

SURE AS SHOOTIN'

Breakfast, New York Penthouse...

“Let’s buy us a horse ranch this weekend, Tucson,” says Two Gun Bobby, my new husband of a mere nineteen days.

I pause mid-chew. *My name is Jan, not Tucson*, I think, but don’t say for the hundredth time. *Tucson is the city where I lived three months ago and never want to live again.*

“Horse ranch? Buy? Now?” I say around my mouthful of delectable French toast, prepared by our personal chef, Antoine. Crumbs fly across the old, worn, wooden bunkhouse table. Seats twelve and is full of slivers, one of which is in my butt from my matching chair.

Two Gun Bobby slaps his leather-chap covered thigh. Matches the rest of his breakfast attire of a white Stetson, pearl-buttoned Western-style shirt and leather gun belt, with a plate-sized gold belt buckle depicting a rearing horse. Two neon orange, plastic, fake revolvers hang in their holsters from either side of the belt. Bobby leaves off the bolo tie. Casual, like.

“I knew you’d be pleased,” he says.

Pleased? I choke on a wad of toast.

Bobby jumps up, runs the long way around the table and pats my back. “I gotcha, Tucson.”

Or maybe I choked on being a lying, fake-cowgirl. In the three months we’ve known each other, I haven’t dared tell Bobby that *I ain’t a cowgirl in any sense, sure as shootin’*. Especially one who gets near a horse. Which is kinda the definition of cowgirl. The most western thing about me is my old Tucson home address.

I slug back my water and mime catching my breath. And think.

Is it time to confess my non-Westerness? Maybe my understandable horse-phobia?

Bobby's hand drifts from my back to my big-busted front. I don't know if it was my boobs or my t-shirt, with a man on horseback emblazoned tit-level, that first drew him to me. We met at his first company, AppAloosAs, conference, me a lowly receptionist from his new Tucson office. Legend is that two years ago, he took a break from his endless consumption of 1950s horse operas in his grandma's attic. Then created an app that makes millions.

His swollen anatomy part presses his belt buckle into my back.

I held out for sex for after marriage, telling Bobby that I'm an old-fashioned cowgirl. That made him make romantic cow eyes my way. I've got nothing against cows. I've never met cows. Just three horses, years ago. I'd assumed that after we got married and "honeymooned" our private parts raw, I could confess.

I lean away from that belt-bruise, turn and grab Bobby's hand. "Thanks, pardner," I say. "I'm gettin' too excited for my gosh darn own good."

Our wedding night was a bronco-busting wild ride. With only one cringe-worthy note, that being my new husband wore his belt with his two fake six-shooters to bed. The horse-shaped bruise on my belly from the belt buckle didn't fade for a week.

Bobby kisses my cheek. "Of course you are, darlin'. We're still honeymoonin'."

The day after that first night, when I walked with a bow-legged gait, we went clothes shopping at a Western attire store. A profusion of pearl buttons assaulted me. "I prefer more fashionable—" and that's as far as I got. The Montana-Big-Sky-Thundercloud look on Bobby's face made me backpedal quick.

Now Bobby goes back to his seat. "Betcha us gettin' a horse ranch brings back memories."

Oh, you betcha. The memories make my guts tighten. I stare out the huge penthouse picture window at the magnificent Manhattan view. Yup, I've only briefly been the girlfriend and then wife of a rich man, but oh how I love the lifestyle. Beats my broke-receptionist Tucson life—no style.

Maybe if I confess how I got to be horse-phobic, we could put the whole ranch business on hold.

Forever.

"When I was four," I say, "I went on a pony ride at a fair. You know those rides where the ponies are tied to a stake in the middle and go round and round?"

Bobby nods. "I never got to do that."

I nod back, not sympathetic. "The pony scraped my leg raw rubbing it against the corral's rough log fence." I massage my leg at the painful memory.

My new husband leans back in his chair and tilts his head.

I press on. In for a pound of horse flesh... "Second time, I'm six, on a trail ride. The horse rolls onto its back, trying to crush me." I shiver. *And maybe kill me.* "Luckily, my feet didn't reach the stirrups, so I stepped off as the horse went down."

Before I could tell him about the horse that bit me, Bobby leans forward. He places his hands in fists on the table. His face and voice flat, he says, "You sayin' you're afraid of horses?"

No, I hate horses. I don't say that. I know I'm teetering on the horse-powered brink. Obsessions can be as crazy dangerous as horses.

Think, Jan, think.

I need to backpedal fast again. "Of course not, Two Gun," I say, spitting out the words faster than thought. "It's just that buying an unseen horse ranch on a weekend doesn't seem all

that sensible.” Whoa, where’d those words come from? And not that Bobby has any type of sense, including horse sense. If what the two of us knew about horses and ranches was water, it wouldn’t be enough for a cactus.

Bobby’s eyebrows raise. A good sign. “You might have a point. It’s a lot of money.”

Keep going, Jan, but what—ah. A touch of reality and Bobby would be sure as shootin’ to decide the cowboy life was not the life he wanted.

“Instead,” I continue, “let’s try a weekend at a ranch. That way, you’ll know what you like. And which horses you like, too.” Like me, I hoped he hated everything, especially the horses.

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At the Horsin’ Around Dude Ranch outside Mesa, Arizona...early evening...

Bobby takes a deep breath. “Smell that sweet manure perfume.”

“Yup,” I say with my well-practiced fake enthusiasm. I rub my sweaty nose. “That’s horse poop all right.” A stench I hope I never smell again after this weekend.

Together Bobby and I stand on the large wrap-around porch at the entry to the Horsin’ Around Dude Ranch. What is it about Western slang’s aversion to the letter “g”?

I avoid looking at two carved wooden horse statues that flank either side of the double entry door. They remind me of a horse statue in our penthouse foyer. First thing after Bobby drops his cowboy fixation, that horse is coming down. I’m tired of creeping my way around that thing.

Out from the main door steps a man in jeans, a lightweight cotton plaid shirt, a simple leather belt, and a straw cowboy hat. He could be any guy on a Tucson street. I can tell from Bobby’s expression he’s disappointed that the man isn’t decked out in mega-cowboy gear. Like

my husband, with his chaps, Stetson and now real, loaded, six shooters in his holsters.

The man's eyes tighten at the sight of my husband's outfit. But he pastes a grin on his face and sweeps off his hat. "Welcome to Horsin' Around, Mr. and Mrs. Carrington. I'm Joshua Canton—Josh—stable manager and your personal guide for the weekend."

"Hope you're not just joshing around," Bobby says.

Josh gives a hearty laugh, like he's never heard that joke before. I'm betting all of the ranch employees know how wealthy my husband is and will act accordingly.

"And call me Two Gun Bobby." He points at me. "She's Tucson."

Our personal guide's eyes grow tighter still, the smile fixed. "Shore nuff," he says. He places his hat back on his head. "Now let's get you situated in your room and down to dinner, frank and beans—"

Yuck. My last meal in New York was a fantastic bouillabaisse. I feel like maybe it was a meal for the condemned.

"—and in for an early bedtime." Josh points east. "Gotta get up early to start riding—ridin'." The "gs" are disappearing from Josh's speech and the twang intensifying. I understand and empathize. We're both giving the customer, uh, my husband, what he wants.

Josh opens the door and gestures for us to enter. I go first, my new cowboy boots pinching my feet. As Bobby passes him, Josh clears his throat. "Uh, Two Gun Bobby, I assume you'll leave your guns in the hotel safe for the duration of your stay?"

My husband stops dead in the doorway. He turns to Josh and fixes him with a dead-eye stare. "They're not loaded."

A lie.

Josh presses his lips together.

“And I’m *Two Gun* Bobby, remember?”

A hard swallow from Josh. “Shore nuff,” he says.

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The next day at the Horsin’ Around...

I beg off from the first day’s ride, telling Bobby that it’s because of my “monthly womanly trouble.” Which I had two weeks ago. Luckily, Bobby isn’t paying attention to my period schedule. I figure that if I tried to ride, I might die. I spend the day in our room, dreaming of New York.

Bobby returns at sundown, stinking of sweat, both his and the horse’s. Best of all, he’s walking funny, legs spread out so far side-to-side his belt is stretched wide. Sure as shootin’ saddle sore.

Yes! Nothing like pain to discourage—

He flings his arms wide. “Best day of my life.”

Oh, horse poop.

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That night...late...

I lie awake next to Bobby, who somehow, someway manages to snore with a Western twang. Even his bean farts twang. His whole body is obsessed.

What to do? How to save my New York lifestyle?

Maybe I could confess—and then Bobby would annul our brief marriage. Best I could hope for is to get my job back at AppAloosAs. Go back to living in my one-bedroom hot-box apartment in Tucson.

At least there’d be no horses there. Patio too small.

Ugh. Nope.

Maybe if Bobby bought a ranch, I could—I shiver. Horses, everywhere. Horses that'd kill me, one way or another. They'd tried before and would try again. I shudder. How to save my life? How to not die by horse?

Die.

I remember Bobby saying, "Now that I've got a wife, I've got to get a will." If he died intestate, it'd all come to me. I tremble.

But how? Prison cells are even smaller than my old apartment.

In his sleep, Bobby snorts like a horse and says, "giddyap." I groan. He flings out an arm and knocks his gun belt off the nightstand. It thuds to the floor, luckily neither gun in their holsters going off.

I sit up. An idea blooms in my mind.

Goodbye horse ranch, hello New York.

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Early the next morning...

Bobby perches atop his horse, an ancient, fat mare. She rolls her eyes my way and lays her ears back. Right back atcha, horse.

"Shore glad your missus changed her mind and is joinin' us, Two Gun," Joshua says. He tips his hat toward me.

I have no intention of "joinin'." Now or ever. *Once my plan works...*

My husband grins in the dim dawn light. "Me too," he says. He shifts in the saddle. "Glad you're comin' along, Tucson."

Nope, I have no intention of "comin' along."

“Hurry up, Tucson.” Bobby slaps one of his holsters. His empty holsters.

I grin. Last night I removed his guns and hid them under the bed.

He looks down at both sides of his belt. “Where in tarnation are my shooters?” He makes to get out of the saddle.

Oh-oh. I can't let that happen. I hold up my hand. “Hard to get dressed in the dark. Must've missed ‘em,” I say. “I’ll go get ‘em.”

Before Josh or Bobby can respond, I race into the lodge. My heart galloping, I run to our room and scrabble under the bed for my one murder weapon—I’ve got two. I check to make sure both guns are loaded and ready. *New York here I come.*

I sprint back, one gun in each hand. Through the lobby glass door, I see Bobby sitting on the old mare like he belongs. *Not for long.*

I burst through the door and down the porch steps. Dang, that damn horse is close. *Keep going. Make it believable.*

In a few steps, I come up beside Bobby and his horse. I fling up one of my arms, gun in hand. I shout “Found ‘em!”

I “accidentally” fire the “unloaded” gun at Bobby’s chest.

I miss. Really not a cowgirl.

The old mare rears. She begins to topple over to her side. The one I’m standing next to.

“Whoa!” Bobby shouts. *Yeah, right.*

I fling up my arms to stop the ton of horse flesh headed my way.

Yeah, right.

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Six months later...porch at Two Gun AppAloosAs Ranch...

My cheerful husband rides up on his old, fat mare and stops alongside the porch rail. The horse gives me another ears-back side-eye like she always does.

"Hate you too," I mutter under my breath.

"Great news, Tucson," Bobby says. "Just finished talking to a specialist. He's flying out tomorrow to start horseback therapy. We'll have you up on a horse and then up on your feet in no time."

I sit in my custom-built wheelchair, the chair built to look like I'm on a galloping horse. I hate this wheelchair.

Sure as shootin'.

END