



Cowboy Sunset Sweetheart

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Western, Adult

Description: Desert Sky Ranch: Where passion ignites under the Southwest sun.

Jack's torn between duty and desire for wrangler Lily.

He is an older man.

And her boss.

A fire between them they can't deny.

It would be easier if he weren't engaged to another woman.

Sparks fly as secrets unravel, risking all for a love hotter than the sands.

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LILY

I step out of the car and take in the sweet air that surrounds me. I'm finally here. Two flights and two hours of car rides, both ludicrously expensive. Thankfully, this Jack Thomas guy had already paid for all of it, and the contract he's offering me is making all the effort more than worth it. That I got the job over what I'm sure must have been dozens of other applicants makes me feel like I've won the lottery.

Looking out into the distance and into the sunset only makes everything even better. The beautiful blend of pinks and oranges as the sun descends behind the mountains. I want to see this every day for the rest of my life.

The contract is only for a year, however. I guess I'd have to be happy with that.

I'm being hired as a wrangler on the ranch. More generally, I'm just an extra hand to help get stuff done, being sent to do certain things as needed. That can be anything from catching wayward horses or, much more boringly, just making sure all the numbers add up right for tax time.

The driver helps me get my bags to the doorstep of what was certainly a grand ranch house. I'm not entirely sure where I'm supposed to go, but nothing about this Jack guy seemed to suggest he was the kind of asshole that would make me stay in the barn or anything like that, and it wasn't like there was an obvious guesthouse in sight. I tip my driver healthily, still having plenty of the travel budget Mr. Thomas gave me, and he nods my way, before driving back up the trail and leaving over the horizon.

I continue to enjoy the sights all around me. The Desert Sky Ranch is certainly impressive. A hundred or so horses run through the fields, my eyes lighting up as I see them. They're being rounded up and into some stables by Mr. Thomas's current wranglers.

My eyes light up even more when one particular figure approaches me, sitting tall on quite the stallion. The horse is a rich brown thoroughbred, with a beautiful mane. He was expertly taken care of, but even then, he had nothing on the specimen that was saddled on his back.

"You must be Ms. Bennett," he says, his voice deep with a slight bit of gravel. He tips his light brown hat my way. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

I swallow, but hesitate. His are words that require a simple response, but I'm frozen stiff as I look him over. He has to be over six feet tall, clearing that mark by a good bit. The denim he wears, common sense clothing for someone with a rough job like he has, is well tailored to him, and shows that he is built wide yet lean. The five-o'clock shadow is a bit old fashioned, but I definitely am liking what I'm seeing.

After an embarrassing amount of time, I clear my throat and finally manage to respond to him. "Um, yes. Yes, I am. That's my name."

You just answered the question three times. Good job, Lily. Way to make a first impression.

"And, um, Mr. Thomas?" I ask.

"You don't need to be that formal with me; this ain't high society. You can call me Jack."

"But you called me Ms. Bennett."

“Well, you seem to be a girl who ought to be respected on the same level as high society types.” His smile is disarming.

And all I could do was giggle in response, like some sort of foolish schoolgirl. “Um, no, really, just call me Lily. Please.”

“Good, good, it’s a very pretty name and fitting of you.”

Jeeze, he’s laying it on thick. My face is a deep crimson. He’s younger than I expected, but I can tell he’s still old enough that he shouldn’t want a girl like me, who could still pass for a high school senior if you don’t look at her too closely.

“Let me help you get your stuff in. The day’s about done, and I want you settled in before I send you running about the ranch tomorrow.” Jack guides his horse to a nearby water trough, before grabbing one of my suitcases and opening the door for me. “I expect a good work ethic here, but I ain’t a tyrant either. I’m sure you’ll do just fine.”

Through his large home, he leads me to the guest room. It’s pretty spacious, a queen-sized bed and plenty of light. I even get my own bathroom. With how I’d been roughing it in recent years, it’s pretty much a palace by comparison.

“Any house rules I should know about?” I ask as I put down my luggage and he follows suit with what he was carrying.

“Just the usual common sense ones. Don’t be blaring loud music at three in the morning, clean up after yourself, don’t put the cast-iron pan in the dishwasher.”

I giggle again at the oddly specific nature of the last note. “All right.”

He had taken his hat off as we came in, and it made it hard to keep my eyes off him.

Rugged locks of black hair, everything about him tickles me in all the right places.

I know I shouldn't be ogling him like this. He's my employer. This is all just business. But, my word, is he handsome.

"Oh, I guess this is important to note sooner than later," Jack says, gesturing toward two porch doors. We step through and look out over the range, giving me another opportunity to enjoy the setting sun. This time I spot a bluff in the distance. The view from there must be magnificent. Jack is quick to snap me out of my daydreams, however, reminding me of what we were out here to discuss. "See that tall fence over there?"

I raise an eyebrow as I see it. It's a bit of an eyesore, a jarring ten-foot-high wooden fence, and not a particularly well-maintained one. "Not my first choice of a boundary, but I guess you need to mark the end of your property somehow?"

"I mean, yes, but I didn't install that fence. That's my beloved neighbor's construction. Guards it like a hawk. I'm just thankful he's not using barbed wire anymore." Jack leans on the railing of the porch. "That's the Perry ranch. For now, I'm going to strongly discourage you from going over there, or anywhere near there."

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“What, does he shoot trespassers on sight?”

“He used to. Or I guess his father and grandfather did. Modern world is a bit less forgiving of lethal property defense when you control acres of land.”

“And I’m guessing you’re not on the best of terms with your neighbor?”

“Hardly. A century-old feud between my family and his. Some pencil pusher back at the start of the twentieth century bungled the lines on a map and we’ve been dealing with the fallout of that ever since.”

“Some Hatfields and McCoys-style stuff?”

“We’re thankfully a bit less bloody than that. And besides, the end of this little turf war is something that will happen sooner than later.”

I stare at him, concerned about the format of his words. “Uh... I didn’t sign up to join in on some sort of private ranch war.”

He laughs. “No, no. And I’m not expecting you to get involved. By the end of the year, though, our lands should be well and properly merged and that 1903 surveyor’s mistake will no longer be relevant.”

“Buying him out?”

“Max’s too much of a prideful idiot to let that be the situation. No, I’m marrying his daughter.”

Hearing those words makes my heart sink, and it sinks deep. I mentally slap myself. He's my boss. Not someone to be swooning over. Maybe I should be imagining him as some schlubby middle manager, like the last few bosses I had were.

"Of course, he doesn't approve of our plan," Jack continues. "But Sarah and I are adults; we can make our own decisions. She's as sick of his nonsense as I am."

"Aw, forbidden love, rebelling against her father's wishes."

"If you want to see it like that, yes." The way he talked about her wasn't very passionate. Or maybe I am just seeing things, still not believing the hot guy in front of me was already engaged. "It'll be good for both our ranches. And the town. People seem to think they need to pick sides, just because that's what they've always done."

"What, do people get in fights over ranches they don't even live on?"

"No, which makes it all the sillier. People saying they think Perry's on the right side of it just because that's what their grandfather thought. It's all a bunch of archaic nonsense and it always has been."

"I guess there isn't that much to obsess over in a small town, so they need to bicker about something."

"Then I guess they'll have to go pick sports teams like normal people when this is all over."

I didn't come here to get involved in petty squabbles. I came here for the horses. I leaned on the railing, my chin in my hand, letting my thoughts roam. "So the long and short of it is to avoid the big ugly fence."

"You shouldn't have much trouble. Most of the horses are pretty spooked away from

it by now. I think he's been using some pesticides on his side of the fence. Likely terrible for his grass and the environment, but he's that petty."

"You're an environmentalist?"

"If I don't have an environment, I don't got much, Lily. It's just common sense for me to care. Plus, you know, it's the right thing to do. I want this ranch to stay in working order, and thrive for years to come, something to hand down to my kids, and something for them to give to my grandkids. If I'm spraying acidic chemicals everywhere, all that I'm going to be giving them is a useless plot of land."

A long sigh escapes my lips. "I'm sure you and Sarah will make the most of it. And have beautiful children."

He grunts. "Yes. Sarah's and my children. This is all for them."

More of that oddly neutral tone. "What about your family? What do they think of you sleeping with the enemy?"

"They mostly think it's some plot from the Perry family to get at us. My siblings, aunts, and uncles are all saying they're not showing up for the wedding unless I can prove it's legitimate. And it is. Sarah and I have made sure we have very thorough prenups and arrangements. We've thought this out. There's no foul intention on her end, no doubts in my mind. I understand why they're acting the way they are, but they have to realize this feud is too stupid to continue."

I almost want to flat out ask him if this marriage with Sarah is a political and economic one, and not one of love. But that felt weird and accusatory, and I remind myself that this guy has more than a decade on me in age. Pursuing him romantically is just weird, and it would be weird even if he isn't engaged.

Even disregarding my strange interest into his personal life, I can tell I am going to be working under a good man. His horses seem happy, he cares about the land, and he didn't seem to have a rash bone in his body.

It makes me want him even more.

I'm twenty-two. I should have been over these crazy, boiling teenage hormones, but no, they were still there, urging me to make dumb decisions like trying to flirt with my boss.

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My soon-to-be-married boss.

Because why make just moderately bad decisions?

You should always shoot for the moon and make the worst decisions you can possibly make.

2

JACK

“Cheddar here is a bit of a rascal if you let him be,” I say, guiding him back to his stable. He had led poor Lily on a wild-goose chase across the farm. “You have to show your dominance with them sometimes, let them know you’re not going to stand for it.”

Lily sighed. “I didn’t think I would have to deal with that sort of thing with horses.”

“Oh, yes. They’re social animals. They play games and feel people out just like we do. May not be able to hold much of a conversation, but they have personalities all the same.”

It has been a few days since Lily had come to the ranch. She’s settling in quite well.

“Thought you were a horse girl,” I joke, closing the stable door behind me.

“I totally am, I just forgot how wild even the not-so-wild horses can be. Last few

ranches I worked for just made me do bookkeeping, despite me signing on as a wrangler.”

“Thought a pretty dainty thing like yourself couldn’t handle the hard work?”

“Bunch of denim-clad assholes chomping on cigarettes, so yeah, probably.”

I chuckle. “I think you got the skills to handle whatever I throw at you, Lily.”

“And what else are you planning on throwing at me?”

There are things I want to throw at her, all right. Things I wouldn’t mention in polite company. Since the moment she stepped foot on my ranch, I knew what I wanted. Her.

“Nothing out of the usual. Just keep doing what you’re doing, and I’ll be happy with you.”

In the few days since she’d come, we’ve been glued together at the hip, and not because she needed me to be. I just can’t help myself. Ever since I rode up to her, I couldn’t help but be magnetized to her presence. That smile of hers had my heart flutter, and everything else only made the situation worse. Those curves, that hair, her voice, her giggle. I finally understood what this whole love-at-first-sight thing was.

Not like this is all a one-way appeal either. I see her looking up at me. How there’s only ever been a smile on her face. How she shakes her little butt against me when I’m nearby. She turns so red when she realizes what she’s doing, too, as if she’s embarrassed by it.

Which I guess is understandable.

I'm engaged.

Why did this girl show up now instead of six months ago?

"Sarah should be rolling in within the hour," I say, giving Cheddar his feed bag. "You don't have to meet her now if you don't want to; you've done plenty today. Go take it easy."

I heard her let out a long breath at the mention of my fiancée's name. "No. I should. She's going to be one of my bosses here, right? We should get acquainted."

"Hmm. Not so much. Sarah and I hadn't really discussed what happens to our ranches in terms of when everything's happening. Don't know when she'd become a presence around here, really."

"Aren't you getting married in a few months? I thought you'd both talk each other's ears off about it."

It's my turn to turn a slight shade of red. "Um, it's all very legal and confusing, and we thought it would take away from our relationship."

Which is a huge load of shit, given it's our entire relationship.

"I guess it isn't my place to pry," Lily replies as she straps feed bags to the snouts of some of the other horses. "I'm the new recruit. I don't expect my bosses' entire romantic history a week after signing on."

"Don't fret over it, little lady. It's natural to be curious about those around you and make conversation."

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Maybe I need to sequester myself far away from her. I've been using the excuse of showing her the ropes as to why I've been hanging out with her so much these past few days, when usually I don't engage with my employees unless they or I need something.

Just start keeping far away from her for a whole year, Jack. That'll help you resist temptation. It's a big ranch. It should be easy, right?

The sound of crushing gravel under tires hits my ears from a distance. Sarah's SUV is pulling up in the ranch house's driveway. "Guess I have to go meet my bride-to-be. You have everything here under control, I gather?"

"We're just about done anyway. And you're not sounding too thrilled about meeting your future wife. Did you two have a fight or something?"

"Oh... no, I'm just being funny," I say, forcing a smile on my face.

I don't think Lily bought it.

We head out of the stables, and Sarah steps out of her vehicle, slinging her purse over her arm.

She's pretty, I suppose. Objectively. Long blonde hair, takes care of herself, just the right height to have long, slender legs. She must have dealt with so many guys trying to get with her through high school and college. She just isn't my type.

Not to mention, her last name made it even more impossible to imagine her as a good

match for me. Every time I saw her around Greenbluff, I just naturally expected all the vileness of her father, just in a prettier package.

Fortunately, that isn't the case, but it doesn't make it easy to forget that innate gut feeling.

She smiles our way as we approach. "Hey, there, Jack. This is your new wrangler, I'm guessing?"

"Sarah, this is Lily. Lily, Sarah."

"Hi," Lily says, meekly shaking her hand. She looks so intimidated by her.

Sarah looks Lily up and down. "Do I have to worry about you going behind my back?" Sarah has a smug little grin on her face, her arms behind her back to further sell the playfulness.

"What?" I cough, a chill going down my spine. "Don't be ridiculous, Sarah. One, I'm almost old enough to be her father. Two, I respect boss-and-employee boundaries. Three, I'm dedicated to making what we have work."

She laughs again. "I'm noting that your dedication to our engagement is the third thing you mentioned."

I want to feel things for Sarah. It would make everything so much easier.

I never believed in love at first sight. My parents always told me that their relationship took work, them starting off on a shotgun wedding after what was supposed to be a one night stand. But they had more in common, the more they got to know one another. They worked hard with one another, and they made it work, and they both came to eventually fall deeply in love with one another. This is how I

thought it would work with Sarah and I, but we didn't even have that off night of passion to start with. Just two people with a shared goal of burying an idiotic century-old family feud.

Of course, Lily showing up goes and wrecks how I think I love and lust work. Damn, that girl is making me feel things without even trying, and I know every inclination I'm feeling toward her is such a bad idea.

"I look at all three reasons as equal in importance, and it doesn't matter which comes first."

"Sure you do, Jack. I totally believe you." Sarah starts heading toward the ranch house. "You coming? I don't think you want me doing all this myself."

"Doing what?"

"Planning the wedding, silly."

"Oh." I pause, glancing at Lily, who is nervously shuffling in place. "Do you really need my help for that, Sarah?"

"I don't really. I'm just giving you proper warning, since it's your wedding too. You sure you just want to let my imagination run wild? Unrestrained by the bounds of thrift or bad taste?"

"I've never been much of a planner. Or had any grand designs for my wedding." This wasn't a lie to get out of it. I guess I'm just a stereotypical guy in this sense. Outside the woman I loved being there, I couldn't care less about the set dressing of it all.

"You know I love pineapples," Sarah laughed. "Do you really want pineapple on the cake? Or even worse, pineapple on the pizza at the reception?"

I let out another long breath and look at Lily. “You know what? One of your duties is being my assistant. Why don’t you go and help Sarah with this? Offer your insight. Keep her from going too crazy.”

“Are... are you going to make me go do math? Make me keep a budget?” Lily freezes in place.

I shake my head. “I’m not that worried about the money. I’m what you see, Lily. A bit of a cowboy. And we’re in New Mexico. Go help Sarah and just keep reminding her that we’re in New Mexico and not Hawaii.”

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“Um, all right. I didn’t expect wedding planning to be a part of my job, but I guess it’s better than bookkeeping.”

Sarah cocks her head and raises an eyebrow. “If that’s how you want to do it, Jack, that’s how you want to do it. Come on, then, Lily. I’m sure you can keep me from doing anything too stupid with Jack’s money.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “I’ll finish wrangling the rest of the horses. This is all I expect of you for the night, Lily. Thank you.”

She nods. “No problem.”

Lily awkwardly follows Sarah into the ranch house, leaving me standing alone.

I laugh to myself, appreciating the absurdity of the situation I had just created. I wished that it was Sarah helping Lily plan her own wedding, instead of the reality.

At least I have the horses to keep my mind off things for a bit. That distraction wouldn’t last too long, but hey, at least it’s something.

3

LILY

“Would a country band be too on the nose?” Sarah muses aloud. “Just because we’re out here in the West doesn’t mean we have to go with that, right? What do you think Jack likes?”

I shrug. “I haven’t heard him play much music in the time I’ve been here. Shouldn’t you already have an idea of that, since you’re the one about to marry him?”

Sarah is furiously typing and clicking away at her laptop as we sit at the ranch house dining table. “He hasn’t really talked about that much. He hasn’t really talked about much of anything, to be honest.”

This was one awkward job Jack had put me on. As much as I’m enjoying his company, it’s not like I know him well enough to go and plan his wedding.

“He doesn’t talk about anything actually. The man’s an enigma wrapped in a mystery,” she says with a smile. “But his heart is good. I know that much.”

I take a sip out of my can of soda. “How can you be so sure?”

“He didn’t hesitate when I proposed.”

I cock an eyebrow. “You proposed?”

Sarah laughs. “Yes. He had brought up wanting to bury the hatchet on this whole feud thing. Asked me out on a date to do so. Said he was hoping that I had more sense than my father. I told him that I was hoping I had more sense than my father too.”

“Your father doesn’t approve, I take it?”

She shakes her head. “No. He thinks I’m being played. Then he suggested I go and try to backstab Jack.”

“Backstab him? By marrying him?”

“Insist on some insane prenuptial agreement and then divorce him as soon as I’m legally able to. Search his ranch to find something to get him arrested on, and if I can’t find anything, plant some illegal evidence somewhere.”

I grit my teeth. “So your father is not against playing dirty, I see.”

“His awfulness made me wake up to the fact that I needed to make changes in how I approach things. I can’t just keep carrying on his legacy like this.”

I sink down in my chair more. Their relationship is so weird. They respect one another. They have common goals. There is no passion, and that just weirded me out. Was I just being hopeful that maybe I still had a shot with Jack? Or maybe I’m just oblivious, and some relationships are just like this? Not everything works like it does in a romance novel. People get married for a whole bunch of other reasons besides love.

Sarah stops, looks toward me, and cups her chin with her hand. “What color theme should we go with? I was thinking of something red, orange, or pink. Like the sunsets over the vast fields of our ranches.”

“Those are nice. That’s definitely something you should go with. Tie it together with both of your histories.”

“Yeah, good idea. I’m going with that. I always wanted to be a wedding planner, but I guess the world has other ideas for me.”

With my soda can empty, I toss it to the recycling. “I think you got this without me. I’m going to go check in with Jack before I call it a night for myself.”

“Hey, just having someone to bounce ideas off of is invaluable sometimes. You helped, even if it felt like you didn’t.”

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“Well, I’m glad to be of service even if I felt like I didn’t do anything.”

She laughs. “I hope to see you around more.”

“Thanks. Take care of yourself too.”

I head out, and look around to see if I just spot Jack nearby. No such luck. I head toward the stables, where he was last. He’s not there, either, so I decide to take out Misty, one of the calmer-tempered mares. The ranch is pretty big, so if I had decided to look for Jack on foot, I’d be out until midnight.

The sun is setting, and I enjoy it even as I ride through the fields. I finally spot another horse. Jack is up on the bluff of his ranch, the one that overlooks the town below. I head over and hop off Misty.

“Catching the view before calling it a night?”

“Yeah.” He’s sitting down and leaning against a nearby large rock. “Remember to come enjoy this sometimes. It’s a reminder of what I have here and how it should be treasured.”

I take a seat beside him. “It is really nice.”

He looks at me. “What are you doing up here?”

“Just wanted to check in with you before I called it a night.”

“I told you that you could call it when you were finished with Sarah.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know. I just wanted to check in with you again.”

He chuckles. “Worried about me? On my own ranch?”

“I don’t know. I just... I just wanted to see you again? I’m sorry,” I say, pushing myself up. “That’s too familiar. I’ll head back.”

He grabs my hand. “You don’t have to.”

“You sure?”

“If you want to appreciate the sunset, I’d be happy to have someone to enjoy it with.”

I sit back down. “Then why not ask your fiancée?”

He goes silent for a moment. “Never thought about doing that.”

I laugh. “Really selling me on how deeply in love you are with one another.”

Jack sighs. “Sarah’s and my relationship is one of practicality. People don’t usually marry for political reasons anymore, but if some people back in the thirteen hundreds could suffer through it for their country's sake, why can’t we?”

“Suffer? Keep going. Tell me how much you love her.”

He shakes his head. “‘Suffer’ is too strong a word, yes, but that’s not the point. You’re a little shit sometimes, you know that?” He’s smiling as he says it.

“I can’t help it. Your whole engagement seems absurd.”

“It is. Through the eyes of a twenty-first-century person, marrying the daughter of your long-standing local nemesis feels horribly out of date. But it’s what needs to be done.”

The sun makes its final descent behind a mountain far in the distance. “So you’re just giving up on love? Just like that?”

“I thought maybe we’d work for it. Sarah and I like one another well enough. Sure, the passion is nonexistent, but you hear stories of the past. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. That’s an arranged marriage, but people ended up romanticizing it as some wonderful love story. Maybe we’ll end up the same way.”

“Just seems like a stretch to me.” I sigh, focusing on the sun instead of him in hopes it’ll keep dark ideas out of my mind.

“Plus, I’m old enough to look past just falling in love as all that matters,” he says, more wistful than before.

“You’re not that old, you know.”

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“I’m twelve years older than you, Lily.”

“And you’re still too young to have your midlife crisis and to be saying stuff like love doesn’t matter. What do you do if someone shows up and you feel something for them? Actual true desire? Passion? Someone who you want to build more with than just a mutually beneficial business arrangement?”

He laughs. “I’d have said that could never happen. That I don’t believe in love at first sight. That’s what I honestly believed up until a week ago.”

“A week ago? Did something change?”

There is a sense of unease within me. I couldn’t avoid it. It conflicts with the need I have to stay near Jack. The whole reason I came up here even when he said I was done with work for the night.

“Someone beautiful showed up in my life. And I was smitten. Usually I never thought myself shy enough to act on my feelings, but common courtesy and my engagement gave me second thoughts.”

He’s talking about me. A chill goes down my spine. The tension between us is so strong, I can hardly feel anything but it, the breeze of the desert struggling to register against my bare skin.

My eyes meet his. Our hands have unconsciously come together, our fingers entangling. My heart has started to pound a million beats per minute. Everything seems to slow down as we gaze into the souls of one another. As his lips move

toward mine.

I should stop this, I think to myself. This is wrong. He's my boss. He's engaged. He's so much older than me.

But I don't want to stop this.

Ever since I laid eyes on Jack, he's been so heavily in my mind. I want to spend more and more time with him. I want him to be my boyfriend. I want him to be my lover. I want him to be so much more than that.

When his lips meet mine, it's simply electric. The blood rushing through my veins, the sheer intensity of everything going through me, this feels right. So fucking right. None of those reasons seem to matter, just pure, pounding lust as his tender kiss grows more erotic, more hot, his tongue invading my mouth and twisting with my own.

I want him. I need him.

And I will have him.

4

LILY

He hesitates. He pulls back. "I'm sorry," he says, breathlessly.

"Don't be."

"I shouldn't have done that. I should have asked first."

“I’m giving you permission now,” I say. “I’ve wanted this every bit as much as you do, Jack.”

His hand shakes as he pushes my hair out of my eyes. “It feels so wrong.”

It is. He’s my boss. He’s engaged.

But despite all those hurdles between us, we both undeniably want this, and we both want it bad. We cleared those hurdles easily, running right into one another’s arms.

Because even with all that bullshit that’s there, at the end of the day, he’s a man, I’m a woman, and our desire for one another is so incredibly strong.

We kiss again. It’s every bit as amazing and electric as the first time. His hands stroke my cheek, gooseflesh erupting in his path, He pushes my jacket off my shoulders. It’s a beautiful night, and I’m already getting quite sweaty. I hurriedly unbutton my top, Jack taking advantage of the newly exposed flesh in front of him. He’s doing much the same, finally revealing everything I’d been curious about these past few days.

A strong, manly chest. Not a forest of hair, but plenty for me to ogle at and enjoy a great deal. I let my fingers explore his form, feeling the warmth at the sensations that those hairs tickle me with. Our shirts fall down to the ground, crafting a makeshift bed for the two of us, that I’m sure the rest of our clothes will soon expand.

He leans in with a kiss, the heat of his breath tickling my ear. “I’ve lusted after you ever since I rode up to you when you got here. Every detail I’ve learned in the past week has only made that desire all the stronger.”

“I really could just say the same,” I giggle.

“I love that too. I mean it. Catching glimpses of that denim gripping your ass, the

adorable way you laugh, the way your hair sways beautifully as you move, it's taken all my willpower not to go right for you, darlin'."

His hands slide down my back, the feeling of his flesh against mine so damn intense. He cups my ass, and I'm hurriedly undoing my belt, ready to kick those jeans off my legs and let him have full and wide access to my entire naked form.

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I've never done this—given myself to a man... but with him, I'm not nervous. I'm eager. I feel ripe and ready. I want him to take control and have all of me.

His kisses depart my lips only to go down to my neck, my chest, tickling my breasts through my bra. He nuzzles them, and again, I'm so eager to be naked for him I unhook it, and let it fall away, my tits falling open to be tickled by the brisk night air that surrounds us. Firm, strong fingers against my nipples, the fire of his touch spreading through me.

I want all of him too. His hard body, his nice, firm ass. I tug at his belt, hurriedly pulling it through the loops as I yank it off him and start pulling down those jeans. For a time, it's just all one big frenzy of disrobing one another, adding to the pile.

Soon we're bare as the day we were born, his lips on mine again, the kisses going down my body. I swallow, anxiously, not really sure what to do beyond what I've seen in... let's just call them educational videos.

The vibes I'm giving off don't go wholly unnoticed. Jack looks me up and down, a smile on his face as he appreciates what he sees. "Have you ever done this before, Lily?"

"Well, um... uh, I was waiting for the right guy to be with. I've never even had a real boyfriend before." Okay, I had one in second grade, but I'm not sure that even counts because he still thought I had cooties. "Never even been kissed."

Jack pauses and sighs. "We can't do this," he says, sitting up beside me.

“Why? Why not?”

“This can’t be your first time. It isn’t right.”

I glare at him. “Isn’t that my decision?”

“You just said you were waiting for the right guy.”

“I imagined it being with someone who I found hot. Someone who has proven to be kind and gentle. And for it to be romantic. You? You’re hotter than hell, and even beyond the ways you’ve touched me so far, you’re an angel with the horses. And under the setting sun that transitions into a bright night sky? I can’t think of anything more romantic than that.”

He smiles my way. “You’re right. I shouldn’t tell you what you want. I want you, and if you want me, I shouldn’t let anything else stop me.”

Except the whole engagement, boss-employee relationship, and age gap.

Stop, Lily, stop trying to talk yourself out of having something good.

“Shut up and take me, then.”

“Oh, I will,” he says, punctuating it with a brief kiss. “But I’m going to do everything in my power to make it special for you.”

His hands go down my form, all of it so warm and intense, leaving me breathing heavy. He licks my tits, the simple bliss of that so good, but that’s not where he wants to land. Across my abdomen, his hands massaging my thighs as his lips come between my spreading legs.

I had thought guys needed prodding to do such a thing, that I should expect more selfishness out of a lover. But Jack needs no encouragement to give without getting. He kisses me on my clit, the electricity and lightning shooting through me so intensely. He won't stop there. He sets a gradual and powerful pace as his tongue lays the lashes on me, showing such tender care to my center.

There is a steady, rising tide of sensation within me as he laps my slit, and I writhe so delicately beneath him. His hands shoot up my body, paying attention to everything, not just the most sensitive parts as he lays his worshiping of me on thicker and stronger. My heart pounds harder, and I writhe beneath him as the intensity of it all fills my form, overwhelming every nerve inside of me. I never imagined something could feel this good, and it wasn't as if I was completely oblivious and never explored my body.

Jack is just something special though. He knows how to touch me down there, knowing how to stir me just right as I cry out beneath him. Every sound I make is a signal for him to take me harder and harder, and soon I'm moaning for him so completely. The pleasure comes at me so steady, then sends me right over the edge until I'm screaming for him.

The pulsing, pounding pressure of it all is so potent, and I'm soon lying beneath him covered in cold sweat, looking up at him, seeing a delightful grin on his face, him so very pleased with himself. "That a good start for you, darlin'?"

I nod enthusiastically.

He crawls up my body, giving me another loving kiss. "Now I'm going to claim you. Make you mine, and make it so you never forget me."

I nod even more. "Please. Give it to me. I've been waiting a long time for this."

Between us, I see his length. How hard and strong it is for me, how badly he wants to give it to me. It's bigger than I expected, but I have complete trust in Jack to take care of me. He's been so gentle so far, there was no reason to expect for him to be anything else.

"Is it safe?" he whispers in my ear.

I nod. I appreciate the courtesy. I want him, yes, but my lust hasn't made me that oblivious to the risks that come with indulging it.

His cock rubs against my mound, spiraling down toward my waiting sex, so wet and ready for him. Jack gives me another glance, another chance to have second thoughts about all this. Again, I'm no fool. I've wanted this man ever since he gingerly rode up into my life. I wasn't going to give him up now.

With my affirmation, he brings the head of his cock to my entrance, and gently begins to push himself in. The whole time he's watching me intently, so driven to not hurt me.

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Feeling him enter is so overwhelming, hardly what I expected as I fantasized in the past week, but that doesn't mean it was by any means bad. He holds my hands tight as he goes deeper and deeper, and I'm expecting some terrible jolt of pain like all the TV shows and movies had suggested.

It never comes.

Instead, I simply feel all of him. Deep within me, us together, close as two people could ever hope to be. It's powerful, but by no means uncomfortable.

"Nice to see that your body wants me as much as your mind."

I whimper with enthusiasm. "Take me. Give it to me. You've made it so special so far, and I don't want you to stop doing that."

He grunts, and gives me exactly what I want, punctuating his words with another loving kiss. The friction of him sliding out of me only to slide back inside continues, again and again, and I'm gasping hotter and higher for him with each and every movement. I wrap my hands around him, my fingernails digging into his back as I claw at him, desperately trying to hold on with everything I'm feeling.

My legs wrap around him, feeling his ass tense with my calves as our bodies entangle with one another so completely. I soon start to rock against him, making the bliss that we're both feeling echo and grow hotter and higher with each and every moment. I'm so damn enraptured with need for this man, nibbling on my lip and struggling to hold on. Every stroke sends me higher, and I see that it's doing so many things to him too. He's panting hard, but holds on. I can tell he's a gentleman and strongly believes in

the mantra of ladies first.

“You’re so damn sexy. And having you like this just makes you even sexier, more than I thought humanly possible. I need this. I need you, Lily.”

I can’t help but agree with him. I need him. This can’t be a one-time thing. This is too good.

And I haven’t even come on his cock yet.

The climax is on the horizon, it’s too much. I’m barely holding myself together, crying out, the echoes of my delight ricocheting off the mountains that surround us. I know the longer I endure, the greater it will be, but damn, no one could resist Jack. Not like this.

It hits me. The absolute earth-shattering bliss that comes my way, sends me soaring high into the sky and shuddering with bliss. My heart pounds against my chest, and I barely hang on. My entire body is on fire, burning with pleasure, my voice going so hoarse from screaming for him.

Jack is right there with me. Seeing me come is all he needs to come himself, him holding me tight as his cock throbs with need within me, until I feel the warmth escape him and fill me. So much warmth, so much intensity. I love it. I yearn for more, but know it will have to wait.

Together, we pant. We have fucked so long that the sunset has given way to the night properly, and moon is the only thing giving us any light. We enjoy the radiance of one another for a time, looking into each other’s eyes, and seeing the smiling reflection of the other within.

Finally, Jack sighs, and slumps down next to me.

“Wow, are you really doing the cliché of falling asleep right after you come?” I ask, my tone joking.

“I don’t think our clothes make for a particularly comfortable bed, so no. I’m just having second thoughts.”

I sit up, wrapping my arms around my knees as I look his way. “You don’t have to do that. I wanted that, Jack. And it was everything I could hope it could be and more.”

“No. Not you. You’re also everything I could hope for and more, Lily. It’s just...” He pauses. “I don’t want to ruin the mood.”

“Too late,” I say. “I guess it’s the whole engagement thing, mainly.”

He pushes himself up, and wraps an arm around me. “Yeah. I’m having what’s called post-nut clarity. I betrayed Sarah’s trust, and now I’m struggling to think if I could ever hope to keep this engagement going. I feel disgusted with myself.”

“Well, I am more than pleased with you, no regrets on my end,” I reply, my smile wide.

“You’re right. I don’t regret this at all.” There were other problems still looming between us. “I’m supposed to end this stupid feud. Bring the families and the ranches together.”

My heart is heavy as he says those words. Am I a home-wrecker? Did I just come in and ruin this guy’s life for an hour of passion, no matter how good it was?

“No. I don’t mean it like that.” He stops himself. “You’re worth it, Lily. More than worth it.”

“We could...” I take a deep breath. “We could just not tell anyone about it. Keep it between ourselves. We’re the only people for at least a mile. The horses saw us, but I don’t think they’re going to spill our secrets anytime soon.”

“I don’t want to build my relationship on lies,” Jack says as he gets up and starts to look for his boxer-briefs. “But I guess this is the foundation I’m dealing with now.”

“Jack...” I say, with another deep breath. “Have you ever even been intimate with Sarah?”

He freezes. “And if I haven’t?”

“I don’t know. I’m just curious. All signs for me pointed to that fact, but neither of you seemed to be the ‘Save yourselves for marriage’ types. I guess I just wanted confirmation despite going on assumptions.”

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He resumes trying to dress himself. He's silent for a time, and I soon join him in getting dressed. Without one another's body heat and the adrenaline of our tryst pumping, it turns out the desert is kind of cold at night.

"Sarah's and my relationship wasn't built on intimacy, no," Jack says, finally collecting his thoughts enough to give me an answer. "But we did have a common goal. And I don't want to ruin it. We can't do this again, Lily. I need to stay on the right path for all of this, and as much as it pains me to do so, we gotta keep this between ourselves and keep ourselves under control, going forward. Promise me."

Just like him, I take my time in responding as I dress. "All right. Sure. I promise."

"Thank you. And I'm so damn sorry about all of this."

We dress, we mount our horses, and we head back toward the ranch house.

The promise we had made to one another wasn't one that was going to be kept. He knew it. I knew it. But what's another lie on top of all of the others if it makes us feel better about ourselves?

5

JACK

It's been a rough as hell day and I feel utterly exhausted. Lots of running around, lots of horses being more confrontational, lots of trying to avoid Lily and the truth of everything.

I get the last horse back in and finally get the gate closed.

Not seeing her but knowing she's there torments me. My mind keeps flashing back to the utter beauty of Lily. Seeing her body, hearing her moans, the way she smiles, the way she giggles. I can't get the girl out of my mind no matter how hard I try. I had hoped work would give me solace from my intrusive thoughts, but there's no such luck.

Just Lily and all of the joy, and then the reminder of how I had betrayed Sarah and everything I'd been working so hard for to happen.

"You all right there, boss?" one of my other wranglers pipes up. "You look pretty rough."

"I'm fine, Reggie. Just a lot on my mind."

"About work?"

"About a lot of things. Thanks for your concern."

Reggie smiles. "All right. Say, what's your employee fraternization policy?"

"My what? Oh. Do whatever you want, I'm not going to control your private lives. I'm not going to get involved unless there's a problem."

"So, I was thinking of asking that fine piece of ass Lily out to the bar..."

"Lily?" I say, glaring at him, my fists balling. "Don't talk about her like that."

He laughs again. "What? It's what she is."

“She’s a fellow employee. Not a piece of meat.”

“Why, you got something for her, boss?” The grin he has on his face tells me that he knows something.

How? I trust Lily to not spill the beans. And I certainly said nothing. Unless...

I shudder in place, feeling embarrassment for myself and for Lily. The echoes of the night, and that some of my employees do linger into the twilight. Did they hear us? Was it that obvious?

“I’m thinking maybe I’ll ask her up to the cliffside. I think she’d really like that,” Reggie continues, not knowing when to shut up.

Rage takes over, and I grab him by the collar. “If you saw something, if you heard something. You didn’t. Leave the girl alone, and never mention this, or you’re going to be looking for another job real soon.”

“All right, all right, chill,” he says, as I let him down.

I take a deep breath. He probably didn’t mean it as blackmail or even to be mean about it. It was teasing me, just like he does with all the other boys on the ranch.

But it did mean the idea was out there. That I had been up at the cliff, doing erotic things with Lily, because I don’t think the sounds she made could have been mistaken for anything else.

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How many people on the ranch heard us? Or how many people has Reggie already mentioned this to? Rumors spread like wildfire, and they were going to inevitably reach the ears of Sarah.

And then I didn't know what I would do.

I head out of the stable and back toward my ranch house. Sarah's SUV isn't there. She's meant to be staying the week, but I have no idea when she's expected back. I'm engaged to her and I don't know anything about her. It all seems a tad silly, but I guess that's where I'm at in my life.

My nose is greeted with a delightful scent as I step into my home. Is that pizza? I follow my nose to the kitchen, and Lily is there, enjoying a slice torn from a mighty fine-looking pie, one covered with pepperoni, sausage, bacon, green peppers, and even some jalapenos. She's a bit of a spice fiend, if I didn't need more things pushing me to fall in love with her.

"Well, well... isn't that the most hot, steamy, juicy, and spicy entrée I could ever hope to see." I rub my chin with a smile, meeting her eye to eye. "And the pizza looks really good too."

"Do you want some?" she offers. "I picked up some premade crusts from the local grocer, and they're really good. I had thought maybe I'd just put it away for tomorrow's lunch, but I do like sharing. Especially with you, Jack."

I chuckle, and pull off a slice, sitting down next to her.

Being so close to her makes everything feel so light, after the unbelievable weight I'd been dealing with all day. Such a sweetheart, every little thing I learn about her makes me like her even more.

"Jalapenos on pizza is an odd choice," I say, taking a bite. No surprise, it's absolutely delicious.

"I guess you're not much of a spice person? It should be okay if you pick them off."

"No, no. I wouldn't change a thing. I just look at a girl like you and don't think about someone who goes for the hot options."

She giggles. "I got started young. The pizza place my parents used to order from came with some extra peppers on the side, and I ate it because no one else did. Mom always went on about how wasting food is bad, so I thought this was the same. Turns out I liked it, and I've been pushing my boundaries ever since. I'm always in search of my next bit of burn."

"Hit me with whatever experimentation you do when you're here. I don't think I'm to the point of downing Carolina reapers for fun, but I do enjoy the test."

We chat during the meal, enjoying one another's company, and devouring the entire pizza. Given she said she planned to make her lunch for tomorrow, I started thinking about how I could go and make it up to her.

"I'm stuffed," she says, leaning into me. "Think I ate more than I intended to."

"Just couldn't resist, huh?"

"I think I just didn't want to have to leave, so I kept eating to hang around a bit longer."

“You can just hang out, you know. I’m not going to force you out of a room just because I’m done. For as long as you’re here, Lily, my home is your home.”

More of that joyous laughter. “I didn’t think you’d mind. There’s just the whole promise we made. That we shouldn’t do such things. So I didn’t want to be too familiar.”

Looking at her, seeing that she’s so damn beautiful. Knowing that we were already doomed. That Sarah would find out. That we couldn’t run from it forever, and the absolute pain that might come from me refusing what’s plain as day in front of me.

I can’t help myself. I lean in. And I break my promise.

I kiss her.

God, it’s everything I could ever want. The passion that has eluded me, the love. It’s wrong, but it’s so right; it’s how the world should be.

“Am I interrupting something?”

I break my kiss. I look at the entrance to our kitchen. Standing there, holding a brown paper bag, is my fiancée.

She’s not angry, as I thought she might be. She’s not saddened by the sight.

She’s just so very confused.

My heart sinks. Lily looks down at her feet, so ashamed to have gotten me caught in my lie so quickly.

I stand up. “Sarah...”

“I should have known by the way you were looking at her.”

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“I’m sorry, Sarah. My heart pushes me one way even as my brain pushes me another.”

“Jack, I don’t know anymore. Is this how it’s going to be with our marriage?”

I stare at her, slightly in disbelief. “What, you’re not just calling it off right here and now?”

She paces back and forth, setting her bag down. “I don’t know. What even are we?”

“Engaged, last time I check.”

“Yeah, but, like, that’s just some legal mumbo jumbo. We aren’t in love, Jack. We’re just... business partners. Using marriage as a tool to solidify a business agreement. Just something to help one another out.”

Part of me wanted to speak up and say, then she shouldn’t care. I didn’t betray her love. But I knew it wasn’t that simple.

It was for business. The marriage was all a sham. But it was still a marriage. And up until Lily entered my life, I was trying to convince myself that we could work it into something that resembled love, building off the shared values we did have.

That fantasy had gotten even more impossible when she spotted me cheating on her.

“Well, I’m not making excuses,” I say. “I’m not going to pretend you didn’t see what you saw. I’m not going to pretend like, I don’t know, I was giving her CPR with my

tongue.”

Lily is silent through all of this. She feels as guilty as I do, and doesn’t just want to run away from the scene. She has her head in her hands, rubbing her temples, trying to think of the impossible thing to say that would make everything all right.

Sarah takes a deep breath. “I’m going to say I’m thankful that you’re honest about it. A lesser man would feed me lies on top of the breach of trust. But I guess it’s just a wake-up call about what this all is.”

“What are we going to do about the engagement?”

“I told you, I don’t know. Logic and business sense tells me I should just ignore this. Pretend like our engagement and marriage is actually one of love. Maybe take this as permission to go find my own lover. But I don’t know if I want to be part of that. It all seems like a bridge too far, Jack.”

I nod along. “You’re your own woman, Sarah. Whatever you decide to do, I’m not going to protest it.”

There is a part of me that wanted to be the one to break it off. That now that I had an inkling of what love actually is, I couldn’t just use marriage as a tool. It was something that was meant for love.

But I knew how much it meant to Sarah. She didn’t deserve to be in that situation any longer than she had to be.

Sarah picked her bag up. “I’m going to head to bed. I want to run far, far away from here, but I don’t want to give off the idea that anything’s gone wrong.”

“I’m sorry,” Lily says, finally piping up from her silence. “I’m sorry I’m putting you

both through this.”

“You did nothing but act on how you naturally feel, hon,” Sarah replies. “This is all just a complicated mess. A better world wouldn’t put us through it.”

Sarah heads off toward one of my guest rooms to leave me and Lily all alone.

Lily has tears in her eyes. I rush to her side, pulling her head against my chest. “Don’t cry. I never want to see you cry.”

“I just don’t get it,” she says, the sounds muffled by my chest. “Why are you two even getting married?”

“For business,” I say, something I’ve repeated way too many times.

“It’s the twenty-first century. Can’t you just go to a lawyer? Draw up some paperwork? And work like that? That’s how you do business, Jack. You don’t have to have a wedding for all of that.”

“I’m afraid we do in this case,” I say, stroking her hair gently.

“That’s absurd.”

“No, I mean it.”

“Explain yourself, then. I’m not getting why you’re so intent on marrying Sarah. You two clearly don’t love one another. You literally floated the idea of you two having side pieces, and that’s not even for some kink or something. It’s just you two being apathetic to the other cheating.”

“Maxwell Perry is fifty-four years old. He could well live for another fifty years, if

not longer.”

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Lily looks at me with a cocked eyebrow.

“He will keep control of the Perry ranch until one of two things happens. One, he dies. Or two, his eldest child is married.”

“That’s... that’s not how inheritance works?”

“For the Perry ranch, it is. Something I always found admirable about them is they’re a bit forward thinking. They want the next generation to take over when they are ready, and marriage is what they use to signify that. They don’t want the land to stay in the hands of someone who might not have a stake in it existing ten years from now. So the ranch part of the inheritance is given when the marriage happens to ensure its continued prosperity.”

“So... you want to marry Sarah so she gets control of her ranch?”

I nod. “She wants it too. She doesn’t like her father much, and I guess this is the only way to get him out of her life. I want to end this stupid family feud, so I’m playing along. We’ll bring the ranches together and create a brighter future for the both of us and the town of Greenbluff.”

“In spite of you having no feelings for one another?”

“She’s nice. That’s literally all I can say.”

Lily’s shoulders sink. “Now I feel horrible for getting in the way, again.”

“Don’t. You’ve done nothing. As Sarah said, you’re just acting on your feelings. And I’m just acting on mine.”

We share another longing glare into one another’s eyes. And then, another kiss.

I don’t know what will happen between Sarah and I.

But I do know that I love Lily, and I will do whatever it takes to make her happy.

6

LILY

The next week is equal parts awkward and wonderful.

Jack and I get along so well, but we can’t shake the feeling of what happened with Sarah. He’s been holding off on doing anything more explicitly romantic, but I guess just being in his company laughing and talking will do.

For now, at least. I can’t imagine both of us keeping it in our pants forever, or we wouldn’t be in this situation in the first place.

Then there is the Greenbluff Summer Festival.

A big series of tents were erected outside the town, the local farmers bringing in their produce, and even some outside folks coming in to set up attractions. It’s really important to the town, apparently. It’s their way of keeping a part of home alive in a world that is quickly globalizing and unifying. Not to say that’s a bad thing, but knowing who you are and where you came from is important.

Jack had given the wranglers short workdays. He would have given us all the entire

day off, he said, but the horses don't understand the whole-day-off thing. They still needed to be fed and tended to. But any extra stuff that needed doing could wait.

It's the evening of one of the festival's nights, and I made my way down. There's hard, pounding music playing, which shook my expectations. I had thought it'd be some sort of country line dancing jig, but hey, it is the twenty-first century.

I'm not complaining. I'm hardly the type who went to nightclubs and raves all the time, but I couldn't deny the deep pounding bass awakes something in me. I jive out onto the floor, and start letting the music guide me. I realize I must look a tad bit ridiculous, always having been someone with two left feet, but I'm struggling to care.

Someone else there didn't think I needed to be a ballerina to be out there. "Looks like you're groovin' to the beat, little lady."

Jack. He's there in his full denim as usual, but instead of it simply being work clothes, it's the proper attire for the occasion at this party, even if I don't think cowboy boots were meant for dancing this type of music.

"Would you like to join me, Jack?" I giggle, offering my hand.

"Are we going Sadie Hawkins style with this? All right. I'll gladly join you."

I may have offered my hand, but Jack takes control almost immediately. He spins me into his arms, holding me close. As I dance, he moves with me, his hands on my hips, feeling my flesh as it bounces against his. We grind together, our fingers interlocking, as I look up at him, and he looks back at me. I can feel him purr, as well as other things about him.

We really go into it. When the music shifts into something you'd expect more of a town like Greenbluff, Jack takes the lead, pulling me into him, spinning me about,

and taking the lead on a more traditional dance.

“My mother made me go to lessons as a child,” he says, as he leads me so beautifully. I have no idea what I’m doing, but with his guidance, it works. “I always thought it was a lot of old-fashioned hogwash, but doing it with you, Lily, it’s all finally paying off.”

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I chuckle as we strut around. It's then that I finally notice that there's an awful lot of eyes on us. Greenbluff is a small enough town so everyone knows everyone else's business, especially when two powerful families like the Thomas and Perry families set to be wed together is the talk of the town. And I'm most definitely not Sarah Perry, and I'm dancing with her fiancé.

I start to think of some lie to try to deflect suspicion from the situation. Like maybe I'm just one of Jack's cousins who came into town for the festival. But the way we've been dancing makes such an illusion impossible without making Jack seem like an incredible weirdo, because no one dances with their cousin like we're dancing together unless we're from the most remote towns in West Virginia.

So I'm turning a shade of red the whole time, but Jack? Jack's just taking it in stride, his confidence unbroken. He twirls me out in tune with the music, throwing himself into it as much as I was. Every move he makes declares I'm his woman, and that he wants the entire world to know this fact. He holds me steady at times, his cock poking at my ass. "If it weren't for laws about public decency, I'd take you right here, right now, babe."

"I'm not much of an exhibitionist, so I'll be thankful for those laws for now."

"I could turn you into one pretty quick if you let me."

I laugh, and lightly slap him on the chest. "Stop, Jack. You're too silly."

We soon withdraw from the dance floor. We stop by one of the stands to get some heavily sugared funnel cake before finding a seat in one of the more remote spots in

the fairgrounds. It'd be dark except for the subtle glow of lanterns giving me some warm light to enjoy the handsomeness of his face.

"I can't believe we danced like that. In front of the whole town," I say, nibbling on a piece of our confection.

"Why can't you? You're more limber than you give yourself credit for."

"No, no, not that. I just thought we were supposed to keep our thing on the, you know, down-low."

Jack sighs, tapping his fingers on the table. "It's a small town. Even if all my wranglers, you, Sarah, and I kept our mouths shut, the news would get out somehow. So I don't feel any reason to deny myself your touch for their sake."

"So we're going to rub their faces in it instead?"

"Hey, I want to show the girl I love to the world. Is that so wrong?"

My face turns an even deeper red. He hadn't said the words to me directly, but even the suggestion was enough to get those butterflies in my stomach working overtime.

He leans against a nearby brick wall, taking a sip of his soda. "So, Lily, I was wondering..."

"Hmm? What's up?"

"What's your long-term plan in life? Or is that too much to ask a twenty-two-year-old?"

"I have ideas, but why do you want to know?"

He shrugs. “Just curious. We’ve had plenty of good times already. I just want to know more about you. I know you’re a horse girl, or otherwise you wouldn’t be here. Or is this just like, something to raise money so you can go to college and be a marine biologist or something like that?”

I chuckle. “Nope. You read me. Horse girl. Grew up in a city, but my mom would take me out into the country for rides whenever she could. So I wanted to do something with them.”

“Anything in particular?”

“You’re also right in the raising-money part. I want to become a veterinarian. Figured I’d get some money together to lessen the student loan burden and have my years in college be more comfortable with a little spending money.”

He shakes his head. “Just open a clinic? Ain’t most of the jobs for vets dealing with people’s dogs and cats? Not to knock that, they need help just like anyone else. There are horse vets too. I deal with them a lot.”

“Bingo. I want to help sick horses as my specialty. If I had complete control over my destiny with money being no object? I’d focus on rescuing and rehabilitating injured and sick horses.”

“Hmm,” he says, stroking his chin.

“Just like dogs, there’s a lot of people who get horses and don’t understand the responsibility that comes with it. Or literally the puppy thing, where they get a pony and don’t know how to deal with the giant beast it grows up to become. So they neglect it. They abandon it. And that seems to be a quick path to an early death for them. I’d like to stop that where I can.”

Jack looks my way, his eyes wide and sparkling with admiration for me, a smile on his face. He's all ears about what I'm going on about. It resonates with me, in a way that he's not being condescending, treating me like some little girl who is dreaming of sunshine and rainbows, but like what I'm saying is both noble and possible.

"Ideally, I'd be able to home them. Maybe until someone who is worthy can adopt them. Maybe I'll just keep them all to myself. I'll figure it out when I get there, I guess. Not like my dream is coming true tomorrow."

"If I could snap my fingers and make that happen for you, I would."

"Is this where you reveal you're a genie, but there's some arbitrary pact with Sarah where you can't make my every wish come true?"

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“No. Not that. You'd still need to go to veterinary school. Can't do that overnight.”

I giggle before taking a quick sip of my own soda. “What about you? Just happy keeping the family horse ranch going?”

He shrugs again. “I don't think just raising horses is sustainable from a business sense, to be completely honest.”

“Most people are going with these newfangled things called cars to get around in, yes.”

“Horseless carriages, who would have ever thought of such a thing?”

I laugh more. It's just so easy to do around him.

“If I merge the Perry ranch with my own, I'm going to go in a new direction, I think. The demand for horses won't remain, but people still love the animals, as I'm sure you understand.”

“The romance, the history, the majesty. There's just so much to love about them.”

“And there's a growing subset of people who think anything with animals is bad for the environment, and should be tossed aside as a relic of the old world.”

“Greenbluff doesn't seem to be a hotspot for vegetarians. I've gathered that much.” Outside the Thomas and Perry horse ranches, there were also a good deal of beef ranches.

“So I’m going to bring those together. I’m going to push the ranch to be as eco-friendly as possible, and pivot to more of a tourist destination. Take care of the land, let people enjoy that experience of riding across the desert and prairie, just like their ancestors did. Try to give horses a spot in a growingly technological world.”

“You want to show your love for the land and the animals that have given so much to your family over the centuries.”

“Exactly. I don’t think I have it in me to abandon them and then go off to learn to code or whatever it is people are supposed to be doing for a living nowadays.”

A horse rancher who wants to create a new future for horses, and a horse girl who wants to take care of them and keep them healthy. Beyond the obvious sparks of lust we had with one another, my imagination went wild with the possibilities, about how much more perfect we could be together.

“I could be your chief veterinarian. Taking care of all the horses. Maybe you could put foster horses out on show to people who might be able to take care of them, and show them individual love and kindness.”

“We’d have to vet them, of course. Uh, in the checking-their-backgrounds sort of way, not in the animal doctor sort of way.”

Lots of laughter shared between the two of us as we discussed our plans for the future. I spent the entire night just lost in his eyes, talking up a storm with this man, smiling madly the entire time.

We didn’t really talk about our relationship, or what that even was. Just this future ranch we both would pour our hearts and souls into. Even as business partners, we were showing more passion for one another than Sarah and Jack ever had for one another.

People were walking past us, and I realized it's one in the morning, the music had stopped, and the only sounds remaining were drunks droning on about something or other in the distance. Typical one-in-the-morning fare.

"We should head home," Jack says. "I had a wonderful time tonight, but everything must come to an end."

"All we did was talk."

"And that was incredible. I'd keep going until the sun rises, but the local sheriff gets anxious if she sees someone out after two in the morning. Thinks they're up to something, selling drugs, or whatever the big modern fear of the day is."

"Not to mention we need to be up at five to start our work for the day."

He nods. "Shall we, then?"

"Yes, we shall."

There is no one else on this planet that I want to spend the rest of my life staying up till 1:00 a.m., talking about horses, with. I think I'm in love too. I just need to figure out how and when to tell him.

Which, with the whole engagement thing? Even if it's just for business? It's way easier said than done.

7

LILY

It's what I'm deciding is a typical day at the Desert Sky Ranch. I feed the horses, do

some paperwork for Jack, take the horses out for some exercise, do some training, make sure new feed is ordered. This is pretty much what I expected the grind to be when I signed up for the job.

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Seeing Jack as I did, it is just one hell of a bonus. Last night we talked for hours, and we barely got any sleep. But seeing him rejuvenates me and pushes me to keep doing what I'm doing. I imagine if we started taking our relationship even further, though, that might be enough to keep me tired out.

I wrap up for the day, and not a moment too soon. It's been a gray day. There is no call for rain, but you can never trust the weather predictions wholly. As I return to the ranch house, I'm greeted with the unfamiliar sight of an old pickup in the driveway. It's rusty and run-down and looks like it's from the nineteen seventies. I'm surprised that something that old is still running.

Jack is out in front of the ranch house, and seeing who's in front of him explains the dire look on his face.

"You think you're so fucking special, don't you? My daughter has been home all day crying." He's on the older side, balding with gray hair—where he does have hair.

"She most assuredly has not," Jack is quick to fire back.

"The hell you know! You don't care about my daughter's feelings!"

I'm also greeted by the intense smell of liquor. This guy smells like a brewery, and not a particularly good one. I keep my distance, not really enjoying joining arguments I'm not yet a part of.

"I think I've talked to your daughter a whole lot more than you have, which is a shame, given you're her father."

Sarah's dad? I guess I see a vague resemblance, but she's lucky she got 95 percent of her looks from her mother.

"You're disrespecting me! Flaunting your infidelity in front of the whole goddamn town!"

He finally notices me out of the corner of his eye.

"There she is! The fucking slut you're giving up my daughter for!" He looks at me, the hate in his eyes raging.

Jack pushes him. "Don't you fucking talk to her like that." I haven't seen such anger in Jack before.

"I'll talk to her however I want. She's a fucking home-wrecker! A gold digger! She's dressed like garbage!"

I stare back at him, his raggedy flannel and holey jeans. He got a whole lot of nerve to talk."

"You better step off, or I'm going to get the sheriff in here to haul you off to the drunk tank, Max."

"That bitch? Like I should have to take orders from her, she can't make me do shit. Who the fuck made a woman sheriff?"

Did you really have to make your misogyny even more blatant? I shake my head as I massage my temples.

"Don't matter what you think of her. She'll have you in jail for trespassing. All I need to do is make a call."

Max grumbles, “This ain’t gonna be over. You can’t spit on my family’s name like this. You can’t spit on my name like this!”

“So the truth comes out,” Jack says, crossing his arms.

“Fuck you, Jack. Fuck your bitch too.” He waddles away toward his truck. With being as drunk as he obviously is, he shouldn’t be driving, but I think Jack just wants him gone, and I’m in total agreement with him.

Watching his truck putter away, I walk up to my boss. “So, what are you going to do?”

“What do you mean, what am I going to do?”

“Everyone knows your marriage with Sarah is a sham, Jack.”

“That whole stunt he just pulled just emboldened me to be honest. I’m for sure going to marry his daughter now.”

I look at him with disbelief, seeing the slight grin on his face. “Couldn’t he just, not give his daughter the farm? Seems like an honor-system thing.”

“Nope. Both Sarah’s and my lawyers have been over this. It’s baked into the clause of Max’s own inheritance thirty years ago. He has to surrender it once his eldest son is married.”

“But Sarah is...”

“His daughter, yes, but times have changed. Sex-specific clauses like that won’t stand up in court anymore, doubly so since Max has no sons.”

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There's a part of me that wanted the whole thing to fall apart. So my own fantasies of marrying Jack and living happily ever after could come true. Like, there's part of me that logically knows legal marriage is just that, legal. That Jack and I could be together in every sense of the term except legally. But I still wanted the complete package. The one that told the world that I was Jack's and Jack was mine.

Jack holds me close and massages my shoulder. "I'm going to go give Sheriff Rogers a call and fill him in about the trouble Max might cause. While I'm doing that, why don't you head up to our bluff?"

I giggle. "It's our bluff now?"

"May as well be. It's where we both bore our hearts to one another. And where we both bore our bodies. I feel like we should spend some time up there, just the two of us."

His devious grin told me just what that time would entail. "You sure? The sky's pretty gray. Seems like rain."

"I've lived here all my life, and I can tell when it's actually going to rain. It's not going to rain tonight."

"Didn't know you were a weatherman."

"I'm not. I just think I got a ninety percent chance of guessing right."

"And that ten percent chance is us getting soaked in a torrential downpour?"

He shrugs. “In that case, we run home, soaked. We can go into my room. Strip down to nothing.”

I blush at his suggestion.

“Then when we’re done doing things, wearing nothing, we throw on some blankets and warm up by the fire.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

He leans down and kisses me on the forehead before heading into the ranch house. I head to the stable and pull out Misty, giving her a few sugar cubes before heading out.

I don’t think I trust Jack’s weather prediction completely. It smells like rain to me, and I think I hear thunder in the distance. But he has lived here three and a half decades compared to my two weeks, so I’ll follow his word.

Misty takes me to the bluff, and I leave her under a nearby tree and set her up with a feed bag.

I head to the cliff, and take in the sights. It’s not a sunset, no. But the silvers, purples, and grays are beautiful in their own way. The thunder rumbles in the distance, and I’m doubting Jack’s weather predictions even more now, and that doubt is doubled when I see lightning far off.

Still, it’s a cool night, and I enjoy the breeze after a day of hard work. Even if I thought we were just going to get rained on, it’d be with him, which makes everything all the more worth it.

I hear the neighing of Misty behind me, and I turn to see what startles her, hoping that

it's Jack.

No such luck.

“You,” the alcohol-infused drawl calls out to me. “You, it’s all your fault.”

Max hasn’t left the ranch like he said he would. Instead, he’d followed me up to the cliff.

“Look, I came here two weeks ago just looking for work,” I explain. “That something sparked with Jack, I can’t help. Things happen when they happen.”

“I don’t give a fuck about that fuckhead. He can get gold-digged into oblivion for all I care. I care that you’ve disrespected me. You’ve made me the laughingstock of the town.”

“I think you’ve mostly accomplished that yourself,” I say, reflexively, not realizing being a bit of a smart-ass isn’t the best approach at the moment.

He keeps moving toward me. Instinctively, I take steps back. I don’t want this angry drunkard anywhere near me.

“You think you’re a comedian, too, I bet? No, not only do I gotta deal with my ranch being wrongfully stolen from me, I gotta have you disrespecting my name. The Perrys have slaved for over a hundred years, only for some bimbo from the city to spit on us.”

Bimbo? That’s a word I’d never thought to describe me.

He keeps approaching. I keep backing up. Until I realize my mistake. I’m on the edge of the cliff, the one overlooking Greenbluff. The only way out of here is past him,

and he's wide enough that I'm well within his range no matter which way I make a break for it.

"You're worthless," he says, lumbering up to me. The odor of his breath is overwhelming.

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He lunges for me. I try to make my move, but that big, meaty hand grabs hold of me, and then he takes me by the throat with both hands. He's not strangling me—yet.

But being held by the neck over a cliff isn't where anyone wants to be.

“Women who make trouble, like you, used to be quietly dealt with. We'd write it off as an accident. Whoops, they fell down the cliff, the clumsy idiots they are. You're well past the troublesome point.”

“I don't think killing me is going to improve your reputation. What will you even accomplish with killing me?” My words are strained. I'm trying to reason out of this, because I don't see a physical way out. He's holding me up in a way I can kick at him, but he's not tall enough where I can kick something particularly tender. “Sarah and Jack's wedding will still happen. And people will still know Jack's eye wandered away from her. You're still out of a farm.”

“But you'll be gone. I'll spit on that jackass's dreams. Break his heart. I'll hurt him, and I think that's all that matters to me anymore.”

I keep wriggling. The lightning crackles in the distance, thunder following. Water starts to sprinkle down on us, and it's clear it won't be long until it evolves into a full-on downpour. I shudder. Some foolish girl coming up on the cliff, slipping on some mud, and tumbling down on the rocks below. Sure, people would be incredibly suspicious of him, but there'd be enough reasonable doubt that Max could rally his defense to get free.

I didn't want to die. Especially after I've found the happiness that I never thought

possible.

I'm breathing deep. This refrigerator of a man is too strong to escape. Do I try biting? What else could I possibly do?

8

JACK

I want to get to Lily, I told her to meet me at the bluff, and all I want is to pull her close, and kiss that perfect mouth of hers.

I just gotta wrap things up with the Sherriff first, let him know what was going on down here at the ranch.

"Yeah, he's wasted again," I say into my phone. "No, he doesn't seem to be carrying a gun with him. He's never been good at concealing them, so I just think he's being his annoying, rowdy self. All right, as long as you keep an eye on him. Thanks, Sheila."

I hang up and set my phone down. This isn't the first time I had to call the sheriff about Max. The man has some serious problems and only knows how to take it out on people other than himself.

Although, I guess his liver takes a pretty good beating from his habits.

It's just another reason why I wanted to help Sarah get rid of him.

I head back out and grab Rush, one of my stallions. I'm ready to put all this behind me for a while and spend some time with my girl.

God, I'm thinking of her as 'my girl' now. Lily, what are you doing to me?

As I begin to ride out, I notice something at the edge of the ranch. I take a quick detour, and there's an old beat-up pickup truck at the edge of my property. Max's old beat-up pickup truck. I ride toward it, wondering if he has had an unsurprising breakdown with that old piece of crap, but no. It's off, and no one is inside it. It's on the side of the road, so it's not in the way.

I grumble, having a bad feeling about this. Max isn't one for suddenly obeying drinking-and-driving laws. He's not on the road, looking up and down it, so my next guess is he's lurking around my ranch, looking for some way to cause trouble.

Again, this isn't the first time I've dealt with him. Max is terribly boring and predictable like that. The hair on the back of my neck perks up as I ride out and begin my search. Last time he did this, he set something on fire and it could have gotten a hell of a lot worse if it wasn't a day like today.

I sniff the air. I think I'm wrong about my weather prediction. Oh well.

I comb the area. He's not near the fence, or the stables. More riding about, until I spot Misty, the mare Lily has taken a liking to. And then I find Max.

As well as Lily.

I swallow, fear hitting me as hard as it ever has in my life.

The bastard is holding my girl by the throat, leaving her dangling over a cliff.

"Put her down, Max!" I shout, riding up, and hopping off Rush. "Put her down, or this is going to get messier than it already is."

He turns his head to me, sneering. “You did this! You made me a fool, Thomas!”

“Whatever you want to think, this isn’t worth committing murder over. Put Lily down, and maybe we can discuss things.”

“What’s there to discuss? Everyone is laughing at me!”

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“Are they? I haven’t heard anything about that. They barely mention you when talking about Sarah’s and my engagement.”

“They’re talking about me when you ain’t looking. I know they are. And I’m a laughingstock of the entire town. It’s your fault!”

He’s delusional. Whatever he’s got going on, he’s lashing out. And that lashing out is threatening the woman I love.

I take my steps slowly and steadily. I don’t want to provoke him into making any sudden, harsh moves. “Listen, we can talk this out. Man to man. If you want to have a fight about it, we can. But let’s do it on even ground. We don’t need to bring a girl into this.”

“You know I have a bad back!” he snaps back. “It’s not a fair fight!”

Always an excuse.

“I’m sorry for however you’re feeling,” Lily hoarsely says, a desperate attempt at sympathy to penetrate his impossibly thick skull.

I grit my teeth. “Come on, Max. You’re better than this.”

“How do you know how good I am?” he says, looking at me.

Then the little firecracker I’m falling in love with strikes. One good kick, right to the shins, and Max staggers back.

I rush him and take him down with a tackle, and the three of us are rolling down the muddying hill. Lily thankfully takes the opportunity to get out of dodge, but Max doesn't give up so easily. He claws for her, and I go for a punch on his fat cheek, but it doesn't affect him much. He shoves me off him toward the edge of the cliff, and I feel my leg dangle off the side, but the adrenaline is pumping. Fists are flying, and I'm striking at him again and again. He tries to fight back, but he's either not landing hits or I'm simply not feeling it on the high of the moment.

"Help!" I hear Lily scream out into the night. I pay it no mind, my hatred for this man flaring up hotter and hotter. The ground is becoming muddier as the rain turns into a downpour. Lightning strikes and thunder clashes in the sky, but God himself would struggle to stop me from keeping this man from hurting the woman I love.

"What's going on up there?" I hear a voice in the distance call out. "Boss? Something the matter?"

"Perry's causing shit on our ranch again! Get him!" another one calls out, once he catches sight of the situation.

Max has some semblance of sense, and hearing that more people are coming, scrambles away from me. I try to keep him down, wanting him to face more of the Desert Sky Ranch's brand of justice, but with all the mud and water, the man is too slippery. He's hustling away from me faster than I've ever seen him move before.

The wranglers give chase to him, and I pick myself up and look at Lily, who is a bit roughened up but doesn't seem too harmed.

"Are you okay?" I ask, wanting to be sure.

"Yes. A little shook up, but I'll be fine." She's breathing heavy, and coughing hard, likely glad to be breathing at all after what Max tried to do to her.

The lightning flashes in the distance again.

“Shit! The horses got out!” one of my guys shouts.

Of all the times...

Lily runs to help, always wanting to assist someone first. I hold her back. The wranglers stop giving chase to Max and go to collect the horses.

“The commotion of the shouting and brawling, combined with the storm, riled them up too much,” I say, making my best guess on how this situation got out of hand.

A stampede of horses run by us as the water pours down. So much chaos all around us, but I have Lily in my arms. Everything is fine. Well, everything will be fine. As long as I have her, the little annoyances of life seem to not matter so much.

“Come on. Let’s go home, and get out of these wet clothes.”

Lily nods. “There’s nothing I’d like more right now than getting naked with you, Jack.”

We chuckle, leaving the mess to my wranglers. Max is gone. He’s the sheriff’s problem now.

Despite all the horny talk, we calm ourselves down inside, stripping down and cleaning ourselves up from all the mud and grass we’ve accumulated through the day. Lily notices all the cuts I have on my back and comes at me with a first-aid kit.

“I didn’t expect him to react like that,” I say, as she puts a small bandage on one of my cuts. “Max is an asshole, but it’s a big step to go from kind of annoying to outright murderous.”

“It’s not your fault,” she says, massaging my back. “You can’t control how someone else acts. I’m just glad you were there before he did something terrible.”

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“Touching you at all is too terrible for me.”

“I hope he gets what’s his. But I’m fine now. I’m here with you.”

I smile her way and then plant a kiss on her lips. I yearn for her touch, for her presence. Her warmth, her laughter. It’s my new drug, and I’m completely addicted.

We sit on the edge of my bed, draped in towels from our cleanup. I push one off her shoulders, exposing her to me. Her luscious body before me, and I can’t help but get excited just looking at her, knowing so much more is to come. I run my hands down her form, caressing her tits, hearing the soft moan escape her lips. I lay her back on the bed, her completely cooperating as I slid down her form, removing the towel entirely and letting myself take in her majesty.

I can’t believe she’s mine. I’m so starstruck at seeing her, knowing it shouldn’t be a man like me enjoying such a beautiful young woman. So many reasons why not, but the reason why I should overpowers them all.

Another kiss as my fingers go lower, feeling the gooseflesh they create as I move lower and lower on her body, the slight cooing that my touch creates, toward her sex, which is so hot and wet for me as I touch it. She shudders hard as I lay a firm finger on her clit, and begin to show it some tender appreciation.

I embrace and kiss her as I massage her down there, wanting to see the pleasure and joy I’m inflicting on her. She’s trembling from my slightest touch, so inexperienced and unused to such intimacy. But we would learn and grow about our desires, our wants, our needs, our everything together.

“Yes,” she murmurs, even as her hands grasp around the arm doing things to her.
“Don’t stop. Keep going.”

Her whispers invigorate me as I continue to massage her. I run my finger around all of her tender parts, my free hand showing the rest of her body equal appreciation. I love all of her, all of her body, all of her soul. She’s what I’ve been waiting so long for, and am so thankful to finally have.

Even as I remind myself I shouldn’t be having her at all.

Feeling her writhe around my fingers as I pleasure her more and more, it’s the most potent drug I can imagine. No, when I hear her shudder and come on my digits, that’s even greater. A blissful song, and it makes me so damn hard for her.

“Never thought a man’s fingers could make me feel like that,” she says breathlessly.

“That’s just the appetizer, darlin’. I’m going to hit you with the main course now.”

She giggles as I plant another kiss on her, and bring my throbbing cock toward her slit. It had been aching with need ever since I laid eyes on her, and it's been torturing me ever since. Everything about her is perfect to me, and I need to feel her. I’ve done it before, and it was her first time.

I’m not naïve enough to think that the first time is the best time. It can be good, and it is very important, but the sex gets better with experience. The more you know someone, the better you can please them, and the better they can please you.

The first time with Lily had already been the best I’d ever had. So I lusted after the thought of our relationship developing, and how we would bring ourselves to new levels of bliss as time went on.

Every time would build upon the last. I couldn't wait.

I keep an eye on her expression as I bring my cock toward her slit, its head tickling her clit before I begin to push it in. Even if she's not a virgin, she's still inexperienced, and the last thing I want to do is to be too rough with her. She's nodding enthusiastically at me, though, so perhaps I'm being a bit too dainty with her.

I take her more. She's so tight, warm, and strong around me. She coos loudly with every inch I push, and the absolute bliss that she gives me in return makes me ecstatic. She takes all of me, and is vibrating in delight as I hold her.

I can't repeat it enough how fucking perfect she is.

Both of us settled in, I start to fuck her good and proper. I'm not hammering her like a machine off the bat, but I start a good steady pace. Waiting and listening to her. It's absolute bliss for me, either way, but I just want to hear her screaming for me, for her to be an orgasmic mess in front of me.

"Take me more," she whispers. "Take me faster. Harder."

I obey without question. Soon she's holding on to me, and moving to my rhythm, so enraptured with me. We're perfectly in sync with one another, meeting each other's lusts fully, the friction between us sending delightful fire through both of our bodies. I'm shivering with glee every bit as much as she is, my arms wrapping around her, and hers wrapping around me. Our souls are enraptured, completely dedicated to one another and the bliss we share.

Somehow, I hold myself together. I want to hear her sing for me first, but with every thrust, I struggle to hold on. I try to give her a little more than even my cock can give, caressing her tits, her sides, her clit, everything, but she's holding on. She wants

more. And so do I. But I also want that climax, and for her to be right there alongside me.

Lily whimpers, then cries out, every muscle in her body tensing up before the release crashes into her, all of her pounding with sweet, powerful ecstasy.

And that's all the permission I need.

I let it out. I let the orgasm claim me. I let all my passions shoot through my body, my heart hammering right alongside my cock. I give her everything inside of me, flooding her so fully, the warmth between us becoming physical proof of our powerful need for one another.

We're both panting fools in love as I collapse onto her, holding her close. I give her a tender kiss. I hold her near, not wanting to go anywhere, pulling covers over our chilly bodies. The only sounds we hear are one another's heartbeats, the shallowness of our breath, and the rain pitter-pattering on the roof above. It's a sweet pleasure I wish could last forever.

But the words Lily says to me next make a man out of me. "I love you, Jack."

I can't help but respond to her truth with my own. "I love you, Lily."

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With those words out there, I wondered if I could even make myself go through with my original plans now, no matter how pure my intentions may be.

Can I truly lie to the world and tell them that I'm giving my heart to one woman when it truly belongs to another?

9

LILY

I awaken the next morning grasping for someone who isn't there. My arms flail, looking for Jack in bed, and him not being there fills me with a bit of desperation until I realize for a moment it's not going to be the end of the world.

Your mind goes to the weirdest of places when it doesn't have its bearings together, but I guess it also reveals a bit about your truest feelings.

I pull myself up. It's the best I've slept in a long time, even if my entire body aches a bit from the physical activity of the night before. It's a good ache, one I'm more than willing to endure if it means I get to spend more time with him.

"What do you mean, you can't arrest him?" I perk up, and see that Jack is sitting at the desk in his room. He's dressed in only his jeans, the phone call interrupting him getting dressed for the day. "He threatened to murder Lily. He damn near did it. That's attempted murder."

I sigh, realizing he must be on the phone with the sheriff, and that things aren't

exactly going our way.

“I’ve never once filed a false report about Max. But just because my uncles did so thirty years ago, it means you can’t take my word?”

His teeth are gritted, his hand nearly crushing the phone.

“I don’t know how much more you want from me, Sheila. Yes, I get it’s the district attorney saying this and not you. Fine. Yes, I understand.”

He clicks off the phone and throws it across the desk. He takes a few deep breaths. I expected him to go off and break something, and frankly, from what I heard, I would have gone and broke something too.”

I slide on one of his shirts for a bit of warmth as I approach him, and wrap my arms around him. “It’s okay.”

“The hell it’s okay. He tried to kill you, Lily. If the law won’t take care of him, I’m seriously debating going full old-school justice on him.”

“What do you mean, old-school justice?”

“I gather up a posse. I find Max. And we take care of things ourselves, just like they did back in 1875.”

I glare at him, my eyes wide. “You can’t be serious. You’d be the one getting arrested, then.”

“Well, what else can I do?” He’s fighting not to raise his voice at me. He’s angry, and worse than just angry, he’s filled with righteous rage. He knows he’s undeniably in the right and feels powerless to do what he feels needs doing. “I can’t let a man like

him walk the streets alongside you.”

“I’ll... I’ll just stay close to you, Jack.”

He pulls me in for a firm hug, a smile finally coming to his face. “And I want you to stay close. But it’s not right for you to put yourself under house arrest when it’s him who has done wrong, Lily. I’m going to drive myself crazy if Max isn’t taken care of.”

There’s a knock on the door.

Which wasn’t fully closed in the first place.

“Y’all decent in here?” she calls out, but doesn’t wait for an answer.

Sarah walks into the room, and looks both our ways: at Jack, in nothing but jeans, and me in nothing but his shirt. I blush and hide behind Jack, who, to my surprise, is blushing a bit too.

“Well, no one has any parts flopping about, so y’all are decent enough.”

Jack shakes his head. “I know you’re still technically my fiancée, Sarah, but you should give me more warning that you’re coming in, than that.”

“I would if it weren’t so damn important.” She walks in, her gait one from a woman on a mission. “I need you two at the town square in Greenbluff today. It’s the end of the Summer Festival, and I’m going to send it out with a bang. Something to leave the people talking for years to come.”

“Sarah, I appreciate the invitation, but we’ve been dealing with some issues more serious than the festival.”

“Yeah, and that’s why you need to be there. Word travels fast in this town, Jack. I already know how everything went down yesterday, and that my father walked into our home like nothing happened and told me I can’t just be protecting him because he’s my father anymore.”

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Jack's eyes narrow at Sarah. "What do you mean, protecting him?"

"You'll see what I mean when you get your asses down to the festival." She looks us both over. "Preferably with pants and a shirt on each of you, instead of you sharing one outfit."

Jack and I share another brief embarrassed exchange of glances.

"I'm fine with going," I tell Jack, knowing he's probably worried that I'm too traumatized to even look at Max Perry again. It's not a face I want to see in any sense, but I'm not going to cry in front of him either.

"See? She's on board. I'll see you both there."

Jack's fiancée saunters out of the room as abruptly as she came in.

"Well then," I say. "We ought to wash up and get dressed. We kinda overslept."

"You deserve it," he says. "You needed it. It's what the other wranglers are for."

He kisses me on the cheek, and I fight myself not to jump on him right now. As much as I'd enjoy it, I have to say I'm definitely interested in whatever Sarah wants to show us.

The last day of the festival is as lively as the rest of them. People want their last dose of carnival rides and food, a last day of music and dancing, just one final day of fun before the tedium of the day-to-day grind resumes for all of them.

I'm keeping Lily close to me. I haven't seen Max around, but I'm not taking any chances. I don't know how desperate he is to combat his perceived slights, and the last thing I need is for him to stroll into this festival with an old hunting rifle and start making threats at people.

The big draw of the final day is to crown a king and queen of the festival. This position is usually reserved for a bunch of high school kids, but it did give an excuse for the whole town to be gathered. Which I believe was Sarah's intention.

Then I see him.

Max.

It's barely noon, and he's already drunk off his gourd. I can tell just by how he's walking, and the brown paper bag with him suggests that this is only the beginning.

"Stay close," I repeat to Lily.

"I think if we were any closer, we'd be arrested for public indecency, Jack."

I grunt, realizing that maybe she's right; I'm nearly crushing her against my side. In my defense, she feels really nice to be held up against.

On the other side of the square from Max is his daughter. Sarah walks up onto the stage, where an open mic awaits, already set up for the MC to come out and start the festival's closing events.

“Is this thing on?” she says into it, her voice amplified. “Oh, good. That means I don’t have to shout.”

Everyone in the town square turns to her, including her father.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the good town of Greenbluff, I come to you this morning with not the best of news, but news that must be shared. News that is long overdue to be shared.”

There’s murmuring among the crowd. Everyone knows everything that happens in Greenbluff, so the idea of something happening under their noses is a novelty.

“I come to apologize for the many crimes of the Perry ranch, and more specifically, the ones of my father, Maxwell Perry.”

More chattering, but Sarah’s words get the attention of Max, who steps forward to yell at her: “The fuck are you doing, Sarah?”

“Don’t curse in public!” someone scolds him. “There are children here!”

Max grumbles.

“Dad, I can’t let this go on anymore. I’ve given you second chances. Third chances. Fourth chances. All in hopes you’d get your act together. But I’d written you off years ago. I hoped by inheriting the farm, I could just be rid of you. Send you off to drink yourself to death in a tiny apartment, and never really have to do anything about everything I know you’ve done.”

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“Sarah, get off the stage right now, you ungrateful little brat! Be quiet, if you know what’s good for you.”

“No, I won't, Dad. I’ve been quiet for too long. I’m also confessing today for myself, because I knew this all was happening.”

“What was happening?” I hear the drawl of Sheriff Rogers yell. She’s got her arms crossed and her foot tapping.

“At least for the past ten years, likely more, my father has been responsible for countless crimes around this town.”

“Sarah, shut the hell up!” Max shouts, still not caring that there are children present.

“My father, out of desire for petty revenge, has done the following...” She pulls out a sheath of papers. She had prepared for this. “He’s the one responsible for setting fire to Mr. Darby’s tavern on Christmas Eve nine years ago. He said it was because he refused to open on Christmas for him.”

“Sarah, why are you spreading lies?” Max shouts. He starts to move to the stage, but I step in front of him. I want Sarah to keep talking. I’m not sure where she’s going with this, but if it is pissing off Max, it’s at the very least, accomplishing that.

“He let all of Ms. Reynolds’ pigs out of their pen, for, I have written here, ‘turning him down like the frigid bitch she is.’ I’ll remind everyone that losing all those pigs almost left Ms. Reynolds homeless.”

Ms. Reynolds is in the audience, and she glares at Max with homicidal intent.

“Lies, lies, this you trying to become a novelist, isn’t it, Sarah? With all this fiction you’re writing?” Max screams, trying to reason it all away.

“Say whatever you want, Dad. I’m going to keep going.” She flips a page. “This one I’m ashamed I kept quiet so long for. He killed Mr. Hill’s dog, Marilyn.”

Mr. Hill is also here, and I can see rage building within him.

“Mr. Hill’s slight against my father? Dad just thought he charged too much to fix his truck.”

“Sarah, what are you trying to prove? And where’s your proof of this?” Max says, looking guilty of everything he’s being accused of.

“I’ll tell you the latter first,” she states, and holds up the book she was reading from. “This is my personal diary. Where I wrote how much it pained me that my dad did something so heartless and cruel. But I’m supposed to love him, so I kept my mouth shut. Even as he ranted at me, and I kept silent there, too, because if I tried to do anything but agree with him, he’d take his anger out on me.”

“I never laid a hand on you!”

“You didn’t need to hit me to make my life miserable, Dad. Just make me afraid to speak up. To make me count the days until I could be free of you for good.”

“So you made up a bunch of lies and wrote them down?! Is that how you repay me for raising you?”

“If my diary isn’t enough, I have backups.” She holds up her phone. “For some of

these rants, I recorded them. I've waffled many times on whether I should do something about you, Dad. So I kept them. I built my own case. But I can't stay quiet any longer. Not if you're threatening to take human lives."

More murmuring in the crowd. Max is shaking with rage, but he isn't talking anymore. He clearly remembers all those nights he yelled at his daughter, her being the only person who had to listen to him and his nonsense.

"All of this isn't just to shame my father for crimes I don't even know if he can be charged with anymore, no, I want to publicly display a pattern of behavior. That my father is a petty, vindictive, cruel man who you could easily believe could turn to something more vile. Maybe even something like murder. All of this should be enough to launch a full investigation of Jack Thomas's and Lily Bennett's accusations against him, that they shouldn't be disregarded as petty, in some stupid family feud."

People are backing away from Max, staring at him. I'm the only person still near him, ready to stop him from going after his daughter if he gains the balls to do such a thing.

"This... this is your doing!" he yells at me.

He takes a swing. But all that anger doesn't change that he's already a full bottle of whiskey drunk, and I easily dodge it, and send my own right hook across his face. For Lily. Hell, for Sarah too. Even if I don't love the woman, it doesn't mean she deserved anything that Max did to her.

Max crumples to the ground into the sorry heap that he is.

"All right, that's enough. I've seen enough," Sheriff Rogers says, dispersing the crowd further. "Maxwell Perry, you are under arrest."

“For what?” he says, pitifully, trying to get up and away from the sheriff.

“Do I need your daughter to repeat herself? It’s pretty dang clear what you’re under arrest for.”

He tries to squirm away, but I step in front of him. He’s got no choice but to be cuffed, and several of the other men are right behind the sheriff, ready to give her a helping hand if he wants to go and try something.

“Again,” Sarah says into the mic, “I want to apologize for my silence. I should have said something sooner. But I was blinded by blood. By the idea that my father was a man who deserved any sort of loyalty from me. I’m sorry you all had to wait for this closure.”

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Some people start to clap for Sarah. Most people stand silently. What is even the proper reaction for such a thing?

With her work done, Sarah hops off the stage and comes toward Lily and me. “And Jack, this is where I finally get to tell you that the engagement is off.”

I raise an eyebrow. Given my recent passion for Lily, I feel relieved to hear that. “But what about your stake in the Perry ranch?”

“I don’t need to get it via marriage anymore. Ever since I heard about my father attacking Lily, I’ve been talking with a lawyer friend. He said that with all I know, my father is going to be spending some time in prison. And while he’s in prison, I can make a case that because of his lack of ability to manage the ranch, I should inherit it immediately, regardless of my marital status. Use that Perry family tradition to state that’s what the family would want anyway.”

My smile grows. “So you’re going to be free of him without my help. Good.”

“You helped me plenty, Jack. You’re a good man. Even when you found someone you truly loved, you were going to marry some girl just to help her out.”

I laugh. “I don’t know if I could have gone through it now that I have Lily in my life.”

“Eh, it’s not a question we need to answer, anyhow. However, there’s still that family feud you wanted to end.”

I nod. “That’s the other thing a Thomas-Perry union would have settled.”

“We can settle it by me selling you the ranch once I own it.”

“Hmm? You don’t want to own your family ranch?”

“After everything I’ve dealt with? I’m not feeling passionate about family traditions, no. What good I do feel about my family I can honor by leaving their legacy in the hands of a capable, caring rancher. One whose name they’d curse, but I’m sure if they’re up there, they’ll get over it once they see you treat the land right.”

I sigh. “All right. I guess we can’t make any business plans yet, but once all the smoke is settled, we’re going to talk business, Sarah.”

She takes off her engagement ring and returns it to me. “I won’t be needing this anymore. You’re free to do with it what you will. Although, with how you’re looking at her, I think you already know what you want to do with it.”

I take it, and look at Lily, who is a bit overwhelmed by the suggestion made by Sarah.

There’s definitely a part of me that wants to drop to a knee right now in front of her. “Sarah, I think it’d be a bit crass to pop the question with a ring meant for someone else.”

“Oh, probably.” She shrugs. “But I figure if you want to drop it, you can go get a ring specifically for her later. It’s all about catching the moment when it’s right, ya know?”

I laugh. “I didn’t think my ex would care so much about my romantic future.”

“It’s more of a professional interest. Once we get all this nonsense put away, I’m

going to go chase my dream of being a wedding planner.”

Lily raises an eyebrow. “I did notice you were a tad enthusiastic about the wedding for a marriage of convenience.”

“A party is a party. I was going to make the most of it. And now it’s your turn.”

I look at Lily, at Sarah, at the people around us. There’s a few who caught the energy of the scene, and are watching with anticipation.

“Lily, I…” I take a deep breath. “I was already engaged. I’m your boss. And I’m twelve years your senior. There’s no way that romance should have ever blossomed between the two of us, and yet, from the moment I laid eyes on you, I was enraptured.”

There was no plan for me to do this. I could have never anticipated the lengths that Sarah would go for us, and the thoughts of marrying Lily seemed like something that just couldn’t happen.

The stars align sometimes, and when that happens, you gotta be ready to take your chance.

“Everything about you is what I want. From your smile, to your laugh, to your curves, to the countless wonderful ways you make me feel, you’re everything a man could want and then some.”

Lily is trembling before me. I can tell she’s feeling a million things at this moment, because she, too, likely couldn’t imagine this happening this soon.

I drop to my knee. “Lily Bennett, this all feels like a dream. And one I want to keep going. Will you marry me?”

She's frozen in fear. Oh dear, did I make a mistake? I didn't want to break the poor girl.

I grimace at her lack of response. I shouldn't have asked; it's just too much.

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“Yes,” she says, snapping out of her haze. “Yes, I’ll marry you, Jack. I want nothing more than to be with you, forevermore.”

My heart lifts up, relieved, and overwhelmed with joy. I slip Sarah’s ring on to her finger. It’s a bit big, but it’s only a temporary fit. With it in place, I stand up, grab her, and place the biggest, sloppiest kiss I can manage right upon her lips, and hold her so tight.

Clapping erupts around us, and lots of cheering and shouts of congratulations flow our way.

“It’s beautiful,” Sarah says. “Way more romantic than how Jack proposed to me.”

Lily laughs. “How did he propose to you anyway?”

“Over a bottle of scotch and a bunch of paperwork. Just how I always imagined it’d be as a little girl.”

I squeeze Lily tighter. I can’t believe it. But I’ve never been happier. For her, for me, and even for Sarah. We all have such a bright future ahead of us.

11

LILY

ONE YEAR LATER

We didn't rush the wedding. There was still a lot of work to do around the ranch, especially with the expected acquisition of the Perry lands coming soon.

The two of us also wanted to make sure that our love was real. I was young and passionate, and he was the first man I ever fell in love with. He wanted to make sure that he wasn't just a passing fancy for me, and that my youthful hormones would soon lead me astray to the next hot guy to catch my eye.

He didn't understand that to me, no one could be hotter than him. That the fact he was mine made him all the sexier, not to mention that he's handsome, caring, and more than giving in the bedroom. I couldn't possibly imagine someone sexier than he is.

I guess he wanted to be sure himself. He wasn't wrong to have doubts. It's just basic common sense to realize you just don't make a lifelong commitment out of a few weeks of lust.

What you do make it out of is a year of continued passion for one another, when it still burns as fiercely as when you first laid eyes on one another.

And this is still undoubtedly the case as I begin my walk down the aisle.

Sarah had been with me all along in planning my own wedding. She was so into it, I should have guessed how passionate she was about these sorts of things when I first met her.

We were outside, a beautiful summer day, and thankfully a cooler one to boot, aided by a gentle breeze blowing over the gathering. It's as if nature itself were blessing our union.

Both our families had gathered together, Jack paying for everything. My mother was

very surprised when I told her that I was getting married, because she expected to hear I was at least dating first. After hearing how passionately I talked about Jack, though, she told me that she knew he was the one, because I only talked that long about things I truly did care about.

I'm surprised about how much family Jack had too. I had met a few of them before the ceremony, and most of them were just glad to hear that the old Thomas-Perry ranch feud was finally going to end, with a few being especially glad that their family "won." I guess that made them forgive any misgivings they had about his previous engagements. Jack, to his credit, always said it wasn't about winning or losing, just getting his dreams for the Desert Sky Ranch and Greenbluff as a whole moving-forward.

The organ music plays as I start down the aisle, my gown light but traditional. The butterflies in my stomach are out of control as I take small steps toward the altar. Jack is waiting for me, a local priest by him. Sarah is off to the side, grinning from ear to ear, happy to be serving as my maid of honor.

Seeing him stand there, waiting for me is almost too much to believe, but it's real. It's all for me. I walk to the pulpit. He's there for me.

The actual vows and all of that feel like a blur. My heart races a million miles a minute as I stand next to him. I say "I do" and he does as well. It's made official, and I kiss Jack in front of all of them. Tender, passionate, powerful.

"You're mine. And I'm yours. We're in this together now, Lily," he whispers to me during the kiss.

"And there's no way I'd want it any differently."

As the cheering ends, the real music starts. All of Sarah's planning is ready to make

sure that people remember the night Jack and I came together as husband and wife truly special. The pounding bass fills the air of the night sky as the whole lot of the wedding's attendees hit the dance floor. I giggle as I see something brewing for some of the couples there. While tonight is an important chapter in Jack's and my story, this is going to be the beginning for a few other romances tonight. I can only hope that they are all as passionate and loving as the one Jack and I have.

My new husband and I join them on the dance floor. I've always been surprised at his range of talents despite being so outwardly a cowboy through and through. He could throw himself into that club music just as much as the line dance, and use both as perfectly valid excuses to get closer to me.

He kisses me again and again, each more sensual than the last, starting to border on the indecency I worried about before. He pulls me closer as his hips sway so rhythmically, so close that I can feel that he's fighting himself not to turn this into acts of wild debauchery. The time for that will come, and the anticipation is killing me.

For now, though, I follow his every move. I grind my hips against him, simultaneously entrancing and torturing him. He runs his hands up my body, feeling and savoring every curve I have. Another kiss, and even more tongue, he's damn near making out with me on the dance floor.

As the music shifts to something more traditionally cowboy, he doesn't let up, which surprises me. His hands close around mine as he leads me with some swings; he keeps my body so tightly against his as he struts across the dance floor. We're the center of attention, people giving way to our rhythmic movements, proving that in spite of the lack of passion in Jack's first engagement, he's more than making up for it with his second.

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I follow his movements so well. We let our motion and the music do the talking, and it's like we're telepathically linked with how in sync we are with one another. He makes me feel so damn alive that I can't possibly imagine life without Jack in it now. Our passion had burned so hot for a year so far, and it felt like the sun itself would burn out before our love did.

Dusk turned to night, and night into twilight. We had the time of our lives together, and were never more than a foot away from one another for long. He treats me like a queen, because he is my king. As people head home, our kingdom empties, and we look at one another, smitten and love drunk like we're just a pair of hormonal teenagers. It's not far off from the truth for me, but it just made me feel all the sexier that I had turned him into one as well.

We stumble toward the ranch house, both of us exhausted from the night's events. Would we enjoy our first night as husband and wife together in a more traditional, carnal sense? Or would we balk cliché and simply go to sleep? I had read that the latter is more common than people believe, given weddings are surprisingly exhausting.

Jack sweeps me off my feet nonetheless, and carries me across the threshold, all while I giggle like a lunatic. "You didn't need to do that."

"Hearing you laugh is absolutely why I did need to do that."

I slap him on the chest. I love him. And with the way he looks at me? It's absolutely mutual.

Our union would be eternal ecstasy forevermore, a love that would never burn out.

12

JACK

SIX MONTHS LATER

“And there we go. It’s official. The Perry and Thomas ranches are now one,” Sarah says, as she finishes laying down her signature.

It’d been a long fight to get all this done. Even when arraigned for all of his crimes, Max hired lawyers to snap back at his daughter, and things got messy. Thankfully, Sarah’s lawyers had more than enough cunning to win over the judge, so Sarah got her inheritance, while Max got twenty years.

She negotiated pretty hard, wanting to make sure everyone and everything was taken care of. This included having me hire all the wranglers and other workers who were employed by the Perry ranch and honoring all the contracts, they had made, to the best of my ability for a few years after the fact. Then on top of it all, Sarah gets a little bit of a nest egg to take care of her for the rest of her life if she’s smart about it.

“And you’re free of your father and your future as a rancher,” I reply, stroking my chin. “Off to wedding-planner college or whatever you need to do to be a professional wedding planner?”

She laughs. “No. Not just yet. It’s weird, but I’ve never really not been bound to the land. My father was always too much of a control freak to ever leave the ranch for too long, so the only vacations I ever got were at an amusement park a county over. So I think it’s time I remedy that.”

“Off to see the world, huh? Where to first?”

“Where our supposed honeymoon would have been.”

There’s a smile on her face suggesting I should have known where that was. Which is fair, given we were engaged. But I truly remembered nothing, and instead stare at her like I’m a deer in headlights.

“Italy, Jack. We were going to go to Italy.”

“Oh. Right. That did seem kind of fun. If only for the food.”

Lily and I had spent two weeks in the Bahamas. Nothing too exotic for a honeymoon, but I did gain appreciation for fried alligator in between spending most of my time there in a room with Lily.

Sarah closes up her folders and sighs. “It’ll probably be a bit before we ever see one another again.”

I let out a deep sigh. “Yeah. We have no official reason to be around each other anymore. No sham of an engagement, no business meetings, no running into one another in town.”

“No pointless family feud. The idiotic thing that brought us together in the first place, I’ll remind you.”

I smile. “You’re always welcome here, Sarah. This is still your home, even if I technically own where you grew up.”

“Never doubted it. But you ought to invite me back sometime, and not just rely on me getting homesick.”

“Invite you back for what?”

“I don’t know. Your and Lily’s fifth wedding anniversary? The anniversary of us ending this dumb feud?” Her eyes narrow at me. “Or how about your kid’s first birthday party?”

More laughter from me. “What, just writing off that maybe Lily and I want to be child-free?”

“You’re so full of shit, Jack. And if you weren’t, that’d be a shame, because you’re going to be one hell of a father.”

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She heads out the door. I'm surprised how good of a friend she's been. Absolutely no romantic feelings for her, no, but definitely something platonic.

I head out the door and find Rush. Misty is out of her stable, letting me know Lily is out somewhere on the ranch. Which means I get the joy of finding her, and if she's somewhere remote enough, the joy of enjoying her.

Married life has been a dream. Even the most monotonous days being a rancher are fun when Lily is there beside me. And when all the horses are fed and taken care of, the nights are an even greater treasure. Long rides into the sunset, gathering around a fire simply talking, about anything and everything. Our favorite movies, books, music, all about our hopes and dreams, and trying to make our plans for the Desert Sky Ranch into a reality.

With the paperwork done, we can start to make proper moves toward it too.

I ride up to the bluff. The one where she had given herself to me, and made it so I'd be the only man she'd ever be with. I had thought that maybe the whole incident with Max would have made this spot traumatic for her, but I laugh to myself whenever I remember Lily's response when I mentioned that to her: "Fuck him, this place is beautiful. I'm not letting him ruin this for me."

She's sitting against the rock, staring off into the distance and enjoying the setting sun. I sit down beside her. We're quiet for a time, and even that is absolutely wonderful. Her presence is so sweet and calming to me.

Unfortunately, I can't be quiet forever. "The ink is drying. It's all done now. The

Desert Sky Ranch has officially doubled in size.”

“That’s wonderful, Jack. I can’t wait to see what we can do with it.” Her tone carries an aura of melancholy. It worries me.

“Is something the matter?”

She lets out a deep breath. “I got a call from the doctor today.”

The way she’s speaking, it worries me. I shudder with fear as I worry that something terrible is about to happen, that the happiest thing in my life is about to be snatched away from me.

Thank God that my anxiety is oh so wrong.

“I’m pregnant, Jack. Two months in.”

I stare at her in disbelief. “That’s... that’s wonderful, Lily. My news is nothing compared to that.”

She laughs. “Why did I think for even a second your response would be anything but that?”

“Because this is all too good to be true, and you’re smart enough that you think there has to be a catch.”

She leans on my shoulder, and I wrap my arms around her. “I’ve been looking for that catch for almost two years, Jack. I don’t think I’m ever going to find it.”

“Guess there isn’t one. Just happiness and joy for us to enjoy for the rest of our days.”

We resume our silence. There’s not much more that needs to be said. She’s going to

be a wonderful mother. Caring, sweet, and absolutely sexy as hell. Me as a father? I had my ex's endorsement, but really, all I can say is that I'm going to give it my all.

My mind fills with thoughts of a future, of our growing family. Of one day handing this ranch down to my son, or daughter, or whichever kid inherits our love of horses.

This land is ours. Ours to strengthen, to tend, to leave more beautiful than the way we found it.

This land will be the eternal monument to our love, even after both Lily and I are long gone.

We will have such a wonderful life building it together.