EXCLUSIVE
BONUS EPILOGUE

Billionaire Rancher

ALISON REID

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by Alison Reid

Three Years Later…

The afternoon sun hung low over Silver Meadow Ranch, bathing the rolling pastures in golden light.

Eric tightened the leather halter around the young thoroughbred's head while Levi adjusted the lead rope.

The colt tossed his head, ears flicking nervously.

"Easy there," Levi murmured, rubbing the horse's neck. "He's got plenty of fire."

Eric smiled. "That's exactly why I bought him."

"If he runs half as well as Patriot does, you'll have another champion."

Before Eric could answer, the distant hum of an engine echoed across the ranch. Both men turned. A sleek black Range Rover glided up the long gravel driveway before coming to a stop outside the house.

Eric frowned.

"We expecting company?" Levi asked.

"No."

The driver's door opened.

A woman stepped out wearing an elegant cream pantsuit, oversized sunglasses, and heels completely unsuited to a working ranch. Her dark hair was perfectly styled, every inch of her polished, sophisticated, and expensive.

Eric felt his stomach tighten.

His parents had been trying to convince him to return to Boston ever since he'd moved to Colorado. Every phone call ended the same way, insisting his "little ranch adventure" had gone on long enough and that it was time to come home.

They had been polite to Amy at the wedding. Welcoming, even. But he had seen it in their eyes. She wasn't the woman they had imagined for their son. Amy didn't belong in Boston's exclusive social circles, and she never would.

Thank God.

Neither did he anymore.

The life he'd built here—the ranch, the horses, Amy, and Amelia—was real. It wasn't built on appearances, social status, or old money. It was built on love, honesty, and hard work. It was everything he'd spent years searching for.

Jessica removed her sunglasses, offering the same practiced smile that had once fooled him into believing she loved him.

"Hello, Eric."

Levi looked between them.

"You know her?"

Eric's expression hardened.

"My ex-wife."

Levi's eyebrows shot upward. He knew all about Jessica, but this was the first time he'd ever laid eyes on her.

Jessica walked toward Eric with measured confidence.

"You look well."

Eric wasn't interested in exchanging pleasantries.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was driving through Colorado..." she began. "I thought I'd stop in."

Eric folded his arms.

"That's a long drive for a coincidence."

She hesitated before quietly admitting, "I was hoping we could talk."

"There isn't much to talk about."

"Please."

Eric glanced toward the ranch hands working nearby. He wasn't about to have this conversation in front of everyone.

"Five minutes," he said flatly.

Jessica nodded.

"Inside?"

Eric sighed.

"Fine."

He turned toward the house without another word. Levi watched them disappear inside before quietly muttering to himself.

"Well... this oughta be interesting."

* * * * * * * *

Jessica stood in the middle of the living room, slowly looking around.

"It suits you."

Eric remained standing.

"What do you want, Jessica?"

She looked at him for a long moment.

"I've made a lot of mistakes."

He said nothing.

"I've had a lot of time to think."

Still nothing.

"I know what I did was unforgivable."

Eric's expression never changed.

"You cheated on me."

She lowered her eyes.

"I know."

"You stole from me."

"I know."

"You lied to me every single day."

Tears filled her eyes.

"I know."

Silence settled between them. Finally, she looked back at him.

"I've regretted it every day since."

Eric simply stared.

"I thought I wanted that life. The parties. The travelling. The attention."

She gave a sad laugh.

"I didn't realise what I was throwing away until it was gone."

She stepped closer.

"I've never met anyone like you."

Eric didn't move.

"I miss you," Jessica said quietly. "And I was hoping..."

She swallowed hard.

"...that maybe we could try again."

For the first time since she'd arrived, Eric laughed. Not because it was funny. Because the suggestion was so completely absurd.

"You can't be serious."

"I am."

"I'm married, Jessica."

"I know." Her voice trembled. "But I think we belong together."

Eric stared at her in disbelief.

"You actually think I'd come back?"

"I think we had something special before everything went wrong." Her eyes glistened with tears. "I made the biggest mistake of my life letting you go."

Eric slowly shook his head.

"No."

"You haven't even thought about it."

"I don't need to."

Jessica took a tentative step toward him.

"We could still have the life we always talked about."

Instinctively, Eric took a step back, putting the distance between them again. His expression hardened.

"No."

"I've changed, Eric."

"Maybe you have."

His voice remained calm.

"But nothing has changed for me."

"I love my wife."

"I love my daughter."

"And there isn't a single part of my life I'd trade for the one I left behind."

She blinked.

"I wasn't mourning you after our marriage ended."

She frowned.

"I was mourning the dream."

Her confusion deepened.

"I spent a long time believing I'd lost my chance to have a wife who truly loved me. A wife I could trust."

His voice remained calm, almost reflective.

"I thought I'd lost my chance to have children. To come home every night to a family waiting for me."

He drew a slow breath.

"But that was never the life you wanted."

Jessica's face crumpled.

"You cheated on me. You stole from me. You shattered every ounce of trust I had."

She opened her mouth.

"Eric—"

"No."

His voice wasn't raised. It didn't need to be.

"You don't get to rewrite history simply because your choices didn't turn out the way you expected."

He held her gaze without a trace of anger.

"You walked away from our marriage long before it ended. You made your choice."

A brief silence settled between them.

"I made mine the day I met Amy."

His expression softened, every trace of bitterness fading from his face.

"She gave me everything I'd convinced myself I'd never have. A wife who loves me. A little girl who runs into my arms every time I come home. A family."

He looked around the room.

Framed photographs lined the mantel. Amy laughing beside Patriot. A family portrait from Amelia's first birthday. Tiny muddy footprints still marked

the timber floor near the back door where Amelia had raced inside after playing outside.

His entire world surrounded him. A genuine smile spread across his face. Not because of Jessica. Because of the life waiting for him every single day.

"I spent years believing you had stolen my future."

He looked back at her.

"The truth is, you only delayed it."

His voice was quiet but filled with absolute certainty.

"I have a home filled with love instead of lies... trust instead of betrayal... laughter instead of silence."

He shook his head.

"There isn't a single thing you could offer me that would make me risk losing any of it."

Outside, another vehicle pulled into the driveway.

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Amy climbed out of her truck carrying several shopping bags, one hand instinctively resting against the gentle curve of her stomach. She'd only just started to show, but every time Eric looked at her, his eyes lingered there, as though he still couldn't quite believe they were going to have another baby.

When she'd told him the news a few weeks earlier, he'd simply stared at her before tears filled his eyes. Then he'd wrapped her in his arms and whispered, "I never thought I'd be lucky enough to have one child... now you're giving me another."

Before Amy had even closed the driver's door, eighteen-month-old Amelia squealed.

"Unca Levi!"

The little girl clambered out of her car seat as Amy opened the rear door, then toddled across the grass as fast as her chubby little legs would carry her.

Levi laughed.

"There she is!"

He swept Amelia into the air, spinning her around until her delighted giggles echoed across the ranch before settling her comfortably against his shoulder.

"Have you been helping your mama today?"

Amelia nodded enthusiastically.

Amy smiled.

"I think she charmed every shopkeeper in town."

Levi chuckled.

"She's got her daddy wrapped around her finger already."

Amy looked toward the house.

"Where's Eric?"

Levi shifted slightly.

"Inside."

"Everything okay?"

He hesitated.

"His ex-wife turned up."

Amy's eyebrows lifted.

"Jessica?"

Levi nodded.

"They're talking."

Amy felt a brief flutter in her stomach. Not fear. Just surprise. She trusted Eric completely. Taking Amelia back into her arms, she walked toward the

front door. Just as she reached it, Eric's voice drifted through the open window.

"...you have to be out of your mind."

Amy stopped.

"If you honestly believe I'd ever go back to that life."

Inside, Jessica stood speechless. Eric's voice was firm.

"You weren't the dream, Jessica."

He shook his head.

"Amy is. My family is."

A smile spread across his face.

"I have everything I ever wanted."

Before he could say another word, Amelia wriggled in Amy's arms.

"Down."

Amy laughed softly and set her on her feet. The little girl pushed open the screen door before Amy could stop her.

"Daddy!"

She squealed with delight as she ran across the room. Eric dropped to one knee just in time to catch her as she launched herself into his arms.

"There's my beautiful girl."

He hugged her tightly before kissing the top of her head.

"What have you been up to today?"

Amelia beamed.

"Shop!"

"You went shopping?"

She nodded enthusiastically.

"Wif Mama."

"Did you help Mama?"

Another vigorous nod.

"I hep."

Eric chuckled.

"I bet you did."

Amelia's little face lit up.

"I get cookie!"

"You got a cookie?"

She held up one tiny finger.

"One."

Eric laughed, glancing over at Amy.

"Just one?"

Amy smiled innocently.

"I have no idea where she gets her sweet tooth."

Amelia leaned close to Eric and whispered loudly enough for everyone to hear.

"I get choc'late too."

Eric looked at Amy with mock surprise.

"Chocolate?"

Amy laughed.

"It was one tiny square. She'd been very helpful."

Eric grinned before kissing Amelia's cheek.

"I think that's a pretty good day."

Still carrying his daughter, he crossed the room and pressed a gentle kiss to Amy's cheek.

"Welcome home."

Amy smiled up at him before her gaze shifted to Jessica.

Jessica stood silently, watching the little family with an expression somewhere between disbelief and quiet heartbreak.

Amy offered her a warm smile and held out her hand.

"Hello. I'm Amy."

A brief pause.

"You must be Jessica. It's nice to meet you."

Jessica stared at the outstretched hand for a moment before slowly reaching out to shake it.

"Nice to meet you too," she replied quietly.

For a long moment, neither woman spoke. Then Amy smiled again, slipping her hand naturally into Eric's free hand. Jessica noticed the simple gesture immediately. It wasn't possessive. It wasn't defensive. It was effortless.

The kind of touch that came from two people who never doubted where they belonged. She hadn't come too late because another woman had replaced her. She'd come too late because Eric had finally found everything he'd once believed he would never have—a wife who loved him without reservation, a little girl who raced into his arms every afternoon, a growing family, and a home filled with love instead of lies.

There was nothing left for her here. She gave a small, defeated smile.

"I'd better go."

Without waiting for a reply, Jessica turned and quietly walked out the front door. Eric watched her leave.

"Goodbye, Jessica."

There was no anger in his voice. No bitterness. Only finality. He closed the door, then turned back to the people who mattered most. Amy smiled up at him, and Amelia reached for his hand.

Eric took Amy's hand in one of his and Amelia's in the other. He'd spent years believing he'd lost the life he'd always wanted. Standing there with his wife, his daughter, and another baby on the way, he finally understood. He hadn't lost it.

He'd simply had to wait for the right person to share it with.

* * * * * * * *

Amelia had been down for almost ten minutes when Amy stepped out onto the porch.

Eric looked up from the fence he'd been repairing with Levi. The moment he saw her, a smile spread across his face.

He set the hammer aside and walked straight toward her.

"She's asleep?" he asked.

Amy smiled.

"Went out like a light. She was exhausted."

Eric chuckled.

"She certainly kept you busy today."

"She kept everyone busy today."

As soon as he reached her, he slipped an arm around her waist and drew her gently against him.

Across the yard, Levi looked up just in time to see Eric kiss Amy's forehead. He grinned.

"Well... I'm outta here."

Amy laughed.

"You don't have to leave every time you see us."

Levi tipped his hat.

"I know."

He smirked at Eric.

"But I value my eyesight."

Shaking his head, he wandered toward the barn, leaving them alone. Amy rested her head against Eric's chest.

"You know he's never going to stop doing that."

"I know."

Eric smiled as he looked down at her.

"How are you feeling?"

His hand settled over the gentle curve of her stomach, his thumb brushing softly across it. Amy covered his hand with hers and smiled.

"We're doing okay."

"Just okay?" he teased.

She laughed.

"A little tired. Apparently growing a baby is a little exhausting."

"I wish I could do some of it for you."

"You already do."

She looked into his eyes.

"You take care of me every day."

"You deserve it."

His answer was immediate.

"You spend your days looking after everyone else. Amelia. Me. Every animal that comes through your clinic." He brushed a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "So, when you come home, it's my turn to look after you."

Amy's heart swelled.

"I love you."

Eric smiled.

“I know.”

She laughed, giving his chest a playful shove.

“You’re supposed to say it back.”

“I was getting there.”

He leaned down and kissed her softly.

“I love you more than I ever thought I could love another person.”

She slipped her arms around his neck.

“You know...”

“What?”

“When I first drove into Steamboat Springs, I was terrified.”

“I know.”

“I thought I was running away.”

Eric rested his forehead against hers.

“No.”

His voice was barely above a whisper.

“You were driving toward the life you were always meant to have.”

Amy felt tears prick her eyes. She looked toward the house where Amelia slept peacefully upstairs.

“Our little girl.” Her hand drifted to her stomach. “And this little one.” Then she looked back at him. “I never imagined I’d have all this.”

Eric smiled.

“Neither did I.” For a moment, his eyes drifted toward the house. “I spent a long time believing my future had been taken from me.” He looked back at Amy. “I couldn’t have been more wrong.” He kissed her again, slow and tender. “It was waiting for me right here.”

Amy smiled through happy tears.

“We found it together.”

"We did."

He rested one hand against her cheek and the other over their unborn baby.

"I love you, Mrs. Reynolds."

Amy laughed softly.

"I love you too, Mr. Reynolds."

They stood together in the warm afternoon sunshine, saying nothing more. They didn't need to.

Everything they'd ever dreamed of was already in their arms... and sleeping peacefully inside the house.

—The End—

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