

## ROCK CREEK RANCH

Like an alien mother ship the towering gray-black thunderstorm loomed larger by the minute, billowing toward me over rocky slopes, engulfing the whole of the mountain above, firing white daggers at earth and clouds that rumbled with their searing flashes...closer, faster, louder! I was on the run!

The monsoon season began early with a blast of wind and splats of rain the size of silver dollars that cratered the red New Mexico dust and boiled the earth in seconds with its deluge of water and marbles of ice.

Earlier, I'd ignored the booming echoes as I hiked the trail and now paid for it, yelping, running flat-out toward my campsite, arriving at the moment the wind whipped my tent across a pine tree like a ragged flag.

A crash of lightning sent me bolting to my SUV. I huddled inside soaked to the skin, shivering, panting, watching through the rain-streaked windshield as my duffle full of clothes and camping gear sagged and sunk into the growing rivulets that charged down the hill and washed away my dreams of a relaxing weekend away from my desk in Tucson.

Without warning, knuckles rapped on my side window startling me as badly as any lightning bolt. His piercing eyes drilled through the foggy glass and before I had the window fully down he yelled with a voice stronger than the roar of the storm, "How you doin'!"

He leaned in close at my open window, his black cowboy hat held tight against the wind. The neat dark stubble on his finely chiseled features sparkled with wet.

"My stuff's gone!" I shouted desperately, my mind tinged with disbelief that, from out of nowhere here at the height of the storm, this could be him. But no one else could possess that hauntingly handsome face I stared at except Cody.

"Come down to our place." He said in a calm reassuring tone.

I gazed at him unsure. A second later a blinding ear-splitting lightning bolt shook my vehicle and tingled my every hair.

"Damn!" I yelped.

A Pinion pine forty yards away the victim, split in two, its pungent smoke streaming toward us in the wind-driven rain took my hesitation with it.

"Guess I'd better! Thanks!"

Unfazed by all the turmoil he sloped through the mud to scoop up my sodden duffle bag and cradling it under his arm yelled, "Follow me!" as he ran hunched over from the driving rain, hat jammed on head, mud flying off boots, dashing past me up the trail to his 60's-something beat-to-shit-but-still-running GMC pickup.

My tires begged for traction. With engine roaring, my Ford finally squirmed behind Cody's truck and followed him down the mountain road, now a mud river flowing thick and fast as we left the worst of the storm to descend into Rock Creek Valley where we found a quieter gentler rain—the softer feminine side of Mother Nature.

Outside his ranch house, we slid out of our vehicles and plopped our sopping wet butts against my front fender and marveled at the double rainbow painted on the swirling folds of black that covered the distant mountains and at the late afternoon sun shining in brilliant streaks through broken clouds like spotlights on the wet hills and at his pastures gleaming bright and filling the air with a rich scent of alfalfa and sage and creosote bush.

I dared glance at the wet shirt plastered tight on his chest, his damp dark jeans tighter than I remembered, his ample bulge more pronounced, my surge of lust tempered by the sun glinting off his wedding ring.

“Man, do we look a sight.” Cody said through a thin tight smile and with a gaze that quickly wandered to somewhere far off up in the hills and lingered there. “You cold?”

I shook my head, reluctant to admit the elements got the best of me.

“I’ll take care of your gear in a minute. Let’s go get warmed up.”

“I don’t want to intrude.”

“I say you’re not. That’s good enough. She knows you’re comin’.” He slapped the back of my shoulder. “Let’s get a hot drink started and get you out of those clothes.”

Cody didn’t say exactly where she was. I waited in the warmth of the colorful kitchen bright with afternoon sun and heard his voice reverberating over the polished Saltillo tiles from somewhere in a distant room, and a woman’s sounding strange, like a baby crying, and the boy, LJ, I heard him greet his Dad. I searched for a place to take a piss, down a hallway past spacious high-walled rooms with kiva fireplaces and carved posts supporting viga and latilla ceilings in this noble and charming old Southwestern adobe hacienda, brim full of uncanny tension.

As I zipped up my sodden jeans, his voice behind me echoed in the tiled and colorfully stucco-plastered bathroom, “Probably best you stay down at the bunkhouse for the night. She sleepwalks sometimes. No need to disturb you with that.”

Thoughts flashed of Old West bunkhouses filled with those handsome stripped-to-the-waist card-playing cowboys perched on edges of their cots, those hand rolled smokes dangling from those lips, those bunks chocked full of the aloof and self-possessed, those chiseled bodies oozing masculinity. Those kinds of men.

Those kind, like Cody who leaned against the door watching me, waiting, wondering, clutching a roll of dry clothes, his dark eyes like daggers I feared might pierce my innermost thoughts.

“Oh... sorry. I’m dazed.”

He comforted my factitious self with a nod. “You’ll sleep well tonight.”

I had my doubts with the kind of stuff he stuffs inside my head.

He led me to the bunkhouse, a little one room rock and timber hip roofed bungalow at the end of a stone path that wound past clumps of sagebrush between the ranch house and the barn.

“This one here’s the best.” He said, tossing the roll of clean dry clothes on a cot at the south wall. Jutting out from the east wall was another cot with a family photo on the lamp stand beside the bed, and next to it a simple lo-boy dresser where several pressed Western shirts hung stiffly from a rod above.

“Someone lives here?” My question ignored, he stepped into a small shower alcove tucked in the corner between the two cots and there pissed noisily in the toilet.

I stripped and toweled myself dry. Bare-assed naked, I crouched on the floor by my pile of camp clothes salvaging what I could from my duffle bag. I found dry parts, I found wet parts, but always on the same garment. Slowly I sensed a presence behind me and glanced over my shoulder, startled.

“Sorry.” He said softly, staring down on my nakedness that I quickly tried to hide. He quickly mumbled, “Hey, you’re cool.”

His eyes darted to something or nothing on the nearby wall leaving me not cool but hot and breathless as he held captive my lingering stare.

Cody had lost his clothes down to his Calvin Kleins and above its waistband the last rays of sun snuck through the window by my bed and glistened on his closely mowed hair spread across his pecs, a manly canopy over a dark narrow trunk of it that fell down rippled abs to his birth knothole to abruptly disappear within his bulging shorts next to where his sinewy fingers clutched the roll of clean dry clothes.

“I’ll wear whatever doesn’t fit.” He offered with a faint wry smile that made me wonder if he were trying to squelch a derisive laugh. “I’ll get you some underwear, if you want.”

“Yeah-yeah. Thanks. If you got extra.” I blurted, trusting that a pair of shorts would let me feel less vulnerable, more equal, more protected. I crouched modestly until he turned away.

“I need to take a leak.” I said, slowly rising off the floor, letting my eyes inhale the pulsing muscles of his backside as he glided barefoot and silent as a cat to the dresser near the other cot. He opened the drawer. I finally realized who occupies this place.

When I approached him after my nervous piss, Cody stood near naked in a confident slouch next to an assortment of clothes he’d laid neatly on my cot, and as much as I resisted, his shorts magnetized my eyes.

“I think we’re about the same size.” He said as his gaze slowly coursed over my body.

“Yeah, you’re bigger than I thought.” My unpredictable mouth spurted. “I mean... you’re...” My foot tasted like it always does.

“So are you.” His glance was one you’d toss a fool. He stepped to one side which left the end of the cot a comforting wedge of no-man’s land between us. “No matter. If the shoe fits, wear it.” He then frowned, “Is that what I meant to say?”

The question hung suspended in mid-air, me mesmerized by his faint smile now graced with a hint of pearl-white teeth glistening behind those bold red lips centered between his stubbled dark-haired cheeks, billboards of potent masculinity, and by his brooding onyx eyes, those mysterious gems possessed by the young Cody Montoya. Such power he has! His slightest glance could roil my guts!

“Would you hand me a dry one, please?” He didn’t need to ask... he could have reached... I could have hesitated, but his strong quiet voice compelled me to submit to his droll request and I handed him a shirt so he could cover some of what tempted me. My fingers brushed his and my mental gears speed-shifted from giddy to serious. But he didn’t move or jerk away, nor did he notice or even seem to care. My touch, my total nakedness, meant nothing to him. His own, to him, even less.

I focused on my shorts—not his—and to zipping my jeans and stuffing my lust for a married man, reminding myself to be grateful for hospitality from a guy I’d only met one other time, a man who owes me nothing.

“Yeah... your clothes fit pretty good. What do you think?” I said in an attempt to sound jaunty yet masculine.

He cocked his head. I took the cue and turned so he could see my side and butt.

“I have my clothes tailored.” He said as his eyes ran from my bottom down to the floor and back again. “Awesome fit. Here, try the shirt.”

There was a bit of extra room in the shoulders and arms. No matter, I savored the thrill of his cloth on my skin, and as he dressed I feasted on the eye candy he wrapped so snugly in my presence.

“I’ll hang your clothes on the back porch. That’s our only kind of dryer. They should be ready by morning. Who knows with the weather.”

“Thanks. Much appreciated.”

“Come on, let’s go get that drink.”

I followed Cody up the path to the ranch house remembering the first time we met that sunny afternoon last spring when he surprised me as he came through the brush near my mountain camp, me sweaty naked, showering as best I could under a jug of water jammed in the crotch of a tree, him apologizing for the interruption and talking in nervous spurts about how he accidentally stumbled on me while on his way to look at a ramshackled corral, the one I’d passed earlier that day during my hike.

Cody’s discovery flustered me as much as him, and after I quickly dressed, the guarded way we both talked loosened just a bit and we spent some time together walking the fence line down to that old corral where he told me of his hopes for a cattle permit so he could expand his herd. Even if he thought me queer, he didn’t seem to mind, and the time spent that afternoon with this handsome cowboy suited me just fine.

Early the next morning when I was breaking camp I heard his old GMC bounce to a stop close by on the mountain road. His arm hung out the open window, his face flashed a quick smile that drew me to the truck.

“Mornin’ Ty.” The fingers of his right hand brushed across his hat brim in salute as I approached, then he glanced at the bench seat beside him and quickly back at me. “This is my son, Little Jesse. LJ, we call him.”

A pint-sized clone of Cody popped up from nowhere, standing stiff and upright, leaning back against the seat with arms folded confidently across his chest and decked out in a copy of the neat Western outfit his Dad wore, right down to the green and red Kokopelli bandana around his neck. LJ forced a wary smile. A chip off the old block. Absolutely. The elder’s shadow, no doubt of that.

That day Cody wore no ring. Any man like him I always checked. That day LJ was his subtle message: ring or not, Cody was a married man.