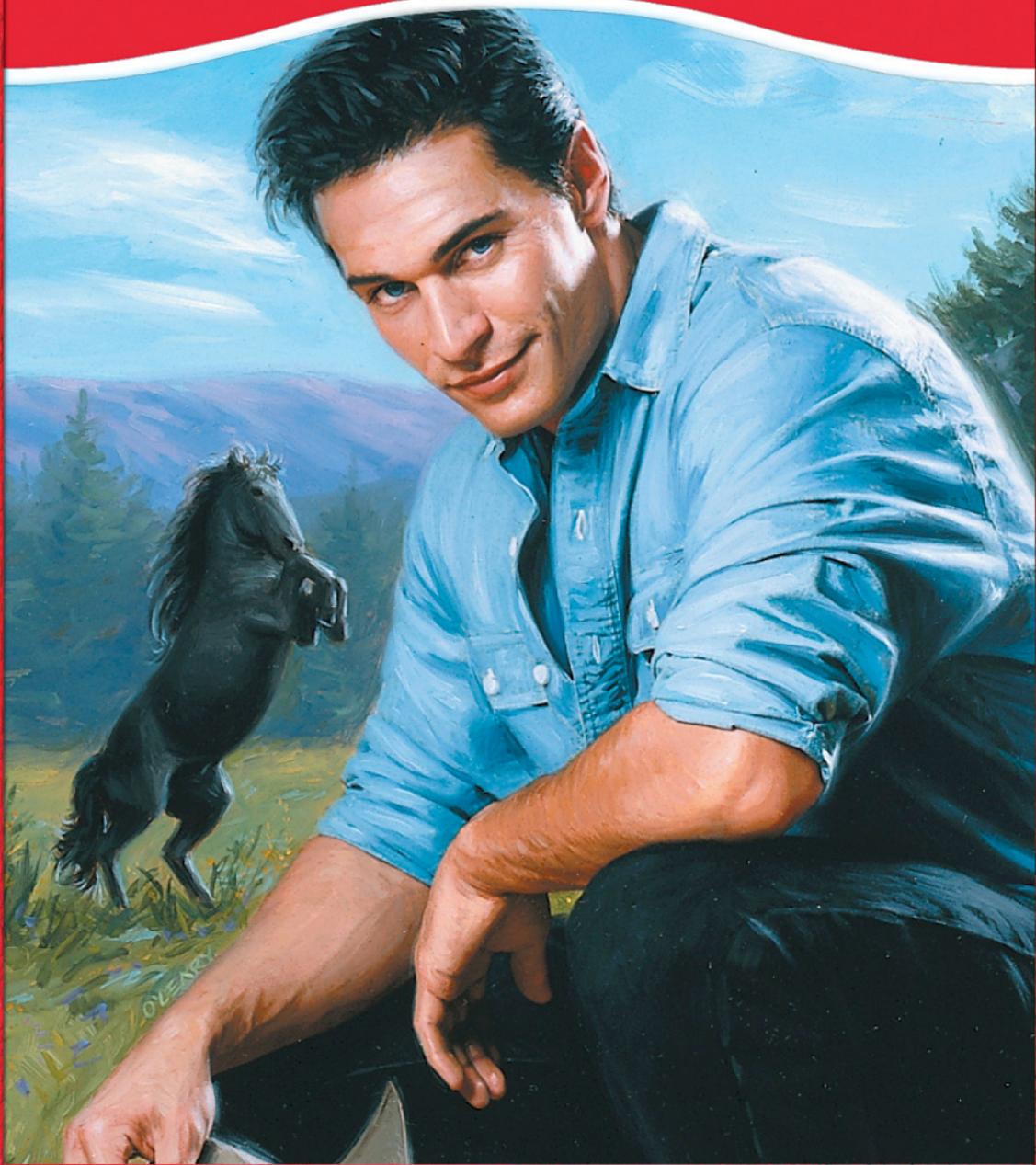


MILLS & BOON®

Tough To Tame

Jackie Merritt



Vintage Desire

Jackie Merritt
Tough To Tame

«HarperCollins»

Merritt J.

Tough To Tame / J. Merritt — «HarperCollins»,

I knew a woman on the ranch would disrupt my peace—and I sure was right. Jake Banyon had his hands full catching a wild stallion without wrangling with a fiery Carly Paxton. His boss's daughter's unexpected invasion of his hard-earned privacy posed a threat to Jake's loner status. The explosive temptress was all dangerous curves, yet her eyes said commitment—just the kind of woman Jake had vowed to avoid. But he hadn't anticipated the gut-wrenching longing she stirred in him—or the unexpected desire to be tamed by love...

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The Ranch Was Not Going To Be The Same During Carly's Visit, And There Was No Pretending Otherwise.

But that was something he'd known before her arrival. What he hadn't anticipated or foreseen was the heart-pounding, throat-drying, gut-wrenching awareness in his own system caused by this woman. Not that he would do anything about it even if he wanted to, which, for his own peace of mind, he didn't. But she was his boss's daughter, for crying out loud, and even if he were the most dedicated of womanizers—as he'd once been—he would not touch his employer's daughter.

But oh, how he wanted to!

Dear Reader,

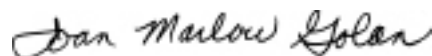
Silhouette is celebrating its 20th anniversary throughout 2000! So, to usher in the first summer of the millennium, why not indulge yourself with six powerful, passionate, provocative love stories from Silhouette Desire?

Jackie Merritt returns to Desire with a MAN OF THE MONTH who's Tough To Tame. Enjoy the sparks that fly between a rugged ranch manager and the feisty lady who turns his world upside down! Another wonderful romance from RITA Award winner Caroline Cross is in store for you this month with *The Rancher and the Nanny*, in which a rags-to-riches hero learns trust and love from the riches-to-rags woman who cares for his secret child.

Watch for Meagan McKinney's *The Cowboy Meets His Match*—an octogenarian matchmaker sets up an ice-princess heiress with a virile rodeo star. The Desire theme promotion THE BABY BANK, about sperm-bank client heroines who find love unexpectedly, concludes with Susan Crosby's *The Baby Gift*. Wonderful newcomer Sheri WhiteFeather offers another irresistible Native American hero with *Cheyenne Dad*. And Kate Little's hero reunites with his lost love in a marriage of convenience to save her from financial ruin in *The Determined Groom*.

So come join in the celebration and start your summer off on the supersensual side—by reading all six of these tantalizing Desire books!

Enjoy!



Joan Marlow Golan
Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire

Tough To Tame

Jackie Merritt



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JACKIE MERRITT

and her husband have settled once more in the Southwest after traveling around the West and Northwest for a while—Jackie wanted to soak up the atmosphere and find new locales and inspirations for her appealing Western stories.

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One

The long-distance telephone conversation began as usual; Stuart “Stu” Paxton, calling from his home in New York, asked how things were going at his ranch in Wyoming. What was unusual was the reply of the ranch manager, Jake Banyon. “I’m afraid we have a problem, Stu. A strange stallion has been gathering himself a harem of our mares. He collected one the other night and two more just last night.”

“A strange stallion, Jake? I’m not following.”

“Neither am I,” Jake said grimly. “Truth is I have no idea where he came from or who he belongs to. If he belongs to anyone, that is. He appears to be completely on his own.”

“Surely you’re not thinking he’s a wild horse,” Stuart said, sounding skeptical.

“It’s not impossible, Stu, though to be perfectly honest he has the conformation lines of good breeding. Course, I’ve only seen him once and that was from a distance.”

“And he just showed up? A full-grown stallion? Jake, he had to come from somewhere. With the ranch being so isolated and all, I mean, he didn’t just trot over from a neighbor’s field.”

“Exactly. I’ve put an ad in the Tamarack newspaper describing him. If anyone in this county owns him, they’ll be calling. In the meantime, I’ve got men out every day trying to locate his lair. I’d like to get those mares back.”

“And if you manage to capture him?”

“That’s hard to say without getting a closer look at him.” Jake was intimating that if the stallion did belong to someone, the horse might be carrying tattoos or brands identifying his owner.

Stu grasped the concept at once. “Makes sense. Well, let me know what happens.”

“Will do.” Jake then started talking about other events on the 4,000-acre Wild Horse Ranch, owned by the Paxton family for almost a century. Stuart hadn’t taken to the isolation and business of raising cattle, as his ancestors had, and he’d left the ranch right out of high school and, to this day, only went back two or three times a year. Since his father’s death ten years before, Stuart had relied entirely on hired help to keep the place going. Even though he didn’t want to live in Wyoming, he couldn’t bring himself to sell his birthright. He’d run into some bad apples posing as ranch managers, however, and now claimed to be extremely fortunate to have a man of Jake Banyon’s knowledge and expertise at the helm. During their four-year working relationship, the two men—even though Stuart was twenty years older than Jake—had formed a durable bond of mutual respect.

Jake was still talking about current affairs at the ranch when Stuart interrupted. “Jake, sorry to break in like this, but I called tonight for a reason. I need a favor. Uh, it’s a personal favor.”

Stuart sounded anxious, which startled Jake. If ever he’d met a more confident, self-assured man than Stuart Paxton, he couldn’t remember it. Nor, he realized, could he recall Stuart ever asking for, or even mentioning, a “personal favor.” This was a first, and it made Jake sit up and take notice. He would, after all, do just about anything for Stuart.

Jake had grown up on a ranch—same as Stuart—but that was the only similarity between the two men’s early years. Stuart went to college and then proceeded to make a name and a fortune for himself in the business world. Jake’s home had been in Montana. He had finished high school but he’d been too far gone on a local girl to consider leaving her to attend college—a disappointment for his father. But he’d worked as a cowhand for his dad and made plans with Gloria to get married in August.

When August rolled around that summer, however, Gloria gave him back his ring and announced that she’d met someone else. “Sorry,” she’d said calmly.

Jake went a little crazy. He was nineteen years old and believed his life was over. Everyone had advice for him, none of it meant a damn. He loved a girl who’d met “someone else,” and there was nothing he could do about it. He had never felt so helpless in his life, especially when Gloria moved away and no one would tell him where she’d gone.

He started going from woman to woman—the wilder the better—until his father gruffly told him to wake up and smell the coffee. “Jake, you’re drinking too much, and I can’t depend on you anymore. Find yourself another job.”

Years passed. Jake’s downward slide went from bad to worse, and he’d pretty much hit rock bottom when he’d finally gotten a whiff of that coffee his dad had talked about. It was at his father’s funeral—his mother had died long before—when something inside of him seemed to cave in and he saw a painfully clear image of what he’d been doing to himself over a girl who probably never had loved him. He vowed on the spot to be the kind of man his dad had been—hardworking and clean-living. He would, of course, run the family ranch.

Only there no longer was a family ranch. The bank fore-closed, and Jake—totally stunned and shaken—had tried to make some sense out of the shambles of his life. His old friends—especially the women—couldn’t understand why he avoided them or why he wasn’t hanging out at his favorite watering holes.

To make a complete break with the past, Jake left Montana and went to Wyoming to find work, and he just happened to stop in a little town called Tamarack. While eating supper in a café he read the local newspaper and saw an ad for a ranch manager. That was how he met Stuart Paxton, and to this day Jake still considered it a miracle that Stuart had taken a chance on the transient, down-on-his-luck stumblebum he’d been four years ago.

Jake’s most profound regret was that his parents, especially his father, had not lived to see the man he was today. He worked hard, he was physically strong and fit, he didn’t smoke, drink or chase wild women. In fact, the pendulum had swung so far in the other direction that Jake had become an antisocial loner. That was one reason he loved the Wild Horse Ranch; it was eighty miles from Tamarack, the nearest town, and he didn’t have to even set eyes on a woman unless he wanted to take that long drive, which didn’t happen often. His sex drive, once so outrageously out of control, was now banked and mostly forgotten. Jake questioned his wasted youth and wished he had it to do over again. He should have gone to college when Gloria broke their engagement. He should have behaved like a man, taken her rejection on the chin and gotten on with life instead of floundering in self-pity for so many years. All he could do, he’d finally decided, was to accept the way he had once lived and be proud of the way he lived now, sincerely believing that he had Stuart Paxton to thank for everything he’d accomplished.

It was the reason he said quietly, “Stu, whatever you need, if I can help out, all you have to do is name it.”

“Thanks, Jake. I knew I could count on you. Okay, here’s the situation. You’ve heard me mention my daughter Carly.”

“Uh, sure, Stu. What about her?” Actually, Jake just barely recalled Stu talking about his daughter, probably because Jake simply hadn’t been interested enough to retain the memory. Stuart’s wife had died many years ago, and Jake did remember—vaguely—Stuart saying something about the difficulties of raising a daughter without her mother.

“I brought Carly to the ranch a couple of times when she was a little girl, but then in her teens she decided she didn’t like it, so I didn’t force her to go with me when I went to Wyoming. She hasn’t been there for about fifteen years. Anyhow, this past year has really been tough on her—her divorce, you know—and, Jake, it breaks my heart to see her so unhappy. She’s trying so damned hard to pick up the pieces and start a new life that she deserves a medal. But I think she still can’t believe that a man could be as...as phony and despicable as her ex was.”

Jake frowned. There was something Stuart wasn’t saying, Jake could hear the hesitation, the holdback, in Stuart’s voice. But Jake really didn’t want to hear any sordid details about anyone’s divorce—anyone else’s personal problems, for that matter, because he had more harsh memories of his own than any one person deserved—so he didn’t encourage Stuart to say more than he had.

Instead, he murmured quietly, “What is it you want me to do?” He heard his employer draw a long breath before he spoke.

“I’ve been thinking that a change of scene just might give Carly a whole new perspective. Jake, would you mind if I sent her to the ranch for a visit?”

Jake’s whole body stiffened with instantaneous dread. It was all he could do to say something even remotely sensible. “It’s your ranch,” he mumbled.

“But you’re running it, Jake. It’s your home, and if Carly’s presence would bother you in any way...”

Jake had gotten his wits together—some of them, at least. “No, no, Stu,” he said, abruptly cutting in. “Carly is more than welcome here. Anytime.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.” Jake’s mouth was so dry he felt parched. The ranch was a strictly male society. Even the cook was a man. The house was old, rundown and not especially clean. Jake was the only person who used the house at all; every other man on the place slept in the bunkhouse.

But Stuart knew all that, Jake thought uneasily. When Stuart came to the ranch, he used one of the four bedrooms on the second floor. There were boots and clothes in that particular room’s closet and bureau, things that Stuart deliberately left behind so he wouldn’t be hauling them back and forth between New York and Wyoming.

There were no bedrooms on the first floor, which meant that Carly would be sleeping upstairs, same as Jake. It flashed through Jake’s mind that he could move into the bunkhouse during her visit, but he hated giving up his privacy so much that he immediately retreated from that idea. He needed his privacy, he could not live with a bunch of men. And the crew wouldn’t like it, either. Jake had never attempted to be buddies with his men, and if he moved into the bunkhouse now, everyone on the place would be uncomfortable.

“I think Carly remembers some things about the ranch,” Stuart said. “When I brought her there as a child, my folks were still living, of course, so her memories could be more about her grandparents than about the ranch itself. But it’s a nice quiet place, Jake—which I think she needs right now—and she will own it someday, so there’s more than one reason why she should spend some time in Wyoming.”

“Anything you say, Stu.” Jake marveled at the normalcy of his voice when his pulse was leaping around erratically and his palms were sweaty. Everything had been just about perfect for four years now, ever since he’d set foot on Wild Horse Ranch. A woman on the place—any woman—would change the very air they all breathed. The men smoked, chewed tobacco, spit and cussed wherever and whenever they felt like it. They told off-color jokes and made crude references to females in general, even though most of them were married or had girlfriends and would defend the reputations of their own women to the death, if challenged.

But that was all stuff that Stuart knew, too, Jake thought. Stuart had grown up among cowhands, and there was one thing they both knew they could rely on. Cowboys might be tough talkers and hard as nails with other men, but they were respectful and often shy around a lady. Now, if the lady turned out to be not so ladylike, that was a different story, but the truth was that most cowhands—just like most men in any line of work—took their cue from the woman.

Actually, Jake admitted with a knot of anxiety in his gut, it wasn’t the men he was worried about if Carly really did come to the ranch; it was himself. He liked the status quo. He liked eating in the cookshack with the crew and not having to worry about meals. How would Carly take eating with a bunch of strange men?

Of course, there again Stuart knew the score, and Jake didn’t think it was his place to suggest that his employer’s daughter might not enjoy some of the routines on the ranch.

“When, uh, do you think she’ll be coming?”

“Probably in a week or so. I’ll let you know for sure.”

“Do you want me to meet her plane in Cheyenne?”

“No, I think I’ll hire a helicopter for the trip from Cheyenne to the ranch. I’ll let you know when everything comes together,” Stuart said.

“Yeah, okay,” Jake mumbled. They talked a few more minutes, but when Jake hung up he couldn’t remember what they’d said. He really felt as though the life he had created for himself on this beautiful piece of Wyoming land was slipping away. A rational part of his brain told him not to panic or jump to conclusions. After all, Carly Paxton might be a perfectly nice person who would fit in so smoothly that no one on the ranch would even be aware of her presence.

“Yeah, right,” Jake muttered with a dark scowl on his face. Getting up from the desk he’d been sitting at in the room used as an office in the house, he headed for the front door and stepped outside onto the wide, wraparound porch. This was a favorite after-dark retreat. The crew was somewhere in the vicinity of the bunkhouse—smoking, talking and just hanging around until bedtime—but that building was behind the main house, along with the barns and corrals, the sheds and such. Jake always felt pretty much alone on the front porch, and when the weather was good—as it was now, in late June—he spent a lot of evenings out there. It was a good place to think and to formulate the men’s work schedules. The seasons pretty much determined the cycle of work on cattle ranches, but there were still decisions to be made about which man should be doing what.

Settling himself into a chair, Jake inhaled deeply and attempted to reason away the knot of anxiety in his gut. That exercise raised a question: Who was he now? He was not the same man he’d been after Gloria dumped him, nor was he like the other cowhands on the ranch. He couldn’t compare himself to Stuart, who possessed almost a magical talent for making money and who certainly lived in a much bigger world than Jake did.

The word misfit entered Jake’s mind, and he sighed heavily. He couldn’t deny being a misfit, nor could he deny the bitterness he still felt toward all women because of what one had done to him, even though he kept it fairly well under control. For instance, it was not a subject he had ever discussed with Stuart. In fact, he hadn’t talked about his past with anyone since coming to Wyoming. Wasn’t it rather peculiar that he couldn’t get rid of the bitterness when he’d stopped seeing Gloria so long ago?

Jake thinned his lips. He hated these moments when he tried to analyze himself. Good Lord, he was no worse than any other man on the place. Everyone had problems and not everyone had solutions. He would live through Carly’s visit and, in the meantime, he’d do a little praying that she still wouldn’t like the ranch and her stay would be brief.

Other than worry, what else could he do?

This helicopter ride is by far the best part of today’s trip, Carly thought while gazing at the Wyoming landscape below the aircraft. She had very little memory of the openness, the lack of population, and realized that the things she did remember from childhood visits to the Paxton ranch were from a child’s point of view and possibly contradictory to the reality of this remote part of the world.

Today she was fascinated with the occasional huddles of buildings she saw—obviously other ranches, for the most part few and far between—and the almost traffic-free roads, the immense fields and pastures dwarfing herds of cattle and antelope. The beauty of the distant mountains—the Tetons—actually took her breath, and she felt something sigh within her, a whisper of serenity she hadn’t felt in a very long time.

Carly really hadn’t wanted to come to Wyoming, and had agreed to her father’s suggestion merely to alleviate his concern for her. She had caused him terrible worries in the past year and had decided that a trip to Wyoming was a very small sacrifice for her to make, if it made her dad feel better.

Now, seeing the area for herself, through adult eyes, she realized there was no sacrifice involved. Who would not appreciate the vastness of uncluttered valleys and the grandeur of distant mountains,

such as she was viewing? Small wonder that her father had become excited whenever he'd planned a trip to the ranch.

The pilot touched her arm to get her attention. "Your destination is just ahead," he told her. "We'll be landing in that field to the right of the house." The copter began descending.

Carly found the spot the pilot had indicated and the corners of her lips tipped into a little half smile when she found herself nostalgically remembering the large two-story house, with its wraparound porch, and the numerous old shade trees in the yard. Attempting to absorb everything at once, her gaze moved to the barns, sheds and corrals. The lower the copter dropped, the more details she could see.

Then, movement farther out caught her eye, and she spotted two men on horseback, riding hard it seemed, trailing some distance behind a third horse. Were the men trying to catch the riderless horse? For some reason, Carly wanted to know what was happening.

"Could you get closer to those three horses?" she asked the pilot.

"Sure, no problem," he told her.

The helicopter swung to the right and dropped lower, until it was just above the treetops. Carly could see the two riders look up and knew that the copter had startled them. At almost the same moment she got an unobstructed view of the third horse, the one without a rider.

"Oh, he's magnificent," she whispered in awe. The horse was black as coal, and his hide glistened with perspiration in the waning afternoon light. Why on earth were those two men running him so hard? Had he escaped a stall or corral? "What do you think is going on?" she asked the pilot.

"Looks like the men on horseback are trying to rope the third horse. They're both carrying ropes."

"Oh, yes, I see that now." The black horse suddenly disappeared in a heavy stand of timber, and a minute later so did the two men and their mounts. Carly felt a pang of disappointment. She would have liked very much to see the outcome of that chase.

"Okay if we land now?" the pilot asked.

"Yes, of course. Thanks for the detour."

"No problem at all. As I told you when we met, I've flown your father out to the ranch many times. He sometimes requests a few detours along the way."

Carly smiled. "Like father, like daughter?" Carly liked being favorably compared to her father, even though she knew their personalities differed in some very crucial ways. Stuart was a laid-back easygoing guy, which sometimes gave people an erroneous impression of his intelligence and perspicacity, particularly in business. Carly, on the other hand, was high-strung, excitable and quick to speak her mind. Plus, even with a high IQ, she had inherited very little of her father's talent for spotting a money-making deal and then knowing exactly what to do about it.

There was one more trait Carly wished she had inherited from her dad: He was an incredibly good judge of character, and she fell really short in that department. Her awful marriage was proof of that, and she wondered now if she would ever trust her own judgment of a man again. Not that she was in any kind of rush for another personal, so-called romantic relationship. Her entire system shied from the idea whenever it passed through her mind, and she didn't doubt that it could be a very long time before she let herself be caught in that trap again. In truth, she had come to believe that the whole concept of romance was nothing more than media hype to sell magazines and expensive products to lily-livered women who believed they simply could not live any sort of productive life without a man. She was no longer in that category, thank God. Instead of the romantic little fool she'd once been, she was now a down-to-earth, unromantic, unsentimental, no-nonsense realist. No sweet-talking, butter-wouldn't-melt-in-his-mouth man was ever going to pull the wool over her eyes again. She believed it with every fiber of her being.

The pilot, a pleasant, older man, smiled back. "No crime in that."

Carly smiled again, but said no more. They were about to land and she could see a tall lanky man in jeans, boots and a big hat standing at the edge of the field.

When Jake heard the approaching helicopter, he had immediately headed for the landing field. He'd stood there frowning when the copter veered off in another direction. But he'd been able to follow its course well enough and had watched until it turned around.

Jake was admittedly nervous about this first meeting with Stuart's daughter. To be perfectly honest, he'd been nervous since he'd lied to Stuart on the phone and said that Carly was welcome to visit the ranch anytime. She wasn't welcome, no woman was, and Jake had been wishing for everything from a pilot's strike canceling flights to Wyoming to a flu virus hitting the entire country that wouldn't kill anyone but would sure keep them from traveling. Those were silly wishes, of course. Nothing was going to prevent Carly's visit, and that fact had sank in a little deeper every day until now it seemed to gnaw at the very center of Jake's bones.

It was especially unnerving that instead of landing immediately, the copter had flown a circle over the ranch compound. Since the pilot would have no reason to make that aerial tour, then Carly must have asked him to do it.

Hell, why wouldn't she want to get a good look at the ranch? She hasn't been here since she was a kid.

That argument, though sensible, didn't elevate Jake's dark mood by much. If Carly was the kind of woman to throw her weight around because her dad owned the ranch, then there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell of the two of them getting along. And if they didn't get along, wouldn't it affect his and Stuart's relationship?

Jake's lips thinned from an abrupt onslaught of tension. He couldn't let anything destroy, or even maim, his and Stuart's working relationship. He and Carly Paxton—Stuart had told him that she'd resumed her maiden name after the divorce—had to get along, even if it meant his kowtowing to an overbearing woman's whims. Mumbling a curse over that image, Jake watched the copter descend and finally settle on the ground.

The pilot cut the engine, and Jake began walking toward the aircraft. He had a terrible knot in his gut and something else almost as uncomfortable—a premonition. From this moment on his life was not going to be the same.

“Damn,” he muttered under his breath. “Dammit to hell.”

Two

Carly unhooked her seat belt with her gaze on the tall man coming forth. He had to be Jake Banyon, but he wasn't at all what she'd expected. How had she gotten the impression that the ranch's manager was much older? She was approaching thirty, and Banyon looked to be about the same. On top of that surprise was another: he was good-looking! Taking in his long, lean body clad in snug, faded jeans and a blue work shirt, and the ruggedly handsome—though hard—features of his face, Carly felt an unmistakably sexual flutter in the pit of her stomach.

The sensation startled then angered her, and she set her lips into a thin, grim line. This visit just might be cut very short, she thought resentfully, although she had packed for a long stay just in case she happened to like the ranch. Dad could have told me Banyon was young and good-looking. Why didn't he ever mention it?

The pilot hopped out of his side of the copter, called a hello to Jake and then opened the door for Carly. She put her feet on the ground just as Jake walked up, took off his hat with one hand and offered the other.

"Jake Banyon," he said tonelessly and without a smile. "Welcome to Wild Horse Ranch."

"Thank you," Carly said stiffly, giving his hand a quick shake and then pulling hers back as though she had just touched something poisonous. Actually, the warmth and life of his working man's calloused hand had sent shock waves through her system that nearly caused her to panic right in Banyon's face.

Good Lord, she thought in the next uneasy breath, except for the sniffing and smelling we are sizing each other up like two strange dogs!

It was true. Jake was shaken because Carly was tall and slender, with stunning green eyes and long dark hair. He'd hoped—ardently—that she would be ordinary, 'very ordinary', and she wasn't. She was appealingly female and would stand out in any crowd.

Carly's thoughts were similar and horribly perturbing. Banyon had the bluest eyes she'd ever seen, a head of almost black hair and darkly tanned skin. There was no warmth in those incredible eyes, but even cold and guarded they were drop-dead gorgeous. She'd been so positive that she would not be affected by a man for a long, long time and here she was feeling feverish and giddy around a damn cowboy. It was totally unacceptable, and any remnants of panic she'd felt a minute ago vanished and were replaced by a defiant determination to remain on her family's ranch for as long as she wanted. No way was she going to let a good-looking cowboy scare her off.

The pilot was taking luggage from the cargo compartment and setting the suitcases on the ground. It was a nice, safe subject, and Jake used it to get himself thinking about something other than Carly's long legs and impressive figure, displayed nicely but provocatively—he thought—in a pair of fitted jeans and a blue-and-red striped shirt.

"I'm going to move your luggage away from the copter," he said. "Then I'll walk you up to the house. I'll have a couple of the men bring in your suitcases."

Carly almost said, "Walking me to the house won't be necessary. I'm sure I can find it on my own." But she stopped herself in time and murmured instead, "That will be fine." As Jake walked over to the pilot and luggage, Carly whispered, "That nicety was for you, Dad." It wasn't Banyon's fault that his good looks and age unnerved her, and neither could she condemn her father for not better describing Banyon during conversations about the ranch and Wyoming. Dad probably hasn't even noticed that Jake is good-looking, and why would he?

Truth was, she thought uneasily, she could tell that she was as much of a surprise for Jake as he was for her. This was not a comfortable situation for either of them. She knew about the bunkhouse and that Jake was the only person occupying the house. She knew about the cookhouse and that the men took their meals in an attached dining room. Her father had—at least—emphasized those points

again, in case she'd forgotten past discussions, and he'd told her that she could eat with the men or prepare her own meals in the house, whichever she preferred. His final advice had been to "relax and enjoy yourself, honey."

Carly turned to scan the peaceful green fields that stretched for miles in every direction, then the foothills to the west and finally the mountainous horizon. One would have to look long and hard for a more perfect place in which to relax, but something told her that she would have found relaxation much easier to attain if Banyon had been twenty years older, bald and bowlegged.

She lowered her eyebrows, frowning over her own narrowed eyes as she contemplated her unexpected and extremely unwelcome physical reactions to Jake Banyon. She was positive she would be as irate over an attraction to any man at this stage of her life. She needed more time to heal, for God's sake. The emotional wounds from her frightening farce of a marriage were barely scarred over, and in all honesty the mere thought of romance made her shudder. Romance was merely an illusion, anyhow, she now believed, a short-term ploy that men used to get women right where they wanted them. Once that was accomplished and men started showing their true colors, their women had better watch out.

Heaving a sigh, Carly pushed those dreadful thoughts from her mind and looked at Banyon and the pilot moving her luggage a safe distance from the helicopter. She decided then and there that however magnetic she found Banyon to be, he was never going to know about it, primarily because she was not going to let a meaningless physical attraction override her common sense. She wasn't ready for anything but the most distant of friendships with any member of the opposite sex, and until she was ready, this and any other relationship with a man would be chilly indeed.

The two men shook hands, the pilot called a goodbye to her and returned to the cabin of his aircraft. Carly moved away from the copter and stood near her suitcases.

Jake walked up. "Your things will be fine here for a few minutes. Let's go up to the house now."

"All right." She spoke without really looking at him, and she began walking when he did. The helicopter took off, and the turbulence caused by the rotors tossed her hair around. Smoothing it down, she chanced a quick glance at Banyon. "I hope this visit is not too much of an intrusion," she said coolly.

"Don't worry about it."

"Sounds like you are," she said bluntly.

"I'm what?"

"Worried. Well, don't be. I promise to stay out of your hair."

Can you? Are you capable of entertaining yourself and staying out of everyone's way? Jake doubted it. The ranch was not going to be the same during Carly's visit, and there was no pretending otherwise.

But that was something he'd known before her arrival. What he hadn't anticipated or foreseen was the heart-pounding, throat-drying, gut-wrenching awareness in his own system caused by this woman. Not that he would do anything about it even if he wanted to, which he didn't, for his own peace of mind. But she was Stuart's daughter, for crying out loud. And even if he were the most dedicated of womanizers—as he'd once been—he would not touch his employer's daughter. It was more than that, though; he respected Stuart far too much to risk offending him by making a pass at his daughter.

All of those surprising feelings and thoughts aside, however, Jake felt an obligation to make Stuart's daughter feel welcome. "You're not an intrusion, and I'm not worried about anything. In fact, I sincerely hope you enjoy your stay."

She didn't believe a word of it. Tone of voice was so much more telling than words, and he really sounded as though he'd just eaten some sour grapes. The truth came to her in a flash. Banyon had agreed to her visiting the ranch because her father had put it to him in a way he hadn't been able to gracefully refuse.

Carly was thinking of the bond between her dad and Jake Banyon when he asked, “How was your trip?”

In Carly’s opinion that was one of those questions people asked when they didn’t know what else to say. But it indicated that he was trying to make the best of things, and could she do any less?

“Long,” she said a bit dryly, then remembered that it hadn’t all been boring. “The helicopter ride was enjoyable, and let me ask you about something I saw from the air when we were approaching the ranch. Two men on horseback were chasing a third horse. Or they appeared to be chasing it. Do you know what was going on?”

Jake abruptly stopped walking to stare at her. “Was the third horse black?”

What a peculiar reaction to a simple question, Carly thought. She certainly had gotten his full attention with it. Standing her ground, she stared back, though he really didn’t seem to notice. Apparently he was still intent on the third horse, which seemed odd to Carly.

Still, he was obviously anxious about her reply, so she didn’t keep him waiting. “The third horse was black as pitch, and probably one of the most beautiful horses I’ve ever seen,” she recited, wondering if that was the information he was seeking.

“That damned devil stallion!” Jake’s eyes bore an angry light. “He’s getting bolder. I sure hope those men you saw captured him.”

“What?” Carly’s confusion showed on her face. “Did he escape...or something?”

“Escape! He doesn’t belong to this ranch. He doesn’t belong to anybody, as far as I can tell. He’s wild as a March wind, and he’s stealing our mares.”

Carly frowned. “I don’t get it. I mean, are wild horses common around here?”

“They used to be,” Jake said grimly. “The story is that about a hundred years ago a cavalry unit turned a bunch of horses loose in this part of Wyoming. The herd multiplied for a while, then began dying out. I haven’t heard of anyone spotting any of those mustangs in years. Then, out of the blue, that black stallion showed up and started gathering himself a harem of our best mares.”

Jake started walking again, and Carly hurried to keep stride. “I still don’t understand,” she said. “I’ve read about wild horses and seen pictures of them, and that stallion doesn’t look at all like the mustangs in those photos.”

“I know he doesn’t. He looks like he comes from good stock, but I’ve tried everything I know to locate his owner, with no luck. The only conclusion I’ve been able to come up with is that a mustang mated with a mare of good lineage and the result was that stallion.”

“I guess that theory makes sense,” Carly murmured, intrigued by the “mystery” stallion and where he’d come from. “And he’s been collecting a harem, as you put it?”

“He’s already managed to lure away five of our mares.”

“Is he luring mares from other ranches, as well?”

“Not that I’ve heard.”

He’d spoken so curtly, so brusquely, that Carly sent him a quick, curious glance. Banyon struck her as one of those people who would rather stew silently than talk about a problem. And while he’d already had the wild stallion problem to deal with before today, her arrival had obviously given him another one. She sensed that he would rather not talk about the stallion, but she really didn’t care what he preferred. Her curiosity had been piqued and she wanted to know everything he did.

“Would you say that he considers this ranch his home territory?” she asked.

“God only knows,” Jake muttered.

“Well, this is a huge ranch. Maybe he was born here.”

“It’s possible.”

Carly was positive that he’d grunted those two words. Obviously the topic unnerved Banyon, and so did her insistence on talking about it. But they had clashed at first sight, she told herself, so why worry now about soothing the savage beast, so to speak? Banyon seemed to be as untamed as this country, a raw, ill-bred, boringly macho guy whose favorite pastimes probably included tractor

pulls and those perfectly awful arena shows where men driving old clunker cars deliberately ran into each other.

Besides, she really didn't care if Banyon liked her or not, though it was not something she'd thought about before meeting him, and if she wanted to say something, she'd do it.

"Well," she drawled, "I guess this ranch is appropriately named."

Jake sent her a look of utter disgust. "Losing good mares to a rogue stallion is not funny."

"No, but it is interesting. Wild Horse Ranch is being stormed by a wild stallion. Yes, I find that quite interesting. Tell me, if and when you capture him, what will you do with him?"

"Some of the men think we should shoot him."

Carly's eyes got huge from shock. "You wouldn't! Does Dad know about this?"

"He knows." They had finally reached the lawn around the house. Jake had had enough conversation about that stallion and, in fact, was anxious to deposit Carly in the house so he could go and find the men who had been chasing that devil. It would be an incredible stroke of luck if they'd caught him.

Carly still wasn't through with the subject, however. "I can't believe Dad would agree to killing such a beautiful animal, just because he's a nuisance," she said with distinct disapproval.

Jake stopped walking and faced her. He spoke gruffly, impatiently. "Let me set the record straight. First of all, I said some of the men think we should shoot that horse. I didn't say how I felt about it. Second, that stallion is not just a nuisance. He's a damn thief, and as long as he's running wild he's going to keep on increasing his herd of mares. Do you think a rancher should ignore the loss of valuable horses? Your father doesn't think so, and neither do I." Spinning on his heel, Jake headed for the house.

Carly ran to catch up. "So you're not going to shoot him?"

"I didn't say that, either," Jake growled, surprising himself with a comment that indicated he might decide to shoot the stallion, when, in fact, he'd never once considered that option. He was not an animal killer, never had been. He didn't even like hunting. But that stallion had him on edge, Carly herself had him on edge, and he wished to high heaven that she would just stop talking about it.

She knew what he wished, which was kind of strange as reading other people's minds was not a common occurrence for her. But Banyon's annoyance was so obvious. He actually looked pained, as though she or some unseen thing was sticking pins into him.

Well, that was just tough. No one was going to shoot that horse while she was here, and Banyon might as well know from the get-go how she felt about it. Besides, she didn't particularly like the tone of voice he was using with her, as though no one but him even had a right to an opinion about that stallion.

"Maybe I should also set the record straight," she said coolly. "I didn't come here with any intentions of questioning your authority on any aspect of the operation of this ranch. You and Dad apparently have a mutually acceptable working agreement, which I fully intended to honor. But I will not sit by calmly and permit you or anyone else to shoot a horse that is only doing what his nature demands."

They had reached the stairs to the front porch. Jake stopped in his tracks and turned to her with his eyes narrowed, thinking, so she is the kind of woman to throw her weight around! And, as galling as it was, she had a right. Or she would have someday, when she inherited the ranch.

In the meantime, he took his orders from her dad—on the rare occasion when Stuart Paxton issued an order—and Carly might as well understand right now that he would not put up with interference from her or anyone other than Stuart about how he ran the ranch.

"Exactly what would you do about it if we did shoot that stallion?" Jake asked in a chilling, challenging voice.

Carly hadn't expected to be so openly challenged, and her heart sank a little. But then she lifted her chin. A confrontation with Banyon within fifteen minutes of her arrival was startling, but if she

didn't stand her ground now she would look spineless and without convictions and standards strong enough to fight for. It was the way she'd behaved during her marriage, and she had vowed to never again permit a man to ride roughshod over feelings she had every right to possess.

But her next thought—Jake Banyon was nothing like her ex. Banyon, in fact, might not be like anyone she'd ever known—made her wonder if open warfare with him was wise.

Still, should she cower and withdraw from a serious issue just because Banyon had an overwhelming personality?

She stood her ground and said in a voice every bit as challenging as Jake's, "I'm sure there are laws against killing animals you don't own."

"There are also laws permitting ranchers to protect the animals they do own from predators," Jake snapped. The anger in his system alarmed him, and he had to ask himself what was causing it, the topic under debate or Carly's pretty face and blatant sexuality. He didn't deserve this, dammit, he didn't. He'd sown his wild oats years ago and he didn't need any reminders that he'd been living without sex for a long time. Living contentedly, for a fact. Now, this very minute, his body was stirring in ways he'd practically forgotten and sure hadn't missed.

Jake told himself to calm down, to tell Carly that he never had planned to kill that stallion, which would stop this ridiculous controversy here and now. But when he opened his mouth to enlighten her, he heard himself saying instead, speaking harshly, "I've got work to do. Let's go inside and get this over with."

Carly almost gasped out loud. Banyon's rudeness was insulting and infuriating, and she took a deep breath to thwart the torrent of angry words she would have loved to lay on him. But while she managed to control the worst of her ire, she couldn't stop herself from giving him a venomous look, or from saying, "Believe me, I do not need your assistance to walk into this house. It's been a while since I've been here, but I'm not the complete moron you seem to think I am." Brushing past him, she climbed the stairs and crossed the porch to the front door.

Jake stared after her. She certainly had a temper, he thought, while he tried to control his own. It was when he was striding away from the house that regret hit him hard and suddenly. That had been a stupid way to start Carly's visit, especially when he had vowed to get along with her. What he probably should do was to return to the house, locate Carly and apologize.

But maybe she was the one who should do the apologizing, he decided in the next heartbeat, stubbornly continuing his walk to the barns while hoping those two men had captured that stallion. Dammit, he'd known a woman on the place would disrupt its peace—his peace—and he'd sure been right about that.

In this instance, though, being right didn't make him feel better, and he wore a sour expression all the way to the barns.

Inside the house Carly came very close to completely forgetting that Jake Banyon even existed. It was the house from her childhood memories, but it was so sadly run-down that it broke her heart. Going from room to room on the first floor, she nostalgically touched things—the rocking chair near the living room fireplace that her grandfather had favored, and the old upright piano against a wall on which her grandmother had played merry tunes.

Carly's troubled gaze swept the old wallpaper and worn furnishings. How could her father have let the house go to pot like this? Didn't it mean anything to him?

But did she have a right to criticize anything her dad did or didn't do with any part of the ranch, after what she'd done? Still, she'd only been a teenager when she'd decided not to return to Wyoming; why on earth had her dad let her get away with such bratty behavior?

Carly sighed. She knew why Stuart had let her get away with anything and everything while growing up. It was because her mother had died when she'd been too young to remember, and her father had tried to make it up to her.

The old house tugged at Carly's heartstrings as she walked through the first floor rooms and realized that the place wasn't even clean. There were huge dust motes in corners and under furniture, and from the musty odor she was noticing she would bet anything that the windows hadn't been opened for fresh air in ages.

"Obviously Banyon could live in a pigsty and not be bothered by it," she muttered as she entered the big old-fashioned kitchen. Positive that the refrigerator would contain moldy food, if any, she pulled open the door, then stood there and blinked at the laden shelves. And it was fresh food she was seeing, too, fresh milk, meat and vegetables.

"Odd," she mumbled, staring at the array. Surely Banyon hadn't gone out of his way to provide this food for her, had he? Of course, her dad might have asked him to stock the kitchen, just in case she would rather eat alone than with the men. Yes, that was something Stuart would think of doing. She certainly couldn't imagine Banyon doing it without a nudge.

After checking the refrigerator for bottled water and finding none, Carly shut the door and went to locate a glass for a drink of tap water, which she doubted was drinkable, but what choice did she have?

The sink water was cold and delicious, and Carly stood at a window and had her drink. Something began niggling her; more than likely she had let her dad down by arguing with Banyon almost from the moment they'd set eyes on each other.

But how could she not have spoken her mind about that stallion? Shooting him would be a terrible crime, and she still felt that she would stop at nothing to see that it didn't happen.

She would like to discuss this with her father and find out for herself how he felt about it, but wouldn't that be a lot like tattling? Frowning, Carly decided that whatever problems she might have with Jake or his methods of operating the ranch during her stay, she should not cause a breach between Banyon and her father. Their relationship had worked very well for at least four years, and she'd been on the ranch no more than a half hour and already she could stir up trouble with a few words to her dad. She couldn't let that happen. It would be unjustifiably selfish of her to let that happen, especially in light of the promises she'd made herself during the past year to not cause her father any more headaches.

Sighing heavily, Carly headed for the staircase to the second floor. She might as well pick a bedroom for herself. Someone would probably be bringing in her luggage at any moment.

Halfway up the stairs she went back down and found a telephone. Dialing her father's private number, she left a message on his voice mail: "Hi, Dad, it's me. I'm at the ranch and everything is fine. Hope your business trip to London is going well, though you probably only just got there. Anyway, call if and when you want, though don't feel it's necessary. We'll talk when you have the time. Love you. Bye."

Three

Jake was sorely disappointed and more than a little angry. The two men who'd spotted the stallion, then chased him, had quite a story to tell when Jake finally met up with them shortly before suppertime.

"We'd a caught him for sure if that danged helicopter hadn't spooked our horses," Artie Campbell said disgustedly.

"We would've, Jake," Joe Franklin agreed. "In two seconds flat that devil was in the woods. We followed, but it was a waste of time. He can race through trees and underbrush faster than greased lightning."

"Did you happen to spot any of our mares?" Jake spoke stiffly, because his entire body was stiff. Losing the stallion today was Carly Paxton's fault. Jake had put two and two together about the helicopter veering just before landing. Carly had noticed the men chasing the stallion and had wanted a closer look. The pilot, of course, had merely done as she'd asked.

"Not a one of 'em," Artie said. "He must have 'em hid out somewhere."

Jake nodded grimly. "Okay, you men did your best today. Maybe we'll have better luck the next time he shows himself. I'm going to go clean up for supper. See you later."

Heading for the house, Jake battled the irritation and resentment prickling his system. Carly Paxton was a royal pain in the neck. There was a darned good chance of that rogue stallion having been captured today. Without Carly's nosiness, that thieving horse might be installed in an escape-proof steel pen right now, and Jake could be trying to figure out what to do with him instead of cursing the frustration gnawing a hole in his gut.

Entering the house by the back door, Jake paused in the kitchen to cool down his temper. As much as he'd like to lambaste Carly for her role in this afternoon's fiasco with the stallion, he had to treat her cordially. The situation galled Jake, but he was stuck with it. Stuck with that woman on the ranch for only God knew how long.

Jake sighed heavily. If she wasn't Stuart's daughter...

But therein lay the bind. She was Stuart's daughter, and already he'd snapped at her and even let her think he would shoot that stallion just because she had annoyed him with her questions. He'd better shape up and be nice, however much it went against his grain. Snorting disgustedly, Jake left the kitchen, took a quick look through the first-floor rooms in case Carly was downstairs, then headed for the second floor.

There were four large bedrooms up there—including the one he used—and he started knocking on doors and calling, "Carly?"

She was still unpacking, hanging clothes in the closet and putting other things in bureau drawers, when she heard Jake's voice. Going to the door of the room she'd chosen, she opened it. "Yes?" she said coolly.

Jake tried very hard to smile, to appear relaxed and congenial. "Did you get settled in?"

"I'm working on it."

Looking into her beautiful green eyes made Jake nervous, and he averted his gaze and resented Carly for unnerving him in such a personal way. Certainly he was still angry with her, but deep down he knew that anger was not the cause of his present discomfort. He didn't want to be attracted to a woman he just barely knew and thus far didn't much care for, but there were sparks in his body that were undeniably sexual. It might have been a while for him, but the signs of physical attraction were never really forgotten, even if a man strove diligently to forget a past he'd be better off not having.

Shying from such discomfiting thoughts, Jake uneasily shifted his weight from one foot to the other and cleared his throat. "Uh, there are a few things I should've told you about when you first got here."

He seemed unduly uncomfortable to Carly, but she didn't feel particularly kindly toward him and she felt no sympathy at all for this overbearing man. "Tell me now," she said without a trace of warmth or friendliness.

"Yes, thanks, I will. I stocked the kitchen with groceries, in case you wanted to avoid taking your meals with the men. You're welcome to eat in the men's dining room, of course, but that's up to you. Incidentally, Barney, the cook, will be ringing the dinner bell in about—" Jake checked his watch "—fifteen minutes."

"Dad told me the same thing about meals. Thank you for providing groceries." Thanking him was an automatic reflex. Carly believed she had Banyon pretty much figured out: he was only putting up with her because she was his boss's daughter. Jake had out-and-out lied when he'd told her that she was no intrusion at all. He didn't like her being here, and he was, naturally, trying to conceal how he really felt about it.

"You're welcome. The other thing I forgot to mention when you arrived was transportation. There's a car in the garage you can use when you want. The keys are hanging on a hook in the kitchen—easy to find—and..."

Carly cut in. "Is it your car?"

"No, it's yours. I mean, your dad bought it and..."

She broke in again. "Then it belongs to the ranch. I'll be happy to use it with one condition. If you need it you'll tell me so I don't go off someday and leave you stranded."

Jake frowned. Maybe she really didn't intend to intrude and have everything her way while she was here. Her attitude on the car was decent and unselfish, even though he rarely drove it and she could call it her own during her visit.

"Well, that's about it," he said lamely. "See you later."

Not tonight, you won't! Since there was food in the kitchen, she would prepare her own dinner and eat alone. She was in no mood to dine with a bunch of strangers, especially male strangers. Truth was, she didn't like men very much anymore. Her ex had really done a number on her, and if one man on this ranch leered at her, or even tried to flirt with her, she was apt to smack him.

Shutting the door after Jake had gone, she went to a window and looked out. She might not like its manager, but she could find no fault with the ranch itself. Other than the house, that is, which, if nothing else, needed a good cleaning.

But the area was quiet, peaceful and scenically beautiful. Maybe her dad had been right to suggest that she spend some time here.

Her blood stirred suddenly. However tranquil this place appeared to be, it had disturbing aspects. One, at least, that wild stallion. Had she spoken her mind clearly enough on that subject to make Banyon understand that he or any of his men had better not shoot that horse?

Agitated again, Carly knew she would not rest until she was positive that Banyon had taken her seriously. The mere idea of deliberately killing a healthy horse was appalling and she simply was not going to stand for it.

Marching from her bedroom, she went to the door of Jake's room and knocked loudly. It opened after a minute, and she was startled to see Banyon dripping water and wearing nothing but a towel around his lower half.

Her heart sank. She should have figured out that he'd been planning on taking a shower before dinner and she most certainly should not have put them both in this embarrassing situation.

"Uh, sorry," she stammered, looking everywhere but at him. Still, the look she'd gotten when he'd opened the door was etched on her brain. He was, without a doubt, the sexiest-looking guy she'd ever set eyes on.

She began backing away. "Sorry I—I disturbed you. I was going, uh, going to tell you something, but it...it can wait."

Holding the towel together at his waist, Jake stepped into the hall. “Wait a minute! If you have something to tell me, go ahead and say it.”

She couldn’t do it, not with him half-naked and stirring feelings within her that she had wholeheartedly believed were dead and buried.

“Tomorrow,” she called over her shoulder as she hastened down the hall to her own bedroom. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” With her heart thumping hard, she closed the door behind herself. “Damn,” she whispered, terribly shaken over that little scene. How could she have been so dense as to not realize that he’d come to the house to clean up for dinner?

Jake stood in the hall until her bedroom door closed, wondering what that had been all about. Then he glanced down at himself and couldn’t help chuckling. Obviously his opening his bedroom door wearing just a towel had disoriented Carly, which seemed pretty funny until he visualized her opening her door half-naked.

The amusement faded from his system, and, scowling darkly, he reentered his bedroom and shut the door. The next time someone came to his room unexpectedly he’d damned well better remember who it was that could be doing the knocking.

Hordes of people paraded through Carly’s dreams that night—her ex-husband, many of her friends and...Jake Banyon. All the dreams were disturbing, but the one about Jake was the worst; he wasn’t wearing even a towel in that dream, he was stark naked!

Carly awoke in a sweat, practically gasping for air. She jumped out of bed and ran to the window she’d opened before retiring, where she sucked in huge breaths of cool night air. She was not attracted to Jake Banyon, she told herself, she wasn’t! Dreaming of him naked was perverted. What was wrong with her?

“Oh, no,” she whispered as the details of that dream became much too clear in her mind. Banyon had been fully aroused and walking toward her with shadowed eyes, and she’d been on fire and...and...

Groaning, she covered her face with her hands. Why on earth would her brain devise such an erotic dream about a man she didn’t even like?

The next day, dressed in jeans and boots, with her long hair arranged in a single braid, Carly hiked around the compound, peering into barns and other outbuildings, and generally getting acquainted with the lay of the land. She found the garage and the car Jake had told her to use if she wanted, and she tried to picture him driving an ordinary car and found it hard to do. From what she’d seen of him so far, pickups and sports utility models seemed more his style. Instinct told her that his machismo was neither forced nor phony. He was so typically the western male—as portrayed in movies and novels, she thought cynically—that there was no way she could place him in any other scenario.

Moving on, she realized that there were no men about— not even one of the ranch hands. She stopped at a corral to pet a pretty palomino mare’s nose and thought of taking a ride. The mare seemed gentle and responsive to her voice and caresses, and being on a horse seemed like a wonderful way to spend a few hours.

But where were the saddles kept? There must be a tack room in one of the barns, she decided, and headed for the nearest one.

She was almost there when she heard music. She stopped to listen closer so she could determine where it was coming from. Her gaze swept the compound.

“The cookhouse,” she whispered, and veered from the barn to investigate that building. Inside was a large dining room, with numerous tables and chairs. She walked through that room to the kitchen and stopped in the doorway. An older man wearing a white apron was peeling potatoes at the sink.

“Barney?” she said.

He turned around and grinned. “Ms. Paxton?”

Smiling, Carly walked in and offered her hand. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard Dad praise your cooking.”

Barney hastily turned down the radio, wiped his palm on his apron and heartily shook her hand. “That’s real nice to hear, ma’am, real nice. Your pa is a real nice gent, real nice.”

“Yes, he is, Barney, and please call me Carly.”

“Thank you, ma’am, I’ll do that.”

Carly had to smile again. “It smells very good in here.”

“That’s cause I’ve got some cakes in the oven. Uh, everyone knows you arrived yesterday, but what did you do, eat alone in that big empty house last night?”

“Yes, I really didn’t feel like company.”

“Well, tell you what. Anytime you don’t want company at mealtime, you just come to the kitchen and I’ll prepare a nice plate you can take to the house. You don’t even have to walk through the dining room, if you don’t want to. As you can see, the kitchen has its own door.”

“That’s very kind, Barney, thank you. I’ll probably take you up on that offer.”

“Anytime, ma’am, anytime.”

“Well, I know you’re busy. It was good meeting you, Barney.”

“My pleasure, ma’am.”

Carly started out, then stopped. “Barney, do you know the name of the palomino in the big corral?”

“Sure, that’s Goldie. Pretty thing, ain’t she?”

“Very. Well, I’ll let you get back to work.” Carly exited by the kitchen door. Barney was a dear, and Carly felt good because there was at least one person on the ranch she could talk to without worrying about how he might take what she said. That thought bothered her. Was she really worried over how Banyon might take anything she said?

“Not on your life,” she mumbled under her breath. Banyon might be the top dog in these parts, but he didn’t daunt her one little bit.

Even when he’s half-naked? A tingle went up Carly’s spine at the image that question provoked, and she tensed her lips in self-annoyance. That man was not going to get to her, not if he walked around completely naked, damn his arrogant hide!

Quick-stepping to the large barn again, Carly went inside and located the tack room. It was a beautiful day, and she wasn’t going to waste it by puttering in the house. There were a number of saddles on racks, and she picked one and carried it out to the corral. The golden mare was as gentle as Carly had thought and stood quite still while Carly put first a blanket, then the saddle, on her back.

Leading Goldie from the corral Carly mounted, and it was a marvelous sensation to be on horseback again. Exhilarated, Carly nudged the mare into a walk and headed for open country.

Jake and three of his men returned to the compound around noon. The others had their lunches with them, as they were moving cattle from one pasture to another in the southernmost portion of the ranch.

Riding up to the main corral near the largest barn, Jake pulled his horse to a halt and frowned. “Did someone move Goldie to another corral?” he asked.

All three men looked blank. One of them finally said, “Not that I know of, Jake,” and the other two agreed.

Jake looked at that empty corral and felt a discomfiting premonition in his gut. But it was a premonition without definition, and he honestly didn’t know what was causing it, except for the fact that he hadn’t asked anyone to move Goldie and someone had. Goldie was a valuable horse and she was in season. Jake had put her in this particular corral so he could keep a close eye on her. He’d been planning to mate her with Caesar, a pale blond thoroughbred stallion, when the time was right.

“Jake, maybe that wild stallion stole her,” one of the men said. “He’s getting bolder all the time. Maybe he came right into the compound this morning and stole Goldie while everyone was gone.”

Startled by that idea, Jake studied the high pole fencing of the corral and tried to visualize Goldie, or any other horse on the place, having enough space in the enclosure to get up enough speed to jump the fence. Mares in season and stallions accomplished remarkable feats to get to each other, but clearing that high fence from a short distance would be more than remarkable. It would be damn near impossible.

“I don’t think so,” Jake finally said. “I’m going to go and talk to Barney. Maybe he knows something.” Hurrying off toward the cookhouse, he heard the three men exchanging ideas about what might have happened to Goldie. None of their theories seemed feasible to Jake, and he closed his ears to them.

Entering the cookhouse kitchen, he got right to the point. “Barney, did you happen to hear anything unusual this morning?”

“Unusual? Like what, Jake?”

“Goldie’s not in her corral. Did any of the men come back and maybe move her? Not that anyone should’ve moved her, but something happened to her.”

Barney shook his head. “No one came back that I know of, Jake, and I didn’t hear anything unusual. Course, I had been playing my radio, you know.”

“Okay, thanks.” Jake started to leave.

“Oh, wait a minute, Jake. Carly Paxton dropped in and chatted a few minutes. Real nice lady, she is, real nice. Just like her pa. Anyway, she asked me if I knew the name of the palomino horse in the corral. I told her, of course.”

Jake felt such a strong sinking sensation that his knees got weak. “Did she say anything about taking Goldie for a ride?”

“Nope, not a thing. Jake...Jake? What about some lunch?” Barney called as Jake ran out.

“We’ll eat later,” Jake yelled over his shoulder. He ran all the way to the house, hit the back door hard and then ran through the rooms like a whirlwind, shouting Carly’s name. When it was obvious she wasn’t on the first floor, he took the stairs to the second floor two and three at a time, rushed down the hall and unceremoniously pushed open her bedroom door.

“Damn you!” he yelled when he saw nothing but a vacant bedroom. If that woman didn’t prove to be the death of him this summer, it would be a miracle!

Retracing his steps at high speed, he ran back outside to the three men, who were still discussing Goldie’s mysterious disappearance. When they saw Jake’s dark and forbidding expression, they fell silent.

“I want the three of you to go and find the other men. Then all of you are to spread out and look for Carly Paxton and Goldie. I’m positive Carly took Goldie for a ride.”

“Hell’s bells,” one of the men muttered. “Don’t she know Goldie’s in heat? If that stallion gets wind of Goldie, no telling what might happen.”

Jake’s expression became even darker. “Let’s get going,” he said gruffly, climbing onto his own horse. He had no idea in which direction to even start looking for Carly and Goldie, but he couldn’t just stand around and worry.

On horseback, the four men tore out of the compound.

Goldie behaves like a lady, Carly thought, extremely pleased with herself over having thought of taking this marvelous ride. The open fields, bright from sunlight, were lovely with wildflowers and birds flying this way and that. The grazing cattle paid her no mind, and Carly felt a wonderful sense of serenity that had been missing from her life for too long a time.

Her dad had been very wise to suggest she come here, she thought with a feeling of love for Stuart Paxton. As she rode, Carly vowed once more to never worry him again and couldn’t help recalling that he had warned her against marrying Burke Stenson. The Stenson family was as financially well-off as the Paxtons, but Burke’s personal reputation had concerned Stuart.

“He’s a gambler, Carly. Please don’t think you can change him,” Stuart had said.

But she'd been madly in love and hadn't heeded a word said to her about Burke. It was the only time in her life that she had openly defied her father, and she had lived to regret it. Burke hadn't just been a gambler. In fact, that had been his good side, and she probably could have lived with it. But Burke had also been emotionally and physically abusive, and she had not been able to live with black eyes, a bruised body and a shattered heart for long. Her marriage had lasted three years, and looking back at the misery of it she wondered why she'd stayed that long.

Carly pushed that phase of her life from her mind because she hated thinking about it. Besides, if she was going to attempt some serious thinking, it should be about what she intended to do when she returned to New York. Before her marriage she had worked in advertising, and it was a career she could go back to, she knew. She just hadn't found her way yet, but she would.

But she didn't want to be serious today, not about anything, and she rode through grassy fields, moving farther and farther away from the compound, thinking scattered thoughts and even doing some humming, simply because it was a fabulous day and she felt so carefree on that beautiful mare's back.

Approaching a series of foothills, Goldie suddenly tossed her head and whinnied, startling Carly out of her insouciant mood. She patted the mare's neck and murmured calming words, but the pretty mare still seemed agitated.

"What is it, girl?" Carly asked quietly, looking around to see what might have alarmed the horse. A snake, maybe? Remembering that her father had said there were rattlesnakes in certain areas of the ranch, Carly anxiously searched the ground. She saw nothing but grass and a tiny field mouse running for its hole. A mouse shouldn't spook Goldie, but then she really didn't know the mare that well, did she?

Carly urged Goldie to move on, and the mare obeyed. Carly relaxed again. The foothills looked interesting. She could see pine trees and thought she heard the movement of water, a creek perhaps. Goldie could have a drink, Carly thought as she urged the mare up a hill and into the trees.

Oh, this is lovely. It was much cooler in the trees, and the sound of the creek was louder. Wondering if she, too, could have drink from a creek, if it was safe for a human to drink from a creek, Carly realized that she should have brought some water with her. She would not forget water the next time she took a ride, she told herself.

Well, she would let Goldie have a drink, then start back. In the next breath her heart nearly stopped beating. Not twenty feet away, directly in her path, was the black stallion she'd seen from the helicopter yesterday. He was as physically magnificent as she'd thought then, but he didn't look very friendly, and Carly's mouth was suddenly drier than it had been a minute ago.

The stallion pawed the ground, threw his head around and snorted. Goldie began prancing around, throwing her head around and whinnying softly.

"Oh, my God," Carly whispered as fear shot through her. The stallion wanted to add Goldie to his harem, and the mare was responding to his call!

The stallion reared and his whinny sounded like a scream. Stunned and scared to death, Carly tried to calm Goldie, but the mare, in her present state of excitement, was far more horse than Carly could handle. Goldie reared to her hind legs, and Carly tried desperately to hang on, but the next thing she knew she had hit the ground, hard.

The last thing Carly saw before passing out was Goldie running off after the stallion.

Four

Carly was unconscious only a few minutes. When her eyes opened, she stared up at the patch of blue sky visible through the trees and realized that she was almost afraid of getting to her feet, or of trying to. If she'd broken a bone in that fall, what would she do?

With a rapid heartbeat borne of dread, Carly gingerly began testing the mobility of her own body. It was relieving to be able to move her arms and legs with no more than the discomfort of a few aches and pains. Cautiously, she got up from the ground, then clung to a small tree until the dizziness in her head passed. She analyzed what had happened: the fall from Goldie's back, so unexpected and startling, had knocked the wind out of her and was the reason she'd passed out.

Her pragmatic side accepted the analysis and began wondering how far she was from the ranch compound and how long it would take her to walk back to it. She believed that she knew the right direction in which to start walking, but then she felt a spurt of uneasiness when she glanced around and everything looked the same.

That way, she thought, then changed her mind. No, that way. If she weren't in the trees, if she'd stayed in open country...

She sucked in a long, suddenly nervous breath. She might as well face facts. The fall had disoriented her; she didn't know which way to go to get out of the trees! One thing kept her from panicking: she'd only been riding in the pine forest for twenty minutes or so. She checked the time on her wristwatch. If she walked for twenty minutes, in any direction, and saw nothing but more trees, she would turn around and try another direction.

Yes, that made sense. Keeping track of the time would be crucial, and she would mark this spot so she could recognize it if and when she had to return to it to maintain her bearings.

Ignoring the aches in her body, Carly let go of the tree, located three rocks that she stacked in a pile—surely she would recognize those rocks if she saw them again—and then set out walking.

By four that afternoon Jake was in a sweat. His path had crossed that of his men several times in their search, and no one had found even a clue as to Carly's whereabouts.

He had reorganized the search at one point, telling some members of his crew to return to the compound and exchange their horses for pickup trucks. There were a lot of roads crisscrossing the ranch, and each and every one of them should be checked.

But he stuck to his horse, because the terrain of the vast ranch was so varied and much of it could only be reached on horseback. Peering into deep canyons and crevices was unnerving for Jake, because he was beginning to fear that Carly had run into trouble. His most consoling thought was that she had merely gotten lost and was aimlessly—and probably frighteningly—attempting to find her way back to the compound.

At moments, though, while riding and searching, Jake felt a searing anger. How dare she take a horse she knew nothing about and go off the way she had? She at least could have told Barney what she'd intended doing. Barney would have warned her against riding Goldie, and this whole thing would not have happened. If Carly was safe and sound when someone finally found her, Jake was going to give her hell in no uncertain terms, and she could call her dad and tattle or do anything else she felt like doing about it.

Around five Jake found himself near the foothills. He stopped his horse and frowned at the pine forests darkening the hills. Was Carly dumb enough to get herself lost in the forests? Jake's heart sank. If she was in those trees, it could take days to find her. He glanced up at the sun; he still had two hours of full daylight and about another hour of fading light as the sun went down.

And then the thought that he'd been trying to keep at bay for hours would remain buried no longer: if Carly had run into that stallion she could be seriously injured, or even worse. The idea of

phoning Stuart with that sort of news was so chilling that Jake couldn't let himself dwell on it. Kicking his horse in the ribs, he headed up the nearest hill toward the pine trees.

Carly had returned to her little pile of rocks more times than she cared to count, and she'd had to start battling a developing fear. She was exhausted and had to rest awhile before trying yet another direction. She sat down with her back against a tree and shut her eyes.

She was so angry with herself that she could think of nothing else. You fool, you moron. How could you have gotten yourself into a mess like this? No one at the ranch has probably even missed you. All the men were out working when you left, and they're probably still out on the range!

But when they did get back, wouldn't someone notice that Goldie was gone? Surely Banyon was smart enough to figure out that she'd taken the palomino for a ride.

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