

Rock Creek Ranch

Like an alien mother ship the towering gray-black thunderstorm loomed larger by the minute, billowing and engulfing the whole of the mountain above, firing white daggers at earth and cloud... closer, faster, louder, rolling down wooded slopes, rumbling toward me with searing flashes.

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 just in time to see a nearby pine tree become the pole my tent flew from like a ragged flag.

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

Without warning, knuckles rapped on my side window scaring me worse than any lightning bolt. His piercing eyes drilled through the foggy wet-streaked glass.

"How you doin'?" Cody yelled before I had the window fully down. He grasped his black Western hat against the wind, the dark fine cropped stubble on his masculine face sparkled with wet, his voice stronger than the roar of the storm.

"My stuff's gone!"

"Come down to our place!" He shouted.

A blinding ear-splitting bolt shook my SUV and tingled every hair. The Ponderosa pine forty yards away the victim, split in two, smoke streaming away in the wind, taking my hesitation with it. "Maybe I'd better, thanks!"

He slopped through the mud to scoop up my sodden duffle bag, and cradling it under his arm he yelled "Follow me!" as he ran, hunched over by the driving rain, hand gripping hat, mud flying off boots, he dashed 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.

Sopping wet, we slid out of our vehicles at the ranch and plopped our 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 with brilliant streaks through broken clouds like spotlights on the wet hills, and at pastures that gleamed bright and filled the air with a rich scent of alfalfa and sage and creosote bush.

I dared glance at the wet shirt plastered tight to his chest, his damp dark jeans tighter than I remembered, his bold 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, looking somewhere far off in the hills. "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 inside."

"I don't want to intrude."

"I say you're not. That's good enough. She knows you're comin'." He slapped me on the shoulder. "Let's get a hot drink started and get you out of those clothes."