



*A Sonnet
for his*
VAQUERO

N.D. WYLDERS

A LOVE'S LANDSCAPE NOVELLA

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

A SONNET FOR HIS VAQUERO

By N.D. Wylders

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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A SONNET FOR HIS VAQUERO

By N.D. Wylders

Photo Description

A shirtless cowboy with a bale of hay on his shoulder. Medium build and looks like he's bit sweaty from his work.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

A cowboy poet in modern times:

This old wattle & daub house! Think what stories it is releasing as it dissolves and decays in its journey back to the earth it came from. The deepest memories might be the earliest, since they were embedded while the house was young and impressionable. Perhaps the most recent events were so strong as to permeate everything from the clay and straw plaster down to its hardwood core. In a few protected spots the blue whitewash still shows the hand-patterned trim, inspired by the love and pride of its residents. How many were there? How many lives and how many eras does it remember? The lines of public record name the owners and the amount of time each had to care for this house and the land around it. To know their stories is to read between the lines of the records and read the scripts of texture left in the whitewash, in the clay and straw and in the wooden bones of this two room haven:

Alex was raised by a sage, slightly sad, single woman, as she made a go of it on her prairie ranch. He easily learned his academics at school, as well as the music lessons his Mama insisted on. He was naturally articulate, and yet able to converse colloquially enough to fit in with his 4H and hockey buddies, or so he thought. Perhaps they didn't quite believe him.

His father led a solitary life on a quarter section of land on the distant side of the county. His small cabin (see photo) was perched on a hill, windows & doors facing south like any sensibly built, Ukrainian home. Alex's Great (and single) Uncle Oleksa, on his Mama's side, built that cabin the first summer he and his brothers homesteaded on this rolling prairie, back in 1910. However, he knew little of either Great Uncle or father, his mother being very circumspect on family gossip and his place in it. Alex had been to his father's cabin a few times and then only when he was quite young.

Alex went off to university and completed a couple of degrees in agriculture with a side in music (is that even possible!?). While there he realizes his homosexual nature but only scratches it, like an itch, when it distracts him from his studies.

Alex returns home in a funk after his masters is complete to contemplate his future, when both his Mama and father's health start to fail. His Mom rented her ranch out and moved to town a year or so ago, but his father spent his last mid-spring days on the land he loved. Alex inherits his father's homestead complete with farm dog and horses. When he moves in to his the tiny, well designed, and surprisingly orderly but ancient cabin he discovers a box of letters that show his inconvenient sexual orientation seems to have run in both sides of the family, for at least two generations. He also realizes that neither his father nor his Great Uncle Oleksa were solitary men for much of their lives.

As usual, Alex is playing his guitar, & singing lonesome, country, blues on the porch, in the setting summer sun when a man a several years his senior bicycles into the small farm yard. Alex remembers noticing him around town back when he was in high school. Now he's looking for a job that will put him back in the saddle, or at least on some farm implement. What brought that potential hired hand (pronounced "hard" hand of course), to Alex on this of all evenings! Was it fate? Was it the sunset, his music and current emotional vulnerability? Or did the entire community conspire to set up this life changing connection to keep them both in their lives.

I know this is a fairly long prompt, so I'm open to interpretations that change the above prequel. I enjoy HEA stories where relationship building and romance are primary. It doesn't matter when the sex kicks in, but I find that frequent and long descriptions of sex get boring. Of course we know most men fall in love with those they find attractive rather than vice versa so I'd like some sex in there. Also, I'm partial to mature men, but feel free to adjust the timelines if it works better. I'm curious how you would deal with the power differential between an older hired man and a younger man with relatively more money and power but less experience.

My inspirations for this prompt were several and include the attached photo of a disintegrating cabin, and the tune (not the lyrics) from Oceanman, by www.BlakeBerglund.com. The music is my perfect sunset song. Feel free to let yourself wax poetic as well as prosaic. Let your inner cowboy poet come out if you like. You might include Dada's &/or Uncle Oleksa's story in flashbacks or as ghosts if you like.

Sincerely,

Mateo

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: cowboys, bears, May-Dec, sweet romance, family drama

Content Warnings: graphic language

Word Count: 20,554

A SONNET FOR HIS VAQUERO

By N.D. Wylders

Prologue

“What are you doing here? I asked you to stay away from Alejandro!” Elizaveta Melnyk’s voice rose, echoing across the lawn, and drew the attention of the other graduates’ family members who’d also come to watch Oklahoma State’s Class of 2012 graduate. Alejandro Delgado winced at the volume, as several heads turned toward them. For a woman who prided herself on decorum, his mother could raise a ruckus with the best of them. Clad in his graduation gown and cardboard hat with tassel, the last thing he wanted or needed was a confrontation between his parents. This was supposed to be a happy day. He’d only graduate from college once.

“He’s my son, too, Eliza.” Standing less than ten feet from her, Kemen Delgado, his no good father, crossed his arms over his chest and locked wills with her. “Did you honestly expect me to ignore his graduation?”

Alejandro couldn’t help but stare. It’d been years since he’d actually *seen* his father. While the elder Delgado’s shoulders were still straight and his body physically fit, his father’s hair was no longer dark under the all-too-familiar black Stetson. Now silver, it gave his father a distinguished look. But what the hell was he doing here? His mother had moved them halfway across the county just to get away from his father.

“Of course I did. You didn’t show up for his high school—” Eliza’s dark eyes were hostile as she clenched her small clutch in one hand. Wearing her best navy blue dress and her mother’s pearls, his mother appeared to be the perfect Ukrainian lady. Only those close to her recognized the potential danger in those chocolate eyes.

“He was homeschooled and you didn’t bother to inform me when he completed his studies. It wasn’t until your foreman called me and told me about his going off to school that I realized he’d finished a full year early.” Kemen seemed to be speaking through gritted teeth.

“If you hadn’t forced me to take Alejandro and move so far away, you’d have known.” Eliza propped her hands on her hips. “And who invited you today? I’m surprised you don’t have your lover with you? Or did—”

“Mom! Enough!” Alejandro stepped between his parents. “This isn’t the time or the place for you to rehash your problems with Dad. Why don’t you find Jase and head back to the car?”

As if the mention of his name had summoned him, his mother's foreman appeared at her side. The grizzled old man had been on the Bar M as long as Alejandro could remember. "Come on, Miss Elizaveta. The missus and I aren't as young as we used to be. Sitting out in this hot sun has sure done us in." He pushed back his white felt hat and nodded toward Kemen. "Give the boy a chance to talk to his pa."

Eliza stiffened. "But—"

"Stop worrying, Mom. I'm a grown man now. I think I can handle talking to my dad." He handed her his leather diploma cover. "Why don't you hang on to this for safekeeping? I'll be there in a few minutes. I'd planned on taking you to Di'Vinci's for dinner. I hear they have pasta to die for."

Eliza's face softened. Her weakness for Italian food was nearly as great as her growing resentment of his father. She narrowed her eyes at his father. "Fine, I'll go. But remember your promise, Kemen."

"I will." Kemen shoved his hands into the pockets of his slacks.

"See that you do." Eliza turned to her son. "Five minutes, Alejandro. I'm hungry."

He nodded as Jase led his mother away. Waiting until she disappeared into the crowd of bodies, he was determined to make this meeting as short as possible.

"Why are you here, Dad?"

Amber eyes, so similar to his own, searched his face. "Can't a man want to see his only son...?"

"If you wanted to see me, you knew where I was. It was your own choice to stay away."

Kemen actually looked uncomfortable. "In a way. Your mom and I—"

Alejandro made a slashing motion with his hand. "I know. You and Mom came to an agreement that it would be better if you weren't a part of my daily life. A decision you both made without consulting me."

"You were only ten at the time, son. Not old enough to understand..."

Alejandro crossed his arms over his chest. "What? To understand my father was picking his lover over me?" Anger that had been buried deep tried to spill out, but he forced it back down. He wasn't going to let this happen. He was twenty-three, not thirteen. Hell, he'd even completed a double major. So why

did his dad's presence bother him so much? He'd long ago accepted the fact his dad had other priorities. Nothing good would come from this. "Forget it. It doesn't matter. All water under the bridge, as they say."

Kemen sighed. "It is, but it still doesn't change the fact I'm proud of you. A double degree in agriculture and music? Quite an accomplishment. I remember the times I used to listen to you play. It was always my favorite memory—of you sitting on the porch with my old battered guitar and singing to Bojangles." A wistful smile crossed his face. "I still have him. He's getting old, but aren't we all?"

Alejandro shifted uncomfortably at the memory. He also remembered those clear summer nights where the stars had shone so bright it was like a painter had thrown white paint into the black sky. The smell of hay on the breeze competed with the feel of the strings under his fingertips. He hadn't been very good, but it hadn't stopped his dad from sitting on the front porch swing and humming along. It was probably one of the things he'd missed the most when he returned home in the fall. Those quiet times just before bed, where there were no chores left to do, and his belly was full of the spicy Mexican food his dad always made for him. It had been just his dad, their hound dog, and him under the stars without a care in the world.

But times had changed. His dad had changed. "Look, I still don't know what you want from me."

A sad smile twisted Kemen's features. "A visit. Nothing more. Jase tells me you planned to take a few weeks off before you start to work at the Bar M. Spend them on the *Rancho de la Luna*. Let me get to know the man you've become."

Anger at his old man's audacity warred with the little boy he used to be. Part of him wanted to tell Kemen to go straight to hell, while the other part urged him to spend time with the man who'd sired him. Perhaps he could find out why he'd shoved Alejandro out of his life all those years ago.

"I should tell you to take a long walk off a short pier." Alejandro watched as his dad's shoulders slumped and felt horrible. No matter what the man had or hadn't done, he was still his father. "I'll think about it, okay? I have packing and stuff to get done on campus, so I wouldn't be able to come out right away, even if I wanted to."

"But you'll think about it?" Kemen rubbed the back of his neck, before sweeping his hat off his head. His expression was earnest. "All I want is a chance, Alejandro. To be the dad I should've been."

Alejandro sighed. His dad had swallowed a lot of pride to come here, knowing he wasn't going to be welcomed with open arms. Part of him respected that. Or perhaps his mother was right when she'd claimed he was too soft-hearted for his own good. "You'll get your chance, Dad. Just don't fuck it up this time."

Then Alejandro found himself swept up in a huge bear hug. Even though he held himself stiffly, his dad was smiling when he released him. "I won't. I promise."

"See to it you don't." Alejandro stepped back. "Mom's waiting on me. I'll see you the beginning of next week."

"I'll have your old room all aired out and ready." Kemen's smile was radiant as Alejandro walked away. Unfortunately, it was the last time Alejandro would see his father alive.

Chapter One

Eighteen Months Later

Alejandro stared in dismay at the fading paint and dilapidated state of the farmhouse in front of him. Even in the fading light of the day, the home looked horrible. Had his dad not done *any* maintenance to the place? But as fast as that thought crossed his mind, he felt horrible. *Of course not, you idiot. It's hard enough to do chores when you're sick from chemo, let alone repair your home.* He shoved his hands into his pockets, before moving around to the tailgate of his truck. The pang of his father's sudden death less than a month after his graduation had barely registered as he dealt with caring for his now invalid mother. A freak car accident on the I-70 had left his mother paralyzed from the chest down and her only son struggling under the weight of the family farm and his mother's physical needs.

So other than paying for a modest flower arrangement and taking the afternoon off to attend the small funeral, he had been left to grieve in silence as he struggled to not only keep his family home, but to find a way to pay for his mother's around-the-clock care. Eventually though it hadn't mattered. His mother had to sell the Bar M to pay the mounting medical bills. *Which is why I'm not going to lose the Rancho de la Luna.* It had damn near killed him to move into town, but his mother had needed to be closer to her doctors. Not that it mattered in the end. A staph infection took her from him a few months ago. Now however, with both parents gone, he needed to get back to his roots. To feel the sunshine on his face, the wind through his hair, and the rhythm of honest to God chores as he worked his body to exhaustion.

Grabbing the two duffle bags that held all of his worldly possessions in one hand and his battered old guitar case in the other, he hauled the items up the rickety steps and to the front door. Setting down the guitar, he was just getting ready to open the screen door when a woman appeared in the opening. With her graying hair pulled back in a braid, and wearing a Metallica T-shirt and a pair of tight faded blue jeans her sudden appearance caused Alejandro to jump in surprise.

"About time you got here," she snapped. "Damned lawyer said you were going to be here this morning. I don't appreciate waiting nearly all day in a hot house while you take your sweet ass time showing up."

“Suzette. You startled me.” He tried to calm his racing heart. He’d briefly met his father’s lover at the reading of his father’s will a little over a year ago. The hostility in her gaze hadn’t lessened during that time. Like it was his fault his dad had left him the *Rancho de la Luna* instead of her. Or the fact that traffic on the interstate had been murder. “Look, I got here as soon as I could. Traffic was a bitch.”

“It took you over a year to get here?”

He flushed. “My mother was ill and just passed away six weeks ago.”

Suzette harrumphed and he suddenly felt like an insect under a magnifying glass as her cool blue eyes studied him. “If I hadn’t promised Kemen to be nice to you, I’d be ripping a strip off your hide a mile wide, boy.”

He blinked at the open hostility in her tone. What the hell had he ever done to her to warrant such a reaction. “Excuse me?”

“You should’ve made the time to come see your old man. Do you realize how hard it was for him to go sniveling to your graduation like a dog with his tail tucked between his knees? Especially when he knew he was dying?”

He stiffened, finally fed up with the heat and the bitchy woman in front of him. Lover or not, he wasn’t going to let her accuse him of lord knew what just because she was pissed she had to wait for him. “I know my relationship with Dad was distant, but don’t for a second accuse me of not caring about what happened to him. If I’d known he had cancer, I’d have been here. But he never even breathed a word about his illness to me when I called to tell him about Mom’s accident. He just told me he understood and insisted I take care of Mom.”

She grumbled then her face softened. “Sounds just like the stubborn bastard. Family first always, no matter the cost.”

He wanted to protest. His dad had never chosen *his* family first. EVER. He’d chosen the woman in front of him over his only son. But it wouldn’t do any good to shatter the poor woman’s illusions of his father. “So they say.”

She shifted and pushed open the screen door. The click of nails on wood behind her distracted him. His frustration vanished as a blur of white, black and tan almost knocked Suzette over in an effort to get to him. With a speed belying his age, the hound dog rushed him. “Bojangles?”

The old basset hound slid to a stop, his long floppy ears swaying as he cocked his head. Sad liquid brown eyes seemed to ask “Do I know you?” as

Alejandro squatted down in front of him. Holding his fingers out, he spoke softly, "It's me, boy." He had to swallow hard against the tears in his throat when Bojangles nudged his fingers with his head in an obvious plea to be petted. His tail thumped against the porch as Alejandro scratched him behind one ear.

"Damn, you must have the magic touch. That damned dog hates everyone." Suzette leaned against the door frame.

Alejandro looked up. Despite her grumbling he could hear the affection in her voice. He patted the dog's head once more, before straightening. "This sweetie? I can't believe he's been giving you guff."

She sighed. "That sweetie? He misses your Dad and isn't shy about showing it." She fished her keys out of her pocket, before removing one. "But judging by his reception, you won't have any issues." She handed him the key. "Here's the key. I've made sure the fridge is stocked with the basics and your utilities are on. The air's on the fritz so it's hotter than hell inside." A soft smile crossed her face. "It'll be nice to have a Delgado on the *Rancho de la Luna* again. The ranch wouldn't be the same if someone else took over."

Confused at her abrupt three-sixty, he took the key. "Thanks, I guess. Is there anything else I need to know?"

She shrugged. "Other than the fact that I hired you a cowhand? No." Then she was stomping down the steps.

He gaped after her. "Wait! You did what?" He didn't have the money to pay for a hired hand. At least not until his birthday next month. Then the trust fund his father had set up for him would finally be his.

She disappeared round the corner of the house. Following after her, with the dog at his heels, he caught up with her just as she swung herself up into a dusty silver Jeep that had been hidden from sight. "Got you some help. You have nearly a hundred head of cattle that are ready to be taken to market, plus a chicken coop and two horses. Do you honestly think you can handle all that by yourself? Especially with the way things are falling down around your ears?"

"But..." He frantically searched for something to say.

"Look, boy. I'm getting up in age and so are my ranch hands. We've barely managed to keep the place running until you arrived. Lucky for you, last year Kemen had already hired a couple of hands from Idabel to bring the calves to market. But they took nearly half the profit. You can't afford to do that again

and keep the *Rancho* from going under. The new hand I hired for you understands the situation and isn't expecting pay until after you take the cows to market."

He squeezed the bridge of his nose. "So let me get this right? You hired a hand for me that is not only aware of my financial situation but is still willing to work for peanuts?"

She shrugged. "Yes. And he's also expecting room and board." She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. "Look, I'm not going to sugarcoat this, Alejandro. Even with Benji's help you may still sink."

"Benji?"

She nodded. "Yeah Benji Coleman. I've known him for years. Honest worker for honest pay. Used to live around these parts until he had a falling out with his dad. He should be here by tomorrow night. He had a few things to wrap up before heading north." She twisted the key in the ignition. "He's a good hand—and," she eyed him thoughtfully, "I don't think you can afford to be picky at this point."

He stared after her as she pulled out in a cloud of red dust. He was at a loss for words. Not only had he inherited his father's falling apart ranch, he now had a hired hand he'd never met, and a dog. "Well, hell." He glanced skyward. "You left me a fine mess, Dad."

Benjamin Coleman IV, or Benji, as he preferred his friends to call him, downshifted and throttled back his motorcycle as he approached the turn-off to the Delgado ranch. Under him the Harley rumbled its protest as he turned off the paved highway and onto gravel. The trip from El Paso had been a long and dusty ride but had flown by faster than he'd expected. Navigating up the lane, he took in the barbed wire fences and scattering of cows. He frowned as he passed a sagging section of fencing, but had to remind himself that the new owner had been absent for nearly a year according to the Widow Ranson. So he mentally jotted it down on his to do list. Hopefully Delgado's son knew his ass from a hole in the ground, or it was going to be a long couple of months as they brought the herd to market.

The sun was just setting when he caught sight of the house. Perched at the top of a small incline and facing south, the fading streaks of sunlight threw a good portion of the home into the shadows—including the porch. Pulling up next to a battered old pickup truck, he lowered the kickstand and turned the

key. The purr of the motor died, leaving the yard almost silent. He swung off the bike, stretching out the kinks the twelve-hour drive had caused. That's when he heard it. The faint sound of a guitar and the most earth-shattering baritone he'd ever heard. Low and sultry, it made him think of smoky bars and a primitive lust, followed by desperate kisses and groping hands.

Drawn to the sound, he lowered the bandana he'd worn over his mouth and slapped his hat against his leather covered thigh before settling it back on his head. As he moved toward temptation, he hoped it wasn't coming from his new boss, but knew his luck wasn't that good. Suzette had told him that the young man had no one and could use the guidance of an experienced man. He'd jumped at the idea. Anything was better than staying with his folks. As the song rose in its intensity, his parents, even the idea of the singer being off limits, faded from his mind. Like rats to the Pied Piper, he was drawn irrevocably closer. Every note wrapped around him. Every softly sung word lured him until he found himself at the foot of the stairs leading to the porch.

The music died and the voice faded when he moved to climb the steps. He wanted to beg the man to not stop. To finish the song, but he froze—one foot on the first step and his hand wrapped around the weathered rail. He could barely force himself to speak. "Please, continue."

The stir of the shadows as a dog got to his feet barely registered as the thud of a chair's legs being lowered back to the floor drew his attention. "Heel, Bojangles." The softly spoken command had no less impact on Benji, than the song. Then the man stepped into the fading light holding a battered old guitar crosswise across his body. Shirtless and barefoot, wearing nothing more than a faded pair of Levi's, he was beyond tempting with his blond hair burnished a dark gold.

At least that's what Benji thought as the man lifted the guitar over his head, before leaning it up against the railing. "You must be Benji Coleman. Suzette said you'd be here sometime this evening. So I saved some stew and homemade cornbread for you, in case you were hungry."

He nodded, surprise at the man's generosity warring with stirring lust inside him as the taut muscles which had been hidden by the instrument came into view. He broke out in a sweat that had nothing to do with the summer heat and everything to do with unwanted desire. His body hungered for more than the offered food.

Then the man stuck his hand out. "I'm Alejandro Delgado. I've been told I'm your new boss."

He licked his lower lip and pushed down his disappointment before taking the offered hand. Even if the other man was interested in a summer fling, as his boss, Mr. Sexy Crooner was definitely off the menu. “Yeah, I reckon so.”

Chapter Two

“Damn,” Alejandro muttered softly as he watched his new hand walk back toward the dust-covered motorcycle parked next to his truck. Black leather chaps accented thick thighs, while his fit torso stretched the light blue wife-beater which showed off the man’s well-defined arms. The hint of body hair at Benji’s neckline had been nothing more than a tease. Even the salt-n-pepper hair half hidden under the cowboy hat did little to deter Alejandro’s attraction. He’d always loved bears. Those sexy older men who were delightfully furred always drove his libido crazy. In fact, his first lover at school had been the divorced father of a fellow student.

Next to him, Bojangles bumped his head against his fingers, begging for attention. “That man is more tempting than my mama’s homemade apple pie.” He scratched the dog’s head. “Think he’ll let me have a bite, boy?”

Bojangles whined softly.

He sighed. “Yeah, I know. A hopeless fantasy. There’s no way that hunk of man is even remotely interested in guys.” He raked his hand through his hair as Benji bent over the saddlebags on the side of the bike causing the leather to frame his ass. “But man... what a waste.”

Turning away from the temptation, Alejandro picked up his guitar and opened the screen door. “Come on, boy. Let’s see about getting our new hand some food.”

Instead of following him inside the house, the dog plopped down on the porch, his sad eyes drifting shut. He shook his head. The dog was no fool. Stepping inside, he swore softly as the intense heat washed over him.

“First thing tomorrow, I’m calling the A.C. guy. I don’t care if I have to hock my truck. I’m not spending another miserable night trying to sleep in here.” Moving over to the crockpot, the only way he was cooking in this freaking heat wave, he lifted the lid off the stew. Taking the wooden spoon, he stirred it, savoring the smells of beef, baby carrots, new potatoes and barley. It didn’t take him long to ladle up a good sized bowl for his new hand. He was just cutting a few pieces of homemade bread, when Benji joined him.

“Son of a bitch. It’s hotter than hell in here.” Benji paused just inside the door, before inhaling deeply. “But damned if that stew doesn’t smell great. Did you make it?”

“Yeah.” Alejandro popped a small piece of bread into his mouth to distract himself from the tantalizing scent of Stetson and male musk emanating from Benji.

“Homemade?” Benji leaned in closer, lifting the cover off the crockpot.

“Yeah...” He trailed off when Benji groaned softly and licked his lips.

“Can’t wait to taste it.” Then he wiped his finger around the rim, gathering up the gravy.

Alejandro nearly swallowed his tongue when he popped his finger into his mouth and sucked it clean. His cock thickened in a rush that was only compounded by the pleasurable sigh and the hunger in Benji’s gaze. The thought of his hand being that... passionate about food had him wondering what he’d be like when it came to sex. *Whoa, hold up partner. Get your frickin’ mind out of the gutter.*

“Tastes better than any canned shit I’ve eaten.” Benji straightened and put the lid back on the crockpot. “But, then again, it’s better than starving.”

“True.” Alejandro fumbled with the lid on the butter. It took him several tries before he managed to get it off. Trying to ignore the presence of the man next to him, he slathered butter on the thick slices of bread before setting them on the lip of the bowl. “There you go. You can eat out on the porch if you want.”

“I think I will. Don’t feel like melting in here.” Benji whistled as he picked up the stew and bread. “And fresh bread and butter. How lucky can a guy get? If it’s as good as the stew, I’ll be back for seconds. I’m a growing boy after all.”

Alejandro chuckled, but refrained from disputing Benji’s claim. Instead he kept himself busy by covering the bread back up and putting the butter back in the fridge. “Not to worry, there’s plenty. Spoons are in the second drawer to the left. Help yourself.”

“I will.” The scrape of the drawer was followed shortly by the slap of the screen door as his new hand carried his food out to the porch.

“Shit.” He braced his arms against the counter as he waited for his dick to soften a bit. Because despite the heat of the house, his frickin’ libido was stuck on high. The last thing he needed was to run off the only hand he had because of his unruly dick.

“Boss, those were some damned fine vittles.” Sitting with his booted feet propped against the railing, while sopping up the last of the gravy with a hunk of bread from the bowl resting on his stomach, Benji sighed contentedly. The boy could cook. For once he’d lucked out when he’d agreed for room and board to be part of his salary. Unlike the last time on the Triple J—where the foreman’s idea of food had been cold cereal for breakfast, jerky for lunch, and canned soup, cold cereal or frozen pizza for dinner.

Alejandro shrugged as he stared off into the night. From the darkened shadows of the porch, the bright moon shed just enough light for Benji to see what he was eating. Above them, the stars glittered against the dark backdrop and for the first time in a long while Benji felt... comfortable, for a lack of a better word.

“It’s just stew—nothing out of the ordinary.” His boss seemed determined to slough his cooking skills off. “Mom insisted I know how to take care of myself when I went off to college.”

Benji studied Alejandro’s relaxed pose against the railing of the porch. The faint glow of the moon threw one side of his face in the shadows, while highlighting the other side. For a younger guy, he was attractive—but still off-limits. So instead, Benji turned his attention back to the conversation at hand. “A college man, huh?”

“Yeah.” He wrapped his arm around the support beam. “Are you going to give me crap about it?”

“Should I?” He kept his tone even.

Alejandro shrugged. “When I came home some of the older hands scoffed at my suggestions. Called them nothing but new fan-dangled ideas.” He brushed his hair back from his face. “As if getting a degree in agriculture makes me lower than cow dung.”

Benji set aside his bowl. He recognized the defensive tone, the stiff set of those wide shoulders, and even understood the reasoning behind it. A lot of the older hands were resistant to change, but instead of taking offense, he wanted to put his new boss at ease. “Cow dung, huh? Or is that your way of saying I’m old?” He rubbed his hand over his closely clipped goatee. “I mean, I know I’ve got these gray hairs going on, but I swear I’m thirty-eight years young.”

A low chuckle rolled free of the younger man. “Thirty-eight years young? That’s a new one.” He gave Benji a thorough going-over with his gaze.

Resisting the urge to fidget was hard, but he managed. With his feet propped on the railing, he leaned the chair further back. “Yep. Don’t let the rugged visage and wear and tear fool you. I can hold my own. And unlike some, I don’t have an issue with book learning. If I could’ve convinced my old man to pay for a degree in agriculture instead of law, perhaps I’d have turned out different. Maybe had a ranch like this to call my own.”

Alejandro relaxed against the post. “So no guff?”

Benji shook his head. “Nope. I don’t give guff. You’re the boss.” He let the chair fall back on all four legs. “But if you fuck up, and you probably will—I’ll give it to you straight. Not to be mean, but to help.”

Alejandro nodded. “I’d expect no less.”

“Good, because Suzette said you needed an experienced cowhand. And most cowhands with my experience won’t work under your terms.”

“Then why did you agree to them?”

Benji sighed. “Personal reasons. My ma is sick. She lives in Idabel and I promised my sister I would come and see her. But Pa and I? We don’t get along none too well.”

“So you hooked up with me.” A wealth of understanding filled Alejandro’s voice. “Family can be a bitch at times.”

Benji nodded. “But don’t think for a second I won’t pull my weight around here. Other than a few evenings off to visit, and perhaps an occasional Sunday morning, I’ll be stuck to this place like a bur.”

“Do what you have to do. I know how it is to have a sick mother. As long as you can teach me the ins and outs of bringing in a herd like this, we’ll call it even.”

Refusing to think about what he would like to teach Alejandro, he nodded. “Yeah, I’ll show you what I know. Twenty years of experience has to be good for something.” He stood. “But first things first. Before we can even think about moving the herd, we need to inspect every inch of fencing you have on the place. I noticed several breaks just along the lane leading up here that are prime areas for Houdini cows.”

A grin tugged at the corner of Alejandro’s mouth. “Houdini cows?”

He grabbed his bowl. “Yep. Them rascals only need six inches of open wire and they are gone. You’ll be lucky if you haven’t lost a few head already.”

Alejandro shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “Then I guess we should turn in if we want any chance of riding the fences before the damned heat sends us looking for some place cool.”

Benji didn't comment on the “we” but followed his new boss into the still warm house. The setting of the sun did little to cool off the home, despite the open windows. “And it won't be in here. It's still hotter than hell in this place.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. Suzette told me when I arrived yesterday that the air was on the fritz, but I thought she meant it was only working half-assed. Until I turned it on this afternoon. By then it was too late to call the A.C. repair guy. Bitch is blowing nothing but hot air.” Alejandro sank into the chair at the table to toe off his boots. “I'll get ahold of him tomorrow. See if he'll take payments.”

After setting his bowl in the sink, Benji reached for the buckle on his riding leathers, determined to get out of the hot material. He knew exactly where the boy was coming from. Money on ranches was usually tight before roundup, but they had to have a cool house to come home to at the end of the day. “Before you do that, boss, let me take a look at it in the morning.”

“You think you can fix it?”

He shrugged as he unzipped the leathers that protected him during his ride out, down his thighs. “Maybe. It might just be out of coolant.”

“That'd be appreciated. I may know how to fix a tractor, or combine, but I know jack about cooling systems.”

“No problem.” Bracing himself on the counter, he leaned down to strip the leathers over his boots. “Consider it my first chore.” He glanced up and damned near swallowed his tongue. Now standing in the middle of the kitchen, Alejandro wiped the sweat slickened muscles of his chest with a hand towel. The flex of said muscles as he dried his face with the towel had Benji wanting to touch. It was then that he knew sleep would be a long time in coming. It would take an act of God to drive out the memory of his boss standing half-naked while he rubbed the sweat off his face.

Chapter Three

The creak of the barn door opening drew Alejandro's attention away from the stall he'd been mucking out. Nearing noon, he'd been up for hours. First feeding the livestock, and now cleaning the pens where his dad's horses were kept. Stardust, a gelding his father had used in the past to cull the herd, lifted his head and snorted, before returning to the ration of oats and alfalfa Alejandro offered to get him out of the stall. Heaving one last fork full of straw and manure into the wheelbarrow, he straightened. *Halfway done*. All that was left was to spread out the fresh bedding. The rap of knuckles against the wooden stall door made him look up from the bale he was cutting the twine on.

"Hey, Benji."

In a battered black hat, a thin white T-shirt and faded blue jeans that cupped a bulge Alejandro wanted to explore, Benji was as tempting as a cool glass of sweet tea on a hot summer day.

It just isn't fair. Here I am soaked through and he's barely broke a sweat. Resting one arm on the top of the pitchfork, Alejandro wiped his forehead with a folded handkerchief from his back pocket. It felt like it was already over ninety inside the barn. "So what's the verdict? Are we gonna have a cool house tonight?"

"Unfortunately, no." Benji pushed back his hat, exposing several damp silver curls. With the streak of grease across his right cheekbone, he almost looked adorable.

"Well hell. Guess I'm gonna be calling that A.C. guy." He'd really hoped that it would be something simple to fix. But instead it looked like they'd be coming back to a steaming hot house after checking the fences.

"No need to do that." Benji picked up the curry brush off the shelf and moved closer to Stardust. "I just needed to order the part. Guy at the hardware store told me it should be in next week."

Alejandro nearly sagged with relief. "Thank God. I thought I was going to have to sell off my truck to fix it."

Benji chuckled, then swept the brush over Stardust's hindquarters. "Now don't go doing that. How are we gonna eat? The bike won't hold much in the way of supplies. At least not enough to satisfy a man with my appetites."

Alejandro swallowed hard, turned back to the straw bale, and tried to not wonder if the man's appetites in bed were as voracious as those for food. But he kept his reply light. "Well, if last night was any indication, I may end up slaughtering a cow and putting it up. That might last us 'til the end of the summer. I don't think I've ever seen anyone put away as much as you did last night."

"Might be a good idea." Benji just smiled. "Save you a fortune on meat alone."

Breaking open the bale, Alejandro nodded. "I'm all for saving money." He forked some straw on to the floor. "Probably the same reason you rode your bike instead of driving."

Benji worked his way over to Stardust's other side. Then glanced up at him, a twinkle in his blue eyes. "Yep. Besides I love the wind in my hair. Which is why I love to ride."

Tightening his fingers around the handle, Alejandro forced himself to breath, to not throw himself at Benji's feet and beg to be the next thing the man rode. What the hell was wrong with him? Even during his first carefree days at college he hadn't been this damned horny. It was as if Benji was his catnip. All Alejandro wanted to do was rub all over the other man. Instead of acting on the compulsion, he continued to spread the straw. He was suddenly glad that the closed stall door stood between his aching cock and his new hand's sharp gaze. "Still I can't believe you rode all the way from San Antonio? That had to be a long haul."

"Not as long as a sixteen-hour day on the back of a horse during roundup." Benji shrugged, and gave Stardust one last pat. "Which reminds me, times a-wasting. If you point me in the right direction, I'll get the horses ready, while you finish taking care of..."

"Stardust." Alejandro supplied.

"Stardust." He ran his palm over the horse's dappled nose, before offering the gelding a carrot he must've snatched from the kitchen. Neighing softly, Stardust snuffled it out of his hand. "And while he's a beaut, I'd think this boy would be happier with you on his back than my heavy ass."

Straightening, he gave Benji a thorough going over. The man was delusional. If there was an ounce of fat on his frame, Alejandro would eat his hat. "Whatever." He nodded to the back of the barn. "You'll find the tack hanging on the far wall. Geronimo, the tan quarter horse, is in the second to last

stall. He should be a good ride for you. But be careful. He may seem docile at first, but he likes to bite.”

“Will do.” Then he was gone and Alejandro gave a sigh of relief. Maybe a dowsing in the horse trough was in order. Anything to keep from jumping his new hand.

“Damn it. Get your fucking head in the game, you idiot. You are not going to touch that boy.” Muttering to himself as he pulled the saddle off its rack, Benji tried to ignore his aching cock. The look on his boss’s face when he mentioned loving to ride had prompted a vision of Alejandro, writhing on top of him as he gave his boss a slow, long ride. One that had nothing to do with horses or motorcycles, but everything to do with satiating the fire raging inside of him.

The nicker from a nearby stall jerked him free of the amorous thoughts. He lugged the saddle toward the stall. Perhaps it would be best if he kept his distance from Alejandro. But how the hell was he going to do that?

Cautiously opening the door, he approached the sixteen-hand quarter horse. As Geronimo stomped his feet, he tried to focus on gentling the horse, but found himself thinking about his boss. Everything about Alejandro, from his music, to his infectious laugh, to his incredible cooking and trim physique, reminded Benji of how long it had been since he’d had a lover. While never a promiscuous man, Benji had his share of lovers. But over the years, he’d become more selective. It took more than an itch needing to be scratched for him to park his boots under a man’s bed. He honestly had to like the guy.

“Shit.” He cursed, and barely managed to avoid being nipped as the quarter horse lunged at him—teeth first. If he wasn’t careful, the damned horse was going to take a chunk out of his hide. “Whoa, there, sweetheart. I’m not gonna hurt you.” He pivoted, never taking his eyes off the horse, and tugged the saddle blanket free. The horse eyed him and stamped its foot again. “Aw come on, baby. Don’t be like that. We both know you want to go for a nice, long ride.”

Continuing to croon in a soft voice, he barely managed to get the blanket and saddle over its broad back and was cinching up the buckle when Alejandro appeared in the opening of the stall.

“Better press up with your knee and drive the air out of his lungs. I think he finds it quite humorous to have both his rider and saddle hanging upside-down under him.”

Benji drew back and looked at the horse. "Now you wouldn't do that to unsuspecting me would you, boy?"

The horse actually flattened its ears and tried to nip at him again. Benji glared at the horse. "You sure this horse is the right one for me to be riding, boss man? He's a bit more than skittish, if you know what I mean."

Alejandro draped his arms over the top of the stall gate. "Don't take it personal-like. He has a thing about his stall. Doesn't like others in it with him. Well other than that three-legged calico cat that's been around forever." He handed Benji the bridle. "But once you get him saddled up and out of it, he's the best horse around."

"If that's the case, why not wait to tack him up until you bring him out of the stall?"

Alejandro chuckled, before straightening. "Ever had to chase a quarter horse? I remember Dad chasing his ass halfway to town before he caught him. Don't think I've ever seen the old man that mad in my life."

Benji bit back a laugh as a memory tugged at him. A slender Hispanic man chewing out a horse in the middle of the road leading to town. The Spanish curses flying out of his mouth would've made the sinner blush. "It was *this* horse? I remember when that happened. It was just before I left town for good." He shook his head. "Some of the things that came out of your pa's mouth. Haven't heard language like that since. Your dad was a helluva man."

Alejandro's smile fell. "I wouldn't know. Once I turned ten, he forgot I existed."

He eased the bridle over Geronimo's head. He had a hard time imagining the same man who'd chased a horse for nearly ten miles had abandoned his only child. But considering his own relationship with his dad, it was probably best if he didn't speculate. "Well, even good men can be assholes at times." Lord knew his was. "Sorry I said anything."

"Don't worry about it. I've made my peace with it. It's in the past anyway." Alejandro moved back from the door. "Ham or roast beef sandwiches for the ride?"

"Ah, roast beef, I guess." Benji couldn't believe his ears. Had the boy just switched from talking about his dad to food?

"Roast beef it is." Then he disappeared, but not before tossing over his shoulder an order to meet him in the front yard in ten minutes.

Staring after him, Benji sighed. “So, that’s not the way to earn brownie points with the new boss.”

Chapter Four

Riding along as the sun beat down on his face, Alejandro sighed. Despite the heat and the various aches from mending the fences, this is what he'd missed while he'd been away at school. Sure the ice time with the guys had been great. He'd enjoyed the hell out of pitting his strength and speed against other men, while playing hockey for the Oklahoma State Cowboys, but the scholarship had merely been a means to an end. It'd helped pay for his coveted agriculture degree. But nothing compared to riding a horse across the rolling fields and smelling nothing but fresh air and... cow manure. He wrinkled his nose. Well, he could do without the last thing, but to feel free, he'd put up with a lot of things, including the smell of shit.

"Only a few hundred yards more. If we're lucky, we won't find any more breaks, and we can head back to the homestead." Benji called out from where he rode a few paces ahead of him. Since the incident in the barn, the man hadn't stopped razzing him. All an effort, he assumed, to pull him out of his funk.

"Well, shit—guess I spoke too soon."

Alejandro sighed as he looked to where Benji was pointing. A huge section of the fence sagged a good eight inches. It would have to be repaired before one of the fifteen hundred pound steers decided it wanted the succulent grass on the other side and simply pushed the fence over to get to it. This was like the third major break in the fencing they'd found. "Christ, I'm surprised Dad had any cattle left with the fences like this."

Benji shrugged as he pulled the carpenter's hammer from his saddlebag. "I don't think they were this bad before the last roundup. It was probably the guys the estate hired to bring in the cattle. They probably weren't paid for anything more than getting the stock to market. Mending fences is something that only the owner or foreman would worry about." He glanced over his shoulder at Alejandro. "Well, get moving boss-man. Surely a youngin' like you can keep up. Unless you're planning on cryin' uncle and heading back to the ranch house with your tail tucked between your legs?"

Had Benji just called him out? He pushed his hat back to study the other man. The smirk on Benji's face said that he had. "Not a chance." He wiped his brow with the back of his arm, before swinging his leg over the cantle. "But for that insult, I just might not share the location of a lovely little pond that's great for skinny-dipping."

“Hmmm—we’ll see about that.” Benji eyed him thoughtfully, before turning back to the fence. “Let’s get this fixed. Then we’re gonna have a little talk about this here pond.”

Alejandro pulled the wire cutter out of his saddle bag. “We can talk all you want, but I’m still not telling you.” He joined Benji at the fence and couldn’t resist poking at his cowhand. “At least not until you ask me real nice and give me a ride on that bike of yours.”

Benji frowned. “You want to drive my bike?”

The mischievous imp inside him grinned. “Nope. I want to wrap my arms around you while you take me for the ride of my life through town.”

For a full second Benji looked like he’d been hit upside the head, before he cleared his throat. “Excuse me?”

Batting his eyelashes at the man, he pursed his lips. “Think of what all the little old ladies would say. There goes that fast Delgado boy, corrupting that silver-haired fox. We better lock up the rest of our men before he takes a fancy to them and seduces them away from us God-fearing women.” As Benji’s eyes widened and his mouth gaped open like a fish out of water, Alejandro couldn’t hold his laughter any longer. It spilled free. “Gotcha.”

Benji shook his head, but a reluctant smile crossed his face. “You had me going there for a second, boy.”

“So here it is. The greatest wonder ever known to many a hot, tired cowboy.” Alejandro bowed and swept his arm out as if he were presenting the little pond to the Queen of England. “Cool luscious relief awaits, my Sir Cowhand.” He whipped his hat off. “Last one in is a rotten, toad-sucking egg.”

Benji was ready to throttle the fool. He’d acted like a clown for the past hour as they’d rode the rest of the fence-line. Now his boss was acting like he was twelve. “Exactly how old are you?”

“Almost twenty-five, last time I checked.” Alejandro grinned over his shoulder at him as he shed his boots. “Come on, pops. Or you’re gonna end up being—”

“What? A toad-sucking egg?” He asked dryly as he dismounted Geronimo and led the horse over to a nearby shrub to wrap the reins around a branch.

“No... worse. A big, fat chicken!” He tossed his shirt to the ground, before reaching for the fly on his jean.

Benji froze as Alejandro shoved the jeans down his legs, boxers and all. His mouth went dry as the plump balls and semi-erect cock came into view. “For fuck’s sake.” He spun around before he did something stupid, like pin his boss to the soft ground next to the pond to find out if Alejandro tasted as good as he looked.

“Aw come on, Benji. It’s not like we don’t have the same parts.”

Which is exactly the problem. “Are you in the water yet?”

A splash was his answer. Benji waited two long minutes before cautiously turning around. The rumpled clothing on the ground mocked his control. After listening through the paper-thin walls as his boss’s bed creaked, his imagination had been stretched to the limit. Especially when he’d heard what sounded like a low groan of pleasure. The idea that Alejandro had been stroking his cock less than six inches from him had Benji reaching for his own dick. Who’d ever thought to put the beds in both rooms against the same wall had either been a voyeur or hadn’t thought of what the sound of another’s pleasure would do to the person trying to sleep on the other side of the wall.

His dick hardened behind his zipper. His body’s reaction assured him that entering the water would be a disaster. He stalked over to his horse and swung up into the saddle, wincing as the leather saddle horn butted up against his erection. “I’ll see you back at the house later.” He’d use the shower at the house, then head into town. A cold beer away from temptation was safer than going with his first idea.

“But... where are you going?” Alejandro asked, an almost dumbfounded look on his face as he stood alone in waist deep water.

“Out. For some adult fun, junior.” He almost wished the words back when Alejandro sank back into the water. *It has to be this way.* Then he kicked the quarter horse into a trot—telling himself he was merely riding back to the house, not running away from Alejandro.

Pacing the kitchen, Alejandro glared at the clock over the stove. The luminous dial read almost midnight. On the scarred Formica table top, the ranch records mocked him. He’d been trying for hours to balance the books, but his dad’s idea of bookkeeping was like nothing he’d ever seen in his life. It was even more foreign than the college calculus class he’d taken his senior year at OSU. Frustrated with both the arcane number crunching and his absent

cowhand, his temper was frayed. So when he heard the growl of the Harley Davison as it pulled into the yard, he stalked over to the window.

In the moonlight, he could make out Benji's roughly hewn profile as he shut off the bike. He'd half expected some slinky bimbo to crawl out from behind his hand, but couldn't deny the relief he felt that Benji was alone. When Benji pushed the bike on to its main stand and threw a leg over the machine, Alejandro moved back from the window. *Never let it be said that I'm invading his privacy.* He'd just sunk back into his chair and was once again trying to decipher the damned ledger when Bojangles gave a soft woof.

Standing in the doorway, Benji froze, taking in the scene before him. Alejandro could only imagine what he was thinking. Papers strewn over every available surface, a cup of half cold coffee and his boss sitting in a pair of boxer shorts with his hair standing up in every direction from the number of times he'd run his hands through it.

"I wasn't expecting you to be up." Benji's voice came out like gravel.

"Working on the ranch books. Or at least trying." He amended. "Dad wrote it in some kind of short hand I've never seen before." He pushed the thick yellow papered ledger away from him.

He was surprised when Benji stalked closer, then spun the book around to face him. His fingers traced over several lines. "This here," he pointed out a figure with a two-letter combo behind it, followed by another set of numbers, "means he got paid a stud fee. The first number is the stud number, the second is probably a client's initials, while the last is agreed upon servicing. For instance... this six means that he was paid for six draws." He scanned down several rows. "Your dad had a helluva stud service going on."

"You can read it?" He couldn't keep the relief from his voice.

Benji glanced up. "Yeah, it's similar to the code I learned on the Flying J. A lot of old-school guys use this type of bookkeeping. It's not hard to learn, once you learn the basics. If you want, I'll teach you."

Alejandro jumped up and wrapped his arms around Benji. The scent of beer teased his nose, but was so faint the man had maybe had a few several hours ago. "Thank you, thank you." It took a few seconds to realize that Benji was stiff as a board. Drawing back, he stared at the man. "What..."

Benji pushed him away. "Look, I..." He raked his hand through his hair. A look of disgust crossed his face. "I don't think this is going to work. I'll see if I can put a few calls in and find you another hand."

“What? No! I don’t want another hand.” Panic built in Alejandro’s stomach. Even in the short time Benji had been at the ranch he’d enjoyed the man’s company. And today had proved how well they could work together. He didn’t want to start over with another hand. “Look, I swear being gay isn’t contagious—and I’ll keep my hands to myself. Just don’t leave. You have so much experience to share with me.”

Benji scowled at him. “I’m not your fucking father.”

Alejandro pulled back, stung. “I had a father, thank you very much. And I don’t want another.”

Benji began to pace. “Fine, older brother, or whatever relation you want to stamp on me. I can’t be what you need.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “And what exactly do you think I want?”

“Fuck, I don’t know! At times you treat me like an older brother, like fucking around at the pond today. At other times, like this morning when you fed me and commiserated about my mom having cancer, I swear you were feeling sorry for me.” Benji growled, and tossed his hat on the table. “But what just confuses the hell out of me is the instances when I can *see* the lust rising off you. Like you want to rip off my clothes and do mean things to me.”

Alejandro sank back into his chair. “So? You’re an attractive man and I happen to love older men. There’s no crime in looking.”

“Exactly! You’re thinking with your dick! The youth of today is confusing. Nothing like what I was like when I was sowing my oats.” He placed his hands on his hips. “You found a potential lover, then got to know them more than just a few hours or days before deciding to jump in the sack together. Unlike you, I didn’t go to college and screw an obscene amount of lovers. So if you’re looking to use the down-on-his-luck cowhand as another notch in your damn bedpost—forget it!”

Alejandro clenched his jaw at the accusation. Anger, only rivaled by the pure frustration he felt at his father’s abandonment, rose in him. “Fine, let me lay this out for you in simple terms.” He held up his hand and began counting. “One—I’ve had exactly two lovers in my life. Both I happened to care about deeply before we made love. I’ve never been promiscuous.”

He surged out of the chair. “Two—I happen to find your company enjoyable, so forgive me for acting like a goof. I tend to do that when I’m

having fun. Three—I don't feel sorry for you. I remember what it was like to lose a mother, and did what I wished someone had done for me. Besides, I enjoy taking care of people. It brings me pleasure. And four—I do happen to find you attractive and would jump at the chance to be your lover.”

He got right up in Benji's face. “But I will *never* force myself on another man. You've drawn the line in the sand. So if you decide to stay on, your virtue is safe. The fag won't touch you. But don't for a second use my sexuality as an excuse to leave.” He slammed the ledger shut. “I'm going to bed. If you're here in the morning, great. If not, I hope your mom gets better fast.”

Slipping out of the room, he let the tears he'd been holding at bay flow. Why the fuck was he so screwed up in the head over Benji? Twenty-four hours shouldn't be enough time to make this kind of connection.

Chapter Five

The slam of a screen door sounded like a gunshot, waking Benji from slumber. He winced as the bright sunlight streamed through his open window. Judging from the angle of the sun, it had to be at least ten or eleven o'clock in the morning. He squinted at the clock on the bedside table.

10:38

The glowing numbers taunted him as the faint sound of men talking reached his ears. *Alejandro*.

Memories from the night before flooded his poor brain. He'd hurt Alejandro with his brash words. He hadn't meant to, but in his own fumbling way, he'd screwed up. He tossed his arm over his eyes, debating if getting up was really worth it. At least until his bladder changed his mind.

Rolling out of the rack, he staggered to the bathroom. The thumping inside his skull reminded him exactly why he didn't drink anymore. His body just couldn't handle the aftermath. It was a bitch getting old. "Shit. How much did I drink last night?"

He shut the door and answered the call of nature. In the darkened confines, he desperately wished he hadn't gone back out to his bike to retrieve the whiskey he'd picked up in town. Always aware of the dangers of drinking and driving, he'd had one beer at the bar, then bought the pint. He'd intended to take it to his room and have a few—but with the way his head pounded, he'd had more than that.

Once finished, he washed his hands and opened the medicine cabinet in search of aspirin. He spotted the familiar white bottle, shook out four, and popped them into his mouth. Leaning down, he drank straight from the faucet, savoring the tepid water. With his thirst quenched, he started the shower and slipped inside the steamy confines.

With the water beating down on his shoulders, he hung his head between his outstretched arms. As the fog cleared from his brain, he knew he owed his boss an apology. He shouldn't have jumped all over the younger man the way he had. "Damn when I fuck shit up, I do it good."

By the time he'd finished his shower and slipped into his last clean pair of jeans, he thought he might be able to stomach some food. Wandering into the

kitchen, he was just filling a cup of coffee when the raised voices coming from the front porch had him pausing.

“Look, I don’t care what you think you know about my father, I’m not buying it.” Alejandro sounded pissed.

“You don’t understand, Mr. Delgado. It wasn’t that your father didn’t want to be around you. It was your bitch of a mother—” The unknown man was obviously trying to reason with his boss.

“Stop right there!” Alejandro’s voice rose. “Mama may not have been perfect, but I’m not going to listen to some rich, pansy-assed banker talk shit about her.”

“Damn it, you’re just as stubborn as your father. I told him, time and time again, that he needed to tell you the truth.”

Deciding he’d heard enough, Benji pushed open the door, uncaring that all he wore was a pair of jeans. An older gentleman in a suit stood on the first step leading up to the porch, holding a thick padded envelope in his hand. Alejandro didn’t even bother to glance at Benji. Instead he kept his gaze on the other man. Even from his spot five feet away, Benji could feel the tension radiating off Alejandro. “Is there a problem here?”

“No. Mr. Downing was just leaving, Benji. He has nothing I want.” Alejandro brushed by him, the scent of his soap and cologne teasing Benji’s nose.

He nodded. “I’ll see he gets off the ranch, boss.” He resisted the urge to tip the younger man’s face up. His sudden need to read Alejandro’s expression was strong, but he controlled it as his boss slipped by him to enter the house. The slap of the screen door seemed loud. He rolled his shoulders as Mr. Downing continued to stare at him. He couldn’t care less if the businessman liked him or not.

“Okay, time to leave. Boss has spoken.”

Mr. Downing gave a brief nod, then bent to place the padded envelope on the top step. “I understand Alejandro is upset. I would be too, if I were in his shoes. But the fact of the matter is that I promised his dad to deliver that to him once he moved onto the homestead. I keep my promises—even when I don’t want to.” He straightened and fussed with his tie. “Tell Alejandro, that while I don’t agree with how Kemen handled the situation, I can understand why he did. Men of my generation didn’t flaunt their lovers. Appearances meant

everything.” He nodded toward the parcel. “Please make sure he gets those. When the time is right, he’ll want to read them. A boy, even fully grown, still needs his questions answered.”

“I can’t promise they won’t end up in the fireplace, but I’ll take them to him.”

The man’s shoulders slumped. “Thank you.” He reached inside his jacket for a slender silver case. He opened it and pulled out a crème-colored business card. “My name and contact information.” Taking a pen, he scrawled another number on the back of it. “Please tell him to contact me if he has any questions. Doesn’t matter what time it is either. I’ll always make time for my Kemen’s son.” He placed the card on top of the envelope. “Tell him that.”

As the man walked back to the gleaming Lincoln Towncar, Benji let what the man said sink in. Whether Alejandro realized it or not, he’d just kicked out the one man who knew Kemen better than anyone else—his lover.

Alejandro was sitting at the table with a cup of coffee when Benji came back in—the thick envelope tucked under one arm. He stiffened. “I don’t want his damned letters.”

Benji shrugged, and placed the packet on top of the fridge. “Want? I don’t want to have an asshole of a father who kicked me out when he realized he couldn’t change the fact I was gay, or that I wouldn’t follow in his footsteps.” He tucked something under a magnet, before turning to face him. “But that doesn’t change the fact that, right now, I need him to be there for my ma.” He moved to the coffee pot. “Just like one day you may realize despite how his distance hurt, you’ll need the connection those letters offer.”

Leaning back in the chair, Alejandro watched as his cowhand put sugar in his own coffee. Benji sat down across from him, cupping the steaming mug. Then he sipped it, his eyes half shut. Letting the legs of his chair land on the floor, Alejandro glared at his hand. “How the hell am I supposed to stay angry with you, when you say things like that?”

Setting down the cup, Benji grinned. “You’re not.” The smile fell from his face. “I’m sorry about last night. I was an asshole. Forgive me?”

Alejandro stilled, unable to believe Benji thought a mere apology would make up for the man’s accusations. “You think it will be that easy?”

Stirring the spoon in his cup, Benji shook his head. “Nope. But a man can hope.” He met Alejandro’s gaze. “Look, I didn’t handle the situation well. Chalk it up to frustration at being attracted to a much younger man who happens to be my boss.”

Of all the things that Alejandro expected Benji to use as an excuse, that wasn’t one of them. Alcohol? Yeah. Cranky from a long hot day in the Oklahoma sun? Sure, it could happen. But because he found Alejandro attractive? Never in a million years. “So you’re saying that you would—”

“Like to get to know you better?” Benji propped his chin on one bent arm. “Yep, but I screwed the pooch on that. It’s probably for the best anyway. Once my ma is... gone, I’ll be heading back to Texas and...”

Alejandro’s heart sank at the reminder. Benji’s presence was temporary at best.

“...so I guess I settle for lusting after you from a far, while teaching you what you need to know.”

Taking a sip of his coffee, he finally nodded. “While I can’t say I don’t understand your reasoning, I can wish things were different. You intrigue me, Benji Coleman, but I’ll settle for picking your brain.” He looked up at his hand. “At least tell me you’re going to be sticking around until after roundup.”

Benji took a long drink. “Mom’s got stage four lung cancer. They’re giving her less than three weeks to live. So I’ll need some time off when she finally goes, but I’ll be here for the roundup.” He gazed at Alejandro, his expression unreadable. “That’s what I promised the Widow Ranson when I agreed to help you out. I’m a man of my word.”

“Of course you are.” Alejandro forced a smile, uncomfortable considering his own mother’s recent demise. Maybe a change of subject would be wise. “Why don’t I make you something to eat? I’m sure you’re hungry.” He got up and moved toward the fridge. “How does leftover stew and rolls sound?”

Benji relaxed back against his chair. “For breakfast?”

“No, for lunch. Breakfast was hours ago.” Rummaging inside the fridge, he pulled out the leftover stew and grabbed a tube of Grands biscuits. Then he carried them over to the counter. It only took a few minutes until he had the biscuits baking in the toaster oven and the stew reheating in the microwave. He turned back to face Benji. “It’ll be ready in about ten minutes.”

“Good, my stomach thinks my throat’s been cut. The hot wings I had at the bar didn’t stay with me very long.” As if on cue, Benji’s stomach rumbled so loud Alejandro couldn’t help but laugh.

“Obviously.” But the outlying cause had him frowning. “But let’s get one thing straight. I can’t dictate what you do on your off time, Benji. However, if there’s a repeat of last night, there will be no job. I need a sober hand who is willing to work, not one so hung-over he has to lay in the rack ’til noon.”

Instead of becoming belligerent or even protesting, Benji merely nodded. “Understood boss. No more drinking.” He looked sheepish. “When I fuck up, I fuck up good.”

“That you do.” The microwave dinged and Alejandro pulled out the stew to give it a stir as a comfortable silence filled the kitchen.

“More coffee?” He offered as he waited on the biscuits.

“Yeah, I need the caffeine.” As Alejandro poured him another cup, Benji touched his arm. “Thanks, boss.”

Alejandro sighed. “You won’t be thanking me later, when I have you out chasing chickens.”

The cup froze halfway between Benji’s mouth and the table. Then he carefully lowered it. “Why on earth would I be doing that?”

“Because that damned ornery goat of Dad’s chewed through the twine holding the chicken pen shut. Good news is it was the inner door, so they didn’t go far. Bad news? They are now in the calving pen. We can’t move the yearlings, like we planned, until all the chickens are gone.”

“You’re shitting me.” Benji’s head thumped down on the table. “You’re going to have a grown man chasing chickens.”

“Yep.” The buzzer on the toaster oven went off, demanding Alejandro’s attention.

“You’re just evil, boss,” Benji complained, as he lifted his head.

“You have no idea.” Alejandro smiled as he set down the food in front of Benji. “But at least I’ll feed you first.”

Chapter Six

As much as it strained Benji's self-control, he and Alejandro fell into a routine over the next few weeks, even with his nightly visits to see his mom. Every morning when the alarm went off at five, he'd stumble out of the bed to find a fresh pot of coffee waiting for him while Alejandro showered. Then, after he'd had his first cup, they'd switch places and he'd shower while Alejandro made breakfast. When he was done, he'd then join his boss for breakfast.

A man's breakfast. He nearly drooled as he pulled up to the table. Steaming bowls of food filled the space between him and Alejandro. Light fluffy eggs, what looked to be like two pounds of crispy bacon, golden hash browns, and thick chunks of fresh sourdough bread. Combined with strong coffee and orange juice, Benji was in hog heaven. Even when he'd lived at home surrounded by all the luxury that money could afford, more often than not, it had been either cold cereal or pop tarts during the week, or some frou-frou breakfast food like quiche or crêpes on the weekends.

"Damn, it looks good, boss." He reached for a thick slice of toast and the jar of fruit preserves. "You're gonna end up spoiling me. How am I supposed to go back to Cookie's grub when I go back to San Antonio?"

Alejandro merely smiled as he filled his own plate. "Perhaps I'm trying to butter you up, so you'll stay."

He grunted as he sank his teeth into a piece of thick-sliced bacon. The salty hardwood flavor burst over his taste buds. "I'd say you'd have a good chance of it if you keep cooking like this."

Rolling his eyes, Alejandro began eating. "Figures. Mom always said that the way to a man's heart was through his stomach."

Benji chuckled. "True enough, but honestly? I'm more apt to fall for a guy who enjoys music as much as I do. You never realize how much I appreciate coming back from seeing Mom to find you fiddling around with your guitar."

"You need, I supply. Perhaps it means we're meant to be together." Alejandro joked around a mouthful of scrambled eggs.

Benji paused at the words. It was true. His boss was more in tune with him than any other man or lover had ever been. He always seemed to know when

Benji needed a no-nonsense boss, or when the goofball could come out and lighten his hand's mood. When had he ever been as content or happy in his life? *Well, other than the erection from hell that always seems to be present when we're together.* Everything about Alejandro had him rethinking their agreement to just be friends. Especially the looks his boss kept sneaking when he thought Benji wasn't looking. Perhaps it was time to put them both out of their misery? Maybe once they scratched their itch, the chemistry would calm down. He opened his mouth to suggest just that when the telephone rang.

Reaching behind him, Alejandro grabbed the old handset off the wall and answered it. "Hello... oh hi, Lucinda. How are you?" Then his expression went sober. "I'm sorry, sweetheart."

Benji's heart plummeted. His mother. *Shit, not now.* He closed his eyes against the searing pain in his chest. Even prepared as he had been for the inevitable news, he couldn't believe his mom was finally gone. The soft gentle woman had been the one person, aside from Lucinda, who'd understood his need to be something more than a lawyer who sat behind a desk enclosed in an office. As he tried to cope with the reality of it, Alejandro's voice was distant—at least until his boss mentioned him.

"...yeah, he's right here." Sympathy shone from Alejandro's eyes as he tugged on the coiled cord and offered him the phone.

Swallowing hard, Benji took it. Putting it to his ear, he steeled himself to hear the grief in his younger sister's voice, but nothing could compare to the reality of it. "Sis?"

"Oh Benji, she's... gone." Lucinda's voice broke.

Taking a deep breath, he tried to compose himself. "Wh-hen...?"

"Early this morning." She drew a deep breath, anger bleeding into her voice. "The hospice worker told me she woke Dad around two, but by the time I got there at three, she was gone. The asshole waited until she was gone to call me. What the fuck... did we ever... do to him?" She was openly sobbing now.

At a loss, he tightened his fingers around the receiver. "Nothing, sis. He's just an old man who can't accept change—"

"This has nothing to do with change, and you know it! We were born this way. It's not a choice, despite what he thinks. Do you know he actually told me that my *roommate* wasn't welcome at the funeral? After ten years he still refers to my partner as a roommate. That if I brought Anita, he'd have both of us removed?"

He flinched under his sister's fury. It was true. The illustrious Benjamin Coleman the Third refused to acknowledge that both his beloved daughter and son were gay, but to ban his only daughter from having her partner at their mother's funeral for support was beyond cruel.

"I'll talk to him, Luc. Even if it comes to blows, Anita will be there." He squeezed the bridge of his nose as he wondered what heinous price his father would demand in return.

"Don't, Benji!" His sister's plea filled his ear. "It's not worth what it'd cost you. You know what Dad will demand."

He dropped his hand to the table, his breakfast a sudden lead weight in his stomach. Across the table, Alejandro covered his hand with his, giving it a squeeze—offering comfort silently. Meeting his boss's dark eyes, he reassured his sister. "It won't happen. There is nothing on God's green earth that will convince me to work for him. I'd end up killing him within weeks. I still plan on heading back to Texas. Roscoe offered me the job of foreman on the Flying J after roundup. He's looking to retire."

At the mention of his eventual return to Texas, Alejandro removed his hand. Benji immediately felt its loss and wanted it back. He caught the younger man's wrist and held on, while still focusing on his phone conversation.

"Good." She sighed. "Don't let that bastard win. At least one of us should be happy."

He kept his gaze on Alejandro, unwilling to let him withdraw. "I know you love your job as a partner in Coleman and Winterest, but is it worth dealing with Dad every day?"

"He'll eventually retire. Mom had been pushing him for the last few years to retire. Maybe her death will convince him."

In the background he could hear the bellow of his father's voice. "Is that Ben?"

"Yes, Dad." Her answer was terse. "I called him to let him know about Mom."

He thought he'd heard something about making sure "that damned irresponsible son of mine is at the funeral home by ten," before his sister came back on the line, but he refused to look away from Alejandro. He needed him. He didn't know if he could hold it together without him.

“Sorry, about that. Can you meet us at Hedke’s Funeral Home around ten to make arrangements?”

“Ten?” He softly asked Alejandro.

Freeing himself, his boss started putting the leftovers in the fridge, but paused long enough to nod. “I’ll drive you into town.”

“Yeah, Alejandro offered to drive me. If he does, can I catch a ride back with you?”

After his sister assured him it wouldn’t be a problem, he said good-bye, and reached across the small table to put it back on the cradle.

“It bothers you when I talk about leaving.” He caught Alejandro’s arm as the man returned for another load of dishes.

Alejandro glanced down at the hand on his arm, then sighed. “Look, it’s my issue. I care about you. I shouldn’t, but I do. But right now, you have other things to worry about than my feelings.” He brushed his fingers over Benji’s cheek. “Take the time you need. Me, the ranch? We’ll be here when you’re done and we can have this discussion then—if you’re still so inclined. Deal with your mom first, just promise me you won’t drink, no matter what an unforgiving ass your dad is. Your mom loved you—don’t honor her gift of life by falling into the bottle. I may never have met her, but from your stories, she sounded like a wonderful woman.”

Benji gave a curt nod, even as his eyes teared up. “She was. And she would’ve liked you. Kept asking me to bring you to see her, but with my dad...” He winced, not even wanting to contemplate his dad’s reaction to that.

“Is an asshole. I get it. Nothing new for me. I’m familiar with asshole dads.”

Benji wondered if Alejandro understood the shit-storm he was about to walk into just by driving him to town. “Still you know you don’t have to drive me. I can ride the Harley. Because sure as the sun rises in the east, Dad will catch one glimpse of you and accuse you of everything from being a fag to corrupting his worthless son.”

A grin kicked up one corner of Alejandro’s mouth. “Well considering I *am* gay and I *am* more than willing to corrupt you... I’ll just be living up to his bad opinion.” A determined look crossed his boss’s face. “I’m driving you. End of discussion.” Then in a move that had Benji freezing, Alejandro leaned down and brushed a kiss over his lips. “Now get moving, cowboy. We have chores a-waitin’.”

As Alejandro gathered up the last of the dishes and threw them in the old dishwasher, Benji suddenly realized that leaving the *Rancho de la Luna* after roundup might not be as easy as he'd thought. Somehow with everything he did Alejandro had snuck past his defenses. If he weren't careful, he'd fall in love with a man almost young enough to be his son. *And wouldn't dear old dad just love that.*

"Hey Benji?" Alejandro glanced over his shoulder at him.

"Yeah?"

"Someone once told me that us college boys will fuck anything that sits still. So unless you're planning on playing the willing victim, I suggest you get a move on. Or I might just think you're looking for some lovin'."

"You wish." Benji tried to say it with a straight face, but couldn't stop the chuckle that escaped him. Even with the horrific loss of his mother, his Alejandro knew how to make him smile.

Chapter Seven

Keeping his emotions under tight control was difficult, but Alejandro managed. With his back to Benji, he busied himself with loading the dishwasher, and waited for Benji to head outside. It was their routine. The older man would scatter the chicken feed while he cleaned up the breakfast dishes. But, as the man continued to sit and watch him, even after he'd made a joke about jumping him, Alejandro felt like a bug under a microscope. He probably shouldn't have kissed him, but he'd had such a lost look on his face, and then he'd tried to warn Alejandro off taking him into town. When would the man learn that, despite his age, Alejandro didn't run from a confrontation?

The sudden scrape of a chair being pushed away from the table had him sighing in relief. Soon he'd hear the snap of the screen door, but instead there was a sudden heat against his back and Benji's arms appeared on either side of him as the larger man crowded him closer to the counter.

"If I don't remember to say it, thank you, Alejandro." His voice rumbled over Alejandro. Every muscle in his body trembled with anticipation.

"You're wel—" He found himself suddenly spun around to face Benji—or rather Benji's chest. Even as big as Alejandro was, his hand still stood a good eight inches taller than his respectable five-foot-ten height.

"But the next time you kiss me, it'd better not be because you feel sorry for me." He wrapped a hand around the back of Alejandro's neck to pull him up on his tiptoes. "Because I'd hate to have us end up in bed for that reason. Especially when I want you squirming under me because you want me as much as I want you."

Then Benji laid a kiss on him that rocked Alejandro to his toes. Clinging to Benji's wide shoulders, he was panting by the time the older man lifted his head. Benji didn't seem to be in much better shape, his cheeks ruddy and his breath fast.

"Just remember that, boss." He warned before stepping back.

Alejandro nodded mutely as Benji smiled, turned and slipped outside. Sinking back against the counter, he braced his weight on his arms. *Damn, the man packed a punch.* Inside his pants his cock protested loudly. The urge to track down his cowhand and have his way with him was strong. Only the

steady tick-tock of the old kitchen clock above his head reminded him that they were on a tight schedule. If he did what he wanted, then they'd be late for sure. Even if his cock didn't understand, his brain did.

"Get it together. He was just thanking you." Turning back to the dishwasher, he poured in the soap before starting it. "Besides he's still leaving. Even if the sex would be explosive, he has plans for the future that don't include you."

As the truck ate up the miles between the ranch and Idabel, the tension inside of Benji grew with each passing second. He didn't want to make funeral arrangements, didn't want to deal with his dad, and sure as hell, didn't want to subject Alejandro to the fool. But as the old saying went, spit in one hand and want in the other... and see which one fills up the fastest. It wouldn't be the one filled with his wants, that was for sure. He was screwed.

"I'd tell you to relax but something tells me that you won't." Alejandro kept his gaze on the road.

"I feel like I'm being led to my own death. If that makes any sense." Benji tipped his head back against the headrest. "I'd rather be anywhere than here, but my sister is counting on me. If it weren't for her? I'd probably send flowers and be done with it. I loved Mom—I did. But having to deal with Dad?" He turned his head to look at Alejandro. "I'd rather have my teeth pulled out."

Alejandro chuckled and downshifted as they hit the city limits. "I can understand. I felt the same way when my dad showed up at my college graduation." He took his eyes off the road for a moment. "But I dealt with it. I wasn't going to let his presence ruin the day for me." He picked up Benji's hand and rubbed his thumb over it. "Just like you will make sure your mother gets the funeral she deserves."

"I wish I had your faith in me." Benji flipped his hand over to wrap his fingers around Alejandro's as they turned into the funeral home parking lot. He immediately recognized his sister's blue Mazda parked next to his dad's silver Escalade. "Dad had fits when Lucinda traded in the Mercedes-Benz he got her for the Mazda."

"But I see she still has it." Alejandro remarked as he parked next to Lucinda's car.

Benji smiled. "Of course she does. It's one way she can get back at him without starting a war."

“Little digs. I bet that sticks in his craw—almost as much as this will.” Alejandro gave him a genuine smile before lifting their joined hands. Brushing a kiss over his knuckles, he gave Benji a look so full of love it had him pausing.

He stared at his boss blankly. What the hell was Alejandro doing? Before he could form the words, there was a rap on his window. He stiffened. His father tapped his watch, a gesture reminiscent of Benji's childhood. His father lived by that damned watch. Nothing ever changed, including his father. Even with the death of his wife, Benjamin Augustus Coleman III was turned out as elegantly as ever in his silk suit, neatly pressed shirt and perfectly matching tie. He was the epitome of a well-to-do attorney at all times. *A pissed off well-to-do attorney.*

“Ben, if you're done making goo-goo eyes with your... whatever, your sister and I could use your undivided attention. At least she had the good sense to leave her *roommate* at home. Our meeting with the funeral director starts in less than ten minutes.”

“I know what time it is, Dad.” Benji tried to free his hand, but Alejandro continued to cling to it. Then he winked.

“Aren't you going to introduce me to your father, darling, before I head back to the ranch?”

Benji's jaw dropped. Of all the things he expected to endure today, his boss playing a total fruit wasn't one of them. “Ah... I guess, *cupcake*.”

Benjamin's shoulders stiffened. “I don't have time for this, son. We have serious things to deal with today. I just lost my wife, and this isn't the appropriate time or place for a social visit with some...” he glared over at Alejandro. “...twink you're fucking.”

Benji wanted to recoil in horror. He couldn't believe his dad was acting like this. “Dad! Alejandro happens to own the *Rancho de la Luna*. He's not a twink!”

Releasing his hand, Alejandro exited the truck to square off with Benji's father. “I'm sorry about your loss, Mr. Coleman, but there is no need to treat your son as if he's a simpleton. You may have lost your wife but he lost his mother.” Alejandro stood his ground even as Benjamin slammed his fist down on the hood of the truck.

“You have no right to lecture me on anything, young man. You're what twenty? Twenty-two at the most?” He glanced back at Benji, giving his son a condemning look. “As usual Ben is living up to my low expectations.”

“Enough, Dad.” Benji shoved the door open. “You can say what you want about me, but you’ll leave Alejandro alone.”

Benjamin laughed. “Alejandro is it?” He ran his gaze over Benji’s boss. “Let me guess, you’re Kemen Delgado’s boy. Tell me something son, are you assuring the bank doesn’t foreclose on that worthless ranch of yours the same way your daddy did?”

Surprisingly Alejandro didn’t even flinch. “You mean with a lot of hard work and just as long hours?”

Benjamin outright laughed. “Oh, I’m sure that he had to work hard... on his knees. The only reason *Rancho de la Luna* still belongs to the Delgados is because your daddy was the president of the bank’s lover. He sucked Ian Downing’s cock long and hard to keep that worthless piece of land. Much like you’re attempting with my son. I have a news flash for you, son—Ben may carry the Coleman last name, but he’s nothing but a broke, rundown cow punch, good for nothing more than running cattle. And in a few years, when his body gives out, he won’t even be good for that. I disowned him years ago. It’s only because I promised his mother he’d be here that I even let Lucinda call him when the doctor gave her less than a month to live.”

Alejandro bit the inside of his cheek to keep from decking the condescending man in front of him. Large like his son, Benjamin was merely an older version of the man he’d been falling in love with. Poor or not, Benji was twice the man his father was. Giving a short laugh, he pushed away from the bumper.

“You think I’m after Benji for his money?” He shook his head. “There’s one thing you’ll soon learn about me, Mr. Coleman. I’ve worked for everything I’ve ever had. Had my first paper route at twelve, earned a hockey scholarship to pay for college, hell I even worked two jobs while my mom died of staph infection. So despite the trust fund *my father* had the wisdom to set up for me, I’ll continue to do so. I could care less if Benji has twenty dollars or twenty thousand. I’d never take money from the man I love.”

The man’s jaw clenched. “Whatever. Come along Ben. Your sister is waiting inside.”

“Alejandro... I’m—” Benji looked torn, upset almost.

“Don’t worry about it. Nothing your old man says means a damn thing to me. You take care of business and I’ll see you back at home, sweetheart.”

When he slipped back into the truck he was well aware of Benji's gaze on him. His cowhand looked bewildered. He gave him another wink and blew him a kiss. "If you need me to come back and get you, call me."

Benji gave a curt nod, before turning to follow his dad into the funeral home.

Alejandro's smile disappeared a moment later as he put the truck into reverse. As he pulled away, he couldn't get Benjamin's words out of his brain.

"Your daddy... he sucked Ian Downing's cock... to keep that worthless piece of land."

Chapter Eight

Where do I start? That's the question that's been beating around my brain since I found out I was sick. How do I explain to my son, to you—Alejandro, why I let your mother have her way? Why I couldn't have been a stronger man in the face of her anger?

I have no excuses. I married your mother with all the hopeful dreams all men have. I wanted a family, I wanted to be a good man, an honorable man. I even wanted to love your mother. In truth, she was the best friend I ever had. I only wish I could've loved her the way she loved me.

Looking back now, I realize I never should've married her, but don't think for a moment I regret having you. You have always been my pride and joy, as well as my child. It nearly broke my heart when your mother demanded I stay away because I had the audacity to fall in love with another man. But whatever you do, please don't think badly of your mother. I'm not completely blameless. I married her, promised to cherish and hold her forever, then abandoned her when I fell in love with Ian. A man I've been lucky to share the last twenty years of my life with...

Alejandro swallowed hard against the tears stinging his eyes, while he crinkled the edges of the letter between his fingers. After going to the bank only to find out that the president was out of town on business, he'd remembered what Benji had said about one day needing a connection to his father. So now he sat at the kitchen table reading letters written in the shaky hand of a dying man. He just never expected to find out his father was gay, or at least bi-sexual. Smoothing out the letter, he set it on the table, then picked up Ian's ivory business card.

Pieces were falling into place, but he desperately needed to talk to the only soul still alive who could possibly give him answers. The only question was, after the way he'd acted toward Ian, would the man even take a call from him? Deciding there was no time like the present, he dialed the cell phone number with trembling fingers. As it rang, he swallowed hard.

“Alejandro? I was hoping you would call.” Ian’s tone wasn’t as brisk as it’d been two weeks ago.

He clenched the receiver tight. “You knew... my dad?”

“Very well. I loved him.”

The softly spoken words held more emotion than Alejandro had expected. He needed to look into Ian’s eyes as they spoke of his father. “Look, I know you’re a busy man, but would you be able to meet me somewhere for coffee? Or come to the ranch. I have some questions I’d like answered, but I don’t want to ask them over the phone.”

“Of course.” There was a wealth of relief in the man’s voice. “I can be at *Rancho de la Luna* in less than thirty minutes.”

Alejandro rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ll put the coffee on.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d rather have a glass of that sweet tea I heard so much about. Your dad used to brag about how truly delicious your tea was. That’s if you have some already made?”

Alejandro flushed. “Yeah. Just fresh this morning.”

“Good. I’ll see you in twenty minutes, young man.” Then the phone clicked in Alejandro’s ear.

“Damn he was right. That is the best damned tasting tea I’ve ever had.” Ian Downing set his iced tea down, looking more at home in the kitchen than Alejandro ever thought he would. Instead of his suit, he was wearing a pair of khaki’s and a light colored polo. “So you want answers?”

Alejandro shifted. “Yeah.” He nodded toward the folded letters in the center of the table. “You dropped those off to me. You said then, at my dad’s request?”

Ian ran his finger around the rim of his glass. “Yeah. I did. He wanted you to know the truth.”

“According to those, you and he were lovers?” Alejandro studied the older man’s face.

“Yes.” A small smile lifted the corners of Ian’s mouth. “I always thought I’d be a bachelor, then I met your dad. He was so full of piss and vinegar when he stomped into my office at the bank, demanded to know why the hell I

wouldn't approve his loan." He chuckled. "I found myself suggesting that we go out to Sullivan's for a beer and discuss it. There was just something about him. I had to get to know him better."

Alejandro clenched his jaw. "You used the loan as bait? Benjamin Coleman said it was the only reason you and Dad were together."

Ian narrowed his eyes. "Initially—yes, I did. I wanted him and my generation wasn't as open as yours is, but don't think for a moment that I abused my position at the bank to get into your dad's pants. Not once in twenty years did I ever sign off on a loan for Kemen. He did business with First Union, not First United. I wanted no hint of impropriety."

Relief filled Alejandro that Ian hadn't mixed business and pleasure when it came to his father. While he didn't like to think of the man using the idea of a loan as a way to pursue Kemen, he could understand Ian's reasoning. "So how did going for beer evolve into you being lovers? Because, according to those letters, he left my mom and me for you."

Ian nodded. "It wasn't something either of us wanted. When he told me he was married and had a child, I tried to make a clean break of it. I stayed away."

Alejandro leaned back in his chair. "You didn't know he was married? I find that hard to believe."

Ian stiffened. "Well it's the truth. I've been with the bank for thirty-five years. I knew your great uncle when I was a young man. When Oleksa died there were rumors of a distant relative claiming the land, so I naturally assumed that your dad was his heir—never thinking that he was married to Oleksa's niece." He sighed. "When I found out, we had a huge fight."

"Well it's obvious you must've made up, because my father and mother ended up divorced. Then Mom moved me halfway across the county."

"I can never tell you exactly how sorry I am for that. I tried to end things. I told your father to go back to his wife and child, I absolutely refused to break up a family. I'm an orphan myself and I wasn't about to let Kemen throw away his family." A flash of guilt crossed his face. "That's when he told me it was too late—that he loved me and whatever romantic feelings he had once for your mother were long gone. I tried to talk him out of it—we weren't lovers then, just good friends who happened to be attracted to one another. But your father was a determined man. Once he put his mind to something..."

“...it happened.” Alejandro nodded. “If there’s anything I remember clearly about Dad, it was his unwavering determination.”

Ian propped his elbows on the table. “Along with his love of you, those were the two things that made me love your father the most. Sure, he had that handsome, dark, swarthy look that many Latinos have, but it was his heart that won me over.” He sighed. “Looks fade. Time goes on, but when you find a man who lights up your world, you hang on to him with all your might. I had twenty-two wonderful years with Kemen, but even if it had only been twenty-two days, I would’ve counted myself lucky.” He reached out for the letters in the center of the table. “Have you read them all?”

“Not yet.” Alejandro gave a brief shrug. “The first one was hard enough.”

Ian scanned through several, before handing him one. “Read this, and then I have a proposition for you.”

Alejandro reluctantly took the letter. “Really?”

A smile crossed the older man’s face. “Yep. Your father has one last gift for you.”

When Benji stepped into the kitchen, he never expected to find Alejandro sitting at the table reading his father’s letters. Emotionally raw, he’d hoped that Alejandro would be playing on the porch. Instead of hearing the sweet notes he’d yearned for, there was nothing but silence. Not that it mattered, because the familiar sense of homecoming was the same. He might feel like he’d been run through the wringer after dealing with his dad, but the peace he found in his boss’s presence remained the same.

“Arrangements made?” Alejandro looked up from the paper in his hand.

“Yeah. The funeral is the day after tomorrow at two.” After walking over to the fridge, he pulled out sweet tea. “Do you want to go with me?” As the words flew out of his mouth, he froze. Had he honestly just asked his boss to put up with his dad again? “But truthfully, I’d understand if you don’t want to—Dad acted like a real horse’s ass today.”

The scrape of the chair was his only warning, before Alejandro appeared at his side. He froze as the younger man took the pitcher from him. “If you want me there—I’m there. Dad or no Dad. Understand?”

He gave a nod. “Yeah, but Dad accused your dad of sleeping with the bank president today, and I can’t promise he won’t do worse at the funeral.”

Alejandro gave a laugh. “Funny thing about that—Ian stopped by the ranch today. We had a nice long talk, and let me assure you Ian has never—ever held a loan on the *Rancho de la Luna*. They were lovers though.”

Benji kept his face straight. “After talking to him the day he left the letters, it doesn’t surprise me.”

Alejandro nodded, before running his fingers up the front of Benji’s shirt. “We had a very enlightening talk, too.”

Distracted by Alejandro’s touch, Benji fought to focus on their conversation. “And?”

“And he made me realize something.” Alejandro’s hands drifted back down over his abs, until they were mere inches from Benji’s groin.

His breath caught as his cock hardened. “Yeah?”

“Yep.” Alejandro curled two fingers through Benji’s belt loops to tug him forward. “That if I found the one man who lights up my world, I should hang on to him as long as I could—whether it’s twenty years or twenty days. Well, I’ve found that man.”

Benji swallowed hard. Was the man saying what he thought he was? “But you...”

Alejandro arched an eyebrow at him. “But nothing. I know you’re going back to Texas after roundup.” He nodded toward the calendar. “And if I counted right that gives me approximately thirty-eight days to enjoy you.”

Benji hissed, as Alejandro brought their lower bodies together. Desire struck hard and fast, turning the blood in his veins to molten lava. His eyes drifted shut as he wrapped an arm around the smaller man’s waist. “You don’t know what you’re asking of me, Alejandro...”

“Yes, I do...” Lips skimmed over his jawline to settle near his ear. “I’m asking you to share my bed for the remainder of the time you’re here. To not only fuck me through the mattress, but to hold me through the night.” Teeth tugged at his ear lobe. “To make memories with me.” Alejandro released his flesh. “I won’t ask you to stay, but at least let me enjoy what time we have left.”

“I can’t give you what you want.” His protest came out as a croak. Standing in front of him with his heart in his eyes, Alejandro was Benji’s worst nightmare. What if he took what his boss offered him, and then he failed? He’d

disappointed a lot of men in the past by not being what they needed. It would kill him if the same happened with Alejandro.

But instead of drawing back as Benji expected, Alejandro just smiled. “Can’t or won’t?” His hand drifted down to cup Benji’s cock through the denim. “Because this tells me, you’re more than capable of giving me what I want.”

Anger surged through Benji, magnifying his arousal. “Damn it, I could fuck you all night long, Alejandro. But it doesn’t change the facts. I’m only here until roundup. Then I’m gone. I won’t break your heart.”

Alejandro actually laughed. “And you think by refusing to sleep with me, that when you do finally leave I’ll be left whole?” He squeezed his fingers, stroking Benji’s cock through the denim. “Too late for that. Because even if you don’t make love with me, you’ll be taking my heart when you leave.”

Benji jerked as if struck. “You can’t love...”

“Love you?” Alejandro leaned closer, pressing Benji up against the counter. “Newsflash, hoss, I can and do.” He leaned up and licked the pulse pounding at Benji’s throat. “And there’s not a damned thing you can do about it.”

Benji drove his fingers into Alejandro’s hair. “God damn it—you better understand what you’re letting yourself in for.” He growled the words against Alejandro’s lips.

Chapter Nine

Alejandro wanted to shout “hallelujah” as Benji tackled him to the bed. They bounced as they landed. Immediately Benji supported his weight on his knees, as he pushed Alejandro’s arms up and toward the headboard.

“Hang on and don’t let go—you hear me?” Benji’s tone was harsh, but the lust in his hazel eyes assured Alejandro that he wasn’t angry.

“Yeah.” Alejandro wrapped his hands around the slats in the headboard. He hissed when the thick pelt of Benji’s chest hair rubbed over his bare skin, as the older man moved back. Watching Benji through narrowed eyes, Alejandro marveled at the intensity of the other man’s need. It seemed once Benji decided to take him up on his offer, there was no hesitation. He’d stripped Alejandro down to his boxers before they’d even made it out of the kitchen. By the time they’d reached Alejandro’s bedroom, Benji was down to nothing more than his socks.

“Damn...” Alejandro moaned when Benji knelt between Alejandro’s spread thighs, his sex full and rigid from a nest of silvery hair. “I don’t think there’s anything sexier than a man who goes commando.” He tightened his thighs around Benji, loving the contrast between his lighter skin and Benji’s slightly darker tone.

Benji jerked when Alejandro’s inner thigh brushed his cock. Then he pulled back, freeing himself from Alejandro’s grip with ease. “And I find nothing more frustrating than a guy who wears boxer shorts.” He reached under Alejandro to grab the waistband of his underwear and yanked. “Makes me want to burn every damn pair you have.”

“Why?” Alejandro gasped as Benji’s other hand delved under the material in front to cup Alejandro’s cock and balls.

“Because it keeps me from tasting this.” He shoved the material down far enough that Alejandro’s cock sprung free, the swollen tip of his erection dotted with pre-cum.

Alejandro arched his back when Benji spread the fluid around the head. Benji’s touch was deft as he steadied the swollen length for his mouth. He shouted as Benji wrapped his mouth around the head of his aching sex. Each lash of Benji’s tongue sent a jolt of pleasure through him, until he was perilously close to coming. “Please, stop!” He squeezed his eyes shut.

Benji growled and lifted his head. “Stop?”

Alejandro panted. “Gonna come.” His chest heaved, even as his fingers dug into the wood. “Want you inside me... when it happens.”

A slow smile crossed Benji face. “Trigger happy, cupcake?”

“Fuck, yeah.” He bucked up toward Benji. “I’ve been hot for you since you rode up on that damned bike. I’ve jerked off more in the past two weeks than I did during my entire time in college.”

Benji narrowed his eyes. “When?”

Alejandro was getting irritated by the questions. Why hell wasn’t the man fucking him?

“When did you jerk off? We’ve been in each other’s back pockets since we met.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. “In the shower—I’d go into the shower—smell your soap and rub one off. Quit asking me a million questions, damn it. Just fuck me!”

Benji circled the base of Alejandro’s cock. “One last question. Please tell me you got lube and condoms.”

“Bedside drawer.” Alejandro gritted out, thrusting against Benji’s fingers.

“Good.” There was a scrape as Benji opened the drawer, followed by a snick as he popped the top on lube. “Legs up? Show me that pretty asshole.” Benji ordered.

Lifting his legs, he hissed as the cool lube trickled over his crease to settle on his rosette. “Fuck!”

“In just a second.” Benji promised as he breached the tight ring with the tip of his finger.

Pushing out, Alejandro moaned as Benji sank deeper. He was sweating and swearing by the time Benji worked what felt like three fingers inside of him. “Quit fooling around... fuck me... please!” His head tossed against the pillow.

“Well... since you asked so nicely...” Benji drawled softly as he replaced his fingers with his cock. “Shit! You’re tight!”

“And you’re... God-damned thick.” Alejandro gasped as Benji lowered his body over him until their chests were touching and his cock was trapped between them.

“Hang on to me. I want to feel those fingers digging into my shoulders.” Benji grunted as he began to move.

Releasing his grip on the headboard, Alejandro wrapped his legs and arms around Benji as the man slowly thrust against him. The bed springs squeaked as Benji moved a bit faster. Moaning deep in his throat, Alejandro could only hang on as the pleasure of having the man he loved deep inside him pushed him higher.

“Oh, my God.” He babbled, burying his face against Benji’s shoulder, as the intense feeling in the pit of his stomach grew. “More, please.”

“Oh, yeah.” Benji gritted out, the sound of his hips slapping against Alejandro’s ass echoing through the room.

Then toe-tingling euphoria washed over Alejandro as Benji shifted his angle and his cock pegged Alejandro’s gland. “Fuck... right there,” he gasped.

A low rumble escaped Benji. “Yeah... come for me, sweetheart.”

Alejandro’s breath caught in his throat as his body obeyed, filling the space between them with creamy seed. “Benji!”

“Good boy.” Benji rasped, his hips snapping harder and harder as he sought out his own pleasure. Clinging to him, Alejandro rode out the storm until Benji stiffened and filled the condom with his release. “Damn...” The older man collapsed over Alejandro.

Running his hands up and down Benji’s back, Alejandro began to hum an old Spanish love song he remembered his father singing—before his mother had moved them away.

“That’s the same song you were singing the first time I met you.” Benji whispered against his shoulder.

A low chuckle shook him. “A love song from my childhood—before my parents split.” He began to softly sing, the words flowing from his lips. “*Quiero regalos que a las palabras... para ser su red para cuando usted se cae... te llevará de la man al caminar...*”

Lifting his head, Benji smiled. “Beautiful. What does it mean?”

Alejandro pursed his lips. “You mean after how many years in Texas you don’t know Spanish?”

Benji dragged his fingers down Alejandro’s side. “Don’t make me tickle you...”

Alejandro widened his eyes in mock horror. “Okay, okay. It means... I want to gift you the words... to be your net for when you fall... take you by the hand when you walk...”

Benji rolled them over so Alejandro found himself cradled across the older man's chest. “What I wouldn't give to have that... to be the center of your universe. To share a love like that...”

Alejandro placed his hand over Benji's heart. “Who says you can't?”

“Says reality.” He lifted Alejandro's hand and placed a kiss against its palm. “I wish that love was enough, but man can't live on that alone.” He squeezed Alejandro tighter. “It would be so easy to love you, but food, shelter... all of it costs money, and I've seen your books. Even if we got top dollar for your herd, there's not enough cash flow to support one—let alone two of us. It's going to take prudent planning to keep you afloat until your trust fund comes in.”

Alejandro stilled. While Benji hadn't come out and said he loved him, it gave him hope. He just needed more time. “What if I told you I had a way? Would you stay?”

“What way?” Benji ran a hand down his back.

“Well, Ian and I talked about more than love and my dad.” He nibbled on his lower lip. “You know that worthless land your dad claims I have?”

“Yeah?”

“Well according to Ian, Dad set up one last deal before he passed away. It seems my land isn't so worthless. There is a company out of Houston that has a new technique of drilling for oil that won't harm the land—and they want to drill in the field north of the house. Surveys say that it's rich in minerals that normally only appear when oil is present.”

Benji drew a harsh breath. Alejandro could see the slowly dawning hope in his lover's gaze. “So what does that mean? Drilling for oil can take even longer than your trust fund that's coming ready.”

He smiled down at the older man. “What it means is that my father drew up an iron-clad contract with the company, which includes a tidy sum to keep the ranch afloat until the oil comes in. I signed the contract this afternoon. So now the only problem I have is convincing my hand to stay on.”

“You're serious? You want me to stay?”

Alejandro nodded. “You're my light, Benjamin Augustus Coleman the Fourth.”

Benji groaned. "I'll stay... on one condition."

Alejandro cocked his head. "And what's that?"

"Don't *ever* call me that again." He buried his fingers in Alejandro's hair.

Wetting his lips, Alejandro lifted up enough that his mouth was only inches from Benji's. "So what do I call you?"

"How about 'the man who loves you'?" Benji whispered back.

Relief filled Alejandro. "Doesn't quite have the same ring to it, but I'll take it..." The rest of his words were swallowed up by Benji's mouth as he rolled Alejandro under him. His lonesome cowboy had finally found a home.

The End

Author Bio

N.D. Wylders is the flipside of the average girl next door, Dakota Trace. Writing in m/m for the past year, she's decided to devote all of her m/m books to a new pen name, keeping her traditional erotic romance books separate. She can be found around the web on her Facebook page, website or Twitter.

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