

THIS *Red* ROCK

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MAGDALENA, according to the guidebook I picked up from the library last spring, is an incorporated village in Socorro County, New Mexico: perennially mild, of considerable historic interest, and set at an elevation of 6,548 feet. It marks the trail's end of the old Socorro Magdalena railroad, neighbors the abandoned mining town of Kelly, and, with a population of 1,200, is most definitely the kind of place where everyone knows each other. It's also—as, again, I worked out from the guidebook—the closest town to my Uncle Frank's ranch, and, therefore, the place I was making for. That was the plan, anyway.

Not, please note, that it was actually *my* plan. *My* plan, if I'd had my way, would have been to hang out lazy and free around San Diego all summer, no doubt eschewing the library in favor of the attractions of the beach, the parks, and my friends in cosmopolitan downtown. San Diego is an *awesome* place to go to school, whoever you are, but when you're a guy who grew up as the lone homo in a small town in Arizona, my *God*, but you appreciate it. I remember driving out here with a few friends as a rising senior in high school—we took a trip just before school started up, checking out the colleges we were thinking about applying to—and falling in love with the place the second we entered the city limits. Where I come from, everything is red dirt and dust. The idea of a city whose freeways were lined with trees—well, they might as well have been paved with gold, that's all I'm saying. We scooted around town for a couple

hours in Jimmy Romero's little convertible, I remember, winding up, naturally, in the university district. I was half-euphoric already, even before I caught sight of the shock-haired waitress and the rainbow beaded band around her wrist. After that, I was sold. The guys, of course, thought I had a crush on the waitress; the waitress, on the other hand, knew exactly what was going down, and winked at me as we left. I guess you must see a lot of kids like I was then, in those kooky little cafés downtown, wide-eyed and weirdly liberated at their first glimpse of an actual, real-life, *out* person. Guess she recognized the way I was gaping at her, not like I wanted her, but like I kind of wanted to *be* her.

I wanted to be her all the way back to Arizona. Hell, I wanted it all the way through senior year. The thought of being free to be unashamed like that—to pierce one ear and dye my hair and hang out in coffee bars in red chucks, discoursing on philosophy—was what got me through my SATs and my college applications, and the hell that was AP French. When I drove back to San Diego in my own little car a year after that first time, I felt like I'd won something monumental and indescribable. I was gonna make friends I didn't have to lie to; I was gonna *be* there in the Pride parade. I was gonna lie around in the park on sunny days, talking to sailors and reading Nietzsche and looking educated and beautiful. San Diego was where I was gonna be *me*.

I don't have to tell you it didn't exactly pan out that way. I mean, the dreams we dream about the big wide world never do. But the things that were most important to me, the *essence* of what I wanted, I got, and it really was San Diego that let me do that. I'm myself, when I'm there, dressing the

way I feel comfortable, hanging out with guys I genuinely like, whom my mother would, no doubt, despise. In San Diego, I can stretch in the sun and say honestly, “Yes, *this* is the real Alex Arzano.” I’ve never really felt that, anywhere else I’ve been.

You probably understand, then, why the idea of being shipped off to the wilds of New Mexico didn’t exactly fill me with joy.

Thing is, the Southwest is in my blood. Much as I hate to admit it when I’m sitting cross-legged in some beat poetry joint where the air is sweet with weed, that’s what we’ve been since Grandfather Arzano stepped off the boat from Calabria: Southwesterners. I was born under the shadow of that red rock and, sitting there declaiming my T.S. Eliot, it was there where my ghost strode behind me, where my fear showed in a handful of dust. The Southwest is in me—is me—but it’s my *past*. I didn’t want to be stalked by the shadow of my rural childhood.

And so, I argued: “Mama, can’t I just stay here?”

But she was adamant. “Alex, honey, Francesco is paying your fees. The least you can do is help him out a little over the summer. He doesn’t have any obligation to you, you know. Any time he liked, he could cut off your money at the source.”

And boy, if *that* didn’t sober me up real quick. Leaving San Diego for a summer didn’t exactly appeal, but the idea of having to leave it forever, disconsolate and without a degree, was insupportable. If Magdalena for the summer meant San Diego for the next two years, then dammit, I would just have to trip out down to Magdalena. I’d seen the ranch a couple

times before as a kid; I knew it smelled like cows and shit and was run almost entirely in Spanish. I was under no illusions about it being an easy ride—my Uncle Frank has never been the sort for that—but hell, it was still a better deal than the potential alternative.

End of semester, I waved farewell to my buddies, slung my crap into the trunk of my little Fiesta, and filled her up, ready for a long, long drive.

Coulda been worse. At least I didn't look Anglo.

TO MITIGATE my plight, I packed about half a trunk full of Dylan CDs, all sonorous nasals and sentences swallowing their own tails. “Señor’,” I crooned with him, into the wind, “señor, can you tell me where we’re heading? Lincoln County Road or Armageddon?” and I’d never quite seen the truth in that beauty, before. I didn’t anticipate much comfort, the way I was bound. I guess it made the long road just a little shorter; to feel that there was somebody on it with me, somebody who had been this way himself. Once, I even thought I caught him singing just for me—“and I’ll pray for Magdalena as we ride”—and the misconception warmed me for a whole turn around the CD, before the track came round again and I realized that Magdalena was only his girl, and he was *playing* for her all the way to Durango. Well, I wasn’t headed anywhere near Durango, and I sure as hell didn’t have a girl. I liked my mishearing a whole lot better. In my head, as I drove through the desert, the words were as I first heard them, hopeful and apposite. Pray for me, señor. Pray for us.

In New Mexico, things fall away. The farther I struck toward the state line, the cleaner the roadside verges were, the fewer the billboards stark against the sky. I always forget just how much sky there is down there in the southwest, until I drive back out there again and it's all I can see. You can go all day under its azure vastness, bright and fierce as some strange water-metal, and then in the evening it's like it's all erased and repainted, all massed red clouds gilt-edged on a purple plain. I'm getting a little lyrical here, I know, but New Mexico sky is something to be lyrical *about*. If I were really a poet, I'd paint that sky in words.

It awed me, that great vista, as evening fell and my peppy little car chugged on across the sun-dried earth to the Magdalena Mountains. I guess I started to see some possible benefits, in those last few hours of my sticky three-day drive, of all this beauty for a hedonist like me. But as the ranch finally swam into view, its stiff-poled fences and its disparate cows amassed in sullen little clumps, I forgot whatever it was that had started to move me. This would be a summer of sweat and dirt and shit, resentment on my part and irritation on Frank's. As I turned onto the dirt track that led me down to the house, my face was set, my mouth a little down-turned. I am many things, but I'm sure as hell no cowboy.

Frank was quite obviously of the same opinion. We're Italian, and that means we don't hold with any of that "no touching" crap other families pull with their sons and nephews, so he pulled me toward him and hugged me hard when he saw me, but I didn't miss the flicker of doubt under his smile as he pulled away. He was looking at my chucks, pristine and alien in the dirt. "How are you, *grissino*?" he

asked, in his dark copper voice. He gave me that nickname when I was a kid, when I was all height and no muscle. It means, for want of a better definition, “bread stick.” I couldn’t help hearing, in his use of it now, an undertone of “think you can stick this?”

To be perfectly honest, I was far from sure myself. But the last thing I wanted was for Frank to think badly of me. He’s a tough guy, my Uncle Frank, but he’s a fair one, and he was certainly a hell of a lot more judicious than my father was when I came out in my freshman year of college. Given that Dad is a businessman making the occasional commute to a decent-sized city, and Frank is a rancher who never leaves his home on the range, you’d have been forgiven for expecting the opposite outcome. But as it was, my dad is still coming to terms with things—although I know he will, eventually—whereas Frank didn’t even seem to need time to think. He just clapped me on the shoulder, ruffled my hair, and said, “Cchhh, I knew that, *grissino*.” The fact that he was so great about it was what made me particularly eager, suddenly, to impress him, when I saw that doubt in his eyes. He knew I was queer, and he didn’t give a damn, but he also, I could tell, thought it meant I wouldn’t be up to much in the way of ranch work.

“I’m great,” I told him, and suddenly, I meant it, or, goddamn, I meant to mean it. I put on my best eager-beaver smile, and tried to un-tilt the natural stance of my hips. I’m not, you know, the campiest flower on the bush, don’t get me wrong. But obviously, here, *manliness* was going to be important.

Frank smiled, a little too much as if he knew what I was thinking. “Okay, kiddo. Let’s get your stuff inside.”

I snatched my valise out of the trunk before Frank could get to it, grinning too hard to cover the strain of its weight. “Sounds like a plan. Lead on, noble Francesco!”

Frank laughed, a short little sound in his throat, and shook his head. “First on the left, if you’ve forgotten,” he said, scooping up the rest of my things in his work-hardened arms.

I threw him another grin and led the way indoors.

MY BED at Frank’s place, I remember, always seemed like a prison-board when we went to the ranch before, but evidently my dorm-room student life had hardened me. I fell asleep almost as soon as my head touched the pillow, and woke to the glow of an amber dawn inching through the gaps in the curtains. I lay still for a moment or two, just watching the light intensify, thinking about how it looked almost as if the window frame were catching fire. But this was a ranch, and ranches wake up early. There was a familiar commotion going on outside, men shouting indistinctly in the distance, and the constant mooing of cows protesting at their treatment. I lay there another decadent minute, luxuriating in the warmth of my cocoon. And then, with a monumental effort, I threw back the covers and swung my legs over the side of the bed.

Normally, I only dress quickly when a room is cold. There’s something about the cool starkness of tile against your bare feet that makes you want to curl your toes and shudder them into your shoes as fast as you can manage. By

this logic, I guess my little bedroom at the ranch should have had the opposite effect, because the tile there was still pleasantly warm to the touch, the polished kiss of it oddly soothing to my feet. But this was my first morning, and I was still mindful of the promise I'd made to myself the night before. I was gonna show Frank what I was made of, and already I was the laziest son of a bitch on site. So I hauled on my jeans without even stopping to think; skinned into my T-shirt and fastened up my belt and my shoelaces like I was being timed. Catching sight of myself in the mirror, I was pretty content with what I saw. Maybe the earring could have stood to go, but I was fond of it, and I had no desire for the damn hole to close up 'cause I'd taken it out for the summer. It wasn't particularly noticeable, anyway, except from time to time when the sun flashed it up in passing. My hair, for once, was something close to its natural black, and my skin had already picked up some early summer color. In the southwest, people tend to assume we're Latino, and I don't usually correct them. I reason that Italian-Americans *should* be more qualified to be Latinos than anyone else, even if what most people mean by it is something altogether more Spanish. In the glass there, I thought I looked pretty unremarkable. There were plenty of slim young men on Frank's land, browning like nuts as the summer's heat increased. I could do my bit without attracting any attention.

The moment I stepped outside, I doubted my convictions. It couldn't have been much past six thirty, but the place was already a hive of activity: guys in beat-up Levis stalking past with hay bales on broad shoulders; and cattle trooping in neat files down to the sheds for milking. I stood on the edge of all of this organized, heavy-duty chaos,

looking on as my stomach sank into my totally and utterly inappropriate boots.

“Shit,” I muttered, as I watched a guy chivvying some renegade bull back into its pen. “Aw, *shit*.”

“Problem?”

A soft voice, lightly accented, and rich with amusement. I whipped round, withdrawing my hands from my pockets instantaneously. Another habit I hadn’t yet managed to kick, even though my jeans were far too tight for it to look anything other than effete, at best.

There behind me, surveying me with the corners of his wide mouth quirking, stood a guy. One of Frank’s rancher guys, to be precise: a loose-limbed, dark-haired, caramel-colored twenty-something in a well-worn hat and jeans. His hands were casually in his pockets, too, but somehow the cut of his pants, while rewardingly tight—a requisite for riding, I reminded myself—prevented the stance from appearing fey, the way my skinnies tended to make it. Nothing about this guy, in fact, could be called skinny. The muscles in his forearms showed as ripples under the bronze of his skin.

“No problem,” I assured him hastily, when I could trust myself to speak. “I’m just new around these parts—or new to ranch work, anyway, if not to this ranch itself. I’m Alex.” I held out my hand.

“Frank’s nephew,” the young man said, knowingly, the corner of his mouth turning up a little more. It should have been irritating, that he already seemed to know who I was, but somehow, it seemed more charming than anything else.

Maybe the fact that I was distracted by his smile had something to do with it.

“You got it,” I confirmed. “Alex Arzano.”

“Oro,” he reciprocated, taking my hand in his, just as I was about to withdraw it in embarrassment. The *rrr* rolled easy as thunder over his tongue. “Oro Torres. This is my third summer here.”

“You from around here?” His grip was firm and warm. I didn’t want to let go, which of course is why I did so as soon as I was able. It wouldn’t do me any good at all to get attached to a guy like this, all easy swagger and brawn. But damn him, with his unexpected warmth, he wasn’t making it easy.

“I grew up down near Santa Fe,” he said, shaking his head slightly in response to my question and laughing shortly. “Closer to home than you expected, right? Folks up here always assume I must be Mexican because of my accent.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” I lied.

He smiled, and countered, “You had. But you weren’t listening properly, were you?” He laughed again, not at me, but with me, and I felt myself soar a little, despite myself. “My parents are Spanish. Real old Spanish, from Spain. It’s my first language.” He shrugged. “Mexican Spanish is completely different.”

“I know that,” I told him, earnestly, and then laughed back. “You guys lisp.”

“That’s right!” He grinned at me, and shifted his weight in the dirt. “Important distinction, man. We lisp because

we're aristocrats. Don't forget it."

"Oh, I won't." I was leaning back a little, angling my body toward him. It was an unconscious movement, the kind of stance I took up in San Diego bars, entirely unsuited to the bright dawn sun of a New Mexico cattle ranch, but I wasn't thinking. He was easy to talk to, this guy, this *Oro*. I could see now that there might be something in this summer for me, so long as I kept a hold on myself, didn't let myself get out of hand. If I could be content just to ride the ragged edge of flirtation, enough that there'd always be a margin of plausible deniability, maybe Oro and I could be friends, kind of. Maybe we could have some fun.

"You an aristocrat too, hrrm?" He gestured at my hands, which I had unconsciously stuffed back into my pockets in a way that now felt abruptly and distressingly awkward. I grinned at him nervously, and withdrew them again.

"I wanna do what common people do," I quoted glibly, the back of my throat tensing up the moment the words were out of my mouth at the realization that this guy, unlike everyone at UC San Diego, would almost certainly not have Pulp's back catalog memorized and on hand to quip with. Probably he'd just think I was being an ass. But he went on smiling, although he shook his head a little in a way that told me he thought there was some reference in there somewhere, but that he was missing it.

"Well," he said, tipping his head toward the long shed that ran along the outskirts of the great dirt-field where the majority of the work seemed to be going on, "I'm sure I can fix that for you, if you want some help getting started." The gesture was an obvious invitation, and, combined with the

half-step he took in the direction of the shed, I deduced that he wanted me to follow him. My hands, forced out of their usual hiding place, felt over-large and superfluous. I found that I had no idea what to do with them, and quickly tucked them behind my back.

“Thanks,” I said, my gratitude so heartfelt that I was sure it had to be fully audible in my voice. “Simple things first, I think.”

“Oh, I can find you simple,” Oro said, his voice thick with amusement as he led the way in long, certain strides, the pointed toes of his boots leaving triangles of purpose in the dust. “Things don’t get simpler than mucking out.”

I should have known that was coming. I snorted, and kicked up a little cloud of dust as I tripped after him. “They don’t,” I conceded, humbly. “I’m sure that’s the best place to start.”

“It is,” Oro informed me brightly, shoving open the half-gate of the long building, which I now determined was most definitely a stable, divided up into a number of neat little stalls. When I had followed him inside, he bolted the gate behind us, and cast about the room with his eyes, evidently in search of something. The something turned out to be a spade, which he located quickly, and pressed into my hands.

“Which ones need doing?” I asked him, my heart sinking a little as the weight of the spade registered. It was only a *spade*, for crying out loud. Man up, Arzano.

“You’ll know.” He tipped his head again in the direction of the stalls. “I’ll be back in...” he looked at his watch, a glint of leather and silver against the brown of his arm “say an

hour and a half? I expect progress, aristocrat.” He winked, and tilted the brim of his hat in my direction, a quick switch of his hand knocking it back into place in the moment immediately following. Deft hands, and not a born laborer’s hands, either. I forced myself to divert my energies away from that particular train of thought, and nodded my assent.

“There’ll be progress,” I promised. He grinned, and walked out, *snicking* the bolt neatly back into place behind him.

I soon discovered that he hadn’t been kidding when he said I’d know which stalls were in need of attention. The horses—of which there weren’t too many, really, given that this was a cattle ranch where the horses’ main function was to help with herding—were all out for the day, hard at work. Looking at the stalls, though, my heart didn’t exactly grow fonder of them in their absence.

Put simply, they stank. The horses may have been absent, but they had left their mark behind. As I wandered from one end of the row of stalls to the other, it became evident that not just one or two but all of them were severely in need of a thorough cleaning out. Oro had been right, of course, in that this was hardly a task requiring any great or specialized skill, but my heart still sank at the mere idea of embarking upon it unaided. Spade in hand, I wandered in some desperation back to the main door of the stable and peered out. Oro was nowhere to be seen. The brown dust yard outside the door was quite empty, all the laborers having long since departed for enterprises rather further from the main hub of operations. It seemed that I was quite on my own.

As I saw it, I had two options. I was, after all, Frank's nephew, his guest. Frank had not personally given me any orders at all, and I presumed he was unaware that anybody else had. I could still go back into the house, pretending never to have been awake, and wander in to find Frank for breakfast. But the potential pitfalls of this plan were manifold. Frank, a rancher all his life, would have been awake for hours by now. His general tendency, though, now that he was getting a little older, was to get up in good time to give his men their orders and then go back to the house to order supplies and check accounts before breakfast. Chances were, he had spotted me already from his window. I had no desire to be caught out in my deception after what I said last night. Additionally, I did not fail to recognize the fact that, as one of Frank's trained ranchmen, it was quite likely that Oro's idea of an easy task for a beginner had been gleaned from Frank in the first place, and that Frank, even if I succeeded in convincing him that I had just woken up, would simply set me the same task again himself. And if that happened I would be here again, still facing the same Himalayas of horse dung, but without several of the advantages of the current situation. Frank wouldn't know that I had dragged myself valiantly out of bed without ever being asked; that I had set about finding myself something to do in order to prove myself as eager for and capable of work as any of his hired hands. Furthermore—and I can't pretend this wasn't the overriding factor—Oro would know everything. He would know that my attempted projection of myself as an honest working man was nothing but a delusion; most likely, he would think me a pampered little faggot, and, what's worse, dishonest. The thought of Oro coming in here after the agreed hour and a half had elapsed

and finding that I had completely disregarded his suggestions—never orders, but genuine attempts to help—was too cringe-inducing to tolerate. Oro of the open smile and honey-bronze beauty, I could not disappoint.

Fortified by this decision, I resettled my shovel in my hands, squared my jaw in what I hoped was a manly fashion, and turned back toward the stalls. I would show them, Frank and Oro both. When Oro returned to check, this place would be spotless.

In any event, “spotless” proved to be something of an overambitious goal. A better description of the row of stalls, after I’d had my vigorous way with them, might have been “ravaged,” or perhaps “incompetently scalped.” (Hey, when in the ol’ Wild West, right?) I’d managed to dispose of the contents of four of the stalls, shoveling the majority of the straw and dung out into the wheelbarrow, and subsequently tossing it on the small mountain behind the building. Unsurprisingly, that hadn’t been too hard to find. The guys used it for fertilizer, so it was depleted pretty much on a daily basis, but even when it was mostly gone, the smell could have guided any beginner toward the correct spot. By the time I was done, man was it plentiful. I had no idea that horses could shit so much, or that it could be so freakin’ heavy. Still, I was running on a potent mixture of adrenaline and anxiety, so the “heavy” factor slipped my concern fairly early in the game. The only problem was that there always seemed to be just a few more stalls, right when I thought I must be nearing the end. By the end of the fourth stall, I no longer had any concept of the passing of time. There was just me, aching and filthy with sweat and muck and dust, and the insurmountable, endless task before me. Oh, I was doing

it well enough, I was pretty sure, but it looked to me like it could conceivably go on *forever*. And I didn't want to spend forever smelling like horse shit.

I had paused for a breather, forearm resting on the handle of my shovel as I surveyed my temporary domain, when he came back. Oro: a series of soft-fallen steps through the straw, and a smile I could feel. I knew he was there almost before I even heard him, and the hairs on my nape, I swear to God, stood up. Oh, man.

I've never really liked having people stand behind me. It makes me uncomfortable, like I can feel every inch of space between my skin and theirs, and it makes my flesh creep. The muscles of my back were all ready to clench up in self-defense as Oro approached, but he didn't stop behind me, although he brushed past close enough that his forearm touched my shirt. He settled himself, instead, slightly to the left of me, on the side where the shovel wasn't. And then, for a long, long moment, he just looked.

I have to admit, I was looking, too. Not at the stalls, which so occupied Oro's attention, but at him, my forehead practically touching my sweat-damp arm on the shovel's handle, face turned sideways, ostensibly at rest, but really just to take him in. He had his hands in his pockets, casual, collected; his elbows turned out loosely, the muscles in his arms swelling gently under the skin. He still had his hat neatly, jauntily in place, but there was sweat, now, licking the hollow of his throat, touching his clavicle within the opened collar of his shirt. The lines of his profile were as clean-cut and sharp as the rest of him, his face dark and fine like a toreador's, his black eyes watchful. He smelled: *warm*, working-man warm, musky and human, fresh sweat

and honest toil. The scent of him pricked my nostrils, resonated between my legs. Abruptly, I turned my face away and waited.

“Done pretty good here,” he said, when the long moment finally drew to an end. His smile, when he turned it toward me, was unclouded and clean. He was so clean; I don’t know why I thought of him so vividly as such, but I did. I couldn’t help feeling it. I smiled back. I doubt I could have stopped myself.

“I only managed four stalls,” I pointed out. “And I never got around to the disinfecting part.”

Oro laughed, rich and heady in the heat. “Four’s plenty in an hour and a half, man. Hell, I only expected two. Maybe three, if you were stronger than you look.” He winked at me. “I guess you must be a *lot* stronger.”

“Oh, yeah?” I could feel my body’s desperation to respond, to drape itself unconcernedly over the shovel, to angle itself toward him all wanting, inviting. I struggled against the urge with every fiber of my being. “How do I *look*, then?”

He surveyed me for a minute, head quirked slightly to one side. I could feel myself heating, blood boiling to the surface of my skin under his gaze. I shuffled my feet, and tried to look defiantly back at him, chin uplifted, eyebrows raised in bold inquiry. He laughed a little, as if he’d noticed, and then stopped laughing, so that what he said was very serious.

“You look,” he said, “too pretty for Magdalena. Everybody’s rough as the roads out here.”

And he turned on his heel, his swagger languid, unchallenged. “Do the rest,” he called brightly over his shoulder as he departed. “I’ll be back later.”

I stared after him, voice lost somewhere in my throat. It hadn’t sounded like an insult, in his gorgeous mouth. But if not an insult, I couldn’t imagine what it meant. Or rather, I could imagine all too well, and I thought I’d probably better stop myself. Oro was a *ranch hand*, I told myself; a cowboy and a Catholic. When he said I was *pretty*, what he meant was that he thought I was fey, fragile, too goddamn San Diego to get anything done around here. Except I’d proven him wrong in that already, hadn’t I? I’d proven him wrong, and hell, I’d do it again. I’d do it again *now*, so when he came back this whole place would be done single-handed.

I hefted my shovel, and stalked into the next stall. The muscles pulled across my shoulders as I bent to my task, and it helped a little, the pain, against the imaginings: against the thought of Oro and his fine-cut, masculine beauty. There was nothing *rough* about him, whatever he said.

I shook my head, and repositioned the wheelbarrow by the door.

I didn’t see Uncle Frank at all, that first day. Oro came back a couple of hours later with a packet of sandwiches and a bottle of water; my stomach was protesting so vehemently by this point that my food-hunger actually outweighed any attention I might ordinarily have paid to his person. After rasping my thanks through the thickness of exertion in my throat, knocking back some water and wolfing down the first sandwich with barely a pause to chew, I felt a little more

myself—enough, at least, to notice that he looked pleased. Impressed, even. I let myself indulge, for a moment, the glowing sensation in my chest.

“Hungry?” he asked, eyebrow quirking along with the corner of his mouth (oh, God, his *mouth*).

“Hungry work,” I told him shortly, picking up a second sandwich and tearing it soundly across the middle. “What d’you think?”

The combination of physical exertion and hunger—the sheer *physicality*, maybe, of the morning; the raw sense of masculine endeavor—had made me confident, unusually unconcerned. He seemed to like that, too.

“You did good,” he told me, mouth curved around a grin. “Like you were in any doubt about that, huh?”

“Still nice to hear,” I tossed back at him, stuffing the half-sandwich into my mouth. Under my breath—and through a mouthful of sandwich—I scoffed, “*Pretty.*”

I don’t know, even now, whether I expected, or even wanted him to catch that. But Oro was a sharp one, sharp-eyed and keen, and his laugh only ripened. “I didn’t mean it as an insult, *compa*. I can see you have muscles on you.”

At this point, I still had most of a bread roll in my mouth, which sort of inhibited my capacity for speech. Even still, I could feel my throat tensing up in surprise, or anticipation. Oro tossed me a wink, and another packet of sandwiches. “Here. Keep you going while you disinfect them all, right?”

And with that, he strode out, the curve of his backside drawing my eyes under his dirt-smeared denim jeans. I

started to feel like a pattern was setting in.

I was starting to feel that, maybe, this might not be a bad thing.

WHETHER Oro specifically requested charge of me, or if it was Uncle Frank's independent idea, I never found out. Or when, even—had he volunteered himself before he met me? Was that why he'd known who I was? Or had that been the sort of thing the whole staff had become aware of by some kind of vague osmosis, and Oro really had stumbled upon me all on his own? Maybe he'd asked Frank about me while I was mucking out the horses. Maybe he'd asked after he'd brought me the sandwiches, once he knew I was maybe good for something. Or *maybe*, he'd bumped into Frank at some point during the day and told him what he had me doing, and maybe Frank had said, "Oh, yeah? Well, thanks, son; that saves me a job. Hey, you wanna maybe keep an eye on him for me the rest of the time? Show him the ropes a little?" And *maybe* Oro said yes, because he wanted to keep in Frank's good books. Or *maybe* he'd said yes because he liked me, and there were too many *maybes* there to count.

Anyway. Let's just leave it at me not knowing how things reached the point they did, because it doesn't really matter—even if it mattered to me at the time. Frank caught hold of me later that evening, as I stumbled, tired and filthy, back toward the house. Nobody had told me when things began and ended around here, but the slow roll of people away from the fields was like a tide, determined, strong, pulling with it everyone who fell into its path. I, exhausted, let

myself be pulled. Frank met me ten feet from the door, teeth flashing white in a grin.

“Hey, *grissino*! I hear you’ve been working hard for Oro?”

Oh, man, did I want to work hard for Oro.

I shook away the flush of warmth that caught at my spine at the sound of Oro’s name, and grinned. “Sure have. Your stables have never been so clean.”

Christ, even the muscles of my face hurt when I spoke. Everything hurt, from my aching shoulders right down to my taut hamstrings. Even my hair felt like it might be aching slightly, and this was only my first day. If Oro did this for a regular living, he had to be in *incredibly* good shape.

Frank, moving forward to meet me, was laughing. “I’m glad to hear it! I’ll tell your mother. She’ll be relieved.” He tipped me a wink and slipped his arm through mine, lending me his solid support, if I wanted it. “I’ve put Oro in charge of you,” he went on, as we entered the house by the kitchen door and he gestured at my boots, an unmistakable *get ’em gone*. “So you just do as he tells you, and you won’t go far wrong. That okay?”

“Huh?” I was crouching, by this point; scraping dry dirt off my shoelaces with a thumbnail, preparatory to disentangling the damn things. And, more than that, I was playing for time, really; trying to work out what would be the most apt response, when what I wanted to do was break out in a grin and thank my uncle rapturously. I would have so happily done anything at all Oro told me to, was God’s own truth—and not only because he was six feet of solid sex, either. I’m no idiot, and no pushover, and I need to feel safe

before I'll let anything go. There was something about Oro that absolutely radiated trustworthiness; something in his smile and his clean-cut face that told me he was good people, and he could be relied upon. I would have done anything Oro told me, in any arena, because I trusted him not to tell me wrong. Not something that usually happened to me in quite so short a space of time, and not something I could easily tell Frank, either. Nevertheless, once I'd shoved off one boot, I managed to make an attempt.

"Absolutely a-okay, sir," I said, smiling up at Frank as I fumbled with my remaining boot. "I like Oro. He seems like he knows what he's talking about. And he's patient, too, I guess."

"He's a good kid," Frank agreed, and I could tell by the way his smile softened that he was pleased. I'd done well. And I liked that. "So you just report to him, while you're here. I can see you'll do fine."

Later that night, when we'd eaten, Frank broke out a pair of his own work boots and insisted that I try them on for size while he watched. They were, more or less, perfect, uncle and nephew matching up in this one particular, more neatly than I'd expected. Frank was more pleased than he should have been about this development, too. The smile he smothered behind his palm was more than a little endearing, and I can't pretend that the gifting of his own boots wasn't, in and of itself. There was something undoubtedly symbolic about it, when he could just as easily have dug me a pair out of the supply closet where he kept things for ranch back-up and emergencies. He didn't want to give me something out of storage. He wanted to give me something of his, something he maybe would have given a son. I'd always known that I

was the closest thing Frank had to that, but it was only in snatches—in moments like this—that I realized how much I wanted to live up to that for him.

“Go sleep it out, Alex,” Frank said, clapping me between the shoulder blades. “Let your muscles unclench. More hard work tomorrow.”

I hugged him tight, curtailing it with a back slap of my own. “Will do. Thanks for the boots, Uncle Frank.”

I didn’t have to look back to know he was smiling at me as I made my way back to my room.

A LOT of guys these days have no idea at all what ranch hands *do*. I don’t mean to sound superior, or anything, saying this, but I’m pretty sure it’s true. I know for a fact that my friends in California would never have assumed I’d be spending my first day shoveling horse dung into a pile to be carted off for fertilizer. In California, you only have to say the word “ranch” and everyone’s immediate thoughts are of cowboys, lone rangers roaming the hills, all big hats and fancy boots and pistols shoved into their belts. Ask them what they think these sensitive riders *do*, exactly, and they find it a little harder to respond. It’s guys from California, and from Boston, and from up-state New York, who pitch in obscene amounts of money for “dude ranch” vacations, where they spend a weekend in a ridiculous shirt, singing “Kum Ba Ya” around a camp fire thinking it makes ’em a cowboy.

Well, like I said, the Southwest is in my blood, however

much at home I may feel in San Diego. I always knew what ranches were, and just what ranch work entailed, and I knew that wasn't it. Uncle Frank's ranch hands would never be caught dead wandering out on the hills alone. That's the whole point of a ranch, right there: everybody stays together on it. Frank still has horses, because it's his opinion that cattle respond with greater trust to a herdsman riding behind them than to one chivvying them down the hill in a tractor. He may be right; on the other hand, he may just be kind of old-fashioned. The jury's still out. The point is that ranch hands do actually have *jobs*. Jobs, plural; a whole lot of different things they have to be able to do with ease and expertise. A good ranch hand is a jack-of-all-trades, from seeding, fencing, mowing, irrigation, basic mechanics, to all kinds of animal husbandry. A lot of the traditional gear of the cowboy can still be seen on Uncle Frank's workmen, but that's because a lot of it is eminently practical. "Cowboy" boots are shaped like that so they'll fit well into stirrups; the hat's like that because it's made to keep the sun off your face and the back of your neck all at the same time. Denim jeans were *made* to be durable and perennially appropriate. Shirts with tassels rarely feature into the equation. Lots of guys frequently wear T-shirts under open shirts, although long sleeves are the norm, even so, since they shield you from everything from blazing sun to pesticides. Working on a ranch is far from a walk in the park. Most ranchers are guys who've been brought up in the trade, and those who weren't have to put in a lot of hard work to get themselves up to speed.

When I woke up for my second day of work at Frank's, I wasn't under any illusions. I didn't expect to be a fully

trained *vaquero* by the end of eight weeks' work. Nobody else expected that from me either. But even if I'd never be able, like Oro, to fix anything that needed fixing at the drop of a hat, there'd always be *something* I could probably manage. That morning, what needed managing was the back fence. There'd been kind of an unexpected summer storm a couple nights previously, and the fence had suffered under the onslaught. Oro had all the necessities stowed in a bag on the back of my saddle before I even got out of the house: hammer and nails; wood; chicken wire. He grinned at me when he saw me, and tipped his hat. I steeled myself in my new-old boots, ignored the prickle in the small of my back, and returned the grin.

"Tasks already?"

He had two horses with him, both of them chestnut and gleaming. The one to his right, its reins in his hands, was his, a fact he made quite evident by the angling of his body. The other, the one with the bag on its saddle, must then, I reasoned, be for me. Oro reached out as I spoke, and smacked its flank affectionately.

"I always have tasks, Young Grasshopper," he informed me good-naturedly, his Rs rolling throaty and rich in his mouth. "Frank told me you could ride. That true?"

He was wearing a soft white shirt, worn thin with washing. Against it, his skin was like caramel, burnt-sugar-brown. I swallowed, and pointedly thrust one boot into the horse's stirrup, letting him see how easily I did it, how familiar the motion was for me. "I can ride."

"Good." He let go of the horse, relinquishing power. Letting me know, in some small way, that he trusted me.

“You’re riding Sasha. Frank wants the fence repaired up on the east boundary. I’ll ride over there with you, make sure you know what needs doing, and then leave you to it. Sound okay?”

“Okay,” I said, swinging my leg over Sasha’s back. She was perfectly docile, patient, and leaned into my palm when I stroked her mane. Oro’s horse let out a soft breathy sound through his nose, tossing his head a little to fend off a fly. I smiled slightly, and looked up from the horse to its rider. “You always ride that one?”

“He’s mine,” Oro nodded, patting the animal fondly. “Reuben. And he’s a beautiful specimen, too, aren’t you, Reuben?” He leaned forward, face almost touching Reuben’s mane as he scratched long fingers behind his ears. “Gorgeous boy, huh? Oh, yeah, you sure are.”

Goddamn, I was jealous of the freaking horse.

He straightened up after a minute, and grinned across at me. “I get over-affectionate,” he apologized, a little shamefaced.

“Hey, no problem,” I told him, meaning it wholeheartedly. “He’s a good horse. You have every right to be in love with him.”

Oro laughed outright at that remark, the sound of it heady and clear in the scarlet early morning. “I do, don’t I?” He shook his head. “Screw it. I do.”

We rode out around the ranch’s perimeter together, the first sounds of the day’s work just beginning to break the dewy after-dawn quiet. We didn’t speak much, because it didn’t feel like a time, really, for speaking, with the sky still

stained from sunrise, and the silence hung comfortable between us. Half way there, he told me I had a really good seat, and I glowed a little with pleasure. A little further on, I asked him if that was a different hat, and he laughingly congratulated me on my observational skills. Other than this, there wasn't any conversation. I rode just slightly behind him over the dried out grass, and watched his back as he moved, the shift and sway of him as he straddled the horse. The sun cast the shadow of his hat in a dark puddle over his shirt, right down to where it clung to him lightly, sticking to the beginnings of sweat in the dip of his spine. I turned away; focused my eyes on the horizon. Any more of that, and I'd be imagining that sweat on my tongue, the salt-sharp tang of his skin as I licked down his back. Oro was a workman, a professional; he didn't deserve that. I watched the colors changing on the backdrop of sky, and rode on smooth behind him.

It doesn't take too much expert knowledge to fix a fence. When we arrived at the gap the wind had created in the neat brown line of the fence, the two of us swiftly dismounted, and Oro unhitched the bag of equipment from Sasha's saddle. He took out the hammer first; laid it on the dry earth, near to the boundary line. Next came the nails, stuffed into one of those little plastic bags you get at the bank, for safekeeping, and last of all, the wire.

"Some of those things are hoop-tacks," he told me, as he flattened the roll of wiring and began to unfurl it. "I'm sure you don't need too much guidance, here; man with a college education can fix a fence, right?"

I laughed shortly and scratched the back of my head in some embarrassment. "Well," I said, "I think I can probably

manage this, yeah. But when the apocalypse comes, or whatever, I somehow think my college education's gonna be a hell of a lot less use than your ranch expertise."

Oro held up a hand, victorious, grinning. "And you've learned something vital already," he said, catching my eye so I'd know there was no malice in it. It wasn't necessary. There was no malice in Oro at all. But it was appreciated, nevertheless.

For another minute, I watched him spreading out the chicken wire on the ground, his muscles bunching and stretching as his hands worked nimbly. Then he stood up, and swung himself back onto Reuben's back.

"Okay," he said, "Chicken wire, tacked across the gap. Then you add the new planks with nails, and tack the wire to them, as well. Think you can handle that, college boy?"

"*And find my way home,*" I told him, raising my hand in a salute. "Sir."

"You need a hat," he said, mouth twitching, considering.

"I don't burn," I assured him, as he turned his horse.

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe. I wouldn't risk it. I'll see you in the main yard later?"

"Sure," I called after him, hand upraised as he rode away.

As it happened, I saw him a little earlier than that.

I'm not a slow worker, whatever people might expect. I had the chicken wire tacked up within the hour, and most of the planks nailed on an hour after that. I'm sure fencing is the kind of work that can become back-breakingly tedious

after a while, but a couple of hours of it in the early morning is almost soothing—or it felt like it, after the mucking-out. I found myself almost, ridiculously, *enjoying* it as the sun strengthened on my back, pausing to lean back and survey my work and declare to myself that It Was Good.

That was when I heard the hooves approaching.

At first, quite naturally, I thought it must be Oro. Then—and I’m almost ashamed to admit this, but it’s true—when I realized that it *wasn’t* him, I thought something must have happened to him. As if there could be no other reason for Oro to have anything better to do than come and see to me, Frank’s city-boy imposition of a nephew. The sudden thickness in my throat blocked all rational thought.

The man on this horse was middle-aged and Hispanic, real Hispanic, mustachioed and slight. I half-ran toward him, although I remembered myself enough not to crowd the horse. “Is everything all right?” I called up at him, one hand over my eyes to shield them from the quickening sun.

“Oro wants you,” said the guy, and then smiled before I had much of an opportunity to panic. “You’re his go-to guy for the duration, right?”

“Right,” I said, raising my eyebrow to show I didn’t exactly follow. “He needs my help?”

“He wants your help,” said the rancher, nodding. “Saddle up. He’s seeing to one of the cows.”

And then he belted up, tight as the proverbial clam. I studied him for another bemused moment, before I figured that the only way to find out anything more would be to see to things for myself. So—because I knew Frank had an

absolute horror of things being left out indefinitely in the open—I quickly stowed my tools and things in my saddlebag, reattached it, and climbed up onto Sasha’s back.

“Okay,” I signaled, when I was ready, “Take me to him.”

When I said I had always been aware of the variability of ranch work, I wasn’t kidding. I knew that ranchers had as much to do with the care and upkeep of animals as with keeping the ranch in good repair, and that this ranged from herding the cows, to feeding them, to breaking new horses in. What I had forgotten, though, was that most ranches don’t have access to veterinarians. Way out in the wilds of wherever, your local country vet can be pretty hard to find. This ain’t James Herriott country, and when a cow’s gotta calve, she can’t wait for you to find her a doctor.

Apparently, on Uncle Frank’s ranch, the cow only had to wait for Oro.

It’s not every day you pull up outside a barn to find the man of your dreams elbow-deep in a cow’s genital passage. By the worn-out expression on Oro’s face, though, it was quite evident that this *was* kind of a mundane experience for him. Still, he had a smile for me, although as he said, “I guess I won’t shake your hand.”

He laughed softly, and withdrew his arm from the cow. “Breech birth,” he said, with a sigh. “We’re going to have to help her along. I was just making sure.”

“Breech?”

He nodded. “The calf is upside down. So far, it feels like there’s one hind leg in the birth canal. That means we have to get the other leg and the tail in there before we can pull. I

washed my hands and arms in the sink before I started, but if it's going to require genuine interference, we'll need a hell of a lot more soap and water." He indicated a bucket on the far side of the barn. "Do me a favor, Alex? Fill that, and then bring it back out here; the soap from the sink, too."

A lesser man, I like to think, might have stopped to ask questions. Not me. Oro's voice had taken on its commanding tone, the one I could tell he reserved for times of crisis, for keeping the troops under control. As if on autopilot, I nodded, retrieved the bucket, and headed for the kitchen, breathing deeply to steady myself as the bucket filled. Oro and I were going to birth a calf? Really? People trained for *years* to be qualified to do stuff like this. But, I reasoned, veterinary medicine was kind of new, as these things went, in the grand scheme of things. Colonial settlers didn't have specially trained cow-midwives. Guys in Wild West days probably did this shit themselves. Besides, it was obvious that Oro had done this before. As I'd said to Uncle Frank, he knew what he was talking about.

"Okay," I called, stepping back into the barn with the fruits of my labor, "I brought the towel, too. This look good?"

He turned toward me; eyes warm with thanks, hands outstretched for the bucket. And my *God*, did this look good.

He was shirtless, his skin dull bronze in the pale and dusty light of the covered barn. The muscles I had so admired in his forearms, I now saw, continued all the way up to his shoulders, his broad chest, his stomach. A sheen of sweat had broken out low on his throat, and under his arms where he'd raised them toward me. For one hideous moment, I thought I was about to drop the bucket.

Then he said, “Thanks, Alex. You’re a star,” and half-submerged himself abruptly in the tepid water.

I watched blankly as he soaped himself, rinsed, repeated. Then his arm was snaking up again into the cow, disappearing slow and gentle inside it. For a long time, it seemed, I watched him fumble, his white teeth catching on his lower lip as he frowned, feeling for purchase. I felt as if I should be doing something else—making myself useful—but he had given me no further instructions, and there was something captivating about him, immersed in his work like this, his every breath detectible as his naked chest heaved. Sweat broke out on his brow in fine beads, the cords in his neck straining as his arm groped further. Then, just when I was beginning to feel complications I was no longer sure my jeans could conceal, he said, “Aha!”

I picked the bucket up again, guiltily, pointlessly. “Aha?”

“Other leg.” He grinned at me, brief flash of teeth. “Had to push the whole calf forward a little, to make room for it, you see? Got it now, though. Just—a *little*—more—”

Up to this point, the cow had been beautifully patient, enduring this assault upon her person with absolute (and unexpected) bovine grace. Now, though, it seemed, she was objecting to something. Oro huffed through his nose as her hind legs shuffled, shushing her gently, soothing. “Come on, now. It’s okay, baby. I got you.” He looked up at me after a second, appealing with his eyes. “They don’t like this part,” he explained, almost apologetically. “The legs are both in the birth canal, but I’m gonna have to give it a good wiggle to get the tail and backside in there. Keep her calm for me, would you? Just, talk to her, tell her it’s gonna be fine, that kind of

thing. Stroke her flank. But watch out for the legs.”

“If she kicks,” I said, warily, “Isn’t she liable to kick you in the head?”

“If she kicks,” he agreed, with a wry little smile. “Keep her calm for me, Alex? There’s a good boy.” And then he was soaping himself again, sluicing water up over his arms, over the sharp-cut outlines of his shoulders. “Now.”

I can’t say I’m an expert in talking to cows. Actually, it had never occurred to me to try it. But Oro was depending on me—Oro, the shirtless golden god, apparently fearless, his arms even now sliding back up to clasp the calf’s hind legs. Oro trusted me, exactly as I’d trusted him. And that was enough for me.

“Okay, honey,” I began, stuttering a little at first. “It’s okay. We’ve got you. You’re gonna be okay.” My hand moved gently up and over the cow’s flank, stroking the short fur, calming myself almost as much as her. A glance behind me showed Oro once again straining at arm’s length. I took a deep breath, and resumed my gentle touches. “Come on, baby. Just a little bit more. One more push.”

Everything I knew about any kind of pregnancy, I had basically learned from *General Hospital*, so God only knows what Oro thought of me talking to the cow as if she were my struggling mistress. At the time, though, I could barely even spare a thought for that. The cow was looking up at me, wide-eyed and uncertain, and Oro behind was tugging, urging, moving. I raised my voice, gentling the cow as best as I knew how. “Come on, baby. That’s it. That’s it.” Her legs were still, and that was all I could think about. Oro needed a kick in the head like, well, a kick in the head.

Contrary to popular belief, though, cows aren't stupid. This one let me soothe her for a good few minutes, but there's a time constraint on everything. I was just beginning to sense that my time was running out when I heard Oro's soft exclamation behind me, followed by a slithering sound, and the soft *thump* of flesh against earth. The next thing I heard was a soft, animal gasp; and there was Oro, grinning, holding the calf before him, dangling it carefully by its hind legs while it gasped for breath.

"They swallow the uterine fluid," he explained. "You have to clear it." He set the calf down after a second and let it crawl forward. The mother, quick as mothers always are, shifted herself enough that she could reach her calf and commenced licking at its birth-sticky neck. I was still staring at this, spellbound, when Oro swam into view again, patting the mother's nose, rich soft voice saying, "Good girl. Who's a good girl? You did so well."

I stared at him, wide-eyed and breathless and quiet. I registered the burning sensation in my cheeks *before* I realized it was only from grinning too hard. Oro laughed, and clapped me smack across the shoulder. "One calf!"

He dived swiftly back into the bucket again, sluicing the water over his arms and chest, scrubbing at the wet skin with the stick of soap. It was at this point that I realized that he'd just slapped me with a hand covered in cow fluids and I pulled a face, making a sound of protest. He laughed.

"Whassamatter, San Diego? You don't like being dirty?"

"I object to vaginas," I muttered, without thinking, and hauled the shirt off over my head.

My only thought, in that moment, was to get the thing off me. I don't think there was really anything too disgusting on Oro's hand. He'd been washing himself between searches, anyway—if you don't do that, the cow's liable to die of infection, even if you managed to calve it properly—and I felt nothing damp when he touched me. But the thought of having any kind of cow stickiness smeared on my T-shirt was more than a little off-putting. Wrestling it over my head seemed the only reasonable response. It was only after I'd got rid of it, when I was standing in the straw with my hair sticking up at odd angles, that I realized what I'd said. What I was *doing*, more to the point. And what Oro was doing, crouched in just his jeans in front of me. His arms still dripped water, rivulets streaming from his fingertips as he rose slowly to his feet.

"I thought that might be the case," he said.

My heart skipped nervously in my chest. "You—I'm sorry?"

He laughed, stepping cleanly over the bucket. The cow was now very engaged in cleaning off her calf, and there was nothing else between us. I took a half-conscious step backward and swallowed hard, part of my brain calculating the percentage chance that this was just some incredibly vivid dream. Stuff like this didn't happen to guys like me. Hell, *this* was probably just a misreading of the situation on my part. This was probably just—just—

Oro's fingers grazing the bolt of my jaw, tracing gentle and sure down to my chin. Oro's smile, open-mouthed, not a foot from my face. "I'll tell you a secret," he said, voice low-pitched and soft. "Unless it's an emergency—" he inched

closer “—a *birthing* emergency—” I could feel his breath now, warm on my cheek “—I object to vaginas, too.”

By this juncture, my entire body felt as if it had seized up, arrested in place by the shock of his closeness, the warmth of his chest half an inch away from mine. I tried to breathe, failed, and turned my head for a second attempt, my eyes closing of their own accord. He misinterpreted the movement—or, perhaps, he perceived it correctly before I understood it myself. At any rate, when I opened my mouth for air, what it encountered were his lips, a soft warm press with an edge of dampness. I stumbled, hand darting up to clutch at his bicep. He chuckled, soft vibration of it against my lips. The next thing I registered were his arms, the warm strength of them supporting me as I clung to him, drawing breath from his mouth. “Oro,” I breathed, question and prayer and thanks. “Oro, maybe....”

I think he knew before I did that I had absolutely no idea what I was going to say. Oro isn’t the type to bulldoze another person’s opinions, if they want to exorcise them. But Oro *knew* that I was only stalling for time, fumbling my way around this strange new thing with words I hadn’t even found before they were tripping out of my mouth. My hands on his arms were altogether more reliable a guide to what my body wanted as it angled itself toward his, my breath on his mouth quickening as his hands palmed the muscles of my back. The next word, whatever it was, was swallowed in his mouth, one of his hands sweeping up my spine to tangle in my hair as he licked across the curve of my lower lip.

It occurred to me, as the tip of his tongue sought entrance, stroking over the seam of my mouth, that I had never envisioned this, in all my surreptitious thoughts of

Oro. I had thought of his arms, the strength of them holding me steady; of myself on my knees, his cock smearing stickily over my lips. But I had never paused to wonder if he might kiss like this, his tongue stroking over mine, learning the insides of my teeth and the ridges of my soft palate. Perhaps it had seemed too intimate, too presumptuous, even, for a fantasy of an untouchable co-worker, a man I was already desperate to call my friend. Kissing was somehow more than fucking, more than me *working hard for Oro*. Kissing wasn't wanting sex, but wanting *me*.

Oro was kissing me now, fervent and deep, licking fully to the back of my mouth as his jaw worked mine loose and open for him. Oro was kissing me like he wanted this as much as I did. I brought up my hands; raked them through his thick dark hair, curling damply where his sweat had caught it at his hairline. Oro made a desperate sound in the back of his throat, and thrust me back blindly against the wall.

The unexpected collision was harsh on my back, and jarring; our teeth clicked together for a moment before he found his pace again, and went on kissing me. Part of me wanted just to submit to it; to arch into the gentle touches his fingers were now trailing down over my arms and sides; to dig my fingernails into his back and pull him flush against me. But the rest of me had suddenly registered exactly where we were and what we were doing: consuming each other, half-crazed and half-naked, in a barn where a cow had just completed a difficult birth. Someone must have sent Oro up here to help with the calving; what if he came back to make sure everything had gone smoothly? Even without that, it was a little weird to be doing this in front of a cow and, well,

a cow and a half. I had no doubt that the cow would probably not mind in the slightest, but I did. I gripped Oro firmly by the shoulders, and steered him away, detaching my mouth from his reluctantly, catching it again; licking apologetically at the corner of it and then withdrawing, my hands in his hair holding him at arm's length.

"Oro," I breathed, fighting a sudden urge to laugh, "I don't think—the cow—"

"I don't think she cares," Oro pointed out, mouth turning upwards. It was the expression of his that had charmed me so much in the first place, and seeing it now almost undid me, my resolve weakening under the urge to lick the amusement right off his face. But the cow, blessedly, chose that moment to moo sonorously in our direction, and I raised an eyebrow pointedly in Oro's direction.

"I care," I said. "Can we just—maybe in there?"

I gestured, vaguely and one-handed, in the direction of the little room adjoining the barn, where the sink was plumbed. Oro realized then, I think, that I had no intention at all of *stopping* him, of detaching myself from the onslaught of his kisses for good. After that, the idea of moving didn't seem to bother him. He shrugged, and smiled, and leaned in to kiss me again. "There's not much room," he murmured against my mouth, "but if you insist."

He was tugging at my arms, half-lifting me away from the wall. I let myself melt into him, let him guide me; his arms encircled my waist, holding me steady. He knew this barn like the back of his hand, I knew; knew every divot in the flagstones, every obstacle in our path. I trusted him, and I let him haul me across the room. The next thing I knew

was the slam of the door behind us, and coolness at my back as he pressed me unceremoniously up against it, his mouth seeking out my pulse-point, laving the fine skin below my ear. I squirmed at that, one hand coming up to clutch at his hair. “You like—*fuck*—you like taking charge, don’t you?” I accused him, breathless and amused.

“You like it when I do it,” he murmured, his smile tangible against my skin. His mouth drifted, down to the hollow of my throat, and lower, to trace the jut of my clavicle. His hand was drifting, too, tracing circles down over my chest and stomach and then shifting to press between my legs, palming the evidence of just how much I liked it. I surged up, hips bucking involuntarily against his hand, back arching away from the wall.

“Christ—Oro—”

I could feel him humming his pleasure at my reaction, the soft sound setting my skin trembling. His fingers traced the outline of my cock through my jeans, drawing a teasing trail of diffuse pressure from root to tip. When he reached the crown, he waited a moment, and then pressed, the tips of two fingers finding me and pushing directly through denim already faintly damp with pre-come. I cried out again, despite a half-hearted resolution not to. I’ve never quite mastered the art of discretion during sex.

“Oro,” I gasped, lips stumbling over the word even as my fingers skittered over his shoulders. “Oro—God, *please*—”

“Please?” he prompted, sealing his mouth in the hollow of my throat. His fingers resumed their stroking as he sucked, drawing the blood firm and fierce to the surface of my skin. The suddenness of it was startling, almost painful,

but what pain there was found an echo of electricity in my cock, so that I tipped back my head and moaned. Oro laved at the sore spot on my throat; kissed it with near-reverent gentleness. “Please what, Alex?” He nipped at my clavicle; licked at the bone under the skin. “Tell me what you need.”

I panted helplessly, a hard rush of air that brought with it a mewling, involuntary whimper. “Anything,” I managed, as my hands stroked over his shoulders, palming the muscle, feeling it glide sweat-slick under my hands. “Fuck, Oro, God, Oro.” And my fingers were pushing, constant and unconscious and clear. Oro smiled, and let himself be pushed, falling to his knees on the floor and stroking his hands up the insides of my thighs through my jeans.

I hadn’t *meant* to be so ungentlemanly about it, honestly. The gripping and tugging and pushing of my hands had been barely more than a reflex, somewhere beyond my conscious control. But now that he was down there, grinning up at me as he worked open the button of my jeans, I wanted nothing so much as to submerge myself in him; to thrust into his mouth and spend myself in his throat and then, lax with release, have him fuck me to a second coming. As far as I could gather, Oro seemed in full agreement with this plan. He tugged down my zipper; spread wide the flaps of my jeans, and smoothed the denim gently, teasingly flat over my hipbones. Unconstrained, now, by the unforgiving fabric, my cock swelled toward him through the thin cotton of my boxers, already mostly translucent where my slick had soaked through. Oro leaned forward, mouthing at the shape of it through my underwear, and I could not hold back the shout that rose up in my throat, my hands fumbling and clutching at the back of his hair. “*Fuck*,” I rasped, as he

nuzzled me, wet-kissing through the fabric, “Oh, fuck, please, come *on*.”

Oro’s breath was stuttering, now, too, and when he let out a moan against my shaft, I felt it resonate right to the base of my spine. “I want to fuck you,” he said, in a voice gone smoky with want, rough in a way I could almost taste. His fingers slipped deftly under the waistband of my jeans and underwear together, tugging them down over my hips, freeing my cock entirely. It separated stickily from my underwear, clear fluid pooled at the tip of it, smearing against my stomach when it made contact. I bit my lip, and then, helpless, breathed out hard and noisily. Oro was still moving, shoving the jeans mercilessly down my calves, unlacing and removing my boots in approximately an eighth of the time it had taken me to fasten them up that morning. A couple of dull thuds marked their encounter with the opposite wall, and then I was naked, jeans and underwear and socks all in a haphazard heap on the flagstones, and Oro was lifting me, one hand hooked between my thighs and the other arm curled firmly around my waist.

It wasn’t until he laid me down that I remembered the table. My eyes met his in a moment of startled realization, and he smiled back at me in the moment before he palmed my legs open, spreading me there on the table before him like dinner. He was hard, too, so hard that when he popped open the button on his jeans, it only took one press of his thumb at the zipper before his cock burst insistently forward uninvited, shoving the zipper down the rest of the way. I groaned deep in my throat, and let my head fall back.

“Alex,” he whispered, approving, “Alex—I’ve got you.” And then his warm breath was ghosting damply over the

inside of my thigh, pausing at intervals to nip gently with his teeth, licking afterward to soothe the redness away. I thrust up toward him, wanting his mouth, his fingers, *something*, and not quite knowing what to expect, or where. I was very close to the edge of the table as it was, but a moment later he was jerking me still farther forward, pressing my knees up so that all of me was open before him.

“Christ,” I muttered, understanding; “Oro—Oro—”

His tongue, then, curling over my balls, licking at the damp dark space behind and then trailing lower, coaxing, claiming. I writhed on the table as the tip reached its goal, the hot, moist circles he drew around the rim setting shivers twisting and jerking uncontrollably through my pelvis. My hands were everywhere, sparking and jolting with sensation: gripping the edge of the table, the backs of my own knees, his hair. He circled me for long moments, until it felt as if his tongue were dragging repeatedly over every nerve in my body, drawing them all together under his mouth. Then he pressed inside, with the tip of his tongue firmed to a point, and I lost my mind.

The thrust of his tongue as it slicked me, breaching the tight ring of muscle, felt like nothing on fucking *earth*. I’d been rimmed before, the way Oro was doing earlier, but not like *this*; not deep and probing and masterful while I shuddered myself apart around it. His hands were large and firm on my thighs as he fucked me, holding me wide and open for him, and I could *not* stop crying out, not even when the cries dissolved into helpless hiccoughs of air and shock and sobs. Finally, right when I was sure I was going to come in his hair without even the capacity to warn him, he withdrew with an obscene sucking sound, a wet kiss to the

rim before he reclaimed his tongue. Then he rose up, arms hooked under my knees, and shoved me a little further back onto the table. I looked up at him weakly, breathless and desperate and unable even to move, let alone tell him any of the things I wanted to say.

“It’s okay,” he told me, like he understood. “Christ, fuck, Alex, I got you—I got you—”

His jeans were still mostly on when he positioned himself at my entrance, shoved down around his thighs, but not worked down any further. Something about the brush of denim against my calves as he lifted me, as his two fingers thrust and scissored inside me where his tongue had already readied me, was undeniably hot. And then he reached into his jeans pocket and his hand emerged with a condom and a sachet of lube, and I realized *why*, and somehow that just made it all the hotter.

Both packets, he ripped open with his teeth, sharp sudden movements and rustle of foil in quick succession. By the time he was ready, sheathed and slicked and waiting, I was clenching in desperation, my breath coming short as my fingers fumbled and found him. I wanted his heat, his weight, his solidity over me; wanted the thick fullness of his cock inside me. “Oro,” I managed, “Oro—come on—fuck me, *please*,” and then he thrust home, and all words failed.

He was everything, everything I needed in that moment: the warmth of his body and the drag of his skin against mine, the nubs of his nipples trailing sparks of sensation over my chest as he rocked and shuddered. My hands were all over him, in his hair and in the dip of his spine, smoothing down through the sweat that had collected there,

palming back up over his sides. Somewhere in the middle, his mouth found mine, clung, and we licked at each other, sloppy and uncoordinated and glorious. He twisted against me, torques of his hips sending spirals of heat coiling through every inch of my body, fingers clutching at my hips tight enough to bruise. I *wanted* his bruises, like the bruise on my throat, indelible. I *wanted* to thrust up against him like this, slamming my hips into his, meeting him each time in a collision of flesh and bone and want. He nipped at my mouth, at my throat, his breath rasping toward completion. I lifted my hips, and—*there* was that spot inside me, his cockhead slamming against it as he moved; and *there* again, over and over until my eyes were sightless, whited-out with the riptide of orgasm. “Oro,” I gasped out; “Oro—fuck—*fuck*—” And then I was coming, spurting thick and copious between us, slick-sticky and clinging all over my stomach so he thrust through it, his body still rocking spasmodically into mine.

He lowered his mouth to my collarbone when I cried out, his fingers twitching, mouth finding flesh and *biting*, sending aftershocks tripping over my skin. I could feel him inside me, hard and hot where my muscles had clenched reflexively, and I knew he was close by the shivers that wracked him as he moved. “Oro,” I murmured, “Come on, baby. Come for me.”

He froze, then; stilled on the crest of a wave, and choked back sound after sound in his throat until I stroked his hair, and he let out a cry into my throat. Through the thin latex between us, I felt him shoot, and then his body fell suddenly still like the sea after a storm. I stroked his hair, his shoulders, his neck. “Sssh,” I soothed. “It’s okay. It’s okay.”

We lay there, for a moment or two, still and calm and tangled sweaty on the table. But, much as my muscles protested against any suggestion of movement, there is only so long that one can comfortably lie on an old kitchen table in a side-room tacked onto a barn. The ache in my back indicated that our time was up.

“Oro,” I murmured, at length, “Hey. Come on.” I touched his face; shoved at his shoulders a little. “Up, boy.”

He laughed softly, groaning deep in his throat. “Do I have to?”

“My back hurts,” I told him, pointedly. The atmosphere between us was soft and easy; familiar. Not sex-familiar, either. Friend-familiar. Maybe even....

I pushed aside that thought, and then pushed aside Oro. “Up.”

Oro sighed, laughed again, and withdrew, slipping off the table bonelessly. When he landed on his feet, I was genuinely surprised. “You’re amazing,” I told him, mouth broad in a smile.

Oro hitched up his jeans and fastened the button. The zipper he pulled up very deliberately, smiling down into my face. Then he leaned down, pushing my hair back from my forehead. “So are you,” he said softly, gently. It wasn’t a “we just fucked and you were good and that’s the end of it” kind of smile. His hand curled through mine, pulling me up, and I let myself smile back, studying his face. It was, at least, an “I’d like to do that again” smile. Maybe it was more. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

He found my boots for me; retrieved them while I squashed myself back into my jeans. Skinnies are

uncomfortable to put on at the best of times, but when you're sweaty and overheated, the discomfort is unimaginable. I didn't mention any of this to Oro, of course. He'd only tell me I should have been wearing proper jeans. And I couldn't have argued, because I knew he'd have been absolutely right. The trouble with Oro—one of the very tiny, but very persistent, sometimes-infuriating troubles I've found with Oro—is that he almost always is.

We made it home unscathed, that day after the calving. We sluiced out the barn, and put our shirts back on. I got the hell over the non-existent stain on the shoulder of my T-shirt, mostly because I forgot it was there until later in the day, at which point I had a closer look and decided there wasn't actually anything there to complain about. Oro checked over the cow, to make sure she was still fine; there hadn't been any bleeding, but it's good practice to check over her thoroughly an hour or so after the birth, make sure no obvious problems have presented themselves. When nothing had, it was time for me to go back to my fencing, as if that didn't feel like a memory from another universe. Oro kissed me in the doorway—in the doorway of the barn where he'd *fucked* me—and the sky looked a whole other shade of blue, like the earth had somehow shifted on its axis, and it took me a massive effort of will to remind myself that nothing had actually changed. We were still here, the ranch was still here and moving, and it needed us to function exactly like before. Sex is kind of hard, sometimes, to slot easily back into reality. But the reality, whatever my feelings, still existed. The show must go on.

It was a little easier to connect with reality once I'd thrown my leg back over Sasha and resettled myself on her

back. It burned so much at first, in fact, that I almost considered riding back out to my fence-gap side-saddle, before I decided it wasn't worth the strange looks. Besides, there was something good about feeling him in me like that, the stretch of him, the shape. It anchored me, as I tacked chicken wire to fence posts, while my mind floated dreamily half out of my body. It said, *Oro was in you, and that was real.*

SO, THAT was how it happened, with Oro. I don't know if I really need to spell out the fact that the first time certainly was *not* the only time. I guess, last semester in San Diego, I'd managed to set myself four hundred percent against the way I was raised, against ranches and cowboys and mountains that stretch up endlessly to the New Mexico sky. But things have changed more than a little since then. I remembered, in Magdalena, things I'd always known, about ranchers and Uncle Frank, and the taste of desert rain. Behind the main house the night after we first fucked, Oro caught me just as it was getting dark—stepped out of the shadows and pulled me against him and kissed me. I've never asked him if Uncle Frank knew he was gay. I guess if he had, he would never have held it against him. Knowing Uncle Frank, really, he might know without ever having been told. Anyway, I never really feared discovery.

Oro's twenty-five to my almost-twenty-one, all Latin fire and quiet cleverness behind dark eyes. He makes me miss red dirt before I've left it. He makes me want the blue skies, and the silence. He fucked me once in the dark, way up in

the foothills of the mountains; and later, again, in the back of his car, till the windows steamed and both of us were laughing at the cliché. We've ridden together, this summer; herded cattle and tacked up fencing and fixed the combine harvester when it chewed itself up. My freshman engineering class actually helped me there, first time anything learned in school ever really did. I didn't let Oro hear the end of that one for days. He's not an immodest man, but he likes to learn things by trial and taste and feel; he's skeptical of book-learning in a measured way that means he'll read these things before he dismisses them. On that occasion, he certainly didn't dismiss me, but he didn't look too happy, either. The twist of displeasure in his mouth is weirdly attractive; something cute about it, like a wounded puppy. I told him that, too, and he snorted and disagreed vehemently. I sucked him off behind the mechanical store till he came round to my point of view.

I'd been here maybe four weeks when I let the words slip. I could have understood it, maybe, if it had happened during sex—if I'd panted it into his ear when my mind was offline, body writhing under its own power, thrusting and jerking desperately for closeness. But in the event, it wasn't anything like that. Wasn't even afterward, in that quiet space when things are still hazy, your muscles lax and liquid with afterglow. No, I said it when he was grooming Reuben in the stable, stroking his mane and making stupid faces with his fingers twined through the dark strands. He's so ridiculous, the way he treats that horse. His eyes get this *glow*, all coppery under the dark. "God, I love you," I told him, my head on one side. He turned toward me, coppery glint undimmed.

“I love you, too,” he told me, brushing back my hair.

I think it took us both a whole day to realize what we’d actually said. In my case, it had been true for at least a fortnight already, but God, I hadn’t meant to *say* it. Guys don’t come out and *say* stuff like that to the rancher they’re fucking and obsessing over for the summer. These things are called “summer romances” for a reason.

I guess, between us, we’ve kind of forgotten the reason.

It’s been eight weeks, now, and I’m barely the same person. I flatter myself that Oro isn’t, either. He talks a hell of a lot more than he did when I met him, which is surely due to my bad influence. I hope he’ll manage to keep this up when I go back to California. I’ve informed him in no uncertain terms that I expect him to actually speak when I get him on the phone. My mother says I can rack up phone time like a girl, and I’m not about to deny it. I need to hear voices; I need to hear the people I love. And that means Oro has to tie me to the red rock state; wish me goodnight and good morning and remind me he loves me.

I have a suspicion he’ll turn out to be excellent at phone sex.

Packing up my car, I’m quiet, uncharacteristically so. I haven’t actually driven her since I got here, all those weeks and a lifetime ago. I think I get, now, why Uncle Frank’s so fond of his horses. Cars don’t *support* you the way a horse does when you ride him; there isn’t the same sense of respectful give and take. There’s only this massive hunk of metal and you careering it at stupid high speeds through the dirt, and every mile you go is a mile in the wrong direction.

I guess that last part is only true when you're driving away from home.

Oro kisses me long and hard in the quiet before I leave, after I've said my goodbyes to Frank and his household, and the guys on the ranch, and Sasha. Sasha's eyes were large and accusing, wanting me back, telling me I shouldn't be leaving.

Oh, Sasha, believe me, baby, I know. I'll be back for winter break, I promise.

When I had set off for San Diego to start my first semester, I'd thought I wanted rid of the Southwest forever. I wanted to immerse myself in the thrum of generic, the easy acceptance of Everytown, USA. Now, I'm driving with the dust of home on my feet, and I don't want to have to shake it off. My mom's out there, and Uncle Frank, and Oro. My grandfather always said we were Southwesterners at heart. I guess I've remembered why everyone thought he was such a wise old man.

Two more years, Alex. Two more years.

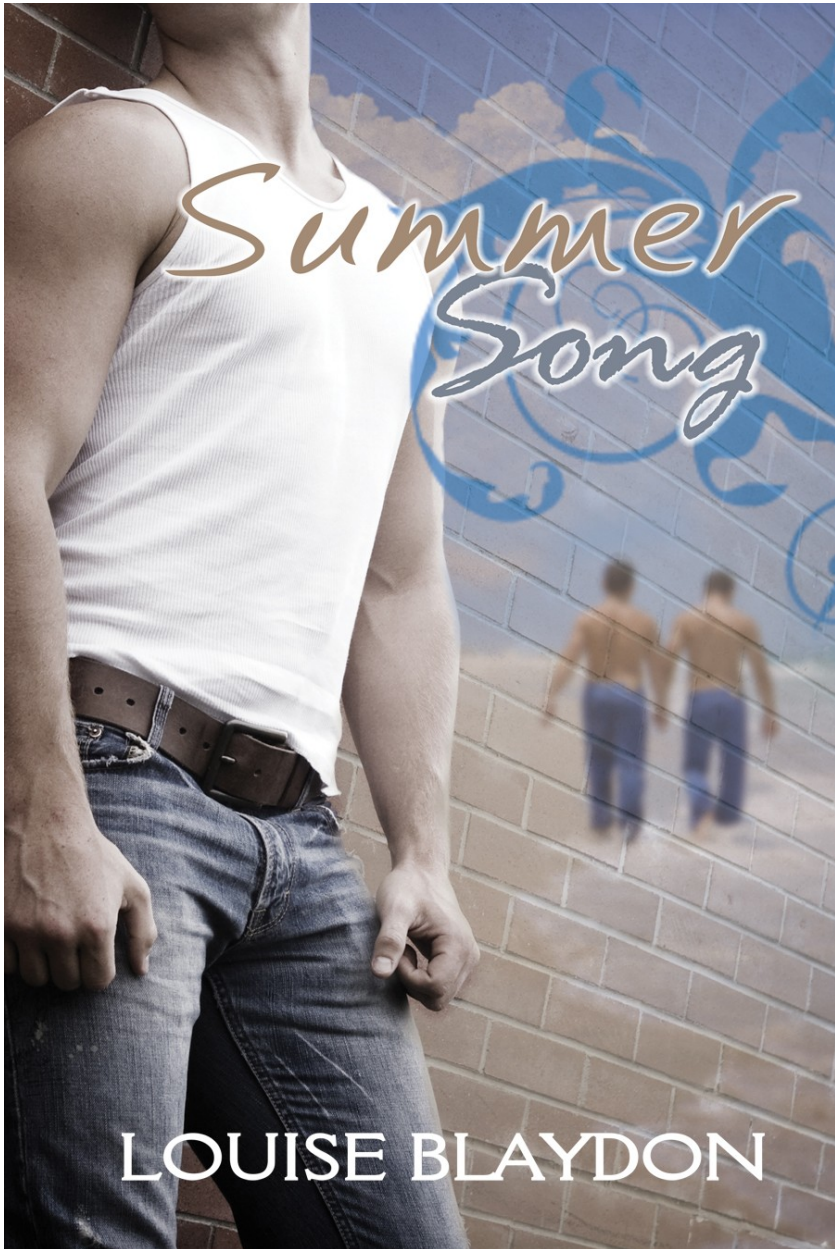
The road speeds under my tires, inexorable and red. Two more years, and I'll be driving home in the right direction.

An avid reader of everything from New Scientist to the back of the cereal box, LOUISE BLAYDON has been writing, encouraged by her father, ever since she could hold a pen. Her writing, like her reading, has wandered erratically from genre to genre, but has settled firmly on gay romance, to the mild bemusement of Dad. Louise also writes sporadically for various journalistic publications and has been known to print the occasional poem.

She owes much of her inspiration and support these days to an amazing network of friends, whose willingness to listen to her rail against life, the universe, and everything she could not live without. Louise's pursuits beyond writing are worryingly few, chief among them being Worrying About Not Having Pursuits Beyond Writing. However, this has long been the case, and after many abortive attempts to pad her leisure-time resume with everything from hiking to yoga, she has pretty much given up. She does enjoy singing, country walking, making deep-voiced sardonic remarks, and tasting the rain, but has a horror of organized activities.

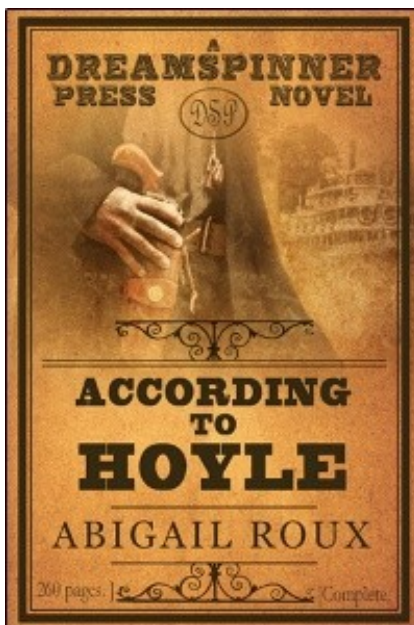
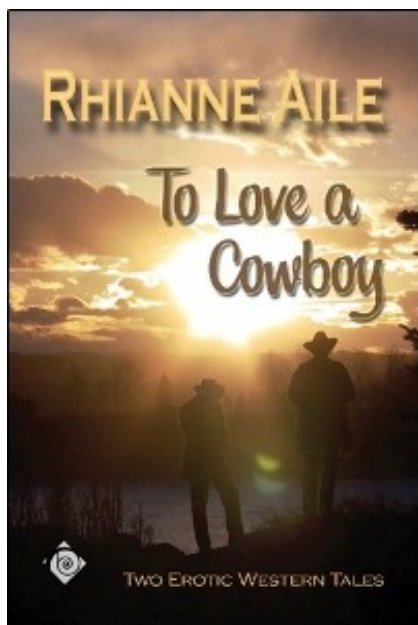
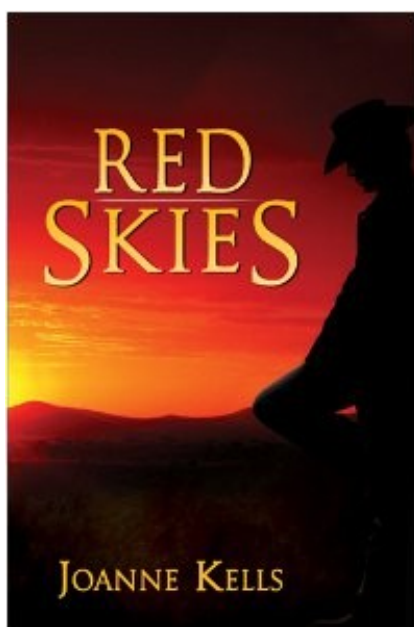
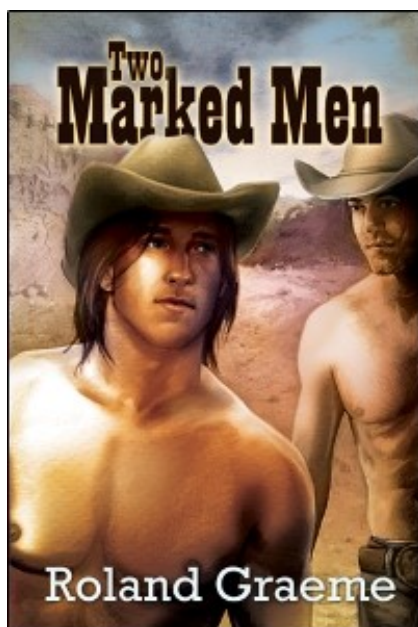
Louise has altogether too many academic qualifications and can only dream that her list of published works will one day be equally long.

Also by LOUISE BLAYDON

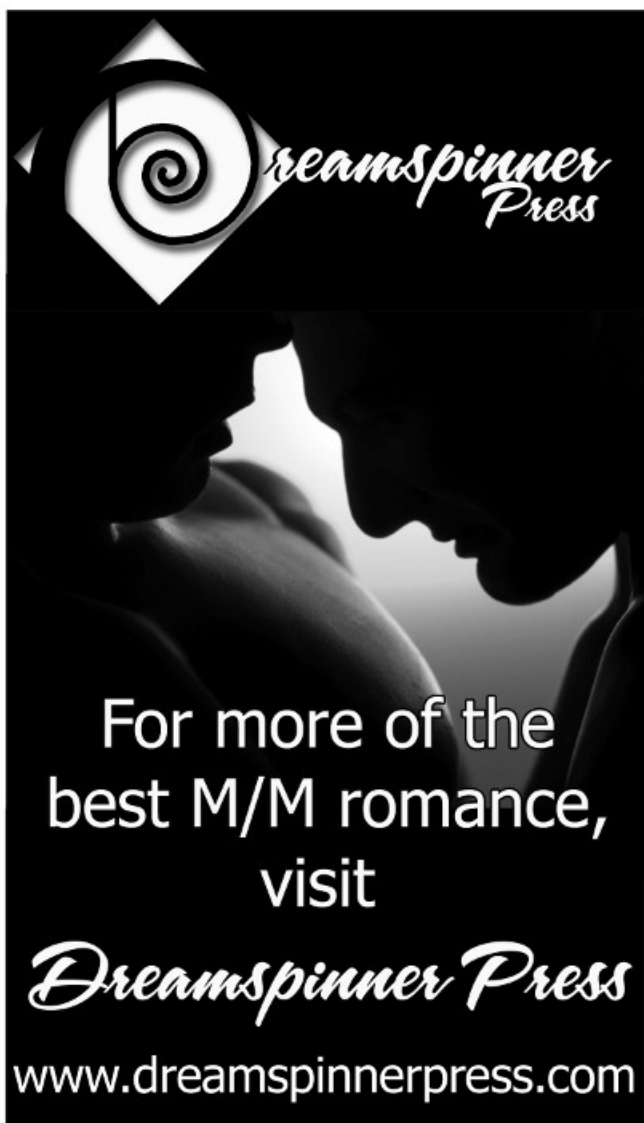


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