



Deirdre
O'Dare

Portrait
of a Cowboy

PORTRAIT OF A COWBOY

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BY

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*This one is for a real Kim
who loaned me her name. Thanks for your
friendship, Hon, and I hope you enjoy living this
ale vicariously with your namesake. <g>
(You did volunteer!)*

*My deepest thanks to the staff
at AQP for your wonderful work and support
through each of my projects and a very special thanks
to “Mr. Z” for giving wonderful faces –and
physiques! to my cowboys. And for
remembering the sunsets!*

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Kim careened around the corner of the two-and-a-half story wooden tower at a dead run, her waist-length braid slapping on her back. She knew the rodeo office was housed in the bottom, while the announcer's booth sat on top. Not that it mattered at the moment. *Late again—the story of my life.*

As she struggled to balance three-and-a-half armfuls of photo gear in the two she'd been given, she swore under her breath. *Shit, of all days for my alarm clock to go kablooy. If I've missed Cody's ride, he'll kill me.*

She had a standing contract with Riverbend's favorite son, Cody Elkheart, to capture on video every ride he made. She also gleaned his publicity shots from the best stills she could get. Similar arrangements with numerous other contestants formed the work which was her bread and butter.

When she twisted to avoid a steaming fresh pile of horse manure,

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she felt her bad knee protest the motion. That knee was the main reason she now photographed instead of competing in the rodeos. There was enough metal in it to set off the alarms every time she went through airport security.

Watch your step, gal. You're in Marlboro country and all the green ain't grass.

As she staggered, trying to regain her balance, she tripped over a pair of blue jean clad legs that suddenly appeared at the periphery of her vision. The strap of the biggest camera bag slid off her shoulder. At the same instant, two powerful arms came out of nowhere to catch and steady her. She gasped. *How could he have gotten up so fast?*

For a long minute she rested against a solid chest covered in soft blue chambray. Then her rescuer very carefully released her. He took a half step back, arms still extended in case she could not find her balance.

"You are all right? I am so sorry. I did not see you coming until you were right here."

She looked up and still farther up, distinctly a novelty. Her five-foot-nine-inch height put her near eye level with most of the cowboys, but this one was a giant. *A totally gorgeous hunk of a giant*, she amended as his baby-blue gaze met hers. An expression of anxious concern marked his chiseled features.

"I was just catching a few minutes of shut-eye before they call my ride. We drove all night to get here, my friends and I, but that is a bad excuse for having my big feet in your way."

There was something odd yet familiar about his speech, both the accent and the strange way he put some phrases together. She was trying to puzzle that out when he sketched a very continental bow, almost sweeping the ground with the ivory-tan Resistol he doffed to make the gesture.

"Wolfgang Voegler, at your service." He smiled with a flash of

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teeth any dentist would be proud to use in an ad. “My friends call me Wolf. Here, let me help to carry your equipment.”

Ah ha, German or something similar—like Hungarian or Austrian.

His accent brought to mind a well-known action movie star. There was even a bit of similarity in their looks, although Wolf was definitely the more handsome. He belonged on a recruiting poster for Kaiser Bill’s army! In spite of herself, Kim felt her heart speed up. It went into double-time when he smiled again, gazing down at her warmly as he reached for the sliding strap.

“I’m heading for the bucking chutes,” Kim managed, “and I’m already late. This hasn’t been one of my better days.”

“That is also where I am to go,” Wolf said, “so we can go together. You are a photographer, no?”

Kim nodded, letting him take the heavy bag while she got a better grip on the tripod, her video camera, and an accessory bag. “Yes, I’m a sports photographer. I specialize in rodeos and horse shows. I guess I should introduce myself, shouldn’t I? I’m Kimbrel Westbrooke, Kim to friends.”

“I am honored to make your acquaintance, Ms. Westbrooke. However, I am thinking that one as lovely as yourself should be in front of the camera instead of behind it.”

She started to snort her scorn at this blatant flattery, but something in the towering man’s tone made it sound so sincere she couldn’t. *Well, hell, if a man this good looking wants to come on to me, who am I to run him off?* She tilted her head enough to smile up in his direction as they started off. “I’m grateful for the help, Mr. Voegler.”

Wolf carried the bag all the way to the end of the bucking chutes where she was going to set up. “Please, call me Wolf. Sorry, but I must go now to make ready for my bronco ride,” he apologized. “But I can come back later to help you move your gear wherever you need to go next.”

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She suppressed a chuckle. He reminded her of her two-year-old Rottweiler. Blitz normally behaved in similar fashion, so anxiously eager to please that he almost stumbled over himself. The man's manner should have been ridiculous, but somehow it was instead utterly charming. She gave him her best smile.

"I'll try to get a good picture for you," she offered. "Thank you so much for your help."

He beamed an answering smile before he loped off toward the opposite end of the chutes.

Although it took a full five minutes for her pulse rate to drop to normal, by the time the first of the bareback riders was announced, Kim was ready to go. She settled in a perch astride the top rail, her Nikon hanging around her neck and the camcorder aimed in on the gate. For the next twenty minutes she stayed busy, shooting as fast as she could. She usually got at least a few frames of every cowboy. Those with whom she had contracts to record their rides got more time.

Wolf was the next to last bareback rider out of the chute. Much to her amazement, he gave a very credible showing, scoring just a couple of points below the go-round winner. How had a foreigner learned to ride like that? He was very obviously not a native of the American west, but his skill gave one no clue of the fact. She found herself hoping he would come around again, just so she could satisfy her curiosity.

The rest of the day's events passed in a blur, mostly viewed through the narrow field of one of her cameras. Although she was aware of the dust, the roars of the crowd, the ever-present scents of animals, leather, dirt, and beer, that awareness stayed on the periphery of her attention as she concentrated on her photography. Getting the perfect shots of each performer in each event had become almost an obsession with her. That obsession served her well, though, earning her the strong reputation that led to a steady income.

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Not that she really had to support herself. Her father's real estate development and construction company had grown to a point it would see her parents and her two younger brothers well fixed for life with plenty left over for her. Kim had her pride, though.

When she married against her parents' wishes, her father had cut off her income. Now that her divorce was several years in the past, she prided herself on making her own way. Never once had she asked for help as she struggled to build her business. Barring unforeseen disasters, she never would.

The sun had sunk far to the west before the dust from the day's final event settled. With a weary sigh, Kim climbed down from her last perch to begin gathering her equipment. Suddenly he was there, her blond giant. He reached to check her when she started to heft the big camera bag.

"Oh no, I am here to carry that," he said. "But first I have a little something for you."

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At twenty-seven, she knew she was still trim and attractive, even if Travis had dumped her along with her hospital bills after her barrel horse fell and smashed her leg. Dumped her with rationalized reasons that made her appear the only one at fault. Her sad joke of a marriage had cured her of any desire to become one man’s property.

Travis Sheppard had been one of those, “My wife’s married but I’m not,” kind of guys. He’d done a real job on her self-confidence when he blamed his continual affairs on her ineptitude as a lover and general inadequacies as a wife. Her sensitive heart had come too close to believing there was more than a grain of truth in his charges even if her mind knew better.

She was still thinking what to say to Wolf when they reached her truck. The completely restored 1960 Ford Ranchero pickup was her pride and joy. The sleek mini-truck sported a glossy turquoise and cream paint job, custom wheels, and a specially made cab-high shell on the bed with built in padded boxes to carry her gear. As she unlocked the lift gate, she turned back to Wolf.

“Why?” she asked bluntly. “I’m no buckle bunny. You’re new, so maybe you didn’t know, but I don’t date cowboys.”

Without responding, he settled the bags and tripod in their neat niches in the back of the truck. He took as much or more patient care with them as she would have. Maybe he was marshaling his thoughts.

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He didn't seem shocked or surprised by her assertion, not even put off.

"You are a strong woman," he said finally. "I admire strength and courage. You stand on your own two feet, do not ask anyone for help, no clinging vine-ness, no coy hints or hiding behind the image of the hothouse flower. And, yes, you are very beautiful as well. It is a pride to me to be seen with someone such as you. I admire fine things as well as beauty."

Perhaps it was rebellion, or maybe simply a weariness of being perpetually alone, keeping the world at arm's length, but suddenly Kim made up her mind. *I'll go. What harm could there possibly be in it? It's only dinner, for Pete's sake.*

"Okay, I'll go to dinner with you on one condition. We won't go to any of the regular hangouts of the rodeo set and I'll go home and clean up first."

He smiled, that smile that made her stomach flip and a tingle start between her thighs. "That's two."

She shrugged. "So it is. Take it or leave it. But what's with the flowers?"

He shrugged in turn. "It is what you might call a European thing. At home we give flowers to a woman without—how do you say—ulterior motives? Not to get her in bed or to make up after a fight, but just because they are lovely and so is she. When I first saw you, I thought of a summer meadow. So I give you this. It is meant only as a compliment, not a bribe." He smiled again, making her heart skip a couple of beats. He had such a sweetly endearing little boy sort of smile.

She turned toward the driver's door, stopping when she realized he still stood at the rear of the truck. "What's wrong?"

"I do not have a car," he admitted. "I travel with some other riders or fly from one rodeo to another. Is there a good restaurant within walking distance? If so, I will meet you there at the time you say."

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“We’ll take my truck,” she said. “Do you want to go somewhere and clean up too? I can drop you at your motel.”

He glanced down at his dusty jeans and shirt, the mud caked on his boots. “Ach, I should. We, my partners and I, are at the Sevens Motel, the one across the highway from the fairgrounds gate.”

“I can swing in there on my way then, drop you off. Get in.” She unlocked the driver’s door, slid in on the leather-upholstered bench, and reached across to unlock the passenger door. As Wolf folded himself into the seat, she realized just how big he was. The truck wasn’t really toy-sized, but his height and the breadth of his shoulders made it appear so.

He’s so big. Wonder if the rest of him is on the same scale?

Disgusted at her wayward thoughts, Kim dragged her gaze away from Wolf’s impressive frame. *Get a grip. You aren’t going to bed with him, just dinner.* But somewhere in the back of her mind a taunting little voice said, “*Don’t bet on it.*”

* * *

An hour later, Kim pulled up in the lot of the motel, freshly showered and wearing one of her few dresses. She wasn’t quite sure why she hadn’t opted for her normal uniform of jeans and T-shirt, but it just didn’t feel right. Not that she really cared how she looked or that this was any kind of special occasion. Still, she had put on an eyelet, off-shoulder blouse with a mid-calf length broomstick skirt—one of her favorites, an outfit she felt good in since it flattered her slender height.

All thoughts flew out of her head when Wolf stepped out the door, striding toward her truck. He wore well-fitted jean-cut slacks of dark blue with a crisp shirt of pristine white. A plate-sized buckle caught the last rays of the setting sun, flashing a diamond-bright reflection. His straw-blond hair was combed smooth. It also caught the fading light, gleaming like spun gold.

He’s just too beautiful to be real! Even as that thought crossed her

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mind, she realized he was totally masculine and very real, more real than any man she'd met in a long time. As he got in, she caught a whiff of aftershave or cologne—a subtle blend of evergreen, cloves, and citrus that made her want to bury her face against that wide chest just to breathe him in.

Watch it, gal. He's got your hormones in overdrive. Don't let things get out of hand!

Later she couldn't have named one item they ate. It must have been steak and maybe a salad, possibly even seafood, but the meal left no impression. Instead her every sense was absorbed with Wolf. They were given a table in a quiet corner at The Cajun Cook Shack, which was a much more elegant place than the name implied, as well as being one where none of the rodeo set hung out.

Wolf seated her with a flourish before he settled beside instead of across the table from her. Some trick of the air currents seemed to envelop her in the scent of his aftershave.

It might as well be marijuana smoke, she thought vaguely. I'm getting high as a kite!

Kim found herself asking questions, listening keenly to Wolf's answers. He didn't seem inclined to brag, but admitted his German family was well-to-do. He had always been fascinated with the American west, he continued, dreamed of competing since he saw his first rodeo on television when he was a young boy. He'd ridden calves on his uncle's farm and horses at stables before finally entering a few competitions arranged by other Wild West fans with what livestock they could assemble.

"As soon as you could, you made your way to America, determined to become a real cowboy," she guessed.

He nodded. "So it was. I did not do well last year, my first season on the circuit, but I am getting better. I've begun to get in the money. Only thing is, my visa will expire soon. Then I am not sure how I can

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manage to stay and continue to compete. I would have to get a job or go to college to extend it, which would take time away from the rodeo.”

He sounded so sad she wanted to reach out and hug him to ease the hurt of it. “I’m sure something will work out,” she consoled, biting her tongue on an offer to hire him herself as an assistant. *Lord knows I could use a pack mule, but I’m afraid I’d be too distracted to work. He’s such a hunk! I’m getting hotter than a two dollar pistol just sitting here talking. He isn’t even touching me!*

Before they had finished a decadent dessert full of chocolate served with Amaretto flavored coffee, she knew that he was coming home with her. Not a word had been said about it, but there was no doubt in her mind. *I don’t date cowboys and I don’t sleep around, but this is an opportunity I can’t refuse.*

Wolf gallantly drew her chair out, taking her arm as they walked to the door. He’d paid with a credit card and left a very generous tip for their waiter, but she’d barely noticed that, totally focused on the man himself. When they reached the Ranchero, he took the keys from her hand to unlock her door. Then he stood gazing down at her for a long moment.

The colorful neon sign over the restaurant entrance reflected off his face in a dazzling play of rainbow colors. Kim reached out for her keys, but wound up catching his arm instead. Beneath the silky broadcloth of his shirt, his flesh was hot and solid. The next thing she knew, he had her in his arms as she stretched up into the first kiss.

Of course he would be a world class kisser... It started out with the lightest tracing of lips on lips, graduated to a nibbling foray of her mouth, and escalated into a French kiss that had their tongues dueling in an ardent mime of the hot sex that lay ahead.

She felt like she was on a carnival ride, one of those that had you up, down, and sideways, all at breakneck speed with dizzying spins and twirls thrown in for good measure. She was melting, the wet heat

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flowed from her mouth to her heart to her twat, hungry and too long denied by her obstinate vow of chastity.

When she made that vow, she'd been so tired of boys, which most of the cowboys were—overgrown boys, full of themselves and their prowess, notching their bedposts as they racked up points in the midnight rodeos between the daytime events.

Wolf is not a boy. She suspected he might be a bit younger than she was, but he was still all man, a real man. Her body had known it before her mind awoke to the fact. If she were totally honest, she'd admit she'd had the hots for him from the moment she settled against that massive chest this morning.

When he came up for air after the amazing kiss, she spoke once she could breathe again. "Come on, cowboy. I'm going to take you home with me." He didn't attempt to dissuade her. Not that she would have allowed him to.

For an instant she wondered how her friend Jana was faring on her quest to take a cowboy home. Kim and Tracey, the third member of their little friendship circle, had bet Jana a steak dinner that she couldn't seduce a cowboy and take him home for the night. Timid little Jana, a high school librarian, was still single—with no prospects. Kim and Tracey worried about her, fearing she'd live out her days as an old maid. Thus the bet, which was really a dare.

Kim couldn't spend much thought on Jana, though, not with Wolf climbing into her truck, filling it with his bulk, his potently pervasive scent and his overwhelming masculine presence. It was all she could do to start the *Ranchero*, then remember how to get back to her house.

By the time she pulled into her driveway, Kim was trembling from suppressed need. She felt like a starving person confronted with a scrumptious banquet, a desert-lost soul stumbling upon an unexpected spring of cool, clear water. She couldn't remember ever feeling so hungrily hot, so needy. Was it the novelty of European charm coupled

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with cowboy macho? Was it the name, Wolf, which conjured up images of carnal hungers, savage power, and elemental forces too fierce to resist?

How long has it been? Once, twice since my accident five years ago, since Trav took himself out of my life. Both times were a mistake, too, another reason for my self-imposed chastity. This might be, too, but I can't deny myself any longer.

They had hardly spoken on the five-minute trip from the restaurant to her home. Now, Wolf followed her through the carport to the back door, held it for her once she unlocked it, and followed her through the utility room into the kitchen. Blitz came bounding through the doggie door from the back yard, making the walls vibrate with the enthusiasm of his greeting.

"Down, boy. Down!" Kim pushed the big Rottie off when he attempted to plant his saucer-sized forepaws on her shoulders and steal a doggie kiss. "I'm not dancing, damn it. Get down."

Wolf laughed. He held his hand down, palm foremost, for the dog to sniff, then scratched along the animal's jowly jaw before he finally slid his hand up to ruffle the rust-rimmed black ears.

"Some watch dog," Kim grumbled. "He'll make friends with anyone who'll pet or feed him, the wretch."

"Oh, no, he simply recognizes a fellow countryman," Wolf protested. After he murmured a few words in what she assumed was German, the big dog all but purred, rubbing his massive head against Wolf's thigh and licking his hand. Watching the byplay, Kim had to admit to herself she'd do the same, given half a chance.

When Wolf spoke a sharp-sounding phrase in a commanding tone, the dog sat, then lowered himself to the floor and dropped his blunt muzzle between his paws.

Kim stared in amazement. "What did you tell him?"

"I merely said I am here with his mistress' permission, that I will do

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her no hurt, and that I have a cousin of his at home awaiting my return.”

“He’s American born and bred,” she said. “How in the world can he understand German?”

“He is a Rottweiler,” Wolf replied. “Of course he understands. It’s bred in his very bones.”

She shook her head. “Whatever. Would you like something to drink? I have sodas, beer, coffee...”

“Beer? American beer or something else?”

She grinned saucily. “Would you believe Heineken? Normally I prefer Dos Equis or Corona, but for some reason I picked up a six pack of Heineken the other day.”

He gave a deep sigh. “I would please have a Heineken.”

She pulled two bottles out of the fridge, popped the caps and handed him one. “We can sit out on the patio or in the great room,” she said. “It’s up to you.”

He shook his head slightly. “Where would be the most comfortable for you?”

She shrugged one shoulder, causing her blouse to slip off of it a bit. His bright blue gaze followed the slide of the white fabric down her arm. “I’m an outdoor girl. If I turn the mister on, it’ll soon be nice and cool. And I have a two-seat glider, not quite as good as an old time porch swing but almost.”

“Turn on the Mister who?”

She laughed. “No, you don’t understand. Around the patio roof there’s a system of tubing with tiny holes that sends out a fine mist of water. It works like an evaporative cooler. A lot of people use them to make their yard or patio more comfortable.”

“Ah, I see. An Americanism. I am learning. Every day I learn new things, new uses for words I thought I knew. It is complicated, your English.”

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Opening the patio door, they stepped out into the soft summer evening. As Kim had said, after a few minutes the damp air became cooler. She waved Wolf to a seat on the glider and settled at his side. For a few moments, they sipped their beers in companionable silence.

"This is your house and you live here all alone? No husband or roommates? I thought single women all had apartments in America."

"I'm divorced," Kim said, hating the words even as she spoke them. They still seemed to demean her in some way. "That isn't strictly single, well it is, but not the same as having never been married. I kept the house—the only thing I kept. I like it."

He nodded. "I cannot see a man wanting to be divorced from you. Or was it that you made him to move out?"

Kim drew a deep breath, let it out slowly, stalling her answer. How best to explain this?

"It was kind of a mutual thing. I had an accident. My barrel horse fell with me. It smashed up my right knee. Things hadn't been going well before that, but afterwards they were worse. That's when Travis left."

"He left when you were hurt? That is terrible! What kind of man would leave his woman injured and helpless?"

The indignation in Wolf's tone warmed her heart. Chivalry seemed to be deeply ingrained in his character. Perhaps it was merely a façade, but she liked the feeling, anyway.

"I was all right," she said. "It was for the best, really. I've never been sorry. We didn't suit."

"I have heard the saying about 'his loss is my gain,' or something like that. It applies here." He set his beer down beside the end of the glider. Then, with one cool, damp hand and one warm one, he caught her by the shoulders, pulling her close. For a long moment, he simply held her.

She leaned into the warm strength of his body, relishing the feeling

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of security, of being cherished. Bowing her head slightly, she pressed her forehead into the hollow of his left shoulder, drawing in his intoxicating scent with every breath. Brushing against the solid heat of his chest, her breasts tingled, nipples springing to eager stiffness. Her blouse and his shirt seemed two too many barriers between them. Skin to skin would feel so...

She felt the light pressure of his face against her hair as he nuzzled a spot above her left ear. The memory of their kiss in the parking lot sizzled across her mind. She wanted to savor more of that. Lifting her head, she bumped his nose. He drew back a little, chuckling.

"Be careful," he said. "A nose breaking would damage my beautiful image."

She giggled. "Most cowboys have been hit in the face a time or two, if not by a bull or a bronc, then by someone's fist in a barroom brawl. Of course not many of them can reach you, can they? Other cowboys, I mean. What are you, about six-foot-six?"

"I am not sure in your feet and inches. A slight bit over two meters."

Right now she didn't really care how tall he was. Taller than she, which was good, and really all that mattered. What she wanted was another kiss, maybe several. She reached up, digging her fingers into the thick golden hair at the back of his neck, bearing down to bring his face to hers.

"There's a song about 'shut up and kiss me.' That fits here, I think."

His delighted, "Yah, I like," was muffled against her mouth.

He was truly a great kisser. A pro, a world class gold medal level champion. His lips seemed to have a dozen textures, a score of ways to move, to press, to nibble and suck and tease. *If I could capture that in a photograph, women would pay a million for it.* The whimsical thought drifted across her mind and was gone, lost in pure sensation.

She wanted to be closer. His lips were all over her face, down her

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throat, nibbling across her bared shoulders, but that wasn't enough. Reaching between them, she tugged impatiently at the placket of his shirt. She was soon rewarded by the soft pop, pop, pop as the snaps came undone. He wasn't wearing an undershirt.

Her busy fingers began to explore the hills and hollows of his wide chest, sifting through the silky dusting of hair which she knew would be golden, absorbing the sleek, muscular heat of him. The contact reminded her of the feel of her horse, a palomino she'd called Oro Mio—My Gold. The gelding had to be put down after the fall; he'd badly broken both forelegs. That had hurt her as much as her own injuries, another thing Trav hadn't understood.

Perhaps inspired by her efforts, Wolf hooked a finger into the elastic edging the neckline of her blouse. He tugged, bringing it down, sliding the white eyelet lower on her arms and dropping the front until he pulled it past the thrust of her breasts. She wore a bra, but it was one of those barely there wisps of satin and lace, a demi-bra that left the upper half of each breast bare, pushed up into the most cleavage her 34B could achieve.

He released her for a moment, drawing back enough to look down at her in the soft glow of the pool lights, which barely illuminated the patio. With a slow exhalation that sounded almost reverent, he lifted his hands to cup each breast, then with one forefinger traced the scalloped edge of the cups which barely covered her pink areolas.

It was all she could do to sit still, permit his gentle exploration and wait for his next move. Normally she liked a slow hand, but tonight, after the long abstinence, she was eager, almost unbearably anxious. Lest he fail to get the idea, she reached to pull his head down, leaning back against the arm of the glider.

He slipped one arm around her to cushion her from the metal before he dipped his head and traced the path his fingers had taken with the tip of a moist tongue. Her nipples were rock-hard, straining against the

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silken fabric, seeking the warmth of his breath, the tug of his mouth. He kissed each one through the cloth, then found and released the front clasp, freeing the cups to fall away.

She might not be large, but in spite of Trav's complaints, she knew her breasts were shapely and firm. Aroused as she was, they bloomed. His warm lips closed gently around her right nipple, tugging as a nursing infant would. She felt the sizzle all the way to her toes although it homed in between her legs, adding more slick moisture to that which already dampened her panties.

"Ooooh, Wolf. That feels so good."

He switched his attention to the other breast, but kept the right one happy with light plucks of his fingers while he suckled the left.

Kim tugged at his shirt, finally freeing the tails from his belt so she could slide her hands along his ribs, around his broad back. The heated smoothness of his skin enthralled her. She wanted to feel every inch of him. Most especially the inches she could feel pressing against her thigh through the fabric of his jeans, inches that grew hotter and harder every second.

For all his macho pride, Travis had been barely average in size, even when fully erect. Had he taken the time for foreplay and showed some consideration for her, he could have satisfied her, but he never did, which made the size even more of an issue than it might have been. While she couldn't be sure yet, she sensed that Wolf's cock was far beyond adequate and that he was a skillful and considerate lover as well. If she didn't find out soon, she was liable to combust!

"I hate to stop even for an instant, but let's take this inside," she said, in a breathless whisper. "I don't think this glider is the place to go much farther."

Wolf surged to his feet. Before she could say "wait," he swung her clear of the glider and into his arms.

"Whoa, I'm too big to carry," she protested.

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He laughed. "You don't weigh much more than a sack of feed, a small bale of hay. Also you are much nicer to hold."

He paused at the patio door, bending to scatter kisses across her face. Fumbling blindly, she found the handle and slid the door open. He turned sideways and stepped through, deftly maneuvering her so that not one toe touched the door frame.

"Now where?" he asked.

"Put me down, Wolf! I can walk easier than I can tell you where to go, especially in the dark!"

Hearing a trace of tension in her tone, Blitz got up from his bed in the hall and advanced toward them, a soft growl rumbling out from deep in his chest.

Wolf spoke to the dog in German again, a calm but stern command in his voice. Blitz hesitated, looking at them, clearly waiting to see what Kim would say or do. He had been trained to protect her, but the power in the voice of the man speaking to him created confusion in his mind. His stubby tail wagged, but he still stood in an alert, ready-to-attack pose.

Kim found her voice, trying to sound as normal and relaxed as she could. "It's okay, Blitz. No one is hurting me. Go lay down."

The dog turned around, starting back to his bed, the slowness of his pace showing his clear reluctance.

"Please, Wolf, put me down. It will be better. When we get to my bedroom, I'll close the door. We don't need any canine voyeurs. I'm not sure how Blitz would handle things, either, because he's never seen me with anyone. There's no use upsetting him any more now."

"He is a good dog. It is also a good thing to have him protect you. I am pleased you do. Very well, here you go." He lowered her slowly, sliding her down his body until her feet hit the floor. He continued to hold her until he was sure she had her balance.

Taking Wolf's hand, Kim led the way down the dimly lit hall to the

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open door of her bedroom. Once inside, she touched the switch to turn on a lamp on the nightstand. Its soft light allowed them to see but did not spoil the gentle romantic ambience. She turned back to close the door behind them, shutting Blitz out of the room.

“He usually sleeps in the hall, anyway, so I’m not being mean to him, but he may not like having the door closed.” She laughed, a wry chuckle. “Around here you might say it’s the dog who’s in charge.”

“He will learn to share you,” Wolf said. “And so long as I do not have to share you with another man, it will be all right. I will not be jealous of a dog. I think he will not be jealous of me for long, either, although we may have to find him a female of his own.”

Kim turned toward him, stopping a moment to lean against the closed door as her legs went wobbly. She couldn’t recall ever feeling so needy, so desperately hungry for a man. Was it simply her long abstinence or was it Wolf himself? Right now she was too confused to determine.

Conflicting sensations surged through her body. She was so aroused that her flesh fairly hummed with energy like an overcharged battery, yet a melting lassitude turned her limbs weighted and weak. Burning desire flared within her depths, sending throbbing pulses downward to make her clit quiver and her pussy weep. Yet her exposed skin pebbled in chill bumps as the breath of the air conditioner whispered down over her.

As if he sensed she was barely able to move, Wolf stepped back to her, reaching to enfold her again. She flowed against him, lassitude gaining for the moment over energy. He cupped her butt in one hand, drawing her tight against the erection straining his jeans.

She pressed as close as she could, lifting one leg to wrap it around his thigh, clawing back the dragging weight of her skirt. There was far too much fabric between them.

They kissed again, tongues dueling in an eager parody of the union

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they both wanted. By slow shifts, Wolf edged her to the foot of the bed, turned her on his arm and lowered her to sit on the edge of the mattress. With a fluid economy of movement, he shrugged out of his shirt. Then he rolled the eyelet blouse up over her head. It followed his shirt to the carpet. When the delicate straps of her bra fell down her arms, she drew free and it, too, dropped.

Wolf sank to his knees, burying his face between her breasts. His breath seared her skin, coming in quick sharp pants. He murmured something she assumed must be an endearment or compliment in German, for the tone sounded reverent although the phrase itself was guttural and somewhat harsh. She tangled her fingers into the gilded silk of his hair, thrilling in the pressure of his face against her tender skin, the slight rasp of his newly shaved beard on the satiny insides of her breasts.

After a moment, he pushed her back until she lay, the quilt cool and slick beneath her back. He knelt now between her knees, the tangled mass of her skirt still making a barrier. He gathered the fabric in both hands, lifting to push it up around her waist, both the skirt and the stiffened half-slip that went under it. For a moment her skin quivered when the cooler air hit the tender flesh of her inner thighs, the damp crotch of her panties.

Within mere seconds, the warmth of his hands and then his mouth chased away the chill. He kissed up the inside of each leg from her knee to just short of the wet cleft that ached for his attention. Finally he kissed her through the fabric. As his lips brushed across her clit, she shuddered, going taut at the first touch, the sudden change in temperature.

He lifted his head, one hand sketching the limits of the cloth. "These must go," he said. He found the narrow elastic ribbon that topped her thong and peeled it off her hips. She arched to raise her butt from the bed and let the fragile garment slip past her buttocks and down

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her hips.

In a moment that last barrier was gone. He pressed his face against the tawny pelt of hair, shaved to a narrow strip that would not show in her bikini. He nudged gently. From the feel, she thought his nose first pushed the outer lips apart to find the hot wet slit within and the aching little bud of nerves that stiffened and reached for a touch. He drew a deep breath as if absorbing her scent and then traced his tongue along the slit.

As she involuntarily bucked, arching toward him, Kim heard herself whimper, a small choked sound of desperate delight and boundless need.

He teased and tasted her until she began to arch and twist, stretching her legs wider as she clutched at his head. "Now, now Wolf. Please! Oh God, please!" Her world exploded in a kaleidoscope of shooting stars, the sudden fall of a roller coaster, a climax so intense it felt almost like pain.

When he stood abruptly, she was left momentarily bereft. With hands that weren't quite steady, he released his belt buckle, eased the zipper down with a slight wince, and let his jeans fall. The room was softly lit, but not so dim that she could not see him. She admired his lean flanks and long muscular legs, but most of all the ruddy cock, moist-tipped with his own eagerness, that thrust out of a dense golden mat the exact same color as his hair but thicker and tightly curled. Yes, he possessed a tool much more than adequate, one fit for a king among cowboys indeed.

Any other time she would have laughed at his hop and twist to get out of boots and jeans in a little two-step of a dance. But at this moment, there was nothing amusing about it at all, nothing that even really reached her awareness except for the gnawing anguish of need. Far from leaving her sated, the first climax had merely primed her for more.

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“Get back down here, you big beast. Now.” Her voice came out almost a growl, throaty and rough. “I’m not waiting another second.”

He smiled, a flash of teeth and eyes as he knelt again, this time on the edge of the bed. He lifted her backward to give himself room as he came down over her. His cock nudged its way into her waiting twat, hesitated the merest instant and then plunged deep into her. She gave a gasp, arching to meet his thrust as she lifted her legs to lock them around his lean hips. His first few thrusts were slow and measured, rocking them in a gentle rhythm, but that was soon not nearly enough for either of them.

The rhythm quickened, the pace accelerated, their hearts pounding to a savage beat driven by urgency. Kim clutched at his sweat-slippery back, her fingertips and nails digging in to the hard-muscled flesh. It took forever and yet was over too soon. The cyclone of sensation built to an incredible crescendo, then suddenly let go, leaving her to spiral down in a dizzy shuddering freefall. She could feel her vagina contracting and releasing, milking him in that final thrust an instant before he groaned aloud. His weight slumped for a moment upon her.

“*Mein Lieber Gott*,” he muttered. The words sounded almost like a prayer.

Before she could feel crushed or trapped by the weight of his body, he rolled, taking her with him so that they lay on their sides, face to face. Locked together, arms and legs entangled and bodies clinging with the sticky moisture of sweat and sex, they lay still, unable to do anything until hearts slowed to normal, breathing eased, and muscles stopped quivering.

“Cowboy,” Kim whispered, when she finally found her voice, “I’d give that ride at least a 98. You stayed on way longer than eight seconds and your form was perfect.”

He laughed, a low rumble in his chest that rocked her body as she lay against him. “I aim to please, *leibling*.”

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Kim lifted her head to look at him. “What did you just call me?”

“*Leibling*. A German endearment, like darling or sweetheart in English. Sorry, it just slipped out.” He offered a sheepish smile, almost like a little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Kim laughed. “Oh, that’s all right. I mean I don’t mind. I just wondered.” When she started to pull away to release her right arm from beneath her body, their sticky skins stuck together.

“Ouch, that hurts!” Moving with care, she finally drew free. “Wait, I’ve got an idea. It’s hot and we’re both sticky. Let’s go jump in the pool.”

She scrambled off the bed, stopping just long enough to slip a pair of flip-flops on her feet and grab a couple of beach towels out of the linen closet. He was out of bed equally fast, padding silently at her heels.

Blitz jumped up as Kim swung the bedroom door open. He looked at her in a puzzled way as if to say, “What are you doing in the middle of the night running around without your furs on?” He fell in behind Wolf, following them out to the edge of the pool. Kim knew he was scared of the water. The dog stopped with a sigh and lay down, far enough back that an accidental splash wouldn’t hit him.

Not bothering with a fancy dive, Kim bounced off the edge about halfway from the shallow to the deep end. The cool water felt heavenly on her skin, with her whole body still sensitized by the intensity of her recent climaxes. She dimly heard the splash as Wolf joined her.

She paddled around vigorously for a few minutes, then lay back to simply float on the sleek surface, buoyed by the water. A delicious feeling of total, sated contentment held her enthralled.

The idea that anyone might spy on them skinny-dipping didn’t worry her. The backyard was enclosed in a six-foot-high block wall while the lights set just at the water level in the pool cast only a soft glow, barely enough for eyes tuned to the dark to navigate. Although

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Kim seldom did so in broad daylight, swimming nude at night was a favorite pastime. She found something especially liberating in the water's caress, the slight nip of the air on bare wet skin, and the hint of the risqué in going unclad.

Floating on her back left her breasts above water-level, teased by a slight breeze that wafted by. Her nipples perked to attention, puckering and stiffening as they chilled. Wolf's low, growling chuckle sounded almost in her ear. She jumped, for she hadn't realized he was so close. Her eyes flew open to find him standing at her side. Here in the middle of the pool, the water hit him mid-chest level, a reminder of how tall he was. It would be right under her chin.

When he reached out and stroked a wet hand across her midriff, she sucked in a sharp gasp. His other hand joined the first, slipping up to cup her breasts, tweaking the nipples to an even greater engorgement.

As new arousal sang through her, she could no longer maintain the relaxed state needed to float. Flipping quickly to face him, she wrapped her legs around his waist and caught his shoulders to steady herself. Now that most of her body was out of the water, her skin responded to the sudden chill by breaking into goose bumps as a shiver coursed over her.

"How can it feel so cold when I know the temperature is at least in the eighties?"

He shook his head. "That figure means nothing to me, but I guess it is warm, no?"

"Yes, warm enough, but I need something to warm me more." She leaned forward and fastened her lips to his in an ardent, open-mouthed kiss.

She already knew there was nothing slow about Wolf. He responded to her blatant invitation by swirling his tongue across and around hers, sucking on her lower lip and nibbling around her mouth and chin. Within moments, she forgot all about feeling chilled.

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Soon she could feel his erection nudging up against her butt. She wriggled, teasing them both by sliding back and forth along the length of his cock, squeezing her buttocks on the thick rod of flesh. Finally she loosened the grip of her legs enough to drop to where he could find her cunt, warm, wet, and ready yet again.

After a few teasing thrusts, Wolf backed up to where he could lean against the side of the pool. Then he began to thrust in earnest. She bounced, letting the water do half the work of moving her up and down. Pushing with her feet against the pool side and straightening her legs to pull back, she built on his rhythm, faster and harder with each thrust and retreat. She would withdraw until only the head of his cock remained inside her, then plunge back until he was buried to the hilt, his balls flattening against her buttocks.

The splashing water on tender and stimulated flesh added to the sensations as the tightening spiral began to build low in her belly. She sucked in her bottom lip and caught it between her teeth on a gasp as a fiercer thrust drove him deeper than ever. Somewhere below and behind her belly button warmth began to build, spreading until she felt like melting butter, all of her pooling into liquid heat around Wolf's delectable cock.

Arching his back, Wolf made a final thrust. Then he keened out a groan that sounded almost like the howl of his namesake. An instant later, Kim's climax hit, an earthquake, a tidal wave, an unwinding so intense she felt as if she were turning inside out. When her rubbery legs would no longer maintain their grip around his hips, her feet dropped slowly until her toes found the bottom of the pool. She slipped off his cock, now softening in the aftermath of his climax.

Wolf leaned back against the edge of the pool sucking in great gulps of air, his face drawn as if in pain although she knew it was only the final throes of utter ecstasy. He muttered a phrase in German, then opened his eyes to look at her, a mixture of wonder and awe on his

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face.

“You are truly amazing,” he said.

“We are amazing,” Kim corrected, feeling the foolish satisfied grin spread across her face. “It’s been a long dry spell, but I think my drought is over.”

Making her way to the steps, she climbed out. She grabbed the two towels which she had dropped on a chaise lounge near the steps. Tossing one to Wolf, she wrapped the other around her body, fending off a new attack of chill before it could set in. Her legs were still not too steady but they held her up, as she started toward the open patio door.

“I don’t know about you, cowboy, but I think I could use some shut-eye about now. If you’re riding tomorrow, you’d better get some too.”

“Yah, er, yes, I am in agreement,” Wolf said.

Within minutes, they slid under the soft comforter on her bed, spooned together, and relaxed. Kim dimly heard Blitz pad in to settle himself at the foot of the bed with a jingle of tags and a scratch or two before he turned around and dropped to the floor, but the sound seemed distant, almost as in a dream. Wolf’s arm bound her close against the comforting and secure wall of his chest while their breath seemed to ebb and flow in unison. Her last dim thought was how good, how very right it felt to be with him.

* * *

At the insistent shrill of her alarm, Kim rolled over—right into a barrier of solid muscle. Still struggling through veils of sleep, she stretched her arm out, seeking to silence the aggravating beeps. Instead of the clock on the bedside table, her hand encountered a stubbled jaw. She snapped fully awake. It had been a long time since she’d awakened with anyone, especially a bed partner who was definitely male. A male bigger, harder, simply *more* everything than any she remembered.

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He rolled toward her, mumbling something she couldn't understand. The only thing about him that seemed fully awake was his cock. No question, it was ready to rock and roll. The clock kept up its racket, but fading in her awareness as a pair of big hands encompassed her breasts and warm breath tickled in the vicinity of her left ear.

"*Guten morgen.*" His low rumble greeted her with drowsy warmth. The rest of his comment was less clear, but she gathered it had something to do with a new way to have breakfast.

Kim blinked the sleep haze from her eyes and looked at her partner. Although her body clamored for more of his delightful attentions, the continuing racket of the clock reminded her rudely that duty called. No way could she afford to be late two days in a row.

"Not so good," she grumbled. "Much as I would love to stay right here, I have to get up and get my shit together. I bet you do, too. What time is your first event today?"

At that, Wolf's blue eyes flew open as an awareness of where he was flashed over his face. "*Himmel!* You are right. We need to get up and get going." He reached blindly to silence the clock, ended up knocking it onto the floor. That racket had Blitz bounding in, barking like a fool as he danced around the bed. Kim sat up, glaring at the dog.

"Don't you even think of it, mutt. You jump on this bed and you're a pound pup—if you live long enough to get there. Dog jail," she added, answering Wolf's unspoken question. "Why they call it the pound I don't know. From impound, I suppose."

"You wouldn't!" He turned briefly to the dog. "I will give you a good home if she feets you out, big fellow."

"It's boots, not feets. And hell yes, I would. He knows better. Don't encourage him, either. Come on, there's a shower in the hall bath as well as in this one. Take your choice."

She swung her legs off the bed as she spoke and felt around on the throw rug for the slippers that weren't there. Neither was her short robe

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in its usual spot on the half-open closet door. More of the previous night's adventures returned to her vividly then. Glancing around the room she saw clothes, his and hers, scattered all over the floor.

"Good Lord, we trashed this place last night." She glanced back to find Wolf leaning against the headboard, a totally unrepentant grin on his face. He had one hand extended to scratch Blitz's ears, but his attention was all for her.

"You look even better by daylight," he said. "Good enough to eat."

Whether he meant the double entendre or not, she felt a heating flush flash through her body. The vision of his face buried between her thighs sent tingling heat blazing through her to settle in that very spot. She was wet in an instant. *Damn, you'd think I had enough last night. I'm turning into a sex maniac.*

"I'm not on the breakfast menu," she mumbled. "I need to be at the rodeo grounds in about an hour to catch the make-up rides. Are you coming with me?"

"Yah." He nodded with clear reluctance. "May I join you in the shower?"

She shook her head. "I'd love it, Wolf, but we'd never make it on time if you do."

He looked crestfallen. "Will I get another chance?"

The begging expression all over his face was so cute she almost laughed but thought the better of it. "That's up to you, cowboy. If you really want to repeat last night, it might be arranged."

"I will carry your bags again," he offered, "and even bring you more flowers."

She laughed, shaking her head and rolling her eyes. "Lord, get me through this day!"

Dashing bare and barefooted into the master bath, she shut the door firmly behind her while he was still hesitating. A few moments later, she heard the water running in the other bath. By the time she emerged,

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he was already dressed. She was too, in clothes out of the second closet off the bath. She hadn't trusted herself to go back nude into her bedroom.

"I must stop at the motel and change," he said, almost apologetically. "You can leave me if you are late, but I cannot ride in these clothes. This is my best western outfit!"

"How can you carry my things if I leave you off?"

He obviously took her remark seriously. "Oh, in that case, I will go to the rodeo grounds with you and then walk back to the motel to change. I don't have any re-rides to make today so I will have time."

"I was just kidding," she said. "You aren't obligated to do anything for me. I'm sure I got just as much out of last night as you did, and I'm not asking you to pay for my favors. Hell, what kind of gal do you take me for?"

He looked shocked. "Oh no, I was not meaning it in that way! You are a lady, Kim, not a *hure*."

"Come on, let's get out of here." Leading the way out through the kitchen, Kim stopped to dump some food in Blitz's dish and make sure he had water. *Thank goodness my gear stays in the truck. I hope I've got enough film and a couple of clean cards for the video camera. I didn't download yesterday's pictures to the computer like I usually do.*

Even though she did wait for Wolf to change, they got to the rodeo grounds earlier than she'd made it the day before. She stopped in the office to see who was getting morning re-rides and exactly when. Wolf waited at the door, a bag over each wide shoulder.

Much to her relief, there were only a few re-rides. The regular events didn't start until ten thirty.

"We've got time to go get something to eat," she said cheerfully as she rejoined Wolf outside the small room. "I just need to photograph three re-rides. They're going to go with them in a few minutes. We can wait here until the riders show up."

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With a grin, Wolf eased the two bags to the ground and reached for her. "We may as well put to good use this time."

Kim couldn't resist the invitation. She walked into his embrace and laced her arms around his waist. Slipping her hands into his hip pockets, she dug her fingers into the solid muscles of his butt as she stretched up for his kiss. She dimly heard someone walk past them, but didn't bother to see who it was. A moment later she heard her name called.

"Kim?"

She drew back far enough to look around Wolf's wide shoulder. Jana stood there, tucked neatly under the arm of a darkly handsome cowboy. After a moment, Kim recognized Tyler Parton, a half-Indian rider who was doing well in the standings although he'd had a bad day the day before.

"Jana? I'd say it looks like you've won yourself a steak dinner."

Jana had a well-loved look about her, which Kim imagined she herself also wore. The smaller woman blushed, but her expression was unabashed. "I 'spose so, although I think that's the least of my prizes." Her gaze slid up to Ty's face with a look of pure adoration.

Ty's arm tightened subtly across Jana's shoulders. "I mean to keep this little filly around. She's going to bring me luck."

Kim laughed. "Go for it, both of you. Say, Ty, do you want me to get any pix of your re-ride?"

"Only if I stay on and the horse keeps his feet."

"And I'm supposed to figure that out ahead of time?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, go ahead. It'll be a good ride. Jana says so."

Kim gestured to Wolf. "Let's go up to the end of the chutes. I'll see if I can get Ty with the video cam at least."

* * *

The morning passed too quickly. Kim managed a few frames of Ty and the other two re-rides before she and Wolf went to breakfast across

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the street from the rodeo grounds. As soon as they had eaten, it was time to get back and set up for the rodeo's last day of action. Wolf saw her to a good perch just past the bucking chutes with her gear close at hand before he left to get ready for his events. She began to miss his company the moment he disappeared from view. When she realized she was mooning, she got mad at herself.

Shit, I am not going to go all mushy and stupid. He was a good lay, but he's a fuckin' cowboy and I don't do cowboys, not more than once anyway. Get over it already, gal. You got your ashes hauled, which you needed big time. Let it go.

Somehow though, something inside wasn't listening to her mental lecture. She wasn't ready to analyze why. Not yet anyway.

When Wolf's ride was called, she edged closer to the chute he was in. Then she turned up the zoom on her camcorder to zero in on his face. The same expression of intense concentration colored his features as the one she'd seen when he rose above her to begin pushing his cock into her the first time last night. That expression sent a wave of heat washing through her. Remembering just how he felt, his body pressing down on hers, his cock seating deep in her vagina had her wet and shaking. Once, twice, a hundred times wouldn't be enough.

She realized then just how intense he was about everything he did, at least everything he felt was important. *Like sex and bronc-riding. Oh hell. And just where would I fit into that equation? Probably a poor second or lower still.*

In spite of that, she had to shoot several close-up frames just for herself as Wolf settled onto the wild-eyed paint he'd drawn for today's bareback ride. If nothing else, she'd have a few pictures to look at when she got lonely, something to focus her memories of the best night of her life. As if she'd ever forget.

She blinked back a self-pitying blur from her eyes as she made a studied effort to concentrate on her work. Cowboys came and went.

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She knew that as well as she knew her name. Why had she let herself be drawn to one when she knew better? Why pretend he was any different than the rest just because of his continental charm and that cute accent?

As she watched, Wolf worked his left hand into the grip on his bareback rig, tugged his hat down with the right, wiggled his impressive butt a little on the black and white hide, and then nodded. The gate swung away. The paint erupted out in a tremendous leap. The old timers would say the horse swallowed his head when he hit. His muzzle was well behind his two stiff forelegs for a second or so before he launched into the next twisting jump.

That paint was a bucking fool, but Wolf was riding him. He had one hand waving free while his spurs scratched arcs of fire along the horse's ribs. Kim tracked the horse, keeping him centered in the viewfinder. Thank God the focus self-adjusted. Her hands were less steady than normal, while her heart threatened to pound right out of her chest as she watched. Any minute she thought she'd see Wolf shaken loose, losing his perfect balance and rhythm, but he didn't.

The crowd surged to their feet, roaring approval. Most of them were fans enough to know they were watching one hell of a fine ride. The whistle shrilled. When the pickup man approached on his stocky bay Quarter Horse, the paint squealed, snaking his neck out to bite at the other horse.

As Wolf waved the pickup man off, Kim could see him gather himself, ease his hand out of the grip and push down on the paint's withers with both hands. When the horse dropped his head again, Wolf launched himself clear. He barely missed a flying hoof as he hit running, stumbling in the rutted mud of the arena. He hadn't even lost his hat!

She had every second of it on tape, too. *Wow, what a ride!*

That glow of pride carried her through the rest of the long

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afternoon. There was a problem when the last bareback rider's bronc kicked the pickup horse. In the melee, the rider went down, right under two sets of pounding hooves. When the horses moved on, he lay still.

A job for Tracey and her partner. I don't envy them. Thank God it wasn't Wolf. She felt selfish for that final thought, but she couldn't help it. The ambulance eased in through the gate at the end of the arena. Tracey and Bo Hamilton, her driver and partner, bundled the injured man onto a backboard and into the vehicle before they screamed off toward the hospital. The incident reminded Kim just how hazardous rodeo could be.

Then, it seemed like there were about a zillion calf ropers and an equal number for the team steer roping. Most wanted pictures, too. She couldn't afford to miss any, so she shoved her dreams to the back of her mind as best she could, dimly grateful that Wolf didn't do bulls.

As long as she'd been around rodeo, at least fifteen years now, she'd never shed her gut-deep fear of the mean-eyed bovines. They probably hurt more cowboys than the rest of the stock together, even the steer wrestling, or dogging which could get pretty rough since they had to have horns to be thrown properly.

By the time the last event was over, a night of little sleep had begun to catch up with Kim. She felt about fifty as she climbed down off the chutes and started to put her gear in the bags. To accompany the throb in her bad knee, a dull headache was starting in back of her eyes.

She tried not to think at all, just concentrate on her routine, getting packed and going home. She'd download the digital stuff tomorrow, then get the regular film turned in to her usual processor, a dark-room genius who officially worked for the local newspaper. All she wanted now, she told herself, was an hour in the hot tub and a good night's sleep.

Bent over the biggest camera bag, checking to see that everything was in place, she was oblivious to the activity around her. Dust swirled

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as cowboys gathered their gear, loaded horses into trailers and got ready to move on, down the road to the next rodeo. She jumped when a shadow fell across her.

A pair of big hands reached down to take possession of the two largest bags. "Did you not know I'd be back to help you?"

She looked up, her eyes dazzled by the gilding rays of the setting sun. All she could see was a dark blur surrounded by a halo of gold. She shook her head. "I thought you'd be leaving with your buds. Aren't the guys you travel with heading out?"

"They are. But...well, I figured I could stay a day or two, anyway. I left my gear by your truck."

Relief took the form of momentary anger. "Isn't that just a wee bit presumptuous? Who said anything about you going anywhere else with me? About there being anything else for us to do?"

She heard him suck in a quick hard breath.

"I knew I might have to persuade or even beg...but it was worth that chance. There are no big rodeos for a couple of weeks so we'd planned to hit a few smaller shows where you don't have to sign up ahead of time. Anything sanctioned will earn points and that's what is important. If there's a rodeo within driving distance, I figured you would be going to it, come next weekend. If I can, I'd sure rather travel with you than with those three yahoos from Texas, even if one of them is a kind of shirt-tail cousin of mine."

She found a smile lifting her down-turned lips. The way he used the distinctive slang of the Texans, but all spoken in that enchanting accent of his stirred a bubble of laughter.

"Wolf Voegler, you are a rascal of the first water! You figured you'd play me just like a guitar, didn't you? I bet you're just angling to get a job or maybe even hitched up so as not to worry about that green card running out—'fess up, now."

"Oh no, it was you I wanted to see again, only you." Pausing, he

PORTRAIT OF A COWBOY

laughed. “Well, maybe a little bit, but what I was really thinking about was this book my cousin has. It shows a hundred and one positions to make love. That means we’ve still got about ninety eight to go. I do not intend to give up until I have tried every single one at least once, maybe twice to be sure I have it right.”

Kim socked him on the shoulder, which probably hurt her fist more than it hurt him. “Damn you anyway, cowboy, I think you just made my day with an offer I can’t refuse.”

“Ah, you watch the big Clint and the Mafioso! I love American movies.” Shoving the straps of her bags onto one shoulder, he slung an arm around her.

Together they walked off toward the sunset, matching strides like a well-trained team. A sudden hunch hit Kim—they were going to be doing that a lot more and for a long time. The notion didn’t feel uncomfortable in any way. Suddenly she wasn’t a bit tired and her aches faded to damn near nothing. Maybe she wouldn’t need those portraits of this cowboy after all.

DEIDRE O'DARE

Deirdre O'Dare, who also writes contemporary romance as Gwynn Morgan, has loved reading and writing since early childhood. She started writing—simple verses and paraphrases of Nancy Drew and Zane Gray—before she was out of grade school and finally settled into romantic fiction in the last decade after leaving her “day job” as a civilian employee of the U. S. Army. She lives in Arizona and frequently sets her stories in the Southwest she knows and loves, but now and then another locale calls to her creativity and she strays, even as far as prehistoric Greece and places that exist only in her imagination.

* * *

***Don't miss Pickup Man, by Deirdre O'Dare,
available from Amber Quill Press, LLC***

High school librarian Jana's best friends Kim and Tracy accuse her of being a professional spinster, still single at twenty-seven. On a bet with them, the weekend of the big rodeo, Jana goes to the favorite nightspot of the rodeo crowd to try to pick up a cowboy. Before the night is over, she knows the steak dinner she'll win from her friends is by far the least of her prizes. Once she gets acquainted with Ty, the phrase "ride 'em cowboy" takes on a whole new meaning. She just might run her brand on this one!

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