

“This book changed my life. And it will change yours.”

— JOE CAMP, creator of “Benji” and author of *The Soul of a Horse*

LAND OF THE HORSES

A
TRUE STORY
of a Lost Soul
and a Life
Found

— CHRIS LOMBARD —

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At the end of the night I was told where my room was, right down by the corrals, and given a small electric lantern and the warning: *If you see a stick moving in front of you, it's not a stick.* There were no lights on in any of the buildings. The place felt like a ghost town. It was hot. The honest, straightforward heat of the Southwest. As I walked by the Grand Prix, I gave the dusty car a much-deserved pat on the hood for another weighed-down, hard-won drive. I made it to my room and opened the door. It was small with a bathroom and a back door. I opened the back door to see where it led.

Horses. The door led right into a corral. I stepped out and there I was, so close to them I just reached out my hand to a bay horse, standing nearby. There were two others with him. A dark-colored horse with one blue eye, and in the far corner, a tall, gangly sorrel with a long white blaze.

I heard a loud rumbling noise approaching the front gate of the ranch. The rumbling slowly grew louder until it was within the compound. Right about the time it would be passing my front door, it slowed and then ended. I went back inside my room and waited.

I heard a vehicle door open and shut and footsteps over gravel to the cement walkway in front of my room. There was a jingling with each purposeful step. Spurs.

A very deliberate knock on the door. I opened it.

"Howdy. I'm Cody Lake. Welcome to the La Osa Ranch."

His first words were said with warmth and a big smile as he looked me directly in the eye and extended his hand. He was in his late thirties. A medium-build man with a curly goatee and brown, slightly curly hair that stuck out from under a dirty white Stetson. He had on a long sleeve, button-up shirt (also dirty), Wrangler jeans, and leather boots that looked like they had seen many a ride. And the spurs.

"How's yer trip?" he asked. "You were comin' from out California way, right?"

"Yeah, California. Long ride but I made it."

"Well, alright then. It's good to have ya here. We're outta season right now as I'm sure ya know but we've plenty of work that'll keep us busy."

He was full of expression in his words and gestures and eyes. He was charismatic in an immediate sense. He had also been drinking and had a glow on.

"Ya own a saddle do ya?" he asked.

"No."

"That's alright. There's some good saddles out the back. We got almost fifty horses here, and we'll find a good one for ya in the mornin' as well. We'll set ya up straight."

"Thanks, that sounds great. When and where should I start?"

He thought for a second. "Well, how about this. I'm ridin' out in the mornin' to gather some horses been out a while. You wanna ride with me?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Alright. Let's say meet me out back at the corrals around six. That'll give me time to get some stuff done before then."

"Sounds great."

He then looked me right in the eye. "You'll find I'm a hard worker and a straight-shooter. If you ever have something you want to say or talk about I don't wantcha hesitatin'."

"Well, I'm real happy to be here and I'm ready to go to work with you, learn from you, and do whatever you need me to do."

Cody looked away modestly. "Aw heck, we'll just work and have a good time. This job is too much fun not to have a good time. You'll learn from me, and I'll learn from you."

That night I lay down on top of the bed with no covers or pillows. It was too hot for anything. It wasn't the most comfortable of beds, but it was the

first bed I had slept on in half a year. With the windows open the sounds of the desert night poured in about the room. I couldn't sleep. I was nervous. I wanted to not just be able to do the job I had been hired for, I wanted to do it well.

I didn't want to let anyone down, including myself.

I heard the sound of Cody's truck driving out to the corrals a little after five. The horses called to him. Everything was quiet until the birds announced the sun was rising. I put the bone-bead bracelet on and looked at my eyes in the mirror. I was clean-shaven, wide-eyed, and ready. At six I came out of my room wearing a long-sleeve, button-up shirt, the very stiff brand-new Wrangler jeans, my boots, and my brown Stetson.

I made my way around the corner to the corrals and there they were. Horses of all sizes and colors, eating hay inside the mesquite fencing. Cody was already getting up on his horse, the bay I met the night before outside my back door. He had on his white Stetson and big-heeled cowboy boots with the spurs. He wore a pair of dark leather chinks. Around his neck was a blue cowboy scarf. The saddle was fine-crafted, worn-in, with a lariat coiled and tied near the horn. When Cody swung a leg over and sat down it was as if the cowboy clicked into place. He immediately looked like he perfectly fit the saddle, the horse.

But when Cody looked at me this time there was no warmth.

"When I say be out here at six that means be out with yer horse saddled and ready to go at six. This may be a guest ranch, but I run a cowboy operation here. I realize you ain't got much experience in that, but I got things that gotta git done. I can't be waitin' on ya."

He then turned his horse and trotted toward the gate, opened it

without looking back, and took off at a quick lope and disappeared into the trees of the Sonoran Desert.

I stood there.

Not the best way to start.

What was I doing here? A cowboy? Maybe I had reached too far on this one. I walked into the tack room. Saddles and bridles lined the walls. With no clear idea of anything else to do I started cleaning. I thought about what I had done wrong exactly. I was out there right at six. Was that some sort of cowboy test?

An hour later I heard the sound of hooves moving over the ground and the sound of a human voice behind them. "Come on! Come on, horses! Hup! Hup!"

Five horses were trotting back to the ranch with Cody behind them, guiding them in. He brought them up beside the big corral and then loped past them and skillfully opened the gate from horseback, rode back and guided the horses in and closed the gate behind them. The whole thing looked rehearsed.

Cody rode up to where I was standing by the door of the tack room.

"Cody, I'm sorry," I said sincerely. "I should have been out here earlier."

"Well, I was thinkin' I hadn't been quite fair with ya. Nothing was yer fault," he said as he got down from the bay. "Come on. Let's get ya a horse."

He walked toward the small pen my back door led to. In it were the blue-eyed horse and the tall sorrel with the white blaze. Cody went to the sorrel and placed the loop of his lariat loosely around the horse's neck. He then led him out of the pen and dropped the lariat to the ground and the horse stood there quietly.

When I first saw the sorrel, my thought was that he was a little gangly and awkward looking, with his tall, thin body and narrow neck and head. He didn't look very strong. Didn't look like anything much at all really.

All in all, I was a little let down that the sorrel was going to be my horse that day.

"This is Alto. He's been here for a while, he's around ten or so. A good horse. A good ranch horse."

I walked over to Alto. Our eyes met. We studied each other. After taking a moment to size me up he looked away, unimpressed. Apparently, I didn't look like much at all to him either.

I went into the tack room and picked the saddle I liked. It was old, not much to it in looks, but I liked something about it. I got myself a bridle, and in no time, I had Alto ready.

"Alright, let's go, cowboy," Cody said as he placed a foot in a stirrup and got back up on the bay. I followed, swinging onto Alto.

"Is that your horse?" I asked.

"Jake here is owned by the ranch. When I got here nobody was riding him. He was too dangerous they all said. They kept him all by himself in a small pen."

We rode through the gate and out into the desert. Cody immediately started talking to me about the ranch, which gates to go through, the difference in the corrals, how Tom and Monica liked things done, about the land. He didn't stop talking or smiling. The way he talked, the swagger to his words, made you feel at ease and had you enjoying being around him. He would walk Jake for a ways and then trot a little or take him up into a lope, and I would follow on Alto, just off to his side. I had never seen anyone ride like Cody. He rode the horse softly and fluidly with no discernible cues or movement in his seat. It was riding without any noticeable riding.

There were no trails. We were just openly riding the land, over rocky hills, through fields of yellow grass, and down along dry, sandy riverbeds called arroyos. I was amazed at the surefootedness of the horses.

"This land is rough," said Cody. "It's desert but it's the most floral desert in the world, and everything has thorns. Ya got yer grasslands here, but mostly it's all ups and downs, sand and rocks and trees, mesquite mostly, with a lot of arroyos made from the monsoons. There ain't no water except

for a few little waterin' holes I'll show ya. Ya gotta be dang careful out here. With the rattlers, scorpions, spiders, thorns, and sun, everything out here will bite ya, sting ya, stick ya, or burn ya."

He was right. Everything seemed on the defensive in an offensive sort of way. Prickly pear cactus with thin, piercing thorns; barrel cactus with hooking, talon-like thorns; the yucca plant with razor sharp edges; and the mesquite trees with their rugged inch-long thorns. You couldn't brush up against anything.

"So, you let the horses graze out here on their own?" I asked.

"Yes sir. We have almost fifty head, mostly Quarter Horses, some Mustangs, some Belgians, a few Mexican horses. About half are in right now, the others we currently have out on the range. Some stay close like the ones I brought in this morning, others go out pritty far. The Rancho de la Osa used to own the whole valley, but now it has just around five hundred acres. We're surrounded by the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge, though, and they have near one hundred and twenty thousand acres of open land they let us use and our horses wander all over it. Sometimes you'll find horses ten or twelve miles away from the ranch. Whatever horses are out we make sure we lay eyes on 'em every week or two to know they're okay and so they remember they're domesticated."

"How many are you looking for today?"

"There's a group of eight or ten I ain't seen fer a while."

We rode on for about an hour and I had no idea where we were or in which direction the ranch was. Cody stopped now and then to examine tracks or to scan the horizon with his binoculars. I dove right into it, scouting for tracks myself.

After about two hours of riding Cody led us into a grove of trees and to a hidden watering hole. We sat atop the horses while they drank, the sun pouring down on us. I wiped the sweat from my forehead with my shirtsleeve.

"A lot of tracks here," I said.

"Pritty much everything in a four-mile radius will make the time to come here. This is the biggest watering hole for a while. If you're lucky you can catch horses here gettin' a drink."

We followed a line of tracks leading away from the watering hole that Cody thought looked fresh. I couldn't tell the difference. We came to a thick forest of mesquite we had to pick our way through. Then it opened up into rolling fields of grass with scattered patches of trees.

"So, yer from Maine. What's that like?"

"Maine is nice. It's actually got some similar qualities to the Western states, as far as the way of life. Where are you from?"

"Me? I'm from Iowa. I lit out after high school to be a cowboy, and that's what I've been doing since, workin' from ranch to ranch."

We rode on. Cody led the way, cutting through the land as if he knew every inch. If it was open, we were loping, side by side. If it was thick with brush, we walked, picking our way through.

"You see, I'm also a cowboy poet," Cody said squinting at me from under the dirty brim off his hat.

"Really? I'd like to read some of your stuff some time."

"Read it? Well...it's not exactly meant to be read. Cowboy poetry is a spoken thing, ya see."

We came across a line of empty water bottles littered about with dirty shirts and sneakers beside them.

"Mojados," Cody said. "You always gotta be on the look fer mojados and banditos."

"Mojados?" I asked.

"The illegals that come across the border. They say there's like a hundred a day coming across these parts. The banditos are the ones that camp out here and ambush 'em, knowing they have all their money and life's possessions with 'em. The ranch's take on it all is we don't bother them and

they don't bother us. With the guests riding with us and all, it's kinda how it needs to be. You'll see the border patrol out as well, but they mostly stick to the roads. We notify them if we see anything and —" Cody stopped Jake and looked up ahead. "Hey, what's that out there? You seein' that?"

I looked hard and saw nothing but hills and trees.

Without any noticeable cue Cody took Jake up into a lope. I followed with Alto. We moved fast for a ways until Cody came to a quick halt and pulled out his binoculars.

"Down in that little dip, you see 'em?" He pointed but I saw nothing. He passed me the binoculars. "Just past that second ridge off to the left of that grove-a trees."

I scanned the ridge with the binoculars, and I saw what looked like a tail swishing under a tree but I couldn't be sure. It appeared to be a good half mile away.

"That's them," Cody said excitedly. "Come on."

We rode out wide to the east of the horses. I soon forgot in what direction they were but Cody seemed like he knew where he was going. We arrived on a small hilltop. Below us were twelve horses spread out grazing and enjoying the morning sun.

"You ever brought in horses before?" Cody asked without taking his eyes off them. He was serious now.

"No."

"Okay. They're gonna run. We don't want 'em to but they will. Especially with that gray leading the pack. They've been living the good life and they're probably not gonna want to come in. We're just gonna stay with 'em so we don't lose 'em. If we lose 'em we might not find 'em again today and then this day's work is all fer not."

Jake started to get excited. Alto started to dance underneath me.

"Don't feel like you have to help or keep up," Cody said, holding Jake back. "It's gonna git Western and I don't wantcha hurtin' yerself. Just get yer

deep seat, keep yer mind in the middle of the saddle, and ride the ride.”

We slowly walked in behind the horses, and one by one their heads raised. We got within fifty yards when one of the horses, a tall gray mare, turned to look at us. I could see the wildness in her eye, unblinking as it followed our intentions.

She turned and started moving. The others followed.

Cody slowly followed on Jake. I followed off to their side.

The gray walked calmly with her herd behind. Cody softly rode up one side and guided them in the direction he wanted. He whistled sharply to get their attention. All of the horses had one eye on us. As Cody worked one side, I went to the other, and together we kept them moving the way we wanted. It was going easy, so far.

Up ahead I saw a small dip to the land, and without ever bringing horses in before, I could sense what was going to happen.

The gray led them down into the dip, and they all broke into a trot as they ran up the other side. They then stayed in the trot. Heads started tossing. Tails swished. My nerves, like they were tied to the horses, started to build. I reached up and pulled my hat tight. Choked up on the reins and set my feet deeper into the stirrups. I looked down at the bone-bead bracelet on my wrist.

The energy was no longer containable. The gray took off.

“Here we go,” called Cody.

Twelve horses sprinted across the yellow grasslands as fast as they could go with the gray mare in the lead. Hooves thundered across the ground. Dirt and dust flew back at us like rain and fog as we galloped after them. Cody stayed right with them on the running Jake. The man rode beautifully. Alto and I were right there as well. I was already going twice as fast as I had ever gone on a horse.

I was all over the saddle. The land was twisty and bumpy, and we were really moving. I stayed calm, kept a soft feel on the reins, and tried to sit Alto as deeply as I could.