



Diamond Spur

By Diana Palmer

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New York Times and USA TODAY bestselling author DIANA PALMER serves up one of her most popular Texans—Jason Donovan—in a thrilling story destined to enthrall her many readers!

Texas rancher Jason Donovan is known for his temper, his brooding nature and his deep distrust of women. No one at the Diamond Spur ranch can stand his moods—except Kate Whittman. She might be young, but she knows Jason is the only man for her. Kate wants him more than anything, but he offers her only brotherly protection—until she discovers that Jason's desire for her is as strong as hers for him.

Ever the gruff cowboy, Jason insists that commitment and love aren't for him. So Kate pursues her own life, away from the man she loves. But just when it seems that her fairy tale is coming true, fate brings her back to Texas. To Jason. And to a dream that she'd almost abandoned...

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Editorial Review

Review

"Palmer...is the queen of desperado quests for justice and true love." -Publishers Weekly

"The popular Palmer has penned another winning novel, a perfect blend of romance and suspense."--Booklist on Lawman

"Diana Palmer is a mesmerizing storyteller who captures the essence of what a romance should be."--Affaire de Coeur

"Diana Palmer is one of those authors whose books are always enjoyable. She throws in romance, suspense and a good storyline." -The Romance Reader on Before Sunrise

"...this is a fascinating story...It's nice to have a hero wise enough to know when he can't do things alone and willing to accept help when he needs it. There is pleasure to be found in the nice sense of family this tale imparts."

-RT Book Reviews on Wyoming Bold

"...lots of passion, thrills, and plenty of suspense... Protector is a top notch read!"

-Romance Reviews Today on Protector

"The dialogue is charming, the characters likable and the sex sizzling..." --Publishers Weekly on Once in Paris

"A delightful romance with interesting new characters and many familiar faces. It's nice to have a hero who is not picture perfect in looks or instincts, and a heroine who accepts her privileged life yet is willing to work for the future she wants." --RT Book Reviews on Wyoming Tough

"Palmer, a romance veteran, knows how to concoct a savory chicken-fried love plot..." -Publishers Weekly on Heartless

"Palmer's latest entry in her Long, Tall Texans series is an intriguing story that blurs the line between good and evil...the romance between the main characters builds nicely with some gentle humor, and the moral dilemmas they face are believable and engrossing." -RT Book Reviews on Protector

About the Author

The prolific author of more than one hundred books, Diana Palmer got her start as a newspaper reporter. A New York Times bestselling author and voted one of the top ten romance writers in America, she has a gift for telling the most sensual tales with charm and humor. Diana lives with her family in Cornelia, Georgia.

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There were huge live oak trees sheltering the Donovan place from the south Texas heat. The impressive pale yellow Spanish-styled stucco house sat between barbed wire fences, far back off the ranch road at the end of a dusty, winding driveway. Kate Whittman was glad to be poking along on the old quarter horse Jason had

given her instead of driving. It had been dry in this part of Frio County, Texas, for some weeks now, and the dust was much less noticeable on a slow-moving horse than in a car.

The Donovan driveway had never been paved. The ranch covered thousands of acres and spare cash always went into buying more cattle, not into modernizing roads. In these days of low cattle prices and overwhelming interest on ranch loans, it took a business mind like Jason Donovan's to keep the wolf away from the door.

Her green eyes scanned the horizon. It was roundup time, Kate knew, and on an operation this size, the spread had to be broken down into sections. Each camp had its own crew and foreman, and Jason would be riding around from one to the other to keep an eye on things. During roundup, somebody always got hurt. While broken bones, burns, contusions, and abrasions were part of the usual demands of ranch work, herding cattle and branding always brought grief. This time the boss himself had run afoul of a maddened mama longhorn, and the ranch foreman had gone sneaking over to Kate's house to fetch her. Any time Jason got hurt, they sent for Kate, because Jason Donovan wouldn't let anybody else near him. He trusted Kate because she wasn't afraid of his temper, and because she alone could manage him when that temper was at flash point.

Kate sighed wistfully, thinking about all the times she'd come down this winding driveway. She and Jason didn't date; in fact he hardly seemed to notice her as a woman. But she'd been friends with his younger brother Gene, and with the housekeeper, Sheila, long before that odd kind of friendship developed between Jason and herself, born out of an equally odd confrontation one night when he'd been drinking. He didn't let anyone very close, even Kate, but she was allowed privileges that no one else was. He was protective of her, in a rough sort of way; a kind of unrelated older brother. Of course, that wasn't at all what Kate wanted from him. But it was as much as she could expect from a man who kept to himself the way he always did.

There was a lot of road between the open range with its spacious improved grazing land, green now that spring had arrived, and the house resting in its solitary nest of trees. In one pasture, cows with new calves were grazing. In another, young castrated bulls made up the steer crop. In still another, huge Santa Gertrudis bulls had been turned out with hearty longhorn-Santa Gertrudis crossbred cows for the third stage in Diamond Spur's three-crossbreed breeding program. In still another pasture, purebred longhorn bulls had been introduced to the crop of two-year-old heifers for their first breeding. The longhorn papas would insure that the new mothers dropped small calves, insuring an easy delivery and less herd losses.

Kate smiled at the efficiency of it all. Jason was a wizard with cattle. His sprawling cow-calf commercial operation had a spotless reputation with its customers, and a large part of it was due to Jason's personal interest in his ranch, and the time he spent overseeing every part of its operation. He was always the first to try new techniques, to use better methods of production. That ability to change with the times, to bend to the demands of modern cattle marketing, had kept his Diamond Spur ranch solvent. When, several years back, other ranchers had turned to investing heavily in new land acquisitions, Jason was experimenting with artificial insemination and embryo transplants and innovative methods of nutritional supplementation.

Kate pushed back her long, dark brown braid and settled lower in the saddle. She grimaced as her jean-clad leg brushed over a nail peeking through the leather. She'd designed and decorated these jeans herself. She hoped they weren't torn because they were part of a collection she hoped to sell to the manufacturing company where she worked. She really couldn't afford any new denim. Things were in bad shape at the small place she shared with her mother, but she didn't want Jason to know just how bad. Anyway, he didn't need any more worry at the moment. The cattle industry was depressed, and even a man with Jason's business sense could go broke. If he lived, she thought with black irritation, remembering how impossible he was

about injuries. Jason never would go to a doctor with a cut. He'd try to treat it himself and the only way he'd have it seen about was if it got badly infected, or if Kate stuck her nose in. For Jason's foreman Gabe to run off in the middle of a roundup hunting her, and risking the boss's temper asking her to intervene, it must be pretty bad this time.

Nobody ever seemed to guess that she wasn't as confident as she pretended to be with Jason. He intimidated her, too. After all, he was thirty—almost ten full years her senior. But she'd learned over the years to hide her uncertainty. Now her dark, slender eyebrows drew together as she wondered if he'd done some irreparable damage to his tough hide. He was male perfection itself, as most of the single women around San Frio would have agreed. It was a pity that he'd become such a dyed in the wool misogynist. She wondered how he'd ever get an heir for Diamond Spur with that attitude. And if anything happened to Jason, his younger brother Gene would never be strong enough to hold the family finances together.

The Diamond Spur had belonged to Jason Donovan since the death of his father, although Gene would inherit a good share of it. Old J.B. Donovan had drowned when the Frio River came down in flood one spring morning eight years ago. But the ranch's name went back a lot longer than eight years. Back in 1873, a Civil War veteran named Blalock Donovan had chanced to sit in on a poker game in San Antonio. In a game that went on all night, and during which one man was killed for cheating, the young Confederate sergeant from Calhoun County, Georgia, won the last hand with a legendary straight diamond flush—and without any wild cards to make that impossible feat any more possible.

In the pot had been a total of one hundred Yankee dollars—and the deed to a broken down cattle ranch in Frio County, Texas. The ranch hadn't had a name at the time. Everyone locally just called it the Bryan place. But Blalock Donovan had won it on a Royal Diamond Flush, with a silver spur in the kitty as his part of the ante. So the Diamond Spur it became. The Diamond Spur it remained. And a Donovan still owned it, 113 years later.

Kate's pale green eyes softened as she saw the heavy-set woman bending over a pan on the front porch. Diamond Spur was one of the richest cattle ranches in Texas, enabling Jason to drive a Mercedes and a new very classy black Bronco. The interior of the house was like an antique museum, with pieces from around the world. And Jason entertained on a lavish scale. In fact, Jason's kitchen had every modern convenience, but his housekeeper, Sheila James, still did her own canning.

Sheila was an institution at the ranch. Rumor had it that she'd been madly in love with old J.B. Donovan, but that gentleman had no use for women after his Nell deserted him and his two sons. The old man took to strong drink and became a holy terror. They said even Sheila had grown afraid of him after that, but that she'd stayed on to look after the boys. She had character and an uncanny tolerance for people. She had a lot of perseverance, too, because old J.B. Donovan had been a hardcase with a mean temper. Jason still was, although Kate could reach him when no one else could. That was something of a joke locally, Kate knew, but nobody laughed about it in front of Jason.

Sheila looked up from the lazy rhythm of the front porch swing, her blue eyes sparkling as Kate came closer. "I sent Gabe after you. I hope you don't mind," she said apologetically. "I figured Jason would bleed to death and become an eyesore out there because his men would be too scared to bury him."

She paused in the act of snapping green beans and stringing them, the shallow pan across the knees of her brilliant green and yellow checked housedress, her salt and pepper hair short and sweaty. She was fifty and looked it. Even Jason gave her a measure of respect, but Sheila was no match for his temper when it was aroused.

"Can't you do anything with him?" Kate replied mischievously.

"Not without a loaded gun," came the dry reply. "Gabe told me that Jason finally stopped the bleeding and bandaged himself, but the blood was still seeping through when he went out again. I'm afraid it needs stitches."

"Well, I'll see what I can do," Kate promised. "Is he where Gabe left him, with the crew out on the Smith bottoms?"

"That's what Gabe said. Thanks, Kate," Sheila replied.

Kate smiled as she turned the horse. "Old-fashioned transportation, isn't it?" She grinned. "But it's a long walk, and Mom has the car at work, since it's grocery store day."

"And you wouldn't ride over with Gabe because he's sweet on you?" Sheila asked knowingly.

Kate, who was twenty and a little nervous about men because of an extremely sheltered background, nodded. Her father and mother had raised her in the same strict fashion they'd been raised. They were old-fashioned, church-going people. And even though her father was dead, her mother was still a stickler for morality and didn't hesitate to ask Jason's opinion of Kate's infrequent dates. That rankled, too, but Kate's mother, Mary, thought the sun rose and set on the man. Kate's late father had been Jason's foreman, and she sometimes thought that was one reason Jason seemed to feel responsible for her and Mary.

She drew her mind back to the present. "Gabe is a very nice man, but I want to be a fashion designer. I don't want to get married for ages yet."

Sheila nodded, thinking privately that Kate and Jason got along so well because both of them wanted their independence. Jason would probably never marry since that Maryland woman had thrown him over for a movie contract.

"Good luck," she murmured. "He was already wound up and cussing when he went out the door this morning. Had some terrible things to say about what I did to his eggs." She sniffed, snapping beans with renewed vengeance. "Nothing wrong with salsa and refried beans on top of them. Well, is there?" she asked Kate.

Kate knew how Sheila made salsa, and having tasted the extremely hot sauce once, she had every sympathy for Jason. "Why did you put salsa on them?"

"Because the minute his feet hit the floor, he started cussing because he couldn't find where I put his jeans, and then he swore the detergent I used gave him an allergic reaction, he said there wasn't enough cover on his bed..." Sheila's thin lips flattened. "I guess I cause cancer, too, although he stopped short of accusing me of that!"

Kate shook her head, laughing softly. "You ought to short sheet his bed for him."

"Oh, don't you worry, I'll get even," Sheila replied. "He loves cherry pie. Hell will freeze over and shiver before he gets another one."

That wasn't quite true, of course. Jason would get hungry for that cherry pie and start flattering his

housekeeper, and he'd have his cherry pie like a shot. He and Sheila had these blowups almost daily, and both forgot them just as frequently.

"Well, I'll go try to patch him up so you can get your own back on him," Kate offered.

"If you can get him back here, I've got some nasty antiseptic..." the older woman called.

Kate shook her finger at Sheila and rode on. But once she was on the narrow, rutted path through the grass that led to the holding pens, she felt a little nervous. Jason in a temper wasn't the most pleasant person to be around. Part of Kate was still a little afraid of him, although she wouldn't admit it or show it. He was a very masculine man, and he didn't bother to hide his faults; he just let them hang out for everyone to see. He'd never have made it as a diplomat.

Kate smoothed her hands down her jeans and fumbled to tuck the shirttail of her faded blue print blouse back into them. Down the road, a deep, drawling male voice called out orders with more than the usual amount of venom, rapid-fire Spanish reverting quickly to English and back again. Jason spoke both. Since most of the local ranch hands were of Mexican-American descent, being bilingual came as naturally as wearing boots around San Frio. Cattle bawled and dust was everywhere, with men on foot and men on horseback trying to keep some kind of mad order in all the confusion.

This rural part of south Texas hadn't changed a lot since the Civil War. There was less native grassland because of the enormous amount of grazing that had been done back in the cattle era. These days ranchers who wanted good grass had to plant it, so the local Soil Conservation Service people were Johnny-on-the-spot with help for those who wanted it, as Jason had. But, too, there was a lot of scrub and more prickly pear and mesquite than anybody wanted. Despite the drawbacks, the open country was the same; wide and spread out and endless, with just a few scattered trees here and there to signal houses hidden from the sun. It was pioneer country. Cowboy country. And Kate, who'd been born next door to the Donavans, loved it with all her heart. Sitting astride the quarter horse with the wind blowing the grass down and teasing her shirt, she felt as free and unchained as the land itself.

She left her horse at the big makeshift corral and moved along on booted feet, tugging nervously at her long swath of hair. Her hair was a deep, rich brown, down to her waist when she didn't braid it or put it up. She had a pretty oval face with wide-spaced green eyes under long lashes, and a straight nose and a bow mouth. It wasn't a particularly beautiful face. It was thin and high-cheek-boned. But Kate had a sweet personality and a kind of unabashed honesty that overshadowed her lack of beauty.

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