, frozen and utterly exhausted. Stone takes her home. He gently strips off her sopping clothes, holds her under a hot shower until her frozen bones stop shivering, then dries her and puts her to bed. Next morning she wakes, and is humiliated when she recalls the impersonal way he'd treated her. She was wrong to think that under all that strong silent man stuff he was attracted to her – he wasn't – not one little bit! He'd had her naked in his hands and hadn't tried anything. He'd even put her in the guest bed, instead of his own. She's made a complete fool of herself – no wonder he doesn't want her around.

Intense attraction... a black moment for

From now on she avoids him, immersing herself in innocuous local events.
(HEADLINE) STIRRING SERMON BY VISITING PREACHER

“make them wait”

Stone misses her like crazy. He misses feeding her doughnuts and kissing the sugar off her lips. He misses her turning up wherever he goes, turning the most routine job into an adventure. He misses reading *The Globe* and finding only dull factual reports of his doings. And he can't get the taste of those kisses out of his mouth. Or the memory of her, all pink and soft and damp and sleepy in his arms.

Ball is now in Sheriff's court.

As it becomes increasingly obvious to him that she has ceased her pursuit of him, he becomes angry. How dare she start something and not wait around to finish it. Well, dammit! It wasn't good enough! It was time the hunted became the hunter. With the assistance of several of the betting public, he contrives to get her into the woods at a community picnic. There they make love and all is blissful. He murmurs that she's become such a danger to the community he'll have to take her into protective custody. What! says Jassie. How do you feel about a life sentence, he mutters, and asks her to marry him.

Hero's action... & heroine's reaction...

Jassie is stunned. She hadn't actually even considered marriage. Before she realizes it, she blurts out that she'd only wanted an affair. That she's going back to the city at the end of the year. He thinks she has just used him as a convenient piece of meat and is hurt and offended. He stalks off.

Initial conflict returns to bite them

Belatedly Jassie realizes that she truly loves him. The one and only time she'd set out to have an affair, she'd fallen deeper in love than ever before. And had a man commit himself to her for the first time ever. She considers the last year. Small-town life is not boring as she'd imagined. There is crime, intrigue, gossip, politics and economic wheeling-dealing – on a much smaller scale than New York, true, but every bit as newsworthy to the locals. And as owner, editor, reporter and printer, she can please herself. And she has friends in Bear Claw, better friends than most of the people she knew in the city. And Bear Claw would be a great place to bring up kids... Jassie realizes she has all the ingredients for a good life right here in Bear Claw... and the most important ingredient is love.

Black moment

Heroine's black moment...

... realization of love.

Ball's in heroine's court.

She writes a special edition of the newspaper with a circulation of one — containing an apology and a declaration of love — and sends it to the sheriff's office. Shortly afterwards she reports a doughnut burglary and sends out an SOS for doughnuts, to which Stone eagerly responds. They declare their love and all is blissful between them. Jassie wakes next morning planning a new headline: (HEADLINE) SHERIFF PROVES VIRILITY QUESTION — *Globe* EDITOR MORE THAN SATISFIED

Resolution and happy ending

How the Sheriff Was Won

Synopsis: Short Version

This synopsis was written after I'd finished the book. It's slightly more polished and conventional (though not much).

New York reporter Jassie McQuilty, 29, arrives in the small Montana town of Bear Claw to take up her inheritance, an old-fashioned small-town newspaper called The Globe. She's a career-minded big-city gal, but she's prepared stay a year, whip the newspaper into shape, sell it for a good profit, and return to the city. Burned by love, she's been advised to learn to lighten up and have an affair. Arriving in Bear Claw she falls off the bus into the arms of Sheriff John T. Stone. Jassie, instantly attracted, finds herself behaving like a cross between Scarlett O'Hara and Melanie Griffith. Sheriff Stone, on the other hand sets her on her feet and walks away.

Introduction of heroine & opening "fish out of water" situation + basic source of conflict / motivation

Sheriff Stone, 32, seemingly has no interest in Jassie. Also burned by love, he prefers his female companionship with no strings attached, and preferably in the next county. However he can't seem to stay away and Jassie can't resist a man who brings fresh hot doughnuts to a starving woman wrestling with an ancient printing press at night. Their first date is arranged with the connivance of a local matchmaker. A series of misadventures, it nevertheless leads to a passionate encounter in his truck, but ends disastrously in an accidental knee jerk reaction which almost cripples Stone.

Introduction of hero & basic source of conflict / motivation

After that he avoids her and Jassie's frustration builds — she thinks he's afraid of commitment but he won't come near enough for her to let him know she only wants an affair. So Jassie prints a provocative headline in which she describes him as "HANDSOME, VIRILE SHERIFF". As she'd hoped, Stone comes to her office complains about her use of the word "virile." In the next issue she prints a retraction of "virile" and promises to "investigate the matter" — the matter being his virility. The townspeople start laying bets as to the outcome and "help" the romance along.

Some comic scenes alluded to

Comedy & conflict — she wants him, he won't play, even though he's clearly attracted — she tries a new tactic

Following an anonymous tip off about naked pagan hunters, Jassie bumps into the Sheriff — also following a different anonymous tip-off. A storm hits and a bus crashes nearby. Jassie comforts a trapped little girl and by the time the child is rescued, Jassie is drenched, frozen and utterly exhausted. Stone takes her home to his cabin, showers her and puts her to bed. Jassie misinterprets his actions as lack of interest, and embarrassed, she avoids him.

Action...reaction; comedy becomes emotional ... suddenly we're serious. Heroine's 1st black moment

Stone has finally come to a decision. He has been badly hurt in the past, but he has decided to build a new life and perhaps even start a family— and Jassie is the woman he wants to build his life with. Since she has begun to avoid him, Stone now begins to pursue her. With the assistance of several of the betting public, he contrives to get her into the woods at a community picnic. There they make love and he asks her to marry him. Jassie blurts out that she'd only wanted an affair. Hurt and offended, he stalks off.

Sheriff becomes the hunter. He declares himself. The original conflict (her temporary stay in town) ruins it.

Belatedly Jassie realizes that she truly loves him. She writes a limited edition of the newspaper (circulation –1) containing an apology and a declaration of love and sends it to the sheriff's office. Shortly afterwards she reports a doughnut burglary and sends out an SOS to which Stone eagerly responds. They declare their love and all is blissful between them. In bed together the next morning, he can see she is planning a new headline. He imagines it's going to be something mushy and romantic about their wedding and asks her what the next headline will be. She tells him: SHERIFF PROVES VIRILITY QUESTION — Globe EDITOR MORE THAN SATISFIED.

Heroine's realization of love, reunion, resolution, happy ending

So, what was I thinking of?

When I wrote the first synopsis, I'd already written the first few chapters of the book, so by then I knew my characters reasonably well and also the main bones of the plot. These were refined and changed quite a bit in detail as I wrote more, as well as in revision, as you can see if you've read the story.

I wanted to show four main things in the synopsis:

- 1) that my **characters** were attractive and believable enough and that their **motivations** for their actions were solid enough for an editor to believe this would make a good story and so take a chance on requesting the full manuscript.
- 2) that I had a good **comic premise** — a fish out of water story, where a woman woos a man with provocative headlines. Also that there were a few scenes with obvious comic potential.
- 3) that the **plot** would work as a **story**, as well as a **romance**. You'll notice there's a pattern of action... reaction. Each action opens up another scene, and I hoped the synopsis would show that scene follows scene in a lively and interesting manner, and that (hopefully) there are some surprises along the way.
- 3) my **comic voice**. That was difficult to show in such a short piece. So I decided to include the headlines as an individual way of expressing this, as well as describing the story in a breezy, lively manner, as well as including some almost-dialogue, even though I knew this was regarded as a real no-no in synopsis advice manuals. I was also hoping to make an editor smile — I figured if I did that, they would request the manuscript. I don't know if anyone smiled — but they did request the manuscript.

For further study, author Lisa Gardner has an excellent [series of lectures](#) on writing synopses.

And [Bronwyn Jameson](#) has an excellent example of another short synopsis on her site, as well as writing tips.

The [Miss Snark Blogspot](#) has a great series where she posts synopses and comments on them. As Miss Snark is a literary agent, the comments are very pertinent and sharp.

Read more about [How the Sheriff was Won](#)

Look at a few photos of [Montana](#).