

Showdown

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Extract

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Chapter One

Bobby Cameron was in the South of France on the day his father died.

Pressing hard into the filly's left flank – he was breaking in a feisty one-year-old bay called Mirage for the legendary French racehorse owner Pascal Breteau – he brought her round for a third time as the dry dust of the training ring billowed and plumed up around him, enveloping both horse and rider in a thick, stifling cloud. Fighting back the urge to choke – he didn't want to do anything now that might frighten or unsettle the horse – he leaned right back in the saddle, relaxing into the languorous, cowboy style of riding for which he was famous, closing his eyes to help himself tune in to Mirage's movements. Soon he could feel every pulse of her taut young muscles between his thighs and the nervous straining of every sinew as she cantered into the turn. It was as if he and the filly had become one being, one fluid organism, circling rhythmically beneath the blazing Côte d'Azur sun.

'Non! Pas comme ça. Regardes, she is steel favouring the left. You see?'

The voice came from Henri Duval, Breteau's trainer, who was standing by the side of the ring in shorts and a T-shirt, his few remaining strands of dark hair stuck with sweat to his otherwise bald head. He was alternately yelling instructions to Bobby and roaring with Gallic bad temper into his mobile phone.

'Ecoutes! She needs more steek, Bobby, uh? Deesmount! Deesmount!'

Keeping his eyes closed, Bobby tried to block out the sound. He wished Henri would go and terrorize someone else. He was ruining his concentration, not to mention Mirage's. Was it any wonder the filly was so goddam flighty, if all she ever heard from her trainer was screaming?

'Arrêtes! The Frenchman was yelling so loudly now that reluctantly Bobby was forced to open his eyes and bring the horse to a stop.

A fine spray of white foam had formed across Mirage's shoulders, frothing like milk above the gleaming coffee colour of her coat, a testament to the intensity of her morning's efforts. She was a terrific

little horse, this one, brave and determined. Bobby could quite see why Bremeau had paid \$300,000 for her. On paper she'd been a risky investment. Although sired by the great Love's Young Dream, a Belmont winner, her dame had been the unknown, unplaced mare Miracle. She'd either make a great racehorse, or burn herself out before she ever got as far as the track. But that was just the sort of horse he loved: a ball of raw energy and speed, just waiting for a little gentle, Cameron-style direction.

At only twenty-three, Bobby Cameron already had a reputation as one of the most skilled horse-breakers and trainers in the world. With his straw-blond hair, endlessly long legs and soulful hazel eyes, the brilliant but notoriously arrogant son of the famous cowboy been born with an incredible gift: a unique rapport with difficult horses. Animals that other, skilled trainers could barely get a bridle on seemed to calm instantly at his touch, soothed into submission by the low murmuring drawl of his voice. It was a talent that owners like Pascal Bremeau were prepared to pay handsomely for.

Even as a small boy, Bobby had shown no fear around violent, kicking stallions, animals that could easily have killed him with one carefully timed hoof to the head. Instead, he radiated a quiet, calm authority that even the most stubborn or disturbed of horses seemed to respect. By the age of twelve, he was breaking in wild mustangs for his father. At sixteen, he was earning pocket money doing the same thing with valuable standardbreds and quarter horses, the classic cowboy's mount, for other wealthy California breeders and owners. By the time he hit twenty, his reputation had spread beyond the state line. He spent what ought to have been his college years training difficult thoroughbreds on some of the most prestigious, multi-million-dollar Kentucky farms, eventually getting commissions from owners as far afield as Ireland, Dubai and, most recently, the South of France.

Born into one of the oldest, most respected cowboy families in the West, Bobby grew up running semi-wild at Highwood, the stunning 3,000-acre Cameron ranch nestled deep in California's Santa Ynez valley. All the local kids envied him his freedom – neither of his parents seemed to mind much that he regularly skipped school to disappear into the hills on his father's horses – but his childhood wasn't the idyll it appeared to be.

His mother, Diana, a teenage tearaway from the Danish tourist-trap town of Solvang, had conceived him during a one-night stand with his ageing cowboy father. A local legend, the reclusive Hank Cameron was a natural with cattle and horses, but children were another matter entirely. Having acknowledged the kid was his and named him as his

heir, he considered his paternal duties fulfilled. Beyond that, Diana was on her own.

She loved her son – that wasn't the problem. But this was California in the early 1970s, the era of free love and cheap drugs, and she was still only seventeen. Consequently, Bobby spent the first ten years of his life on the road, travelling with his mother from one hippy commune to the next, never staying in one place long enough to put down any roots or make any real friends at school.

Sometimes, overwhelmed by the responsibility of it all, Diana would disappear completely for months at a stretch, usually on the back of some scary-looking guy's bike. Terrified that she had gone for good, Bobby spent her long absences being passed miserably like an unwanted parcel from one distant relative to another. Eventually, of course, she would always return, disillusioned with her biker, and full of kisses and promises to get her act together. But by then it was too late. Her son had already learned two important life lessons: that loving people was a risky business; and that the only person he could truly depend on in this world was himself.

Shortly after Bobby's tenth birthday, broke and exhausted, Diana decided to pay Hank Cameron a visit.

Bobby would never forget the drive out to Highwood that day. It was the first time he'd seen the property that would one day be his, and he couldn't believe his eyes. Sitting in the front passenger seat of his mom's dilapidated VW bus, as they bumped and spluttered down the long, winding drive, he gazed in awe at hills so green they looked like something out of a cartoon, that seemed to stretch as far as the eye could see. All across this emerald canvas were grazing herds of cattle, searching for shade beneath the ancient sycamores that peppered the landscape, or making their way down to the river that rushed alongside the driveway like a dancing stream of molten silver. Not even in his imagination, on those many long, lonely nights when he'd lain awake fantasizing about the mythical Highwood, had he ever seen anything quite so beautiful.

Hank, needless to say, was less than thrilled to see the pair of them.

'What the hell are you doing here?' he'd barked, as Diana clambered out of the bus, her dirty, skinny son loitering behind her like a stray dog. It wasn't exactly the welcome that Bobby had hoped for from the father he had long built up in his mind as some sort of cool, romantic hero. But he didn't dwell on it. By this time he was used to being an unwelcome guest, and he was stoic when Diana announced she was leaving him behind with his father for the summer, while she went to find work in Santa Barbara.

‘Leave him here? With me? You can’t be serious,’ Hank spluttered incredulously. ‘I don’t know what to do with him.’

‘Yeah?’ said Diana, climbing purposefully back up into the VW. ‘Well, guess what? Neither did I, when I was seventeen years old and you sent me packing. But we did OK, right, Bobby? Now it’s your turn.’

While the two of them fought it out, Bobby stood calmly on the porch steps beside the one pitifully small suitcase that held all his worldly possessions. Most of what they said was a blur, although he could remember his mother’s parting words as she sped off down the driveway in a plume of dust.

‘He’s your son, Hank,’ she yelled out the window. ‘Deal with it.’

Hank had dealt with it – by ignoring Bobby completely.

‘You do your thing, kid,’ he said, showing his son up to what would be his new bedroom, ‘and I’ll do mine.’

And for the next thirteen years, that was pretty much the way things had gone between them. Bobby never did go back to live with his mother again, although Diana continued to pay semi-regular visits and had him down to Santa Barbara for the occasional birthday or Christmas. But whatever disappointment Bobby may have felt at her abandonment or Hank’s lack of paternal concern was more than made up for by the sheer magic of being at Highwood. Before that first summer was over, he had become fast friends with the other ranch hands’ kids. But much more importantly, he’d discovered what was to become his one great love: horses.

For the first time in his life, he felt he really belonged somewhere. This, at last, was home.

Vaulting down lightly from Mirage’s back, he took off his hat, an automatic gesture of courtesy that belied the dismissive, irritated scowl on his face as he approached Henri.

‘What’s the problem?’ Handing the filly’s reins to a hovering groom, he glowered at the French trainer. Even without the hat, Bobby stood a good six inches taller than him in his cowboy boots and jeans and looked a menacing figure. ‘You’re breaking my concentration,’ he snapped. ‘I think you should leave.’

The already irate Duval now began to turn a worrying shade of purple. Having been let down by adults all his life, Bobby famously had zero respect for authority. It was a trait that had always infuriated his father, and it did him no favours with horse trainers either, themselves a notoriously difficult and arrogant breed.

‘You think *I* should leave?’ Henri couldn’t believe his ears. ‘She is *my* ’orse, Monsieur Cameron. *Tu comprends?* Mine!’

‘Well, now.’ Bobby smiled maddeningly, revealing a row of perfectly straight white teeth. ‘She’s actually Monsieur Brebeau’s horse, isn’t she? If we’re gonna get technical about it.’

His voice was low and rich, like syrup, with a deep Western twang that could soothe horses and excite women in equal measure. Unfortunately it appeared to be having quite a different effect on the apoplectic Frenchman, who had started hopping from foot to foot with rage, like a lizard on burning sand.

‘He hired me to do a job, and you’re making that job impossible,’ Bobby continued. ‘I’d like you to leave.’

‘Ow dare you!’

Henri was livid. Who did this Yankee whippersnapper think he was, waltzing in to *his* stables and presuming to tell *him* how to get the best out of the new filly? If Bobby hadn’t been six foot four of rock-solid cowboy muscle, he’d have hit him. As it was, the strain of holding himself back looked set to give him an imminent coronary.

‘You arrogant little shit,’ he shouted. ‘What the fuck do you know about Mirage? Four days you ’ave been ’ere now and what ’ave you achieved with ’er? Fuck all, that’s what, *mon ami*. Nothing.’ He was literally spitting with fury. ‘She needs the steek, I am telling you. What is the English expression? You do not make the omelette without breaking the eggs, uh?’

Reaching out towards another cowering groom, he grabbed a vicious-looking leather hunting whip – the French variety, with split leather strips at the end tipped with steel – and marched over towards the exhausted horse, waving it menacingly in her direction as she cringed and whinnied in fear.

Silently Bobby stepped forward, shielding Mirage and blocking Henri’s path with his huge torso.

‘Don’t touch her.’

His spoke so softly it was almost a whisper, but his tone was firm enough to stop Duval in his tracks. For a few seconds the two men remained stock-still in a pantomime stand-off, while the Frenchman’s eyes bored into Bobby’s. Eventually, when it became clear that the arrogant American was not going to move and that he needed reinforcements, Duval turned furiously on his heel and stormed off towards the house, hurling his whip on to the ground in frustration as he went.

‘Pascal will ’ave somesing to say about these,’ he muttered. ‘Total fucking deesrespect . . .’

Once he was gone and the grooms had scurried away, no doubt eager to spread the gossip about Duval’s latest temper tantrum, Bobby turned back to Mirage.

‘It’s all right girl,’ he whispered, stroking her reassuringly between the ears and feeling her relax instantly beneath his practised fingers. ‘Don’t you worry, now. I won’t let him hurt you.’

Pressing his face into her neck, he breathed in the heady smell of horse hair and sweat that never failed to calm him.

Duval was an asshole. He wished he could take Mirage back to California and protect her from the guy’s brutality for ever. But that was the one downside of this job: the minute you became close to a horse, and got them to win your trust, you had to leave.

He’d faced the same dilemma a thousand times before, of course. But it still hurt. With Mirage more than most.

A few hours later, lying in the bath in his luxurious en suite rooms up at the house, he wondered how he was going to explain himself to Bremeau when he got back from Paris tomorrow morning.

He was hours away from a breakthrough with Mirage, he could feel it. But as of tonight, much as it pained him to admit it, Duval did have a point: she was not yet ready to progress. He dreaded being forced to hand her back to Henri’s brutal schooling regime, and knew for certain that it would set her back. But the fact remained, she *was* still favouring her left leg on the turn. He should have fixed that by now and he hadn’t. It was infuriating.

Emerging from the hot, lavender-scented water, he dried himself with a towel and, wrapping it Turkish style around his waist, walked over to the window. Unlocking the heavy, white wooden shutters, he gazed outside. Bremeau’s estate, in the hills above Ramatouelle, near St Tropez, was breathtakingly beautiful. The house itself was an old sixteenth-century château, and the stables had been built around the adjoining former winery. As well as being horse country, this part of the Var was also littered with vineyards. The endless, neat rows of vines lent the rolling landscape a symmetrical, regimented air that reminded him of Napa.

Closing his eyes for a moment, he breathed in the warm, honeysuckle-scented evening air, faintly intermingled with the ubiquitous smell of horses and leather that always made him feel at home wherever he was. In the distance, he could hear the soft whinnying of Bremeau’s thoroughbreds fighting to be heard above the background cacophony of the cicadas.

Paradise.

One day he dreamed of training horses as spirited and magnificent as the prancing Mirage back home in California. He had long ago given up talking about these dreams to his father – their conversations

always ended in a screaming row – but silently, whenever he was alone, he continued to nurse his fantasy.

Like most cowboys, Hank looked on horseracing as anathema to Western culture: fine for Arab sheiks and white-collar billionaires with their pristine Kentucky stud farms, all neat white fences, manicured lawns and state-of-the-art technology, but not for the likes of real working men, men bound to the land and to their cattle herds, proud inheritors of their long-cherished cowboy traditions.

Personally, Bobby had never got it. He was as proud of his cowboy roots as the next man. But he also loved horses – all types of horses, from mustangs, to quarter horses, to exotic Arab thoroughbreds. His father would rather die than see Highwood used for anything other than raising cattle, he knew that. But really, what was so wrong about applying traditional cowboy skills and techniques to racehorse training? And where was it written that a great ranch had to be about beef cattle and nothing else?

One day. One day, when Highwood was his . . .

He broke away from his daydreaming with a start at the touch of a cold hand against his back.

‘Sorry. Did I scare you?’

It was Chantal, Pascal Bremeau’s young and very beautiful wife. He hadn’t heard her come in, and the cold of her fingers against his warm skin gave him a shock – albeit a not altogether unpleasant one.

‘No.’ Like his father, Bobby was a man of few words.

‘I did knock,’ she lied, ‘but I guess you didn’t hear me. You looked miles away.’

Half French and half Venezuelan, Chantal oozed the dark, heavy-lidded sultriness of South America, although her English was faultless and bore no trace of an accent. Oddly, the contrast between that clipped British voice and her pneumatically Latin body only seemed to enhance her sexiness.

Bobby bit his lip and tried to think unsexy thoughts. His eighth-grade math teacher naked usually did the trick, but not today. Nothing seemed to be working.

She’s Bremeau’s wife, he told himself sternly.

He mustn’t.

He absolutely must *not*.

‘I thought you might like some company,’ she said, with studied innocence, before slowly and deliberately starting to twirl her fingers through the still damp curls of his chest hair.

Inevitably he felt his cock start to harden and wished he had more than a skimpy towel between him and this stunning girl. It didn’t help that she was looking even more gorgeous than usual this evening in a

crotch-skimming yellow sundress, which did little to restrain her full, bra-less cappuccino-brown breasts.

‘No, thanks.’ He tried to sound firm. He started to prise away her hand, but somehow ended up with his fingers intertwined with hers and his eyes locked into her brazenly inviting gaze.

Goddam. This was going to be difficult.

With his heart rate rising and his dick taking on a life of its own, twitching and jumping like it was being electrocuted, it was all he could do to remember to breathe in and out.

He’d seen it coming, of course. Chantal was a shameless flirt. From the very first morning he arrived at the estate, she’d taken to ‘dropping by’ the indoor school, often wearing nothing more than a pair of frayed denim hot pants and a bikini top that wouldn’t have looked out of place on a Vegas stripper. Not that he blamed her for trying it on. Her old man was no oil painting, and that was putting it nicely. Truth be told, Pascal Bremeau was one fat, humourless, garlic-munching son-of-a-bitch. Plus he was old, really old, and seemed to spend 90 per cent of his time away on business leaving his bored, beautiful young wife to her own devices. What did the guy expect?

But women and training didn’t mix. Bobby resented anything that threatened to distract him when he was working – and Madame Bremeau certainly fitted right into that category. He had tried ignoring her, had even been outright rude to her on a couple of occasions, telling her to leave him alone and stay away from the stables, that he wasn’t interested. But his rejection only seemed to make her more determined.

Tonight was the last night that Pascal would be away.

And he wasn’t training now . . .

‘Look,’ he whispered, desperately trying not to focus on her pupils, which were so dilated with lust she looked like she’d had a shot of horse tranquillizer, ‘this really isn’t a great idea, you know. Your husband—’

‘Isn’t here,’ she finished for him, backing him towards the bed and slipping her hand expertly up beneath his towel. ‘But you are. You know it’s funny,’ she flashed him a wicked smile, wrapping her fingers around his cock like a vice, ‘Duval thinks you are too soft with Mirage. But you don’t feel at *all* soft to me.’

Fuck it.

Groaning, Bobby staggered backwards onto the antique lace bedspread, pulling her down on top of him. God knew he shouldn’t be doing this – not with Bremeau’s wife – but the girl was a force of nature. Trying to resist her was like attempting to turn back the tide with your bare hands. It would take a stronger man than he was.

Agonizingly slowly, she started to stroke him, licking her palm for more lubrication, increasing her pace gradually as he instinctively arched his pelvis forward and bucked against her. He closed his eyes, just for a moment, and when he opened them again found that she was kneeling over him, lifting up her lemon yellow dress to reveal a neatly trimmed, very dark bush and no panties. Just as she was about to lower herself down onto him, he grabbed her round the waist, flipping her over onto her back as easily as he would a ragdoll.

‘What are you doing?’ she giggled, gasping as he climbed on top of her, nudging her already spread legs wider.

‘I don’t like girls on top,’ he said. And with that he thrust into her like a rocket, with so much force that she had to reach back and hold on to the headboard for support.

Bobby enjoyed sex in a simple, matter-of-fact sort of way. But it had never consumed him with passion in the same way that his horses did. Since the age of sixteen he’d attracted women so effortlessly that he’d come to accept whatever sexual opportunities presented themselves as no more than his due, enjoying them in the same way as he might enjoy a good game of golf or a side of home-cooked ribs.

There were women that he loved, naturally – his mother, for all her faults, was still very dear to him, and the McDonald girls, Tara and Summer, the daughters of Hank’s ranch manager, were like surrogate sisters to him – but he had certainly never been *in* love, let alone had a steady, semi-serious girlfriend. The idea had never even occurred to him.

This pointed lack of commitment didn’t seem to put women off, however. If anything, his indifferent, take-it-or-leave-it attitude only heightened his desirability to the opposite sex. But unfortunately, experience had failed to turn him into a sensitive lover. With girls falling into his lap like over-ripe apples, he had never learned to curb his natural selfishness in bed. At twenty-three he still pursued his own pleasure with the same robust single-mindedness as a young stud stallion, quite oblivious of his partner’s needs or desires.

Feeling his orgasm building almost immediately now, as Chantal writhed and clenched beneath him, he made no effort to hold it back, exploding into her like a breaking dam, burying his face in her neck to muffle the sound of his own release.

Happily, she seemed amused rather than offended by the ‘wham, bam, thank you, ma’am’ approach, and not in the least bit put out that she hadn’t come herself.

‘My goodness,’ she laughed, smoothing down her dress and rearranging her hair as he slumped back onto the bed, exhausted. ‘Short but sweet, eh? Is that how all the cowboys do it?’

'I have no idea.' Bobby grinned up at her like a little boy, happy now that he'd got what he wanted. 'You'd have to ask them.'

He couldn't help but admire Chantal. She was that rarest of creatures: a stunning girl with a nice, uncomplicated attitude to sex. It was a welcome change from all the clingy 'my-love-can-change-you' chicks he seemed to wind up in bed with back home.

'I know I ought to feel guilty,' he drawled, watching her peering into the mirror and rubbing off the tell-tale make-up smudges with her finger, 'but I don't. You're far too beautiful to regret.'

Chantal smiled. From anyone else it would have sounded like a line. But Bobby was not given to flattery, and something told her that a compliment from him was probably the real deal. She was just about to turn and thank him, with another offer he couldn't refuse, when an unexpected knock on the door froze both of them to the spot.

'Bobby? Are you in zere?'

Oh fuck. Pascal.

'Just a minute.' Struggling to keep the panic out of his voice, Bobby leapt off the bed in an instant. 'I'm, er . . . I'm not dressed. Give me a second, OK?'

'What the hell is he doing home?' he hissed in a stage whisper to Chantal, scrambling back into his pants while frantically gesturing for her to go and hide in the wardrobe.

'I don't know.' She shrugged. She seemed marvellously unconcerned by their dangerous predicament. 'Why don't you ask him?'

Jeez, French women had balls of steel. What a piece of work! If he hadn't known better, he could have sworn he actually saw her smile as she clambered into the huge antique armoire.

Briefly he wondered how many errant wives of the French aristocracy had used it as a hiding place before her. Hundreds, probably. But this was no time to get historical. Shoving her right to the back, he pulled the walnut doors closed behind her and turned the key. Then, with one long, deep breath to steady his nerves, he opened the door to her husband.

Bremeau had obviously just arrived home from his business trip. Still dressed in a formal three-piece suit, he looked white as a sheet and even more miserable than usual.

Bobby's heart skipped a beat. He couldn't have heard them, could he?

'Bobby.' The Frenchman's short, stubby fingers worked nervously as he spoke. 'This is very bad, *mon ami*. Very, very bad.'

Holy crap. He *had* heard them.

That was it, then: the end of his career, and quite possibly his life if Pascal turned out to be the murderously jealous type, which he looked

like he very well might be. And all over a stupid girl! How could he have been so reckless? And with his work with Mirage only half-finished, too . . .

'Eets your father.' Bremeau abruptly interrupted his panicked internal monologue.

For a minute Bobby thought he'd misheard him.

'What? My *father*? I don't understand.'

'I'm sorry,' the older man mumbled awkwardly. 'I . . . I don't really know 'ow to say these, but . . . 'e 'as died, Bobby. In 'is sleep. About four hours ago.'

Bobby stared impassively at the jowly, pale face opposite him.

No. No, there must be some mistake. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. He wasn't ready.

'I 'ave arranged for the chopper to fly you to Nice airport in 'alf an hour. You understand, no?'

Bremeau's look of concern deepened. Perhaps the boy hadn't grasped his broken English? He kept waiting for him to say something, but he looked utterly shell-shocked.

'Bobby? Are you all right?'

Stunned and mute, Bobby eventually managed a nod.

'Yes . . . yes. I'm fine. I understand,' he said quietly. 'Thank you.'

'I'm so sorry.'

Reaching up, Bremeau laid a comforting hand on his shoulder. All of a sudden the guilt he'd been unable to feel a few moments ago seemed to punch him full force in the stomach. Hank was dead. His father. Dead. And here was this Frenchman, a total stranger, trying to comfort him, little knowing that not five minutes ago he'd been banging the living daylights out of the poor guy's wife – the same wife who was hiding in the closet right now.

The whole thing was like a sketch from a bad sit-com. Only it no longer seemed funny.

His father was dead.

'I'm sorry, too, Pascal,' he whispered, almost to himself. 'Believe me. Sorrier than you know. For everything.'