DIANA PALMER

New York Times and *USA TODAY* Bestselling Author

THE COWBOY AND THE LADY

Diana Palmer

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At sprawling Casa Verde, old flames still burn…Seven years ago Amanda Carson watched her affluent, well-respected family lose both face and fortune. Then her childhood crush–ice-cold cowboy Jace Whitehall–made her an offer she had to refuse. Now Amanda has returned to Casa Verde, Jace's luxurious home. And Jace isn't about to let her forget who she is or what she's lost.Yet beneath their heated words, something simmers, waiting. For what once drove Amanda from this land may be the one thing that can make her stay.

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To Frances Thompson and family

Dear Reader,

It is so interesting to look back at *The Cowboy and the Lady*, first published in 1982. It was written, however, in 1981, a momentous year in my life. Our son, Blayne, was just a year old. I was still working as a full-time newspaper reporter, on call twenty-four hours a day and writing books at night after I got off work. My husband, James, was working at a clothing manufacturing company. We drove a ten-year-old car, had very little money, lived in a rented house and watched the baby as much as we watched television for entertainment.

Twenty-seven years later Blayne is married and his wife, Christina, is expecting *their* first child. We are living in a home we own, not rent, and the car in the driveway is a very fast new Jaguar. I

still work full-time, and have no plans to retire, ever. Like Mills & Boon Books, I seem to have the gift of endurance.

Mills & Boon is now sixty years old. I myself am also into my sixth decade. I am still filled with wonder when I think about the wonderful job I have—one I would gladly do for nothing.

I owe this to a lot of people: my husband and son, who put up with a lot of cold dinners; and my best friend, Ann, without whom I would never have sent off that first manuscript. To my extraordinary editor, Tara Gavin, and my agent Maureen Walters. And last but never least, my loyal readers who are very much a part of my life. They are my family. So is Mills & Boon and its amazing staff. All of us together, writers and others, make up this wonderful company, which has never lost its special touch as the oasis of pure romance in the world.

Congratulations, Mills & Boon, on your Diamond Anniversary. I hope that you, and I, will continue to warm the hearts of women around the world with love stories that never go out of style. And thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving me a job in the first place.

With all best wishes to our readers everywhere,

Diana Palmer

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Chapter One

They were at a standstill, the tall man and the willowy young blonde, poised like boxers waiting for an opening.

"Never!" she repeated, her brown eyes throwing off sparks. "I know we need the business, and I'd do anything for you—within reason. But this isn't reasonable, and you know it, Terry Black!"

He drew a weary breath and turned to the window overlooking San Antonio's frantic late-morning traffic, his hands rammed into his pockets, his thin shoulders slumping dejectedly.

"I'll be ruined," he said softly.

She glared at his back. "Sell one of your Cadillacs," she suggested.

He threw her an irritated glance. "Amanda…!"

"I was Mandy when I came in this morning," she reminded him, tossing back her long, silver-blond hair with a smile. "Come on, Terry, it isn't all that bad."

"No," he agreed finally, "I guess it isn't." He leaned back against the wall beside the huge picture window and let his eyes drift over her soft, young curves, lingering where her beige shirtwaist dress made a straight line across the high, small curve of her breasts. "He can't really dislike you," he added absently. "No man with blood in his veins could."

"Jason Whitehall doesn't have any blood in his veins," she said. "He has ice water and a dash of aged whiskey."

"Jason didn't offer me the account. His brother Duncan did."

"Jace owns the lion's share of the corporation, though, Terry," she argued. "And he's never used an advertising agency, not ever."

"If the Whitehalls want to sell lots in that inland development project they're working on in Florida, they'll have to use one. And why not us?" he added with a boyish grin. "After all, we're the best."

She threw up her slender hands. "So you keep telling me."

"We need the account," he persisted. His thin, boyish face grew thoughtful. "Do you realize just how big the Whitehall empire is?" he asked, as if she'd never heard of it. "The Texas ranch alone covers twenty-five thousand acres!"

"I know." She sighed, and her soft brown eyes were sad with memory. "You forget, my father's ranch adjoined the Whitehalls' before—" She broke off. "Anyway, it's not as if you couldn't go by yourself."

He looked briefly uncomfortable. "Uh, I'm afraid I can't do that."

She blinked at him across the luxurious carpeted room with its modern chrome-trimmed furniture. "I beg your pardon?"

"It's no deal unless you come along."

"Why?"

"Because we're partners," he said stubbornly, his lower lip thrusting forward. "And mostly because Duncan Whitehall won't discuss it without you. He's considering our agency because of his friendship with you. How about that? *He* came looking for us."

That was strange. She and Duncan had been friends for many years, but knowing how his brother felt, it was odd that he'd insist on her presence for business.

"But Jace hates me," she murmured, wide-eyed. "I don't want to go, Terry."

"Why does he hate you, for heaven's sake?" he asked, exasperated.

"Most recently," she admitted, "because I ran over his quarter-million-dollar bull."

"Come again?"

"Well, I didn't actually do it. Mother did, but she was so afraid of Jace that I took the blame. It didn't endear me to him, either—he was a grand champion."

"Jace?"

"The bull!" She folded her arms across her chest. "Mother can't accept the fact that the old days, when we had money, are gone. I do. I can stand alone. But she can't. If she wasn't able to visit Marguerite at Casa Verde for several weeks a year, and pretend nothing has changed, I'm not sure she could manage." She shrugged. "Jace hated me anyway. It just gave him a better reason to let him think I crippled the animal."

"When did all this happen?" he asked curiously. "You never mentioned it after your trip…of course, you looked like death warmed over for a couple of weeks, and I was head over heels with that French model…."

She smiled. "Exactly."

He sighed. "Well, it doesn't change things, anyway. If you don't go with me, we forfeit the account."

"We may forfeit it anyway, if Jace has his way," she reminded him. "It's only been six months. I promise you he hasn't gotten over it."

His pale eyes narrowed. "Amanda, are you really afraid of him?"

She smiled wanly. "I didn't realize it showed."

"That's a first," he observed, amused. "You aren't the shrinking violet type, and I've seen that sweet temper of yours a time or two in the past year." His lips pursed. "Why are you afraid of him?"

She turned away. "Now, there, my friend, is a question. But I'm afraid I don't have an answer."

"Does he hit?"

"Not women," she said. "I've seen him deck a man, though." She winced at the memory.

"Over a woman?" he fished, grinning.

She averted her eyes. “Over me, actually. One of the Whitehalls’ hands got a little too friendly with me to suit Jace, and he gave him a black eye before he fired him. Duncan was there, too, but he hadn’t got his mouth open before Jace jumped in. Trying to run my life, as usual,” she added unfairly.

“I thought Jace was an old man.”

“He is,” she said venomously. “Thirty-three and climbing fast.”

He laughed at her. “Ten whole years older than you.”

She bristled. “I can see what fun this trip is going to be.”

“Surely he’s forgotten the bull,” he said comfortingly.

“Do you think so?” Her eyes clouded. “I had to watch Jace shoot him after the accident. And I’ll never forget how he looked or what he said to me.” She sighed. “Mother and I ran for our lives, and I drove all the way home in a borrowed car.” The skirt of her dress swirled gracefully around her long, slender legs as she turned away. “It was a lot of fun, with a sprained wrist, too, I’ll tell you that.”

“Don’t you believe in burying the hatchet?”

“Sure. So does Jace—about two inches deep at the peak of my forehead….”

“How about if you go home and pack?” he suggested with a grin.

“Home.” She laughed softly. “Only you could call that one-bedroom efficiency apartment a home. Mother hates it so. I suppose that’s why she spends her life visiting old friends.” Visiting. There was another word for it: sponging, and Jace never tired of using it. If he’d had any idea that Beatrice Carson, not her daughter, had steered that car broadside into Duke’s Ransom, he’d have thrown her out for good, despite all his mother’s fiery protests.

“She isn’t at the Whitehall place now?” Terry asked uneasily, visions of disaster clouding his pale eyes.

Amanda shook her head. “It’s spring. That means the Bahamas.” Beatrice had a schedule of sorts about where she visited and when. Right now she was with Lacey Bannon and her brother Reese. But Marguerite Whitehall’s turn was coming up soon, and Amanda was already afraid for her. If Beatrice let anything slip about that stupid bull while she was on the ranch…

“Maybe Duncan will protect me,” she murmured wistfully. “Since it was his idea to drag me out to Casa Verde. And I thought he was my friend,” she groaned.

Terry toyed with a stack of photographs on his neat desk. “You’re not really sore at me, are you?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know yet. But if Jace turns thumbs down on the account, don’t blame me. Duncan should have let you handle it. I’ll only jinx you.”

“No, you won’t,” he promised. “You won’t regret it.”

She glanced at him over her shoulder with a wry smile. “That’s exactly what Mother said when she coaxed me into going to Casa Verde six months ago. I hope your predictions are more accurate than hers were.”

* * *

Late that night she sat curled up in her comfortable old armchair long after the prime time shows had gone off, watching a news program that she didn’t really see. Her eyes were on a photograph in an album, a color snapshot of two men: one tall, one short; one solemn, one smiling. Jace and Duncan, on the steps of the big Victorian mansion at Casa Verde with its green trim and huge white columns and sprawling wide front porch scattered with heavy rocking chairs and a swing. Duncan was smiling, as usual. Jace was openly glaring at the camera, his dark, hard face drawn into a brooding scowl, his eyes glittering like new silver under light. Amanda shivered involuntarily at that glare. She’d been holding the camera, and the glare had been for her.

If only there were some way out of this trip, she thought wildly. If only she could lock the door and put her head under the pillow and make it all go away. If only her father were still alive to control Beatrice. Bea was like a child, backing away from reality like a butterfly from an outstretched hand. She hadn’t even protested when Amanda took the blame for hitting the bull and brought Jace’s wrath

onto her head. She sat right there and let her daughter take the responsibility for it, just as she'd let her take the responsibility for dozens of similar incidents.

And Jace had been given reason to hate her mother long before that accident. But Amanda was too tired to think about that, too. It seemed that she spent her life protecting Bea. If only some kind, demented man would come along and marry her vivacious little headache and take it away to Alaska, or Tahiti, or lower Siberia…

She took one last look at the Whitehall brothers before she closed the album. Now why had Duncan insisted that she come with Terry? They were partners in the ad agency, but Terry was the senior partner and he had the lion's share of experience. She frowned. Of course, Marguerite liked her, and she might have put a bug in Duncan's ear. She smiled. That must be the explanation.

She leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes while the newscaster blared away about a recent murder in the city. His voice began to fade in and out, and before she realized it, she was fast asleep.

Chapter Two

Amanda watched the Victoria airport loom up on the horizon as the pilot of the air taxi banked for his final approach. This part of Texas was no stranger to her. It had been her home before she settled in San Antonio, where she'd gone to college. She'd spent her childhood here, among cattlemen and businessmen and bluebells and an historical legacy that could still make her heart race.

She clenched her hands in her lap. She loved this state, from its western desert fringes to the lush portion of eastern Texas they were now flying over. From Victoria, it was only a short drive to the Whitehall ranch, Casa Verde, and the small community called Whitehall Junction that had sprung up at the edge of the massive property Jace Whitehall had accumulated.

"So this is your hometown?" Terry asked as the small plane touched gently down on the runway with a brief skidding sound before the wheels settled.

"Yes, Victoria," she laughed, feeling her childhood again as she remembered other trips, other landings. "The friendliest little city you've ever seen. I've always loved it here. My father's people settled in this area when it was still dangerous to go riding without a gun. One of Jace's ancestors was a Comanche," she added absently. "It was his uncle who owned Casa Verde. Jace's father, Jude Whitehall, inherited it when the boys were very young."

"You became good friends, I gather?" he asked.

She flushed. "On the contrary. My mother didn't even want me to associate with them. They were only middle class at that time," she added bitterly, "and she never let them forget it. It's a miracle that Marguerite ever forgave her. Jace didn't."

"I begin to see the tip of the iceberg," he chuckled.

They climbed down out of the plane and Amanda drank in the clean air and sun and endless horizon beyond the Victoria skyline.

"No small town, this," Terry said, following her gaze.

"The population is sixty thousand or so," she told him. "One of my grandfathers is buried in Memorial Square. That's the oldest cemetery here, and a lot of pioneer families are buried there. There's a zoo, and a museum, and even a symphony orchestra. Not to mention some of the most delightful concerts—the Bach Festival Concerts are held in June. And there are some old mission ruins—"

"I only made a comment," he interrupted, laughing. "I didn't ask for a community profile."

She smiled at him. "Don't you want to know that it's located on the Guadalupe River?"

"Thank you." He shaded his eyes against the sun. "Who's going to meet us?"

She didn't want to think about that. "Whoever's got time," she said and hoped that ruled out Jace. "Ordinarily, Duncan or Jace would probably have flown to San Antonio after us. They've got

two planes, and they're both pilots. They have their own airstrip and hangars, but it's spring," she said, as if that explained everything.

He blinked. "Come again?"

"Roundup," she said. "When they cull and brand and separate cattle. The ranch manager bears the brunt of the responsibility for it, but Jace doesn't turn over all the authority to anyone. He likes to keep his eye on the operation. And that means Duncan has to double up on the real estate interests and the other companies while Jace is occupied here."

"And time is short," Terry said, pressing his lips together. "I didn't think about that, or I'd have been willing to wait until next month. The thing is," he sighed, "we really need this account. Business hasn't been all that good during the winter, the economy's in such a slump."

She nodded, but she wasn't really hearing him. Her eyes were glued to the road leading to the airport, on a silver Mercedes speeding toward them. Jace drove a silver Mercedes.

"You look faintly terrified," Terry remarked. "Recognize that car, do you?"

She nodded, feeling her heartbeat triple as the car came closer and pulled up in front of the terminal. The door swung open and she breathed a sigh of abject relief.

Marguerite Whitehall came toward them in a dressy pink pantsuit and sandals, her white hair faultlessly arranged, her thin face beaming with a smile.

"It's lovely to see you again, dear," she told Amanda as she hugged her, wrapping her in the delicious scent of Nina Ricci and pressed powder.

"It's good to be here," she lied, meeting the older woman's dark eyes. "This is Terrance Black, my partner at the advertising agency in San Antonio," she introduced him.

"You're very welcome, Terrance," Marguerite said courteously. "Duncan explained the offer you've made. I do hope Jace will go along with it. It's just good business sense, but my eldest has some peculiar ideas about…things," she said with an apologetic smile at Amanda.

"I'm anxious to talk with Duncan about the account," Terry said with a smile.

"He isn't here right now, I'm sorry to say," came the polite reply. "He had to fly to San Francisco this afternoon on some urgent business. But Jace is home."

Amanda felt something give way inside her, and she fought back the urge to leap back aboard the plane and go home. Instead, she followed the two of them to the car and allowed herself to be placed in the front seat with Marguerite while Terry loaded their bags and got in the back seat.

"The weather's nice," Terry commented as Marguerite headed the sleek little car toward the city.

"But dry this year." Marguerite sighed. She didn't go into the various ways droughts played havoc with a ranch. Amanda already knew, and it would have taken the better part of an hour to explain it to someone who wasn't familiar with cattle.

"I'm looking forward to seeing the ranch," Terry volunteered.

Marguerite smiled over her shoulder at him. "We're rather proud of it. I'm sorry you had to take a commercial flight. Jace could have come after you, but Tess was with him, and I didn't think you'd care for her company," she added with a wry glance at Amanda.

"Tess?" Terry probed.

"Tess Anderson," Marguerite replied. "Her father and Jace are partners, with Duncan of course, in that real estate venture in Florida."

"Will we have to consult him about the account as well?" Terry asked.

"I shouldn't think so," the older woman replied conversationally. "He always goes along with whatever Jace says."

"How is Tess?" Amanda asked quietly.

"Just the same as always, Amanda," came the haunted reply. "With one hand reaching out toward Jace eternally."

Amanda remembered that. Tess had always been a step away from him, since they were in their teens. Jace had offered to take Amanda to a dance once—a mysterious offer that Amanda had refused in silent terror. Tess had got wind of it, and given Amanda the very devil, as if it had been her fault that Jace asked her.

"Tess and Amanda were at school together," Marguerite told Terry. "In Switzerland, you know."

It seemed like a hundred years ago. Amanda's family had lost everything when Bob Carson was caught with his financial fingers in a crooked land deal. The shock of discovery had caused a fatal heart attack, and he'd died leaving his stunned wife and daughter to deal with the monumental disgrace and debt. By the time the creditors were satisfied there was nothing left, Jace had offered to help. Amanda still blushed when she remembered exactly how he'd presented the cold-blooded proposition to her. She'd never told anyone about it. But the memory was still with her, and she'd always believed her refusal had fanned Jace's contempt.

After the ranch went on the auction block, Amanda had carried her journalism degree to Terry Black's office, and the association rapidly became a partnership. The job kept the wolf from the door, when Bea wasn't on a marathon spending spree and so long as she imposed on her wealthy friends with long visits. The sacrificing was all on Amanda's part, not on her mother's. Bea liked pretty clothes and shoes, and she bought them impulsively, always apologizing for her lapses and bursting into tears if Amanda was stern with her. Every day of her life Amanda thanked God for time payments. And every other day, she wondered if Bea was ever going to grow up.

"I said, how's Bea?" Marguerite prompted gently, breaking into her weary musings.

"Oh, she's fine," Amanda said quickly. "With the Bannons this season."

"The Bahamas." Marguerite sighed. "Those lovely straw hats and musical accents and blistering white beaches. I wish I were there now."

"Why not go?" Terry asked.

"Because the first time Mrs. Brown was fussy about Jason missing breakfast, he'd fire her," came the tight reply, "and this is the only time I've ever been able to keep a cook longer than three months. I'm standing guard over this one."

Terry looked out the back window uncomfortably. "He sounds a little hard to please." He laughed nervously.

"It depends on the mood he's in," Marguerite said. "Jason can be very kind. He's always easy to get along with when he's asleep. The only time we have problems is when he's awake."

Amanda laughed. "You'll scare Terry to death."

"Don't worry, now," Marguerite promised. "Just make sure he hasn't been near the cattle when you approach him, Terry." She frowned slightly. "Let's see, Sunday evenings are fairly safe, if nothing's broken down or if…"

"We'll talk to Duncan first," Amanda promised her colleague. "He doesn't bite."

"He doesn't always have Tess underfoot, either," Marguerite said in a faintly goaded tone.

"Maybe Jace will relent and marry her someday," Amanda suggested.

The older woman sighed. "I had hoped that you might be my daughter-in-law one day, Amanda."

"Be grateful for small blessings," came the smiling reply. "Duncan and I together would have driven you crazy."

"I wasn't thinking about my youngest," Marguerite said with frightening candor, and the look she gave Amanda made her pulse race.

She looked away. "Jace won't ever forgive me for that bull."

"It was unavoidable. You didn't ask the silly bull to crash through the fence."

"Jace was so angry," she recalled, shuddering. "I thought he was going to hit me."

"I always thought he was angry for a quite different reason. Oh, damn," Marguerite added with perfect enunciation when they turned into the long paved driveway that led to Casa Verde. "That's Tess's car," she grumbled.

Amanda saw it, a little Ferrari parked in the circular space that curved around the fishpond and fountain in front of the two-storey mansion.

"At least you know where Jace is," Amanda said lightly, although her pulse was doing double time.

"Yes, but I knew where he was when Gypsy was alive, and I liked Gypsy," Marguerite said stubbornly.

"Who was Gypsy?" Terry asked the two women, who both had burst into laughter.

"Jace's dog," Amanda volunteered through her giggles.

Marguerite pulled up behind the small black car and cut the engine. The house was over a century old, but still solid and welcoming, retaining its homey atmosphere. To Amanda, who loved it and remembered it from childhood, it wasn't a mansion or even a landmark. It was simply Duncan's house.

"Duncan and I used to hang by our heels from those low limbs on the oak tree at the corner of the house," Amanda told Terry as they walked up the azalea-lined path that led to the porch steps. "Duncan slipped and fell one day, and if Jace hadn't caught him, his head would have been half its present size."

"I shudder to think what might have happened," Marguerite said and her patrician face went rigid. "You and Duncan were always restless, my dear. Duncan has the wanderlust still. It's Jace who's put down strong roots."

Amanda's fingers tightened on her purse. She didn't like to think about Jace at all, but looking around that familiar porch brought back a bouquet of memories. And not all of them were pleasant.

"Your son said that we could take a look at the property tomorrow," Terry remarked casually. "I thought I might spend this evening filling his brother in on the way we handle our accounts."

"If you can get Jace to sit still long enough." Marguerite laughed. "Ask Amanda, she'll tell you how busy he is. I have to follow him around to ask him anything."

"At least I can ride." Terry laughed. "I suppose I could gallop along after him."

"Not the way Jace rides," Amanda said quietly.

Marguerite opened the front door and led her two guests inside the house. The entrance featured a highly polished heart of pine floor with an Oriental rug done in a predominantly red color scheme, and a marble-top table on which was placed an arrangement of elegant cut red roses from the massive rose garden that flanked the oval swimming pool behind the house.

A massive staircase with a red carpet protecting the steps led up to the second floor, and the dark oak bannister was smooth as glass with age and handling. The house gave Amanda goose pimples when she remembered some of the Westerners who were rumored to have enjoyed its hospitality. Legend had it that Uncle John Chisolm had once slept within its walls. The house had been restored, of course, and enlarged, but that bannister was the original one.

A maid came forward to take Amanda's lightweight sweater, followed by a man who relieved Terry of the suitcases.

"Diego and Maria." Marguerite introduced them only to Terry, because Amanda had recognized them. "The Lopezes. They're our mainstays. Without them we'd be helpless."

The mainstays grinned, bowed and went about making sure that the family wasn't left helpless.

"We'll have coffee and talk for a while," Marguerite said, leading them into the huge, white-carpeted living room with its royal blue furniture and curtains, its antique oak tables and upholstered chairs. "Isn't white ridiculous for a ranch carpet?" She laughed apologetically. "But even though I have to keep on replacing it, I can't resist this color scheme. Do sit down while I let Maria know we'll have our coffee in here. Jace must be down at the stables."

"No, he isn't," came a husky, bored voice from behind them in the hall, and Tess Anderson strolled into the room with her hands rammed deep in the pockets of her aqua knit skirt. Wearing a matching V-necked top, she looked like something out of a fashion show. Her black hair was loose and curling around her ears, her dark eyes snapping, her olive complexion absolutely stunning against the blood red lipstick she wore.

"Wow," Terry managed in a bare whisper, his eyes bulging at the vision in the doorway.

Tess accepted the male adulation as her due, gazing at Terry's thin, lackluster person dismissively. Her sharp eyes darted to Amanda, and she eyed the other girl's smart but businesslike suit with distaste.

"Jace is out looking at a new harvester with Bill Johnson," Tess said casually. "The old one they use on the bottoms broke down this morning."

"Bogged down in the hay, I reckon," Marguerite joked, knowing full well there wasn't enough moisture to bog anything down. "Has he stopped swearing yet?"

Tess didn't smile. "Naturally, it disturbed him. It's a very expensive piece of equipment. He asked me to stop by and tell you he'd be late."

"When has he ever been on time for a meal?" Marguerite asked curtly.

Tess turned away. "I've got to rush. Dad's waiting for me. Some business about selling one of the developments." She glanced back at Terry and Amanda. "I hear Duncan is thinking about hiring your agency to handle our Florida project. Dad and I want to be in on any discussions you have, naturally, since we do have a rather large sum invested."

"Of course," Terry said, reddening.

"We'll be in touch. 'Night, Marguerite," she called back carelessly. Her high heels beat a quick tattoo on the wood floor. Then the door slammed shut behind her and there was a conspicuous silence in the room.

Marguerite's dark eyes flashed fire. "And when did I give her permission to call me by my first name?"

Terry looked down at his shoes. "Snags," he murmured. "I should have known it seemed too easy."

"Don't fret," Amanda said cheerfully. "Mr. Anderson isn't at all like his daughter."

Terry brightened a little, but Marguerite was still muttering to herself as she left the room to tell Maria to bring coffee to the living room.

Maria brought the coffee on an enormous silver tray with an antique silver service and thin bone china cups in a burgundy and white pattern.

While Marguerite poured, Amanda studied the contents of the elegant display case against one wall. Inside, it was like a miniature museum of Western history. There was a .44 Navy Colt, a worn gunbelt that Jace's great uncle had worn on trail drives, a Comanche knife in an aging buckskin sheath decorated with faded beads, some of which were missing, and other mementos of an age long past. There was an old family Bible that Jace's people had brought all the way from Georgia by wagon train, and a Confederate pistol and officer's hat. There was even a peace pipe.

"Never get tired of looking at it, do you?" Marguerite asked gently.

She turned with a smile. "Not ever."

"Your people had a proud history, too," Marguerite said. "Did you manage to hold on to any of those French chairs and silver?"

Amanda shook her head. "Only the small things, I'm afraid." She sighed, feeling a great sense of loss. "There simply wasn't any place to keep them, except in storage, and they were worth so much money…it took quite a lot to pay the bills," she added sorrowfully.

Terry caught the look on her face and turned to Marguerite. "Tell me about the house," he said, frowning interestedly.

That caught the older woman's attention immediately, and an hour later she was still reciting tidbits from the past.

Amanda had been lulled into a sense of security, listening to her, and there was a quiet, wistful smile on her lovely face when the front door suddenly swung open. As she looked toward the doorway, she found her eyes caught and held by a pair almost the exact color of the antique silver service. Jace!

Chapter Three

Jason Everett Whitehall was the image of his late father. Tall and powerful, with eyes like polished silver in a darkly tanned face and a shock of coal-black hair, he would have drawn eyes anywhere. The patterned Western shirt he was wearing emphasized his broad shoulders just as the wellcut denim jeans hugged the lines of his muscular thighs and narrow hips. His expensive leather boots were dusty, but obviously meant for dress. The only disreputable note in his outfit was the worn black Stetson he held in his hand, just as battered now as it had been on Amanda's last unforgettable visit.

She couldn't drag her eyes away from him. They traced the hard lines of his face involuntarily, and she wondered now, as she had in her adolescence, if there was a trace of emotion in him. He seemed so completely removed from warmth or passion.

He was pleasant enough to Terry as he entered the room, shaking hands, making brief, polite work of the greetings.

"You know my junior partner, of course." Terry grinned, gesturing toward Amanda on the sofa beside him.

"I know her," Jace said in his deep, slow drawl, shooting her a hard glance that barely touched the slender curves of her body, curves that were only emphasized by the classical cut of her navy blue suit.

"We're not going to have much time to talk tonight," he told Terry without preamble. "I've got a long-standing date. But Duncan should be back tomorrow, and I'll try to find a few minutes later in the week to go over the whole proposal with you. You can give me the basics over supper."

"Fine!" Terry said. He was immediately charming and pleasant, and Amanda couldn't repress an amused smile, watching him. He was so obvious when he was trying to curry favor.

"How's your mother?" Jace asked Amanda curtly as he went to the bar to pour drinks.

Amanda felt her spine going rigid. "Very well, thanks," she said.

"Who is she imposing on this month?" he continued casually.

"Jason!" Marguerite burst out, horrified. She turned to her guests. "Amanda, wouldn't you like to freshen up? And, Terry, if you'll come along, I'll show you to your room at the same time." She herded them out of the room quickly, shooting a furious glance at her impassive son on the way.

"I don't know what in the world's wrong with him," Marguerite grumbled when she and Amanda were alone in the deliciously feminine blue wallpapered guest room. The pretty quilted blue bedspread was complemented by ruffled pillow shams and green plants grew lushly in attractive brass planters.

"He's just being himself," Amanda said with more humor than she felt. The words had hurt, as Jace meant them to. "I can't remember a time in my life when he hasn't cut at me."

Marguerite looked into the warm brown eyes and smiled, too. "That's my girl. Just ignore him."

"Oh, how can I?" Amanda asked, dramatically batting her long eyelashes. "He's so devastating, so masculine, so…manly."

Marguerite giggled like a young girl. She sat down on the edge of the thick quilted coverlet on the bed and folded her hands primly in her lap while Amanda hung up her few, painstakingly chosen business clothes. "You're the only woman I know who doesn't chase him mercilessly," she pointed out. "He's considered quite a catch, you know."

"If I caught him, I'd throw him right back," Amanda said, unruffled. "He's too aggressively masculine to suit me, too domineering. I'm a little afraid of him, I think," she admitted honestly.

"Yes, I know," the older woman replied kindly.

"Tess isn't, though." She sighed. "Maybe they deserve each other," she added with a mean laugh.

"Tess! If he marries that girl, I will move to Australia and set up housekeeping in an opal mine!" Marguerite threatened.

"That bad?"

"My dear, the last time she helped Jace with a sale, she had Maria in tears and one of my daily maids quit without notice on the spot. As you saw today, she simply takes over, and Jace does nothing to stop her."

"It is your house," Amanda reminded her gently.

The thin shoulders rose and fell expressively. "I used to think so. Lately she's talked about remodeling my kitchen."

Amanda toyed with a button on one of the simple tailored blouses she was hanging in the closet. "Are they engaged?"

"I don't know. Jace tells me nothing. I suppose if he decides to marry her, the first I'll hear of it will be on the evening news!"

Amanda laughed softly. "I can't imagine Jace married."

"I can't imagine Jace the way he's been, period." Marguerite stood up. "For months now he's walked around scowling, half-hearing me, so busy I can't get two words out of him. And even Tess —you know, sometimes I get the very definite impression that Tess is like a fly to him, but he's just too busy to swat her."

Amanda burst out laughing. The thought of the decorative brunette as a fly was totally incongruous. Tess, with her perfect makeup, flawless coiffures, and designer fashions would be horrified to hear them discussing her like this.

Marguerite smiled. "I'm glad you don't take what Jace says to heart. Your mother is my best friend, and none of what he said is true."

"But it is," Amanda protested quietly. "We both know it, too. Mother is still living in the past. She won't accept things the way they are."

"That's still no excuse for Jace to ridicule her," Marguerite replied. "I'm going to have a talk with him about that."

"If the way he looked at me was anything to go by, I think I'd feed him and get him drunk before I did that," Amanda suggested.

"I've never seen him drunk," came the soft reply. "Although, he came close to it once," she added, throwing a pointed look at the younger woman before she turned away. "I'll see you downstairs. Don't feel that you have to change, or dress up. We're still very informal."

That was a blessing, Amanda thought later when she looked at her meager wardrobe. At one time, it would have boasted designer labels and fine silks and organzas with hand-embroidered hems. Now she had to limit spending to the necessities. With careful shopping and her own innate good taste, she had put together an attractive, if limited, wardrobe, concentrating on the clothes she needed for work. There wasn't an evening gown in the lot. Oh, well, at least she wouldn't need one of those.

* * *

She showered and slipped into a white pleated skirt with a pretty navy blue blouse and tied a white ruffled scarf at her throat to complete the simple but attractive-looking outfit. She tied her hair back with a piece of white ribbon, and slipped her hosed feet into a pair of dark blue sandals. Then with a quick spray of cologne and a touch of lipstick, she went downstairs.

Terry was the first person she saw, standing in the doorway of the living room with a brandy snifter in his hand.

"There you are." He grinned, his eyes sweeping up and down her slender figure mischievously. "Going sailing?"

"Thought I might," she returned lightly. "Care to swim alongside and fend off the sharks?"

He shook his head. "I suffer from acute cowardice, brought on by proximity to sharks. One of them was rumored to have eaten a great-aunt of mine."

With a laugh like sunlight filtering into a yellow room, she walked past him into the spacious living room and found herself looking straight into Jace's silvery eyes. That intense stare of his was disconcerting, and it did crazy things to her heart. She jerked her own gaze down to the carpet.

"Would you like some sherry?" he asked her tightly.

She shook her head, moving to Terry's side like a kitten edging up to a tomcat for safety. "No, thanks."

Terry put a thin arm around her shoulders affectionately. "She's a caffeine addict," he told Jace. "She doesn't drink."

Jace looked as if he wanted to crush his brandy snifter in his powerful brown fingers and grind it into the carpet. Amanda couldn't remember ever seeing that particular look on his face before.

He turned away before she had time to analyze it. "Let's go in. Mother will be down eventually." He led the way into the dining room, and Amanda couldn't help admire the fit of his brown suit with its attractive Western yoke, the way it emphasized his broad shoulders from the back. He was an attractive man. Too attractive.

Amanda was disconcerted to find herself seated close beside Jace, so close that her foot brushed his shiny brown leather boot under the table. She drew it back quickly, aware of his taut, irritated glance.

"Tell me why Duncan thinks we need an advertising agency," Jace invited arrogantly, leaning back in his chair so that the buttons of his white silk shirt strained against the powerful muscles of his chest. The shirt was open at the throat, and there were shadows under its thinness, hinting at the covering of thick, dark hair over the bronzed flesh. Amanda remembered without wanting to how Jace looked without a shirt. She drew her eyes back to her spotless china plate as Mrs. Brown, Marguerite's prize cook, ambled in with dishes of expertly prepared food. A dish containing thick chunks of breaded, fried cube steak and a big steaming bowl of thick milk gravy were set on the spotless white linen tablecloth, along with a platter of cat's head biscuits, real butter, cabbage, a salad, asparagus tips in hollandaise sauce, a creamy fruit salad, homemade rolls and cottage fried potatoes. Amanda couldn't remember when she'd been confronted by such a lavish selection of dishes, and she realized with a start how long it had been since she'd been able to afford to set a table like this.

She nibbled at each delicious spoonful as if it would be her last, savoring every bite, while Terry's pleasant voice rambled on.

Marguerite joined them in the middle of Terry's sales pitch, smiling all around as she sat in her accustomed place at the elegant table with its centerpiece of white daisies.

"I'm sorry to be late," she said, "but I lost track of time. There's a mystery theater on the local radio station, and I'm just hooked on it."

"Detective stories," Jace scoffed. "No wonder you leave your light on at night."

Marguerite lifted her thin face proudly. "A lot of people use night-lights."

"You use three lamps," he commented. His gray eyes sparkled at her and he winked suddenly, smiling. Amanda, on the fringe of that smile, felt something warm kindle inside her. He was devastating when he used that inherent charm of his. No woman alive could have resisted it, but she'd only seen it once, a very long time ago. She dropped her eyes back to her plate and finished the last of her fruit salad with a sigh.

In the middle of Terry's wrap-up, the phone rang and, seconds later, Jace was called away from the table.

Marguerite glared after him. “Once,” she muttered, “just once, to have an uninterrupted meal! If it isn’t some problem with the ranch that Bill Johnson, our manager, can’t handle, it’s a personnel problem at one of the companies, or some salesman wanting to interest him in a new tractor, or another rancher trying to sell him a bull, or a newspaper wanting information on a merger.” She glared into space. “Last week it was a magazine wanting to know if Jace was getting married. I told them yes,” she said with ill-concealed irritation, “and I can’t wait until someone shoves the article under his nose!”

Amanda laughed until tears ran down her cheeks. “Oh, how could you?”

“How could she what?” Jace asked, returning just in time to catch that last remark.

Amanda shook her head, dabbing at her eyes with her linen napkin while Marguerite’s thin face seemed to puff up indignantly.

“Another disaster?” Marguerite asked him as he sat back down. “The world goes to war if you finish one meal?”

Jace raised an eyebrow at her, sipping his coffee. “Would you like to take over?”

“I’d simply love it,” she told her son. “I’d sell everything.”

“And condemn Duncan and me to growing roses?” he teased.

She relented. “Well if we could just have one whole meal together, Jason…”

“How would you cope?” he teased. “It’s never happened.”

“And when your father was still alive, it was worse,” she admitted. She laughed. “I remember throwing his plate at him once when he went to talk to an attorney during dinner on Christmas Day.”

Jace smiled mockingly. “I remember what happened when he came back,” he reminded her, and Marguerite Whitehall blushed like a schoolgirl.

“Oh, by the way,” Marguerite began, “I—”

Before she could get the words out, Maria came in to announce that Tess was on the phone and wanted to speak to Jace.

Marguerite glared at him as he passed her on his way to the hall phone a second time. “Why don’t you have a special phone invented with a plate attached?” she asked nastily. “Or better, an edible phone, so you could eat and talk at the same time?”

Amanda’s solemn face dissolved into laughter. It had been this way with the Whitehalls forever. Marguerite had had this same argument with Jude.

The older woman shook her head, glancing toward Terry with a mischievous smile. “Would you like to explain the advertising business to me, Terry? I can’t give you the account, but I won’t rush off in the middle of your explanation to answer the phone.”

Terry laughed, lifting a homemade roll to his mouth. “No problem, Mrs. Whitehall. There’s plenty of time. We’ll be here a week, after all.”

During which, Amanda was thinking, you might get Jace to yourself for ten minutes. But she didn’t say it.

Later, everyone seemed to vanish. Jace went upstairs, and Marguerite carried Terry off to show him her collection of jade figurines, leaving Amanda alone in the living room.

She finished her after-dinner cup of coffee and put the saucer gingerly back down on the coffee table. Perhaps, she thought wildly, it might be a good idea to go up to her room. If Jace came downstairs before the others got back, she’d be stuck with him, and she didn’t want that headache. Being alone with Jace was one circumstance she’d never be prepared for.

She hurried out into the hall, but before she even made it to the staircase, she saw Jace coming down it. He’d added a brown-and-gold tie to the white silk shirt and brown suit, and he looked maddeningly elegant.

“Running?” he asked pointedly, his eyes narrow and cold as they studied her.

Chapter Four

She froze in the center of the entrance, staring at him helplessly. He made her nervous. He always had.

"I…was just going up to my room for a minute," she faltered.

He came the rest of the way down without hesitation, his booted feet making soft thuds on the carpeted steps. He paused in front of her when he got to the bottom, towering over her, close enough that she could smell his woodsy cologne and the clean fragrance of his body.

"For what?" he asked with a mocking smile. "A handkerchief?"

"More like a shield and some armor," she countered, hiding her nervousness behind humor.

He didn't laugh. "You haven't changed," he observed. "Still the little clown." His narrowed eyes slid down her body indifferently. "Why did you come back here?" he demanded abruptly, cold steel in his tone.

"Because Duncan insisted."

He scowled down at her. "Why? You only work for Black."

"I'm his partner," she replied. "Didn't you know?"

He stared at her intently. "How did you manage that?" he asked contemptuously. "Or do I need to ask?"

She saw what he was driving at and her face flamed. "It isn't like that," she said tightly.

"Isn't it?" He glared at her. "At least I offered you more than a share in a third-class business."

Her face went a fiery red. "That's all women are to you," she accused. "Toys, sitting on a shelf waiting to be bought."

"Tess isn't," he said with deliberate cruelty.

"How lovely for her," she threw back.

He stuck his hands in his pockets and looked down his arrogant nose at her. There was a strange, foreign something behind those glittering eyes that disturbed her.

"You're thinner," he remarked.

She shrugged. "I work hard."

"Doing what?" he asked curtly. "Sleeping with the boss?"

"I don't!" she burst out. She looked up into his dark face, her own pale in the blazing light of the crystal chandelier. "Why do you hate me so? Was the bull so important?"

His face seemed to set even harder. "A grand champion, and you can ask that? My God, you didn't even apologize!"

"Would it have brought him back?" she asked sadly.

"No." A muscle in his jaw moved.

"You won't…you won't let your dislike of me prejudice you against the agency, will you?" she asked suddenly.

"Afraid your boss might lose his shirt?" he taunted.

"Something like that."

He cocked his head down at her, his hard mouth set. "Why don't you tell me the truth? Duncan didn't invite you down here. You came on your own initiative." He smiled mockingly. "I haven't forgotten how you used to tag after him. And now you've got more reason than ever."

She saw red. All the years of backing away dissolved, and she felt suddenly reckless.

"You go to hell, Jace Whitehall," she said coldly, her brown eyes throwing off sparks as she lifted her angry face.

Both dark eyebrows went up over half astonished, half amused silver eyes. "What?"

But before she could repeat the dangerous words, Terry's voice broke in between them.

"Oh, there you are," he called cheerfully. "Come back in here and keep us company. It's too early to turn in."

Jace's eyes were hidden behind those narrowed eyelids, and he turned away before Amanda could puzzle out the new look in them.

"Off again?" Marguerite asked pleasantly. "Where are you taking Tess?"

"Out," he said noncommittally, reaching down to kiss the wrinkled pink cheek. "Good night."

He pivoted on his heel and left them without another word, closing the door firmly behind him.

Terry stared at Amanda. "Did I hear you say what I thought I heard you say?"

"My question exactly," Marguerite added.

Amanda stirred under their intent stares and went ahead of them into the living room. "Well, he deserved it," she muttered. "Arrogant, insulting beast!"

Marguerite laughed delightedly, a mysterious light in her eyes that she was careful to conceal.

"What is it with you two?" Terry asked her. "If ever I saw mutual dislike…"

"My mother once called Jace a cowboy," Amanda replied. "It was a bad time to do it, and she was terribly insulting, and Jace never got over it."

"Jace took to calling Amanda 'lady,'" Marguerite continued. She smiled at the younger woman. "She was, and is, that. But Jace meant it in another sense."

"As in Lady MacBeth," Amanda said. Her eyes clouded. "I'd like to cook him a nice mess of buttered toadstools," she said with a malicious smile.

"Down, girl," Terry said. "Vinegar catches no flies."

Amanda remembered what Marguerite had said about Tess, and when their eyes met, she knew the older woman was also remembering. They both burst into laughter, dissolving the sombre mood memory had brought to cloud the evening.

But later that night, alone in her bedroom, memories returned to haunt her. Seeing Jace again had resurrected all the old scars, and she felt the pain of them right through her slender body. Her eyes wide open, staring at the strange patterns the moonlight made on the ceiling of her room, she drifted back to that Friday seven years ago when she'd gone running along the fence that separated her father's pasture from the Whitehalls' property, laughing as she jumped on the lower rung of the fence and watched Jace slow his big black stallion and canter over to her.

"Looking for Duncan?" he'd asked curtly, his eyes angry in that cold, hard face that never seemed to soften.

"No, for you," she'd corrected, glancing at him shyly. "I'm having a party tomorrow night. I'll be sixteen, you know."

He'd stared at her with a strangeness about him that still puzzled her years later, his eyes giving nothing away as they glittered over her slender body, her flushed, exuberant face. She'd never felt more alive than she did that day, and Jace couldn't know that it had taken her the better part of the morning to get up enough nerve to seek him out. Duncan was easy to talk to. Jace was something else. He fascinated her, even as he frightened her. Already a man even then, he had a blatant sensuousness that made her developing emotions run riot.

"Well, what do you want me to do about it?" he'd asked coldly.

The vibrant laughter left her face, draining away, and some of her nerve had gone with it. "I, uh…I wanted to invite you to my party," she choked.

He studied her narrowly over the cigarette he put between his chiseled lips and lit. "And what did your mother think about that idea?"

"She said it was fine with her," she returned rebelliously, omitting how hard she'd had to fight Bea to make the invitation to the Whitehall brothers.

"Like hell," Jace had replied knowingly.

She'd tossed her silver-blond hair, risking her pride. "Will you come, Jason?" she'd asked quietly.

"Just me? Aren't you inviting Duncan as well?"

"Both of you, of course, but Duncan said you wouldn't come unless I asked you," she replied truthfully.

He'd drawn a deep, hard breath, blowing out a cloud of smoke with it. His eyes had been thoughtful on her young, hopeful face.

"Will you, Jace?" she'd persisted meekly.

"Maybe," was as far as he'd commit himself. He'd wheeled the horse without another word, leaving her to stare after him in a hopeless, disappointed daze.

The amazing thing was that Jace had come to the party with Duncan, dressed in immaculately stylish dark evening clothes. He looked like a fashion plate, and, to Amanda's sorrow, he was neatly surrounded by admiring teenage girls before he was through the door. Most of her girlfriends were absolutely beautiful young debutantes, very sophisticated and worldly. Not at all like young Amanda, who was painfully shy and unworldly, standing quietly in the corner with her blond hair piled on top of her head. Her exposed throat looked vulnerable, her pink lips soft, and her brown eyes stared wistfully at Jace despite the fact that Duncan spent the evening dancing attendance on her. She'd looked down at her green-embroidered white organdy dress in disgust, hating it. The demure neckline, puffed sleeves and full, flowing skirt hadn't been exciting enough to catch and hold Jace's eye. Of course, she'd told herself, Jace was twenty-five to her sixteen, and probably wouldn't have been caught dead looking at a girl her age. But her heart had ached to have him notice her. She'd danced woodenly with Duncan and the other boys, her eyes following Jace everywhere. She'd longed to dance just one dance with him.

It had been the last dance, a slow tune about lost love that Amanda had thought quite appropriate at the time. Jace hadn't asked her to dance. He'd held out his hand, and she'd put hers into it, feeling it swallow her fingers warmly. Even the way he danced had been exciting. He'd held her young body against his by keeping both hands at her waist, leaving her hands to rest on his chest while they moved lazily to the music. She could still smell the expensive oriental cologne he'd been wearing, feel the warmth of his tall, athletic body against the length of hers as they moved, sense the hard, powerful muscles of his thighs pressed close to her even through the layers of material that made up her skirt. Her heart had gone wild in her chest at the proximity. New, frightening emotions had drained her, made her weak in his supporting arms. She'd looked up at him with all her untried longings plain in her eyes, and he'd stopped dancing abruptly and, catching her hand, had led her out onto the dark patio overlooking the night lights of Victoria.

"Is this what you want, honey?" he'd asked, crushing her against him with a curious anger in his voice. "To see how I rate as a lover?"

"Jace, I didn't—" she began to protest.

But even as she opened her mouth to speak, his lips had crushed down on it, rough and uncompromising, deliberately cruel. His arms had riveted her to the length of him, bruising her softness in a silence that had combined the distant strains of music with the night sounds of crickets and frogs, and the harsh sigh of Jace's breath with the rustle of clothing as he caught her ever closer. His teeth had nipped her lip painfully, making her moan with fright, as he subjected her to her first kiss and taught her the dangers of flirting with an experienced man. With a wrenching fear, she'd felt his big, warm hand sliding up from her waist to the soft, high curve of her breast, breaking all the rules she'd been taught as he touched and savored the rounded softness of her body.

"It's like touching silk," he'd murmured against her mouth, drawing back slightly to stare down at her. "Look at me," he'd said gruffly. "Let me see your face."

She'd raised frightened eyes to his, pushing at his hand in a flurry of outrage and embarrassment. "Don't," she'd whispered.

"Why not?" His eyes had glittered, going down to the darkness of his fingers against the white organdy of her bodice. "Isn't this why you asked me here tonight, Amanda? To see if a ranch hand makes love like a gentleman?"

She'd torn out of his arms, tears of humiliation glistening in her eyes.

"Don't you like the truth?" he'd asked, and he laughed at her while he lit a cigarette with steady fingers. "Sorry to disappoint you, little girl, but I've gone past ranch hand now. I'm the boss. I've not only paid off Casa Verde, I'm going to make a legend of it. I'm going to have the biggest damned spread in Texas before I'm through. And then, if I'm still tempted, I might give you another try." His eyes had hurt as they studied her like a side of beef. "You'll have to round out a bit more, though. You're too thin."

She hadn't been able to find the right words, and Duncan had appeared to rescue her before she had to. She'd never invited Jace to another party, though, and she'd gone to great lengths to stay out of his way. That hadn't bothered him a bit. She often suspected that he really did hate her.

* * *

That night, Amanda slept fitfully, her dreams disturbed by scenes she couldn't remember when she woke up early the next morning. She dragged herself out of bed and pulled on the worn blue terry-cloth robe at the foot of her bed, her long blond hair streaming down her back and over her shoulders in a beautiful silver-blond tangle that only made her look prettier. She huddled in the robe in the chill morning air that blew the curtains back from the window. She'd opened it last night so that she could drink in the fresh clean country air.

A knock at the door brought her to her feet again from her perch on the vanity bench, and she yawned as she padded barefoot to the door. Her eyes fell sadly to the old robe, remembering satin ones she used to own that had dainty little fur scuffs to match. Her shoulders shrugged. That life was over. It was just a dream, washed away by the riptide of reality.

She opened the door, expecting Maria, and found Duncan grinning down at her, brown-eyed and boyish.

"Good morning, ma'am," he said merrily.

"Duncan!" she cried, and, careless of convention, threw herself into his husky arms. They closed around her warmly and she caught the familiar scent of the spice cologne he'd always worn.

"Missed me, did you?" he asked at her ear, because he was only a couple of inches taller than she was—not at all as towering and formidable as Jace. "Not even a postcard in six months, either."

"I didn't think you'd want to hear from me," she murmured.

"Why not? It wasn't my bull you ran over." He chuckled.

"No, it was mine," came a rough voice from behind Duncan, and Amanda stiffened involuntarily.

Tugging away from Duncan, she shook back her wealth of soft, curling hair and glared at Jace's set face. He was dressed for work this morning, in expensively cut but faded jeans and a gray shirt that just matched his cold, narrow eyes. Atop his head was the old black Stetson.

"Good morning, Jace," she said with chilling sweetness. "So sorry I forgot my manners yesterday. I haven't thanked you for your warm reception."

Jace threw up an eyebrow, and there was something indefinable in the look he gave her. "Don't strain yourself, Lady."

Her face burned. "My name is Amanda. Or Miss Carson. Or hey, you. But don't call me Lady. I don't like it."

One corner of Jace's hard mouth went up in a taunting smile. "Brave in company, aren't you? Try it when we're alone."

"Make sure your insurance is paid up first, won't you?" she said, smiling venomously.

"Now, friends," Duncan interrupted, "this is no way to start off a beautiful morning. Especially when we haven't even had breakfast."

"Haven't we?" Amanda asked. "Your brother's had two bites of me already."

Jace cocked his head at her and his eyes sparkled dangerously, like sun on ice crystals. "Careful, honey. I hit back."

"Go ahead," she challenged bravely.

"On my own ground," he said with the light of battle kindling in his face. "And in my own time." He looked from Amanda to Duncan. "What came out of the meeting?"

"Jenkins is interested," the younger man replied with a smile. "I think I hooked him. We'll know tomorrow. Mean-while, has Black explained what the ad agency can do for us on that Florida development?"

"Briefly, but not in any detail," Jace replied.

"What do you think?" Duncan persisted, his brown eyes questioning Jace's gray ones.

Jace stared back. "I'll have to hear more about it. A hell of a lot more."

"Sounds like we're in for a long week." The younger man sighed.

"It may be too long for some of us," came the curt reply, and a pair of silvery eyes cut at Amanda. "And if Lady here doesn't get that chip off her shoulder, Black can damned well take his proposal back to San Antonio without my signature on any contract."

Amanda hated him for that threat. It was all the more despicable because she knew he meant it. He'd carry his resentment of her over into business, and he was ruthless enough to deny Terry the account out of sheer spite. Jace never bluffed. He never had to. People always came around to his way of thinking in the end.

"Now, Jace," Duncan began, mediating as always.

"I've got work to do," Jace growled, pivoting on his booted heel. "Come on down to the Kennedy bottoms when you've had breakfast and I'll show you the young bull I bought at the Western Heritage sale last week."

"Can I bring Amanda?" Duncan asked with calculating eyes.

Jace's broad shoulders stiffened. He glanced back angrily. "I'd like to keep this one," he said curtly, and kept walking.

Amanda's face froze. She glared at the long, muscular back with pure hatred. "I wish he'd fall down the stairs," she muttered.

"Jace never falls," he reminded her. "And if he ever did, he'd land on his feet." He grinned down at her. "My, my, how you've changed. You never used to talk back to him."

"I'm twenty-three years old, and he's not using me for a doormat anymore," she replied with cool hauteur.

Duncan nodded, and she thought she detected a hint of smugness in his eyes before they darted away. "Get dressed and come on down," he told her. "I'm anxious to hear about the ad campaign you and Black have worked up."

"Do Tess and her father have to see it, too?" she asked suddenly.

"Tess!" he grumbled. "I'd forgotten about her. Well, we'll cross that bridge later. Jace and I have a bigger investment than the Andersons, so we'll have the final say."

"Jace will side with them," she said certainly.

"He might surprise you. In fact," he added mysteriously, "I'd bet on it. Get dressed, girl, time's a-wasting!"

She saluted him. "Yes, sir!"

* * *

Later in the day, Duncan took his guests out for a ride around the ranch on horseback, taking care to see that Terry—an admitted novice—got a slow, gentle mount.

The ranch stretched off in every direction, fenced in green and white, with neat barns and even neater paddocks. It was a staggering operation.

"Jace's computer stores records on over a hundred thousand head," Duncan told Terry as they watched the beefy Santa Gertrudis cattle graze, their rich red coats burning in the sun. "We're fortunate enough to be able to run both purebred and grade cattle here, and we have our own feed-

lot. We don't have to contract our beef cattle out before we sell them. We can feed them out right here on the ranch."

Terry blinked. Ranch talk was new to him, but to Amanda, who knew and loved every stick and horn on the place, it was familiar and interesting.

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