



Faking It With a Cowboy Billionaire

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Description: I'm known for many things. Playboy. Billionaire. Owner of the Whiskey Canyon Ranch. But doting boyfriend is not one of them. I enjoy spending my days in the fields and my night with a different buckle bunny. I work hard and play harder.

I spend my working life making sure that my family's business stays a success. We run the ranch to be the best in the area, and even continue to be the biggest contributor to the town's rodeo. My after work activities have never been an issue. That is, until the other sponsors have had enough of my playboy ways.

With a real threat to losing funding, I'm forced to do something I swore I would never do—find a girlfriend. It's with a stroke of luck that a beautiful—and frustratingly sassy—Dakota Myers grabs my attention and begs me to pretend to be hers to ward off an ex. She turns my world upside down, forcing me to straddle the line of love and hate, or I risk losing everything.

Faking It With a Cowboy Billionaire was previously featured in the Wicked Games Anthology. It has been re-edited and now contains new content as a full length novel.

Total Pages (Source): 79

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

Chapter One

Dakota

I know an asshole when I see one.

I could point them out so easily when I was in school, see the bullies being little pricks to those who couldn't fight back.

Just like I know in an instant when I'm sitting across the bench from someone during trial. It's usually those who have more arrogance than sense.

They set off my asshole-o-meter instantly.

Everyone except for Laughlin fucking Chadwick.

There was something about Laughlin that pulled me in. I don't know if it was his unbelievably good looks or his charm. Everything about him drew me in like a moth to a flame. And boy, did I get burned.

"Mark, another, please," I raise my voice over the bass-heavy music, leaning my body against the cool mahogany bar. While not exactly a regular at The Whiskey Dam, I'm here enough to have the bartender know me and my go-to drink. Then again, Whiskey Falls isn't that big of a place. It's either here or The Lucky Dog in town to escape reality for a little while, and tonight I chose the place with music so loud I can barely hear myself think.

Just what I need for a day like today.

Looking up at the shelves of liquor across from me, backlit with a neon blue light, I can't help but think of the ocean. The ocean reminds me of Laughlin and the trip to Vancouver Island we took a few months ago. The very same trip where I found out he had been using me to gain the upper hand on my cases, only to have it used against me in court. He'd lied, cheated, and stole; and there's nothing I can do about it. I can't prove anything. It's my word against his, and that's what hurts the most.

That, and I've also lost all trust in people and my self-respect.

"Fuck!" I slap my hand on the bar, narrowing my eyes down its length. Where the fuck is Mark?

My curse vanishes with the pounding music. I have been so blindsided by his betrayal I feel lost. As if everything I've ever known has come crumbling down on me. For someone that prides themselves in being able to spot shit like this, I was clueless. I was too blinded by love—by lust—to see clearly.

I'm never going to let that happen to me again.

"Are you sure, Dakota?" Mark asks as he walks up to me, leaning his strong, tattooed forearms on the bar.

He's sexy in his own right. Brown hair so dark it's almost black in the dim bar lighting. He looks as if he works out; his muscles straining against his black button-up shirt. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, putting his full tattoo sleeves on display.

I wish I could see him as more than just Mark, the bartender. I wish I could get lost in someone like him to help make me forget all the shit I've had to go through in the last

few months, but I can't. I've been coming to the bar long enough to be considered a regular, which leaves Mark purely in the 'I supply you with your liquor' zone.

I also wished I could sleep with someone and not care. I would love more than anything to be able to shut off the part of my brain that wants a personal connection with someone while also exploring the physical. But that's not for me. If it were, Mark would be in the running for the perfect bed mate. But he's seen too much. Knows too much.

"Just give it to me, Mark." I use my courtroom voice, firm and demanding. It's the voice that lets everyone know I'm not fucking around.

"Last one, Dakota. I mean it." He sighs as he reaches below the bar and pulls out a glass.

I roll my eyes but keep a close watch as he pours two fingers' worth from the bottle of Jack. "Whatever you say."

Snatching the glass from him, I swallow a healthy sip. I relish the burn and smoke as the amber liquid slides down my throat. The burn reminds me that I'm still alive. It reminds me that I can still feel more than shame and guilt.

"I mean it, Dakota." Mark doesn't even try to hide the exasperation in his voice. "No more, and don't go getting yourself into any trouble. You may be a lawyer here in Whiskey Falls, but that doesn't put you above the law."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Or, more like, I don't want to admit I know what he's talking about. I may skirt the law when assholes set off my asshole-o-meter, but they all deserve it.

"All I'm saying is, don't go all Carrie Underwood on Laughlin again, alright?"

“Why would you think that?” I still the glass in front of my mouth, looking at him with a raised eyebrow.

Sure, I may have taken a baseball bat to Laughlin’s precious Mercedes when we got home from the island, but that doesn’t mean I’ll do it again.

I don’t think so, anyway.

Mark tilts his chin to point over my shoulder. I turn, following his gaze and suck in a breath.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

Fucking hell. Not him. Not tonight.

Okay, maybe there is a reason for Mark to think I would swing a slugger at a car tonight.

“No problems tonight,” Mark warns.

I grab my whiskey, downing it in one gulp. Heat engulfs my body as the drink works its magic. Now, I just need to forget tonight ever happened.

“Dakota, is that you?” A familiar boastful voice rings behind me.

Putting on my best fake smile, I turn to face my unwanted guest. “Laughlin.” I halt briefly at the bleached blonde on his arm. “I’m surprised you’re here. I thought the Whiskey Dam was beneath you.”

“What would make you think that?” the asshole laughs, squeezing the bimbo’s hand, which is placed firmly in the crook of his elbow. “I love this place, don’t I, Mindy?”

“Yup,” the blonde replies, popping the ‘p’ while twirling a strand around her finger.

“Right. And Mindy is...?” I don’t want to ask, but curiosity is getting the better of me. I also can’t help but look her up and down, seeing exactly what Laughlin is attracted to. She’s stick thin, bottle blonde with big blue eyes. She looks like she’s just going along for the ride and is perfectly okay with inflating Laughlin’s ego.

So, the complete opposite of me.

“Mindy is my girlfriend.” He emphasizes the word ‘girlfriend’ as if he knew it would hurt me more

The thought of Laughlin being with someone else isn’t what hurts me. What causes the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach is that he can move on so quickly without any remorse for what he did.

That asshole.

“How nice,” I sneer.

“Alone in a bar, I see?” I don’t miss the smirk on his smug face as he makes a show of looking around me.

I want nothing more than to wipe that look off his face. The way he’s standing there with his new girlfriend, running his finger along his lip, tells me he knows what game he’s playing. He thinks he has the upper hand on me. He thinks he’s somehow bested me because he found someone that cares more about the zeros in his bank account than the words that come out of his mouth.

The vindictive, arrogant asshole.

“What makes you think that?” My mind races for ways I can make him think I’m not here alone. Like I am. I need something that sounds believable that will get this prick out of my hair so I can go back to drinking and forget his face.

“Oh, honey. It’s okay. Break-ups are hard. I get it.” His condescending tone makes me want to throw up.

How did I ever find this attractive?

Casually looking down the length of the bar, I notice a man with his back toward me. Black cowboy hat on top of his head, leather jacket stretched across his broad shoulders. He reaches his left hand over the bar to grab his beer, showing his lack of a wedding ring.

I can use this.

Sending up a quick prayer to anyone that will listen, I smile at Laughlin while reaching out my hand and running it up the stranger's arm.

“Laughlin, I'd like you to meet my boyfriend.” I smile the brightest fake smile I can muster, hoping beyond hope that the person I'm groping right now is willing to play along.

Chapter Two

Chance

“I'm serious, Wyatt, I'm not fucking doing it,” I growl as I take a sip of my beer.

“I think it's a shit idea, too, Chance, but I don't see how you can get out of it.” Wyatt Winters has been my best friend all my life, and my ranch manager for nearly a decade. He knows the business side of Whiskey Canyon Ranch almost as well as I do, as if it were his own family's ranch. We grew up together on those grassy fields, running through the mud and horseback riding in the back forty. I couldn't imagine running the ranch without him.

But if Wyatt makes me go through with this harebrained idea, he might just have to.

“Then why are you entertaining it?”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“Are you really going to make me say it?” Wyatt challenges me. I remain quiet, glaring at him, daring him to say what he’s thinking. He sighs, takes a shot of his whiskey, and continues. “You’ve been getting a lot of bad press lately, and it’s affecting the ranch. I don’t like this any more than you do, but it looks like you need to clean up your act or you’re going to lose sponsors for the rodeo. We can’t afford that.”

“I still don’t see what my personal life has to do with the rodeo,” I grumble into my beer.

“You can’t promote a family-friendly event when you’re being spread across the internet with a new woman every night, giving the ladies in town enough gossip for a lifetime.” Wyatt swears under his breath as he shakes his head. “I think it’s a bullshit excuse, but you run Whiskey Canyon Ranch now, and that means you’re in the spotlight. You don’t get a pass as the owner’s son anymore. You’re the owner.”

“Why do you have to be so fucking logical?”

“Why do you have to be so fucking stubborn?”

We stare at each other, unblinking. My chest heaves in agitation as I take in Wyatt’s words.

I’ve spent my whole life involved with the family ranch, but I’ve only been running it for less than a year. I’m sure my dad is rolling in his grave seeing how I’m still living my personal life, much like he would tell me to my face when he was alive. I’m always professional when it comes to the ranch, though. I take meetings, I return

phone calls and emails. It's not like I'm fucking the buckle bunnies in front of clients on a conference room table.

To me, those two parts of my life are separate, but I guess I need to put a hold on the revolving door of bunnies if I want my business to be successful.

“Okay, say I want to ‘clean up my act;’ I have to make it look like I’m dating the same woman for one extended period of time, and go to all the charity events with her?”

“Yes, just until the rodeo’s over. Find someone you can stand long enough, who would please the sponsors, and then break it off after the rodeo. Then we’ll spend the next year making sure we aren’t in this predicament again.”

I can’t hold back my huff. I know Wyatt’s right; it’s the best way to make the investors happy and protect the ranch, but I don’t care for it. There’s a reason I have a different woman on my arm every night. I don’t do relationships. I’m broken that way, and I don’t care to fix it.

“Fine, but I get a say in who this unlucky woman is. I’m not going to be spending my time with just anyone.”

“As if anyone could convince you otherwise,” Wyatt laughs, taking another sip of his drink.

I reach my arm out to grab my beer when a gentle hand grazes my arm.

“Laughlin, I’d like you to meet my boyfriend,” a soft voice behind me says.

Surely the voice doesn’t belong to the woman touching my arm. I’m never mistaken for anyone’s boyfriend, that’s for damn sure.

I turn on my stool, finding myself lost in a pair of breathtaking hazel eyes. There's a pleading look to them that's piqued my interest, along with her hand gripping my arm as if I were a life ring. I don't know what she's asking of me, but I know I want to play along.

"Chance Declan is your boyfriend?" A grating timber asks to my left.

Laughlin Chadwick. Fuck me.

I don't know what this woman wants, but now she's definitely getting it. She doesn't fit the bill of my usual type with her long, dark hair, but she is incredibly attractive.

It's those eyes that are holding me captive. Her intense look is all but begging for me to pretend to be her boyfriend.

And if there's one thing I love, it's a woman begging for me.

"There you are, babe. I've been looking everywhere for you." I lean in, giving her a kiss on her cheek as I whisper, "What's your name, sweetheart?"

"Dakota," she whispers with a smile as I pull back.

"There's no way you're dating this asshole," Laughlin hisses.

Dakota's eyes open wide in astonishment. "And why not? Why would it be so hard to believe I'm dating Chance?" she asks as she leans against the bar.

I wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her in tight to me.

"Like you could land the town's billionaire. Plus, everyone knows he only dates arm candy and you, Dakota, aren't that." Laughlin sneers as he runs his eyes up and down

Dakota's body.

I don't know what this guy's problem is, or Dakota's history with him, but it's ending right here.

"You'd better watch your fucking mouth, Chadwick." I stand from my stool, getting in his face. "You won't like what happens if you say one more word about my woman."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“Your woman,” Laughlin scoffs. “If she were your woman, the papers wouldn’t be flashing your picture with some blonde bimbo from the other night. Or was it two? I can’t keep up with you. Doesn’t look too good on you to be cheating on ‘your woman.’”

I’m moving before I can think about what I’m doing. With his shirt in both of my fists, I pull him close, leaving only a breath between us. “You listen here. I don’t give a shit what you saw or heard. Dakota is mine, and no one fucks with what’s mine. Do you understand?”

“Chance, he’s not worth it.” Dakota’s voice is raised behind me, but I can’t pay attention to that now. All I care about is Laughlin’s fearful beady blue eyes.

“What are you doing?” Wyatt asks, putting his hand on my shoulder.

Breaking my gaze with the weasel, I look around to see we are drawing a crowd. Some have their phones out recording. Others are flashing pictures. I know it’ll be all over the internet and local gossip pages within the hour.

Dropping my hands, I let Laughlin go, causing him to stumble back into his date. With the blonde’s eyes wide in panic, she holds her arms out to stop Laughlin from crashing into her.

“Let’s go, babe.” I turn to Dakota, straightening my shirt. “I don’t like the company in here tonight.”

“Yeah, it’s shocking who they let in,” she says dazedly, glaring between me and the

others. I don't miss the way she stands straighter with her chin held high.

I turn my back on Chadwick, letting him know I'm done with him wasting more of my time. It's then I notice the bartender with his hands on the bar, eyes narrowed at Dakota. I don't know what it is with this woman, but she seems to draw trouble wherever she goes.

"I thought I said no more trouble from you, Dakota. What was that?"

"It wasn't me this time, Mark." Dakota smiles.

"Don't blame this on her." I point my finger at the man. "What do I owe you for all three of our tabs?"

"Nothing. It was about time someone put that jackass in his place." The bartender smiles. "Just don't make it a regular occurrence, okay? Last thing I need is the cops called over some dumbass shit."

"Noted." I throw a hundred-dollar bill on the counter. "Come on, babe. Let's get out of here." I hold my hand out to her. My heart rate kicks up as she places her hand in mine. I love she doesn't hesitate to place her hand in mine, and I'm not sure why.

"Babe?" The bartender asks Dakota with a raised eyebrow.

"Don't ask," she responds with a shake of her head, grabbing her purse from the bar top and following me.

Wyatt grumbles something under his breath, which I'm sure is a curse at me, before he downs the rest of his drink and falls in behind us.

I lead Dakota over to my black lifted truck out front, opening the passenger door for

her. I tilt my head as she stops walking, staring at me as she stands stock still in the middle of the parking lot. One of her hands clutches the strap of her bag, the other at her hip. Wyatt stands behind her, giving me the same questioning look over her shoulder.

Fuck me, they aren't going to make this easy.

“What’s the problem, princess?” I find my temper simmering at the surface after my encounter with Laughlin. I don’t want to take it out on Dakota, but she’s the one that dragged me into this shit.

“You’re the owner of Whiskey Canyon Ranch,” she says with her eyes wide.

“The one and only.” I grip the door, letting the cool metal under my skin centre me.

“Like, the billionaire Chance Declan.”

“Yes, we’ve established this. I’m not sure what my bank account has to do with any of this, though.”

“Sorry.” She gives her head a shake as she walks toward me. “This just isn’t how I was expecting my night to go.”

“I think it’s safe to say the same goes for all of us.” I look into her whiskey-coloured eyes for a moment longer before nodding my head at the open door. “Are you get getting in, girlfriend?”

“I have my car here.” She slips her hand into her purse, pulling out a key.

“Give the keys to Wyatt. He’ll follow behind us.”

Wyatt curses and kicks at the ground, but I don't care. He's the one that's trying to push me to go with the dumbass idea of finding a fake girlfriend, so he's in this just as much as I am.

“Look, I'm very grateful for what you did back there. I panicked when I saw Laughlin and his newest fling, but that's it. We're out of the bar now.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

I take two steps, closing the distance between us. Bringing my hand up, I grasp her dark, luscious curls, drawing her close. I don't miss the shiver that wracks through her body at my touch. "It's not over because the asshole is currently gawking at us through the window. It's not over because half the bar got either video or photos of us together, and it's certainly not over because I need you to return the favour."

Dakota sucks in a gasp, but nods.

"Good girl," I growl before lowering my lips to hers. I know I'm putting on a show for those that are still looking, but I don't care. I've kissed women for less.

"Fucking hell," Wyatt curses behind her, but I don't care.

Dakota grasps my shirt, holding the fabric tight in her fists as she pulls me closer, deepening the kiss. I wasn't prepared for my body's intense reaction to her lips meeting mine. I need this kiss like I need to breathe. Like her exhale is what lets me take my next breath.

As soon as the thought crosses my mind, I pull back. I don't long for women. I never feel anything other than lust—an itch to scratch.

But feelings? I don't do feelings.

"Get in the truck, sweetheart, and give Wyatt your keys." She looks back at me, stunned, brushing her fingers over her lips. I add a stern "now," that gets her jumping into action.

As if remembering we aren't alone, she passes her keys to a pissed off Wyatt with a smile, jumping into the waiting truck.

I close the door firmly and turn to him. "Follow us back to my place." Wyatt's grimace turns to a smirk, making me add, "Not a word," before I stalk to the driver's side and tear out of the parking lot.

Chapter Three

Dakota

Sitting in the passenger seat of this massive beast of a truck, I can't help but stare at the man beside me, wondering what the fuck happened.

I didn't mean for it to go as far as it did when I came up with the idiotic idea to grab the first stranger in the bar and pretend he was my boyfriend. Of course I had to grab the most high profile, woman-using asshole in town.

Chance fucking Declan.

Even though I've never met him before, I know of him. Everyone in Whiskey Falls knows of him. It was big news when he inherited the family ranch last year when his dad passed away. Every paper and gossip rag in town wouldn't stop talking about the playboy son's inheritance and what it meant for the town. Not only is the ranch the biggest supplier of cattle in the area, but it also sponsors the local rodeo, which makes up the vast majority of the town's economy every summer.

"Are you just going to sit there staring at me all night?" His gruff voice rings out from the other side of the cab. I hate how the gruff timbre of his voice makes me press my legs together, fighting the rising heat in my core. I hadn't realized I was staring, but now that my focus is on him, I find myself unable to stop.

He looks older than I would have imagined, with his tanned face and faint lines around his eyes. His black cowboy hat looks clean, but well-worn. He dons a black button-up shirt and dark denim jeans. He ditched his leather jacket when he got in the truck, which lets me see just how his muscles strain against the fabric of his shirt. He looks like he comes from money while simultaneously showing he isn't afraid to get his hands dirty. The perpetual scowl he seems to wear on his face is likely to scare a lot of people off, but not me.

“Just taking in what happened back there.”

“The luck of the draw when you latch onto a random stranger in a bar,” he mutters, keeping his eyes on the road.

“Look, I'm sorry, okay? I...” I start, but I'm not sure how to finish the sentence.

I'm not scared of being alone in a bar; that's never bothered me. What bothers me is Laughlin thinking I'm not over him. I can't stand the thought that he might think I spend my days pining over him, or incapable of moving on. That's the farthest from the truth. I've never been happier since I kicked his sorry ass to the curb.

“What did you even see in him, anyway?” Chance asks, stealing a glance in my direction. “I don't know anything about you, but I know what a weasel he is. You don't seem like the kind to chase after—whatever it is he has.”

I'm at a loss for words, and not because I don't know how to answer him. It's because he's right. I'm not one to follow a guy because of money or status. I couldn't give two fucks about any of that. What happened with Laughlin just seems to be the first in a long line of bad decisions, such as getting into trucks with strangers after grabbing them in bars.

I mean, what am I doing? I willingly got in with a man I don't know, all while giving

his friend the keys to my car. I don't do this. This isn't who I am.

“So, what was it? First love? Family ties? It can't be that you were blinded by lust because he's not that good looking, nor do I think he's good in bed.”

I snicker. I can't argue with that last point.

“You act like you know him well, but I've never heard him mention you. Why is that?” I turn in my seat, crossing my arms over my chest. I'm intrigued, even though I have no right to be. The lawyer in me wants to get to the bottom of whatever bad blood lies between the two of them.

“You first,” he growls.

Dammit, there's that voice again. Goosebumps ripple along my flesh as if he caressed me with his hand instead of his words.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

What is happening to me?

I shrug, uncrossing my arms and trying to find my chipped nail polish more interesting. “We, uh, met on a case, actually. He was opposing counsel.”

“You’re a lawyer,” he says matter-of-factly.

“Yes. I work for Hammond Law.” When he doesn’t comment further, I continue. “Once the case was over, he asked me out. At first, he wasn’t anything like the asshole he is today, or he didn’t seem to be, anyway.”

“So, what made you finally see him for who he is?”

“I caught him stealing paperwork from my locked desk at my home. He was trying to help his company’s clients when we opposed them.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Chance asks, nearly swerving the truck. “I knew he was low, but I didn’t know he was that low.”

“You’re telling me,” I mutter under my breath.

“So, what’s he doing free, then? I’m assuming that’s against the law or something.”

“I didn’t have any proof other than what I saw. He made up some bullshit excuse about finding it and putting it ‘somewhere safe,’ but I didn’t believe him. I always lock up my work when I take it home, especially when I have people over.” I let out a breath, calming the rising anger building within me. “I didn’t know how long he’d

been doing it or for which cases. I knew which ones I'd struggled with to gain the upper hand, but since I would never oppose him in a case due to conflict of interest, it wasn't something I'd even thought about."

We sit in silence for a breath, letting the weight of my confession settle between us. I carried a lot of guilt. Guilt for myself. Guilt for my clients and my company. Most of all, I wanted to kick my own ass for ever believing in Laughlin or the future I thought we had together.

He never once registered on my asshole-o-meter. Not until the day I caught him with a file in his hand.

Now Chance, I don't know where he stands on my asshole-o-meter either. I can feel he has potential to be one, but I can't quite read him. Not yet, and that makes me nervous.

"So, what about you? Where did your hate for Laughlin come from?"

"He tried to take my company to court last year." Chance's voice is gruff and low, barely audible over the truck's engine. "His client made up some bullshit claim that we falsified vet documents after he bought more cattle than he could afford."

"I think I remember Laughlin talking about that. He just said it was a big case that would solidify his shot at becoming partner." I remember the conversations while he'd been working on the trial. Of course, he'd made it sound like he was fighting a big company who took advantage of the 'little guy.' I'd been convinced he was doing the right thing, standing up for those who had been taken advantage of.

Now I wonder just how many cases Laughlin had fought that were bogus or exaggerated to benefit him or his client.

“He didn’t win. It didn’t take our lawyers very long to prove that his client was the one that falsified the documents and did a piss-poor job at trying to hide it.”

“Did you ever find out why?” My curiosity is getting the best of me. The version of events Laughlin had fed me were vastly different.

“His ranch was going under, and he thought I’d be his best chance at a quick buck. He probably thought I’d just pay him to go away or settle out of court, but that’s not how I roll. I know my company, and I know we do everything top of the line. We don’t cut corners.” Chance speaks passionately, grinding the words through his teeth in disgust. “Little did he know, I would go to the ends of the Earth to protect my ranch and my family name.”

“I’d say you did a good job, then. I remember Laughlin was pissed when they lost. Of course, he didn’t go into why.”

I don’t hate that Laughlin had been taken down that way. He deserved it if what Chance said was true. I remember how mad he was when he came home after the trial. He brooded about it for weeks. I could barely stand to be around him at the time, but being a lawyer, I know how easy it is to take cases personally, especially when you pour months, even years, into a trial.

But now that I know what really happened, I know it was more of a blow to his ego than him not being able to help someone.

Jackass.

“Of course not. My lawyer made him look like a child in court. I’ve never seen a judge so angry. Chastised him like he was fresh out of law school.” Chance chuckles as he pulls off the back road and onto the ranch grounds. I am almost distracted by the unlikely sound from the gruff man, but I can’t take my attention away from the

sight in front of me. Imposing large, black steel gates meet us with a 'WCR' standing proudly in the middle.

Chance slows, and when he crawls the truck to just in front of the gate, it begins to open. We sit in silence as we watch the drive appear in front of us. I keep my gaze through the windshield as we pull up to the front of a large farmhouse. It's been years since I'd been to the ranch, only coming when I first moved to Whiskey Falls and my friend insisted I come to a rodeo event the town had put on. Since that time, I'd forgotten how large the house was. Now I'm wondering if Chance lives in this massive house alone.

The thought leaves me a little sad. Such a big house and no one to share it with.

Or maybe he has quite a few someones to share it with. I've heard the rumours around town and saw the pictures online. It doesn't seem like Chance Delcan is ever hurting for company.

So why is he insisting on spending time with me?

I don't get a chance to ask. As soon as he stops the truck and hops out, he leaves me alone with my questions. I watch him as he rounds the front of the truck, stopping next to my car as Wyatt parks next to us.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

I know I need an SUV or a truck for the climate here, but I like my little silver Mercedes. It's one of the few luxuries I've allowed myself since graduating law school, but I still can't help but stifle a laugh as I watch Wyatt unfold his large frame from my small car. I wonder if he's ever been in a vehicle so small.

The scowl on his face tells me that even if he has, he hated every second of it. The petty woman inside of me smiles, knowing that his ride was just as uncomfortable as mine.

I watch as Chance says a few words to him. I can't hear what they are, but I can tell by the look on Wyatt's face he doesn't like it. He spares me a strained look over Chance's shoulder before stalking off to the side of the house. Chance's shoulders slump before he turns back to me and opens the door.

There's something about his movement that makes the anger rise within me. I don't know if it's the smirk that riddles his face as he stands in front of me, or the way he's acting like a gentleman, opening my door when I know he's not, but there's something that's setting me off.

Jumping down, I grind my fists into my hips and I glare up at him. "I don't know what you're planning, but I'm not going to be another one of your conquests. Thank you for saving me back there, but your services are no longer required. I'll just take my keys and go."

"No," he says simply.

"What do you mean 'no?'"

He takes a step toward me, crowding me against his truck. My heart rate kicks up. Not because I'm scared. For some reason, I know I'm physically safe with him, even though he's a stranger to me. Even though I'm deserted behind the gates of his sprawling ranch, where no one but his lackey can hear me scream. No, my heart rate kicks up for the same reason my core is on fire. For the same reason my breath is getting shallow, my palms sweaty. I don't know what it is about being close to this man that sets my body off, but it does. And right now, it's on fire.

He leans in, his palms on either side of my head as he lowers his face, the stubble of his cheek rubbing against the sensitive skin of my neck. Cedar and cinnamon surround me. I have to force myself not to close my eyes and give in to the temptation of burying my nose into his shirt. My chest brushes against his with every breath, causing bittersweet friction against my now-hard nipples.

"I said—no," he growls, brushing his lips against my cheek. "Now, follow me inside and we can talk about what happens from here."

"What do you mean 'what happens from here?'"

"It means—I have a proposition for you."

Chapter Four

Chance

"What was that?" Dakota asks—or rather, demands.

I wonder if that's how she sounds in court. Her almost sultry tone is low and forceful, commanding my attention. The thought of her challenging me like this turns me on. I haven't had many women that have ever tried; they usually go along with whatever I say in the hopes of being the one to 'change my ways.'

“What was what?” I ask, taking off my jacket and hanging it on the coat rack by the door. Kicking off my boots, I leave them haphazardly in the entryway as I brush past her. I don’t need to impress her. What I do need is a beer to get through the impending conversation.

“Don’t play dumb with me, Chance Declan. Why am I here and what is this ‘proposition’ you have for me?” She balls her hands into fists and shoves them tightly into her luscious hips.

Fuck, she looks sexy when she does that. Her step doesn’t even falter as she squares up against me, straightening her spine to trying to reach my height. She doesn’t, not even close, but it’s cute she tries.

I turn and walk away from her, knowing that she’ll follow. I fight a smile as I hear her soft, but sure, footsteps.

“Do you want a drink?” I don’t turn around as I enter the kitchen and open the fridge. “I think I have wine in the cellar somewhere, but it won’t be chilled. I can get you a beer or whiskey.” I grab the first bottle of beer I find, twisting the top and taking a sip, letting the cold liquid pour down my throat. It’s too early in the summer to be hitting the record heat we usually have in the Interior region of British Columbia, but my proximity to Dakota is making me hot like it’s the middle of August.

“Of course you have a wine cellar,” she huffs. “No, I don’t want a drink. I want you to tell me why you brought me here, why you had your lackey drive my car, and why you didn’t drop the act when I asked you to. Most importantly, I want you to tell me what your fucking proposition is!”

“Wyatt isn’t my lackey,” I reply calmly, turning to her and resting my hip against the countertop. “He’s my ranch manager and best friend, not some paid employee at my beck and call.” I take a breath, assessing the best way to answer her questions. She

looks like an angry bull about to charge, and I don't want to be the one waving the red flag.

Even if I am full of them.

“As for why I didn't drop the act—as I said before, that was because Laughlin and our audience were watching through the window. You wanted him to believe I was your boyfriend. That's what I was doing.”

“Are you this much of an asshole with your other girlfriends?” she asks, crossing her arms over her chest. My gaze flickers down to her full breasts, now pushed up and threatening to spill out the top of her shirt. I don't dare linger on them too long, knowing it won't help me get what I need from her.

“I wouldn't know. I don't do girlfriends.”

“So why pretend I'm yours?”

“Because there's something about you I couldn't say no to.” I halt, shocked at my own admission. I didn't mean to say that. What the fuck am I doing even thinking about that? I clear my throat, needing to move on before she comments on it. “Plus, I loathe Laughlin.”

“Alright, I get that.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“As for the proposition—I imagine you know my reputation around town.” I hold her gaze, studying her reaction.

“Yes, I’m aware of your playboy ‘I-don’t-give-a-shit’ status.” Where most women would cower under my gaze, she stands firm. Her back straight, chin lifted, letting me know she’s not going to take anything less than the truth from me.

I admire that.

“Well, it’s causing some problems with the investors of the rodeo. Seems they want to have a say in my personal life, and that means being seen with the same woman for an extended period of time.”

“And what does that mean for me?”

“It means I need you on my arm for all the major corporate events from now until after the rodeo. We’ll also need to be seen in public together, just like any other couple.”

She remains silent, her eyes laser-focused on mine. I don’t dare break from her gaze, but notice the steady rise and fall of her chest as she considers my words. Her breath quickens along with the growing tension between us.

Heat races up my body as I deny myself what I want the most. Not only do I want to look at her now-heaving breasts, but I want to cross my kitchen and take her into my arms. I want to feel their weight in my hands. Find out what it would be like to make her come completely undone.

I give my head a shake. I don't think like this. I don't give a shit what makes a woman tick come sundown. I only care about what gets them off and out of my bed before the sun rises.

"How many?" Her voice rips through the silence, bringing my attention back to the matter at hand.

"How many what?"

"How many events do we need to be seen at and over what period of time? I have court dates coming up and I can't take time away from that just to be seen all over town as your latest buckle bunny."

"You wouldn't be my latest buckle bunny; that's the point." I remain still for another moment before taking a breath and sagging my shoulders. "You're the anti-buckle bunny."

"I don't know if that's a compliment or an insult." She narrows her eyes and tilts her head; but the way she regards me isn't in distaste or anger. She looks at me as if I'm a puzzle. A case to be solved.

A project.

"It's a compliment." I don't look away as I lift my bottle to my lips and sip. This time, I indulge myself in letting my gaze roam over her. She drops her arms from her chest, letting them hang at her side. The black sweater she's wearing clings to her like a second skin, giving way to dark blue jeans and black socks. She must have kicked off her boots, leaving her that much shorter than me.

"You still didn't answer my question. You do that a lot."

“Do what?” My mind draws a blank, trying to recall what she’d asked before I let my eyes wander.

Her curves set her apart from my usual women. Curves that would give me something to hold on to. Let me feel like I won’t break her if I handle her the way I want to.

“You deflect and evade my questions. I can see now why you don’t have a lot of women sticking around.”

“Maybe I like it that way.” I place my beer bottle on the counter behind me, letting the glass tap against the quartz counter ringing loudly through the room. “Plus, they don’t get time to ask questions.”

Dakota rolls her eyes. “Either way. How many events between now and the rodeo?”

“Three. There’s a gala and a dinner the night before with all the sponsors and participants. Plus the rodeo itself which is a three day event.”

“And private dates?” Her tone is flat, unimpressed.

“Undetermined,” I grit through my teeth. Dates are another thing I don’t do. Pick up women at a bar? Sure. Go home with someone from a charity event? You bet. Plan a dinner and night with someone in advance? Never.

She stares at me, using that assessing glare of hers. I find myself wanting to shift under her gaze. It’s one she no doubt perfected for witnesses on the stand, but I won’t let it break me. I won’t let this woman get the better of me.

Turns out, she’s the first to break the gaze, looking around the room, assessing it as she turns in a circle. “What’s with the house?”

“It’s a house,” I answer flatly. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“It’s a little...”

“Ostentatious?” I stand straight and walk to her, hovering over her without touching.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“Big word for a cowboy,” she teases, the corner of her mouth lifting in a smirk.

“What? You think we’re only good for riding horses and tending to animals?” I reach up and tuck a stray curl behind her ear. The citrus scent of her shampoo washes over me, and I have to stop myself from leaning down for more.

“You’re doing it again,” she says, placing her hand on my chest.

My heart races under her touch. I’m sure she can feel it quicken under her palm.

“My dad built it,” I start, once I’ve safely rounded the island. I need distance if we are going to talk. I can’t think while touching her. “The ranch took off about a decade ago, and he was able to buy a lot of the surrounding farms that were struggling. He doubled the size of our ranch in two years.”

“That’s impressive. Must have been really hard for the town.”

“Yeah. He started this to ensure investors from out of the area didn’t come in and take over. He didn’t want industrial buildings and big city landscapes in Whiskey Falls. So, he worked out a plan with the farmers and kept it as farmland. Ended up keeping a lot of them on as employees, letting them rent out the houses they were already in.”

“That was very kind of him.” She moves forward slowly, taking a seat on the stool at the island. She folds her hands and places them on the countertop in front of her. She looks very professional, as if she were interviewing me as a client, not as a potential boyfriend.

Fake boyfriend.

“Yes, he was a good guy.” My voice trails off at the thought of my dad. He always had good intentions, even if he didn’t excite it in the right way. “Once the farm started to get bigger, and we started to sell more cattle out of province, he felt the need to ‘look the part.’ He built this house as a way to entertain those he needed to wine and dine to close bigger business deals.”

“Where’s the house you lived in before that?”

“About an acre back. Wyatt lives there now. I lived with him there until I moved here.” I thought back to living in my old house. Wyatt and I lived like the bachelors we are without a care in the world. It wasn’t quite what I imagined a frat house would be, but we had our share of company. It was my way of having some independence while still working the ranch. Having my best friend there with me made it that much better.

Until my dad died and I moved here. A place I’ve never considered home. If I’m honest, I try to spend as little time here as possible. Usually only to eat, sleep, and do business.

“So why does this place look so bare and cold?” Her tone isn’t judgmental, more curious.

“I sold off a lot of the furniture and art my dad thought he needed while he was trying to impress potential customers. I couldn’t stand looking at them.”

“And your mom?”

“She moved to Alberta to be closer to my aunt after my dad passed. She said she couldn’t handle being on the ranch without him.”

A silence falls over the kitchen as we look at each other. For once, I don't know what to do next. This woman confuses and frustrates me more than anyone else. If she hadn't placed us in this situation, I would have told her to be on her way well before our little heart-to-heart.

Which is another thing I don't do with women. I don't talk about myself or my family. I don't talk much at all. There's something about those hazel eyes that makes me not act like myself, and it's frustrating as hell.

“So, tell me, Cowboy. When's our first date?”

Chapter Five

Dakota

My mind races as I watch Chance across the kitchen island. His stoicism threatens to break under my scrutiny; I can feel it. I can't help that my courtroom persona comes out during my line of questioning with him, but I'm also not ready to let him off the hook with his deflection and evasion, either.

I'm shocked he told me about his family. That was a revelation I hadn't expected.

When I moved to Whiskey Falls after finishing law school, I didn't know what to expect from the small rodeo town. After spending so much time in the city, I expected a lot of dirt roads and hot summers like the ones I experienced back home. What I didn't expect was a town that wasn't so small, you knew everyone, but rather a tight-knit community that still provided some anonymity for anyone who wanted it. Chance can't hide because of how high-profile the ranch is, and while we have never crossed paths, I know of him. The people in town love to gossip about his personal life, always seeing him as the playboy rancher that likes to party. It only got worse when his dad passed away and he inherited the ranch. From what I'd heard, Chance

was a shrewd businessman and ran the ranch well, but his way with women was stopping the town fully supporting him in his position.

I might not agree with what the sponsors are doing, but I understand it. They want stability and to protect their image. They don't want the rodeo tarnished with a scandal or bad press, not that I've heard of Chance involved with any.

What really makes me curious is why he chose me. He could pick from any of the blonde bunnies on his arm on any given night. I bet they would fawn all over him, falling at his feet to get the chance to be his girlfriend, even if it was temporary and fake.

I don't know what the fuck I've gotten myself into, but I'm going to find out.

"The gala is next Saturday." Chance places his large, rough hands on the counter. They're tanned with dirt-laced nails, from what I assume is from working in the fields with his crew. I don't take him for someone that would rather hide in an office all day, and seeing his dirt-stained hands only proves my point. I also can't deny my thoughts race to what else those hands could do.

What would they feel like fanning against my body? Would he have a feather-light touch skimming down my sides? Cupping my breast? I imagine they could turn rougher, more possessive, the longer they explored.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

Would he place those hands on my neck, letting me know who was in charge while he thrust into me?

I shift in my seat, bearing my line of thought. I can't go there with him. I don't even know him. But yet, here I am sitting in his kitchen thinking about the wicked things those dirty hands could do.

“Alright, say I agree to this; what do I need to know?” I let my gaze drag up his body until I meet his striking green eyes. The same green eyes that made my heart race when I first saw them. The very green eyes that now stare at me with what I can only describe as a mix of heat and annoyance.

“It'll be here at the ranch.” He stops for a moment as he lowers his head to his chest and takes a deep breath. “All the sponsors and bigwig assholes I need to impress will be there.”

“I'm sure you're going to win them all over with an attitude like that.” Chance doesn't respond, just raises his head, eyes narrowed as he looks at me, which makes me chuckle. “Why does this rest solely on you to impress?”

“Other than being the largest ranch in town?” He smirks, making my core ignite. I hate my reaction to him. The more he speaks, the more I'm sure he's going to land high on my asshole-o-meter. Another reason why I can't get involved with him. “We host a fair here on the ranch ground for the families. Carnival games, food, the like. We are also the biggest sponsors of the rodeo and it's important that we get the right people on board to keep it successful.”

“Okay, so what do you need me to do?”

He stares at me for a long moment before answering. The tension between us is thick. I usually have a good read on people, a necessity in my job, but I can't read him. He shuts down his emotions like Fort Knox, leaving me confused and curious. I don't know what made him this hardened, but deep down, I want to find out.

I just don't know why.

After making me wait, his smooth, gravelly voice answers in a clipped tone. “I need you to pretend to be my girlfriend. Make it look like it's serious. Hell, I don't know; do what you have to do so that they can stop fucking around and invest in the rodeo.”

“Okay...” I draw out the word, trying to figure out how we could make this work. We don't even know each other, and we have just over a week to make it look like we're in a serious relationship.

“Weren't you just seen out with some tiny blonde a few days ago?” I ask.

“So?” he growls.

Damn, that voice is going to get me into trouble.

His hands shift from the counter to the edge of the quartz, holding on so tight his knuckles turn white.

“So,” I repeat. “I'm trying to figure out how we are going to get people to believe that we're a couple when you're still being seen with your revolving door of women. I refuse to be made a fool of in this project of yours, Chance.”

“Dammit, Dakota!” he bellows, slamming his hand on the counter, making me jump.

“I’m not going to apologize for who I am. Not to you, not to this city, and definitely not to the board of fucking investors that have sticks up their asses!”

His breath heaves as he looks at me. The room is too quiet around us. I don’t dare move. I don’t dare speak. I’m trying to make sense of everything that’s happening. How I got caught up in all of this. How I can make it believable that one minute he’s with a small blonde and the next he’s with me. And I need to make it look like he’s been with me all along.

I just went to the bar for a drink. One damn drink after a long day, and now I’m stuck in this ridiculous situation with Chance fucking Declan.

“And if I say no?” I ask, lifting my chin.

“I don’t think you really have a choice, sweetheart.” He uses the term of endearment mockingly. He holds my gaze as he stalks around the island; each step bringing him closer and closer. He doesn’t stop until he’s an inch away from me. My chest grazing against his with every breath. The scent of beer on his breath fanning over me as he holds my chin with his thumb and finger, daring me to give anything but him my full attention. “You made your move when you put your hand on me tonight. You made it your choice when you declared in front of the bar that I was your boyfriend. Do you really think Laughlin is just going to let this go? Laugh it off as some joke?”

“I don’t think...”

“That’s right, you didn’t think. And look where it landed us.” He stops, towering over me as I stare up at him, perched on my stool. He doesn’t let go of my chin, just like he doesn’t break his gaze from mine. All I can do is drink him in, everything from his strong, broad chest to his crystal blue eyes. It should be illegal for a man this sexy to have the personality he does.

“So now, do you really think you have the right to say no?” he growls, leaning in further. My heart stops as I feel his warm breath on my cheek. I shouldn’t be this turned on, but I am, and I hate myself for it.

I have options. I’m a smart, independent woman. A strong-willed lawyer known for my ability to stand up for what’s right and fight against those who use their power against those less fortunate. I deal with people like Chance Declan all the time.

There is the option to walk right out that door with my head held high, knowing that I won’t be pushed around by the likes of him, the man now firmly in place on my asshole-o-meter.

Who does he think he is? He may own this ranch, but he doesn’t own the town, and he certainly doesn’t own me.

On the other hand, if I want out, the town and Laughlin will know I lied. I’m not prepared to look like an idiot in front of him. He’s taken enough from me and damaged my pride in the breakup. There’s no way I can give him that satisfaction.

I also can’t risk my reputation as a lawyer in this town. I’ve spent too long working my way up since law school.

I have no other option.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“Fine,” I grit. “But you still won’t make a mockery of me. No more women while we are ‘together.’” I make air quotes with my fingers. “As for everything before that, we’ll say we were keeping it a secret until we were more serious. The women you were seen with were just friends until I was ready to be seen with you publicly.”

He looks at me for a long, hard moment. “Why wouldn’t you be ready to step out with me publicly?”

“You don’t have the best reputation with women, Chance, and I’m not someone that just has one-night stands. I don’t buy into hookup culture. I think that would be a pretty good reason why I wouldn’t want to be seen with you.”

Chance reels back as if I’d slapped him. While I feel a little bad about hurting him like that, it’s the truth. I’ll also admit, I appreciate the physical distance it puts between us. It’s too hard trying to think, having him so close.

“Fine,” he barks. “We’ll make it look like you weren’t ready to publicly associate with the likes of me, as long as you keep up your end of the bargain. We are happily in love and all that shit.”

“You’re so romantic,” I scoff. “I don’t know why you have such a hard time finding someone to stick around.”

“Look, just because we’re doing this doesn’t mean I have to like it. In fact, I hate all this bullshit. It’s no one’s business but mine who I spend my personal time with. I don’t need you judging me from your pedestal.”

Who the fuck does he think he is talking to me like that? Like I'm some love-struck bunny that's trying to reform him.

I jump to my feet, feeling my blood pressure spike. Even though I'm a good foot shorter than him, only coming to his chest, I don't let that stop me. I will not back down from this.

"I'm not judging. I'm commenting on what I see, and what I see is a definite level two of the asshole-o-meter."

"The asshole-o-meter?" He smirks that frustratingly sexy smile of his while he rubs a finger over his lower lip.

Why is that so sexy? I'm mad, not turned on!

"Yes, that's how I tell who's an asshole and who's not. I wasn't sure where you landed on it until now!" Letting my frustration get the better of me, I raise my voice and thrust my hands to my hips. "Just because I'm going through with this doesn't mean I like it either. The more you speak, the less I like you. But I agree; I helped put us in this situation so I will play along."

I grab my purse from the counter, sliding it onto my shoulder.

"Where do you think you're going? We aren't done talking."

"Yes, we are." Reaching into my purse, I grab my card and slam it onto the counter. "When you're done being an ass, text me and we'll work out the next steps. Right now, I need to get as far away from you as I can."

And get a very large, stiff drink.

“Whatever you say, princess.” I don’t miss his lighter, mocking tone. Narrowing my eyes at him, I huff as I turn, making my way toward the door. Slipping my shoes back on, I almost barge back in to keep giving him a piece of my mind when I hear that low chuckle.

The sound echoes through my brain as I slam the door and stomp down the steps.

Damn him!

Chapter Six

Chance

I can’t take my eyes off the little white card I’m spinning through my fingers. I don’t know how long it’s been since I sat at my desk, picking up this piece of card stock, refusing to acknowledge what it means. It’s been three days since Dakota left my kitchen. Three days since I’ve been able to get the beautiful, yet infuriating, lawyer out of my head. I spent my days working the fields from sunup to sundown, riding every fence line, fixing every break on my own, just trying to clear my head.

Nothing works.

Every night I’m back in the house I hate, trying to fall asleep while not thinking of her long dark hair or her whiskey eyes. Trying not to take myself in my hand, searching for some sort of relief from this torment. But every day is the same, and every night ends with her name on my lips.

I know I need to contact her to set up our first ‘date.’ We need to be seen around town before the gala if we want to make it believable. Otherwise, she would just be another woman on my arm, and that won’t do. Not to make the sponsors happy.

“Will you just man up and call her already?” Wyatt grumbles.

I look up, seeing my friend leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed over his chest.

“I’m getting to it.” I look back down at the card. I’ll eventually get to it.

“You’re not one to shy away from sweet talking a woman into doing what you want. What’s the difference here?” Wyatt pushes off the frame and crosses the floor, taking a seat in the chair across the desk from me.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“I don’t need shit from you, too, Wyatt. This was your damn idea anyway.”

“Yes, because I’m trying to save the rodeo and keep the town happy with us. You know if we lose the rodeo, Whiskey Falls loses a lot of money.”

“You think I don’t know that?” I spit out. I know I don’t need to take this out on him. I don’t know how many times Wyatt has told me to be more discreet, or not to party so much, but I’m a grown ass man. I’m tired of having people judge me for the way I am. I’m not my father and I’ll never be able to live up to that. Everyone should just leave me the hell alone.

“Look, I just want what’s best for everyone.” Wyatt runs his hands down his face as he looks at me.

I’ve never noticed before now just how tired he looks. The man has been working non-stop getting the ranch ready for the fair, on top of all his regular jobs. I’m pretty sure it’s been years since he’s taken a sick day or a holiday.

I’m going to have to do something about that once the rodeo is over.

“I know you do.” I throw the card onto the desk, leaning back in my chair.

“So, are you going to call her?”

“Yes.” I look up, staring at the ceiling.

“Are you going to be a douche about it?” I don’t need to look at Wyatt to know the

bastard is smirking.

“Most likely.”

“Have you thought about being nice to her? That’s probably the best way to get a woman like Dakota to help you.”

I sit up, looking at my friend in bewilderment. “You’re telling me to be nice? You? The man who can’t even get a woman to be with him in general because you’re a bigger asshole than me?”

“I am not,” Wyatt huffs. “I just don’t have time for women who want to sleep with me for bragging rights. Plus, I’m not like you, fucker. They aren’t throwing themselves at me.”

I grumble, knowing Wyatt is right. I’m aware the women are using me just as much as I’m using them. They want to be the one to ‘reform’ me. Change my playboy ways and make me settle down.

The thing is, I don’t know if I’m capable of settling down.

“I looked into her.”

“You what?” I snap.

“Did you think I was going to let you get into this shit with just anyone? Let alone someone that clung onto you at a bar claiming you were their boyfriend?”

I clench my jaw as I stare at him. I’m mad at Wyatt for not telling me he was doing this, but I’m even madder at myself for not thinking about it first. I’ve let her get into my head and mess with my logic. I’m normally more careful with the women I’m

with. While it might appear I share my time, and bed, with just about anyone, I'm very picky about who I bring home with me. The rodeo circuit isn't as big as most people think. Everyone knows everyone in the tight-knit community, and I don't need to be messing around with the wrong people.

Been there. Done that. Not doing it again.

If there's one thing I've learned, it's that if you mess with the wrong people, it could bring your world crashing down. But I'm not thinking about that right now. I have a bigger problem in Dakota Meyers.

"So, what did you find?" I ask as I blow out a breath.

"For the women you associate with, this one is actually decent."

There was that fucking smirk.

"Explain," I grit out through clenched teeth. If this bastard drags this out any longer, I may crack a tooth.

"She graduated at the top of her class from law school in Vancouver, moved to Whiskey Falls shortly after and started working at Hammond Law."

"Odd move for a city girl, isn't it?" I recline back into my chair, satisfied with what I've heard so far. Doesn't sound like she's someone that follows the rodeo circuit or could have planned this out beforehand, but really, anything is possible.

"Not really. She's from Lone Butte. She's probably familiar with the area." Wyatt leans back, spreading his legs wide and resting his hands on his thighs. "Was in a relationship with Laughlin Chadwick for two years."

“We knew that.”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“I’m just saying, even with her background, the fact she was with Chadwick for so long should shoot up some red flags, shouldn’t it?”

“Not necessarily.” I relay what Dakota told me about their breakup. While I haven’t known Dakota long enough to trust her, I know what an ass Chadwick is, and feel it’s believable.

“You don’t think she had anything to do with the case against us, do you?”

“No, that I can say for certain. She was shocked to find out about the case. Said she didn’t know anything about it at the time. Just that Chadwick needed to win for some big promotion.”

Wyatt visibly relaxes. “So now what?”

“Now, I message her and set up a fake date in town. Make sure that as many people see us as possible. Get the gossip chain going.”

“And the gala?”

“She knows.”

Wyatt nods once and stands. “Don’t wait too long. We don’t have a lot of time before the rodeo and the cutoff for the sponsorship deadline is not far away.”

“You don’t have to remind me.”

“Then act like you care.”

Without another word, Wyatt walks out of my office, leaving me watching him as he goes.

“Fuck!” I slam my hands on my desk, making my computer rattle.

The business card in front of me jumps, landing with Dakota’s name and cell number facing up at me. Taunting me.

I know I should call her, but I also know in my current mood I wouldn’t do anything to help the situation by barking at her.

It’s Chance. We’re going to dinner tomorrow. We should be seen in public before the gala.

Her sarcastic words, calling me a romantic, float through my head. It’s not who I am, or who I’ve ever been. I don’t bring flowers or buy presents. I don’t meet the parents or try to impress friends. Women are never around long enough for any of that to come into play.

So, why’s my heart rate speeding up when my phone lets out a resounding ‘ding’ in front of me?

Good afternoon, boyfriend. Thank you so much for checking up on me. My day is going wonderfully; thank you for asking. I would love to accompany you to dinner tomorrow night. I’ve missed you so much in these three days we’ve been apart.

I let out a chuckle. She’s spunky, I’ll give her that.

Missed me, huh? What exactly did you miss about me?

Your sparkling personality, of course.

So, where are you going to take me? I think you should make it fancy since you have a lot to make up for, considering I've had to be apart from you for so long.

The Corral Steakhouse. I'll pick you up at 7.

Don't you need my address?

Nope. See you at 7.

I put my phone face down on my desk, ignoring the pinging that comes incessantly right after. I smile, knowing she's probably calling me more than a few names, wondering how I know where she lives. I'm sure Wyatt uncovered that when he was asking around about her anyway. Now, I need to prepare for my first actual date—ever.

I don't know how I'm going to make everyone believe I've changed my ways and am settling down with Dakota. I don't even know what that looks like, to be honest. The only real couple I've ever seen were my parents, and I'm convinced they were some couple abnormality. I can't seem to wrap my brain around spending your whole life with only one person.

I came close to having that once, but if anything, it just reinforced that it's not meant to be. Carly proved that to me years ago. Thinking that maybe I was built for soul mates and forevers, even if I couldn't do it the conventional way she wanted me to. But in the end, it almost ruined us both, and I can't do that again.

Picking the business card back up, I stare at it for a moment before twirling it through my fingers once more. There's something about Dakota that's different from any other woman I've met. She's not pushing me for a relationship. She's told me sex is

off the table. For the first time in my life, I've found a woman that virtually wants nothing to do with me.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

Is that why I can't stop thinking about her? Maybe it's the challenge; the game of getting her to give into me so that I can be right. That she's just like all the other women who have let us use each other to forget about all the other shit in our lives.

Except I know she won't. I know that if Dakota and I give into each other we're going to explode like supernova, leaving both of us broken beyond repair.

Chapter Seven

Dakota

"I can't believe you're going through with this," Addie mutters as she sits on my bed, watching me intently.

Addie was the first friend I made when I moved to Whiskey Falls. We gravitated toward each other one night at the Whiskey Dam, sharing our love of a good Scotch and a low tolerance for assholes.

"What else could I do? I panicked and grabbed the arm of the first man I saw. How was I supposed to know it was Chance?" I touch up my lipstick in the mirror, avoiding her gaze in the reflection. "Plus, it's not a big deal. I'll let him take me out to a couple of dinners, show me off for a few rodeo events, and then we part ways. No harm, no foul."

"No harm... I swear I'm going to have to knock some sense into you. There's no such thing as 'no harm' when it comes to Chance. He chews up and spits out women like they're gum. How many women have we heard crying over him not calling them

back or refusing to see them after ‘the best night’ of their lives?” She places her clasped hands under her chin, batting her eyelashes like a damsel in distress.

“Do you know him?” I meet her gaze in the mirror’s reflection.

“No, I’ve never met him.”

“Exactly. You’re going off of what some heartbroken buckle bunny said while drunk in a bar.”

“And you’ve spent all of two hours with him!” Addie swings her legs over the side of the bed, sitting up straighter. “Why are you getting so upset about this? You don’t know him well enough to defend him. Weren’t you just calling him a level two, possibly three, on your asshole-o-meter? What’s with the sudden change?”

I drop my gaze, letting out a sigh. “No change. He’s still firmly at a level two.”

“So, then, what gives?”

Why do I care? Why am I defending him? I have no reason to. He’s a selfish asshole, only out to protect himself.

Only, he’s not, though. If he were, he wouldn’t have stepped up and helped that night in the bar with Laughlin. He would have just shoved me off and said he didn’t know me.

His texts yesterday riled me up. I stewed about it in my office for the rest of the afternoon, pouring my anger into my work. He didn’t even ask me to dinner, he demanded it. I may have been the one to initiate our situation, but he’s pushing it to another level.

“I don’t know.” I drop my shoulders and turn to my friend. “There’s something about him. He pisses me off so much, but...” I trail off, thinking about the way my body reacts to him.

“But you aren’t immune to the sexy as fuck body and the bad boy reputation?” Addie adds with a smirk.

I narrow my eyes at her, refusing to answer.

How can I? I don’t want to admit that she’s right. That he’s the sexiest man I’ve ever seen, even if his personality overrides any attractiveness he has. I also can’t admit that there is something about his bad boy persona that draws me in. I’ve never gone for a man like him before. I’ve only gone for the white collar, ‘yes ma’am’ types. Even though I was blinded by Laughlin, on the surface, he fit that type.

I’m saved from any further questioning by Addie when my doorbell rings. I can’t admit any of that to her. I can barely admit them to myself.

“I’ll get it!” Addie yells, jumping from my bed and running out the door, giggling like a teenager.

I roll my eyes as I turn back to the mirror. While Addie understands my tough exterior and snarky comebacks, she also sees past it. We may have only known each other for a couple of years, but in that time, we’ve been through enough that bonds us for life. She knows when I need to be tough, and when I need someone to be tough for me.

Right now, I need her to be tough for me.

Taking a deep breath, I look at my reflection, checking my makeup one last time.

It's just dinner. I need to think of it as a business dinner. I've been on a hundred of them. This isn't any different. Chance and I have a verbal contract. A meeting of the minds. We are just doing this for our mutual benefit to get Laughlin off my back and impress the sponsors. There are no emotions. No pressure.

I scoff at myself. I know it's a lie, but it's a lie I need to believe if I'm going to make it out of this deal unscathed.

Grabbing my purse from the dresser in front of me, I look down at the soft fabric in my hand. I've never used this one before. It's small, black, and utterly impractical. It only holds my cell phone, a few cards, and my lipstick, but I love it. I picked it up the last time I was in the city, thinking how nice it would be if I were to go to a fancy dinner with Laughlin, or even a work event.

But that never happened.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

He always had an excuse.

‘It wouldn’t look good if I brought a lawyer from our biggest competitor.’

‘We’re just going to talk about cases, and you know you can’t be privy to that.’

‘I’m just going to network for my promotion. No big deal.’

“Fuck!” I throw my purse back onto the dresser, placing my hands on the sides and gripping tightly.

Damn Laughlin! That asshole.

A low, rumbling voice floats through my house, reminding me of what’s awaiting me in the other room. Another arrogant asshole, but for some reason, I know this one is different. How? I don’t know. I only know that I need to stop myself from getting hurt again.

With one more steely breath, I grab my purse and walk through the door with my head held high.

The farther I get down the hallway to the living room, the louder the voices become. Stopping just outside the doorway, I still and listen. They continue on as if they haven’t heard me coming.

“You’re an asshole,” Addie says, her voice raised.

“Your point?” Chance’s voice remains low and calm, as if bored.

“You’re using her.”

“And she’s using me.”

“Once. She used you once.”

“You don’t think she would continue benefiting from this? Publicly throwing it in Chadwick’s face that she’s moved on with someone better?”

“Better is debatable,” Addie grumbles.

“Your opinion is irrelevant. Chadwick will get his little heart broken seeing she’s moved on with someone of higher status. Added bonus, he and I have our own history, which will rub salt in the wound. I’m sure this will also help with her bosses, too. They’ve been trying to get the ranch to hire them for years.”

“Win/win then, isn’t it?” Addie asks sarcastically.

“Look, I’m not happy about this either, but I won’t pretend that the timing doesn’t work for me right now. So I suggest you back off and let Dakota handle it.”

“Okay,” I decide it’s time to end their little heart to heart. Walking into the room, I’m greeted by two sets of angry eyes, now changing their targets from each other to me.

“Well, as nice as this little session has been, I think it’s time we get going.”

“You can still back out of this, you know,” Addie says, placing her hand on my arm. Her eyes soften, filled with what I know is concern for me.

“Addie, it’s fine. It’s just dinner. It’s not like we’re rushing out to get married,” I

joke.

Chance stiffens at my words, turning away from me.

Interesting. I shouldn't be surprised that he's marriage-averse, but his reaction makes me want to dig deeper into why that is.

Addie squeezes my arm, bringing my attention back to her. I can tell she's worried, and if I were honest, I'm worried about myself. But I'm not lying when I say it's only dinner. I'm not under any illusion that this is more than that.

"It's a fake dinner, Addie. A business contract between two parties that will result in a mutually beneficial agreement for a contracted period of time. That's it."

"Don't use lawyer speak on me, Dakota. You know there's a lot more at stake here than that."

"I'm fine," I reassure her as I straighten and turn, seeing Chance is facing us once again. I give him my biggest forced smile. "Are you ready?"

"Yup," he says, opening the door.

"I trust you'll lock up for me?" I ask over my shoulder as I slip on my heels.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“Yup,” Addie mimics, not moving from her spot, arms crossed over her chest.

“See you later, then.” I don’t give her a chance to respond as I make my way out the door and down the porch steps.

“Is she always like that?” Chance asks, right behind me.

“Pretty much.”

I reach for the handle of his truck when a large hand slams down against the window. A blast of fiery heat lights through my body as a hard wall of muscles pushes against my backside, trapping me against the door.

“You can’t go around telling people this isn’t real, sweetheart. Otherwise, why are we doing this?” he growls in my ear.

Dammit, there’s that growl again.

His proximity, his heat, and his lowered, raspy voice do things to me that I don’t want to admit. I don’t want to think about the butterflies swirling around in my stomach, or the shiver that runs up my spine from his breath on my neck.

Nope, I’m not thinking about that.

“She’s not anyone; she’s my best friend,” I whisper in a shaky voice. “She won’t tell anyone.”

“She’d better not. I won’t be made a fool of, either, Dakota.”

The accusation in his voice makes me whip around. Placing a hand on his hard chest, I press to try to give me space, but he doesn’t move. All I feel are the hard lines of his chest. His intense heat. The thumping of his heart under my palm.

“Are you saying Wyatt doesn’t know what’s going on?” I raise an eyebrow at him, no longer pushing on his chest, but not lowering my hand, either.

“He knows,” he grinds out.

“So we’re even, then.”

We stare into each other’s eyes for a moment, neither one of us daring to even breathe. His heart under my hand picks up its pace, beating rapidly against his chest, revealing there’s more going on under that cool exterior of his.

The longer he looks at me, the more his expression changes. Underneath the simmering anger is something else, that if it were anyone other than Chance, I would say was longing. Desire?

No, there’s no way. Men like Chance Declan don’t feel that for women like me. He, especially, only feels annoyance. No matter how much I still think about that kiss in the bar parking lot. How it set my body on fire unlike any other kiss I’d ever had. I go to sleep every night thinking about it, whether I want to or not.

With a final huff, he takes a step back, finally letting me take a breath. I suck in the sweet night air, letting it cool my overheated body. Without looking away, he reaches behind me and pulls on the door handle. The cold metal bumps against me briefly before I move out of its way.

I can't help but search the neighbourhood for anyone that might have seen us. Me pressed against Chance's truck. Him leaning in, caging me. Blocking me.

To anyone else, it must have looked like we were making out, sharing a heated moment.

It was heated alright, but not because of that.

I climb into his truck with an eye roll, careful not to make a fool out of myself climbing into his lifted truck in my dress. The last thing I need is to be flashing him, and the neighbours, on our 'date.' But in reality, it is pointless to worry about people seeing us. That's the whole damn point of this date. To be seen in public together.

I settle in the seat when the door is slammed, followed by Chance stalking across the front of the truck. Looks like I wasn't the only one affected by our little encounter.

This is going to be a long couple of weeks.

Chapter Eight

Chance

"It would help if you didn't look at me like you wanted to stab me with your fork," Dakota says in a sing-song voice as she scans her menu.

Forcing myself to relax, I pick up my own, but I don't see the words in front of me. I know we're surrounded by people and they're all stealing glances. All keeping their eyes on us, even if they wouldn't dare meet my own.

I clear my throat, sitting straighter in my chair. I need to work harder at looking like I am unaffected by the woman across the table from me. While I do resent her for

putting us in this position, I also recognize it's not entirely her fault.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

The black dress she is wearing, however, is.

I try to ignore her delicious curves, but I can't. The dress molds to her body like a second skin, pushing up her lush breasts, hinting at what lay underneath. When she turned and climbed up into my truck, I couldn't help but stare at her ass. I had to put my hands in the pockets of my jeans to stop from reaching out and grabbing her, like I would have with any of the other women I've been with.

But this is Dakota. She's not mine. She'll never be mine.

"Do you know what you're getting?" she asks, placing her menu on the table while avoiding my gaze. "I haven't actually been here before."

Her tone is casual, but I don't miss the way she holds on to the stem of her water glass tightly, or how she hasn't looked at me directly since leaving her house. The ride was short, but tense. She didn't speak a word, but neither did I. As far as I was concerned, everything that needed to be said was done outside of the truck.

I'm also not in the business of making friends with her. I don't even need to like her. I just need to have her on my arm until the end of the fucking rodeo and I can be done with her and move on with my life.

Although I wouldn't mind just one fuck. To get her out of my system. Her body is too much to ignore. Plus, if we have to spend this much time together, we might as well work up all the building tension between us.

"Steak," I grumble, looking around for the server. I need a drink, and I need it

immediately.

“Hmm,” she muses. “What about the blackened chicken? That sounds good.”

“Dunno; I’ve only had the steak.”

“Oh, the pistachio covered salmon sounds amazing,” she continues, completely ignoring what I’m saying.

I grunt, on alert for anyone that might bring me a Scotch or beer. I’d even take a wine at this point. Anything to get through her nattering of meal choices.

“What do you think?”

She finally meets my eyes, and once again, I’m struck by her beauty. My annoyance is nearly forgotten—nearly—when she looks at me.

“Get the steak,” I grind out, remembering what we were talking about.

“Is that all you eat?” She raises an eyebrow at me.

“I’m a cattle rancher. What do you think?”

“I think there’s more to life than eating the same thing over and over.”

“There’s more than one way to cook a steak.”

“Good evening. My name is Hayley, and I’ll be your server today.” The pretty blonde gives us a bright smile. She looks familiar, but I can’t place her. Maybe from when I’d come here for business meals? “Chance, it’s nice to see you again.”

“Uh, yeah, you too, Hayley,” I reply dismissively. “I’ll take a Scotch. Double. Whatever you have is fine.”

The server’s shoulders sag and a sad expression crosses her face. I have no idea why. There’s nothing I said in my order that could have upset her.

“I think what my boyfriend means,” Dakota shoots me a glare that would turn a lesser man to ice, “‘is good evening, and thank you.’ When you have a moment, he would like a double Scotch, please, and I would love a red wine.”

“Boyfriend?” Hayley asks, her blue eyes welling up with tears.

What the fuck is wrong with her?

“Yes, it’s very new.” Dakota’s expression is the perfect mimic of adoration. I know better, especially with how quickly her mood changed.

“I see.” With one last glance my way, Hayley turns her back to me and solely focuses on Dakota. Her voice taking on a firm, but kind tone. “Can I get you anything else? Maybe an appetizer?”

“Oh, the appetizers do look great. I can’t decide between the Mushrooms Neptune and the baked brie. What would you recommend?”

“The Mushrooms Neptune is a popular dish and one of my favourites.”

“We’ll get that, then. Thank you so much for your help, Hayley.” Dakota’s voice is kind. A tone she’s yet to take with me.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

I don't know why that bothers me so much, but it does. I want to hear her turn that voice on me. To talk to me like she feels anything other than frustration and loathing toward me. Why? Fuck if I know. I've never particularly cared what a woman's attitude toward me was. If a woman didn't want to spend time with me? That's fine; there were plenty of other women that did.

So why do I care so much about Dakota?

"You're welcome. I'm sorry, I don't know your name. I've seen you around town, but I don't think we've ever met."

"I'm Dakota. It's really nice to meet you, Hayley." She smiles genuinely, acting as if I'm not sitting here with her. I'm past bothered. I'm annoyed and straight on my way to being pissed off.

"If you're done with your girl talk, I would really like that drink," I grumble. It comes out harsher than I had intended, but the result is still the same.

Hayley jumps, giving me a doe in the headlights look. "Right, sorry, Chance. Mr. Declan. I'll get right on that."

She scurries off without another glance, leaving me with a fuming Dakota. She crosses her arms over her chest, pushing her breasts even farther up her neckline. I can't help my gaze from traveling south, taking in the sight, even if it makes her fresh with a new round of anger.

"Eyes up here, Declan," she hisses quietly, being sure not to draw any attention to us.

My eyes snap to hers. Her cheeks are red, breath short and quick. “What the fuck was that?”

“What was what?” I respond, leaning back in my chair. “She’s our server. I ordered a drink. We don’t have to become friends with those that serve us.”

“Those who serve...” She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath before continuing. “Did you fuck her?”

I don’t answer because honestly, I don’t know the answer to that. I might have.

“You don’t know, do you?”

“I don’t keep a little black book, if that’s what you’re asking, sweetheart.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to, darling,” she snaps.

“Here are your drinks,” Hayley says, going out of her way not to meet my gaze.

Have I slept with her? I’d remember that, wouldn’t I?

“Your appetizer will be out in a minute. Can I take your dinner order?”

“I think I’ll try your blackened chicken, and I think Chance was going to have the steak, weren’t you, babe?” Her fake smile is back, which I’m beginning to hate. Why? I don’t know. It’s not like anything about our relationship is real.

Relationship? I need to stop thinking about it like this. We don’t have a relationship. Like she said, it’s a mutually beneficial agreement. That’s it.

“Rib steak. Rare.” Dakota shoots me a glare that makes me smile up at Hayley.

“Please.”

“You’ve got it.” She collects our menus. “I’ll be right back with your starter.”

“Would it kill you to be nice to people?” She still dons that fake smile of hers as she takes a sip of wine.

“Depends on the people.” I pick up my Scotch and take a healthy sip, letting the sweet burn warm me as I swallow. It’s not as good as the bottle I have at home, but it’ll help me get through the next couple of hours.

“If you want to make this believable, you’re going to have to pretend you at least like me. Do you think you can do that, boyfriend?”

I study her for a long moment. She’s not only the woman I find breathtakingly beautiful. Not just the hard ass lawyer I’m sure she is, based on my interactions with her. I notice a woman who is kind to those around her. Who can be gentle, but firm. She’s not afraid to be genuine and careful with Hayley while standing up to me and putting me in my place.

I’ve never had a woman do that before. Other women had always gone along with whatever I wanted, hoping they’d be the one to change me. Hoping they’d be the one to stay.

They never were.

“I’ve got your starter here.” Hayley placed a bubbling tray in front of me. The earthy scent of mushrooms and melted cheese makes my stomach grumble. I didn’t realize how hungry I was until now. I’m happy Dakota ordered it, even if I’d never tell her that.

“Thank you, Hayley. This looks great.” I look up at her with a forced smile. It probably looks more like a snarl, but I can’t help it.

Hayley’s mouth bobs open and shut a few times before pasting on a smile of her own.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“Of course. I’ll, uh, leave you to it.”

“What was that?” Dakota asks with a gasp once we are alone.

“What was what?” I ask after unravelling my cutlery from the starched white fabric napkin. I place it over my lap and pick up my fork, stabbing a mushroom cap, careful not to spill the bubbling cheese over the top.

“That.” She waves at me with her hands. “What was that with Hayley?”

“You wanted me to be nice. I was being nice.” I pop the mushroom into my mouth, letting all the flavours wash over me. The saltiness of the cheese and the bite of garlic mixed with the hearty mushroom. “This is good. Good choice.”

She narrows her eyes at me as if assessing me.

“What? You wanted nice.”

“And that’s the best you could do? You looked liked you were going to snap at her.”

I sigh, placing my fork on my side plate. “Are you going to eat any of this? It’s really good. You should try it.”

“I will. I’m just trying to figure you out.”

“There’s nothing to figure out.” I bring the corner of my napkin to my mouth, wiping my bottom lip and laying it flat over my lap again.

“It’s my job to figure people out. But you...” I shake my head. “I can’t figure you out.”

“Again, there’s nothing to figure out.”

“There’s always something to figure out.” Dakota shakes her head before picking up her fork and digging into a mushroom.

I know it’s not the end of this. No matter what I do, I know she still sees me as a puzzle to be solved. But she doesn’t know me. No one does.

People know me as their boss. Their business partner. The ranch owner.

The one that can rock their world in the bedroom and send them packing.

But getting to know me? That’s a whole other ball game.

While part of me wants her to, it mostly scares the shit out of me. I don’t get spooked easily, but the realization that someone might get to really see me for more than my public persona does.

There isn’t one person in town that really sees me. Not even Wyatt. They only see what I let them, and that’s the way I like it. Especially when that person is Dakota Meyers.

Chapter Nine

Dakota

I’ve never dreaded the weekend more than I do right now.

Sitting at the desk in my office, I stare blankly at the computer screen in front of me, just like I have been for the last hour. It's been two days, and I still can't get my dinner with Chance out of my mind. In terms of our arrangement, it had been a success. The word is spreading around town of us being a couple. So much so, I can't go anywhere without being stopped and asked about my relationship with the one and only Chance Declan.

"You and Chance, huh? You'll have to give me all the details," Tessa, the barista at The Rustic Cow Cafe gushed as she made me my morning latte.

"Are you sure you want to be seen with that man, dear?" Millie Thompson asked, patting me on the hand while I stopped in at the town's only grocery store after work. "He doesn't have the best reputation, and you're such a nice girl."

"You and Declan, huh?" Mike Walters asks, leaning against my door frame. As a Senior Lawyer at Hamilton Law, Mike took it upon himself to be a mentor to me when I first started. He allowed me to get hands-on experience in areas I normally wouldn't have been able to as a junior. I appreciate and respect him for that, but not so much for his sudden interest in my love life.

"Not you, too?" I groan, looking up from my screen.

"If you didn't want the town knowing about who you're dating, you should have picked someone with a lower social profile." He enters the room and takes a seat across from me. "So what gives? I never pictured you with someone like Chance Declan."

I don't want to lie to Mike. He's been so good to me since I started three years ago, but I don't have any other choice. I can't admit to him that I'm only dating Chance for show. While not completely unethical, it won't be good for business if a lawyer is found to be outright lying, either.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“I guess you could say my previous track record with men wasn’t glowing, either.” I say as I lean back in my chair.

“That’s true. Chadwick was always an asshole.”

“He was?” I ask, sitting up straighter. “Why didn’t you say anything to me before?”

“Because he was your boyfriend, Dakota. I couldn’t very well tell you that you were wasting your time with him.” He holds my gaze, studying me.

“But you’re willing to tell me now?” I raise my eyebrow at him, biting back a smile.

“This is different. Chance Declan is a different league. While Chadwick is an ass, the breakup wasn’t as widespread across the town. Being involved with Chance means that everyone in Whiskey Falls and the surrounding area is going to be watching your every move.”

I hold his gaze for a moment longer, taking in his words. That is another aspect of the deal I hadn’t thought out. Sure, in the back of my mind I knew that being with Chance meant that people would notice; that was the point, but I didn’t think of the magnitude of it. This wasn’t just going to be the talk of the board of the rodeo, or just the town. Mike was right, this would be spread to the surrounding towns, and everyone involved in the rodeo. This is as much paparazzi as small town BC gets.

“But in terms of levels of asshole-ness, I guess you are doing better with Chance than Laughlin. I mean, as far as I know, Chance just breaks hearts, not laws.”

I groan, putting my hands on my face.

He had to bring it up.

“You have to stop beating yourself up about what happened, you know.”

I let out another groan, lowering my head—and hands—to my desk. “Can we not talk about this?”

“You mean how he broke into your locked desk to steal records from you?” I drop my hands and look up to see Mike run a hand through his short, greying hair. “You did everything you were supposed to do, Dakota. How were you to know that the bastard would go to such lengths for that information?”

“Because it happened on my time and in my house, Mike. Our case was compromised because I let him into my home.”

“Dammit, Dakota,” Mike exclaims, rubbing his face with his hands. “We all take our work home with us. We all have a level of expectation that something like this could happen. It’s not like you willingly handed them over. In any case, what’s done is done.”

I huff, crossing my arms over my chest. We’ve had this exact same conversation at least a handful of times since my breakup with Laughlin, and each time, I feel just as bad as the last.

“My point is, I just hope you aren’t jumping into anything with Declan. He might not be the same type of snake as Chadwick, but he’s still a snake.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. He’s not a rebound or some fling. Plus, we’re taking it slow.”

“Uh, huh.” Mike narrows his eyes at me. “And you’re totally fine with the women he has been seeing up until he was spotted with you?”

My heart stops. I knew these types of questions were going to happen. I had prepared for it. Discussed it with Chance. It still doesn’t make me feel any better having it actually asked of me.

“It was nothing. I wasn’t ready to go public with him yet, and they were just friends of his.” I don’t meet his eyes. Instead, I find a speck of lint on my sleeve more interesting than this conversation.

“Uh huh,” he says, obviously not buying what I’m telling him. “And why wouldn’t you want to go public with him when you’re dating?”

Leave it up to the lawyer to not leave this alone. He’s like a dog with a bone.

“You know, we had that big Wilson case.” I continue to pick at imaginary lint on my sleeve.

“Dakota,” Mike’s voice is stern, causing me to look up and meet his gaze. I’ve always seen him as more of a friend than an authority figure, but at this moment, I feel like I’m about to be reprimanded by the school principal.

“What? It’s nothing. They’re nothing.”

“It’s like you’re not even trying to get me to believe you. What’s really going on?”

I purse my lips, trying to come up with anything that would be believable to Mike. Then I remember something Chance had said to me in passing. “It’s nothing. I just know Todd has been trying to get the ranch as a client, and I didn’t want to interfere if our relationship wasn’t going anywhere.”

“And is it going somewhere?”

I take a deep breath. Here it is. More lies. I’m going to have to navigate this without stretching the truth too far. Not to Mike.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“I’m going with him to the Whiskey Falls Rodeo Gala tomorrow.”

“That’s a bold move. He usually goes to those alone.” Mike relaxes back into his chair, resting an ankle on his opposite knee.

“How do you know so much about Chance?”

“Who do you think looked into him for Todd? We needed to learn everything about the man when he took over the ranch. While his father was a tough, but fair, businessman, Chance was, and still is, a loose cannon. Wouldn’t you agree? Surely as his girlfriend you would know this.”

Well, fuck.

“Like I said, it’s newer and we are taking it slow. We don’t talk a lot about work.”

“Right.”

A crushing weight presses against my chest as we stare at each other. The silence in the room is deafening. I know Mike’s not believing this. He’s too good of a lawyer and judge of character to believe me, but there’s nothing I can do other than pray he drops it.

A flash of light from my desk draws my attention away from my building anxiety. My heart rate picks up, thumping in my ears so loud I’m sure Mike can hear it, too. This time, it’s not from his line of questioning, but from the words on my cell phone screen.

Chance

The limo will be by at five tomorrow.

I use every ounce of willpower I have to resist rolling my eyes as I pick up my phone.

I miss you, too, baby. I can't wait to see you tomorrow. I'll be waiting with bated breath to see you again.

Lose the attitude. Does 5pm work for you?

No attitude. Just telling you how I feel, love.

Drop it, Dakota.

Make me, Chance.

I smirk, loving how much I can get under Chance's skin.

"Loverboy?" Mike asks with a wide smile on his face.

"If you mean Chance, then yes." I place my phone back on my desk, face down.

"He's letting me know what time he's picking me up for the gala tomorrow."

My phone dings again, but I don't rush to answer it. Mike looks between me and the phone, raising an eyebrow as he looks at me expectantly. I won't give him, or Chance, the satisfaction of seeing just how much I'm dying to see what Chance's reaction to my text is. How much I hope he's just as frustrated as I am.

"Well, I'll leave you to it, then." Mike stands and walks to the door, turning at the last moment. "Just be careful, alright? I'm not saying that from a business perspective,

even though it is a thin line with how hard Todd has been working on signing him as a client. I meant that for you. You've been through a lot these last few months, Dakota. I don't want to see you hurt again."

Tears well in my eyes as emotion rises in my throat. I'm not a crier. I hate crying. But having Mike care for me like this means a lot.

"Thanks, Mike," I croak, swallowing down the rising lump in my throat.

With a nod, he leaves, closing the door behind him. I sit staring at the closed door for a moment, afraid to let out the breath in my lungs. That was too close. Too many lies. My stomach is in knots knowing that I did that, but what other choice did I have? I can't tell Mike the truth, that it's all a show for me to save face and for Chance to lie to his investors.

It's all getting to be too much. This isn't who I am.

Buzzing from my desk makes me jump. Placing my hand over my heart, the speedy thumping matches the ringing in my ears. Taking a deep breath, I berate myself for being so on edge before picking up my phone, not even looking at the screen before swiping and putting it to my ear.

"Hello?"

"Dakota," Chance's deep growl rumbles through the speaker. That voice. My body trembles, adding to my already emotionally ridden high. "Do not ignore me."

"I'm not ignoring you, Chance. I'm working. Some of us can't just live off family wealth." I regret the words as soon as I say them. I know that's not fair to him. I also know how hard he works on his farm. His silence lets me know the comment also didn't go unnoticed by him. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. What can I do for

you, Chance?"

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“What’s wrong?” he whispers so low I think I might have made the question up in my mind. There’s no way he’s expressing any level of concern for me.

“What makes you think anything’s wrong?” I try to act nonchalant, as if the sound of his voice isn’t causing butterflies in my stomach and a blush on my cheeks. I place my free hand on my heated face, trying to cool it down before rolling my eyes and shuffling around the few papers on my desk. I don’t know why I’m so affected by him. He means nothing to me, and I mean nothing to him.

“Your voice sounds different. Have you been crying?”

My hand shoots back to my face, checking for tears, relieved to find none have slipped out. I’m holding it together better than I thought I would. Between Mike’s concern, and now Chance’s it’s getting to be too much. If Chance keeps being nice to me the way he is, I’m going to absolutely fall apart.

“No, of course not. I’m just...tired.”

“Right,” he answers, but doesn’t sound convinced. “Will you be ready by five tomorrow night?”

“Yes, Chance, I think I can be ready on time.” I don’t bother hiding my sarcasm.

He lets out a frustrated sigh. “Are you going to be like this the whole time.”

“Like what, darling? Waiting on your ever word? Jumping every time you ask something of me? I’m not that girl, Chance. You should have looked to one of your

buckle bunnies if you wanted someone that was going to follow you around like a lost puppy.”

“You found me, remember?” He curses under his breath. “Look, we just have to make this work until the rodeo, alright? Do you think you can do that? After that, we can go back to not knowing each other, okay?”

The logical part of my brain knows that’s what the plan has been all along. My treacherous heart, though, hurts at the thought of going back to a time when I didn’t know Chance Declan existed. Or more, knew what his deep, gravelly voice felt whispered in my ear. To have his piercing blue eyes peer into my soul. Mostly, it hurts to think of never having his hard, toned body pressed up against mine.

I take a few steadying breaths, remembering why I’m doing this, and it has nothing to do with his body. “Fine. A few more weeks of playing lovey-dovey and then back to real life.”

He’s silent for a moment. Long enough to make me wonder if I’ve pushed him too far.

Which leads me to wonder why I care.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay? I don’t like this situation any more than you do.” He grumbles before diving into silence again. “I had a nice time the other night.”

“That’s your definition of a nice night? You almost made the poor waitress cry!”

“You’re right.” He hesitates, as if he doesn’t want to continue with his confession. “I remembered after I dropped you off that I did spend the night with her last year. Nice girl, but she was looking for more than I could give her. She wanted forever. I’m not a forever kind of guy.”

‘Not a forever kind of guy.’ I’d do well to remember that.

“Right. Well, I’m glad you remembered. Even if it was too late.” I can’t imagine living a life where I didn’t know all the people I’ve slept with. I’ve never understood hook up culture. While I wouldn’t ever judge someone based on how they live their life—mostly—I never saw the appeal of it for myself.

The silence that passes between us is thick with tension. I don’t know what to say. I don’t have words to placate him or make him feel better about his forgotten transgression. I also don’t have the words to ease my own feelings about what’s happening between us.

Surely my feelings toward Chance are only because Laughlin hurt me so badly. It has to be because I’m so desperate to feel something—anything—other than heartbreaking embarrassment when it comes to the man I thought I might marry.

Whatever my feelings are, I need to put them aside to get through my time with Chance.

“Look, why don’t we look at tomorrow as a fresh start? Forget about Laughlin and Hayley. We could use the time we need to be seen as a couple and convince people we are madly in love.” I close my eyes, hoping I believe my own words.

“In love,” Chance scoffs.

“Like? Tolerate? Not want to kill?” I pinch the bridge of my nose, feeling a dull headache start.

“Whatever you say, sweetheart.” Chance rewards me with a laugh as he hangs up.

“Ugh!” I slam the phone down, surprised the screen doesn’t shatter at the force. How

the fuck am I going to get through the next few weeks pretending to be in love with this infuriating asshole?

I lean my head back on the chair and close my eyes. The dull headache is rapidly turning into a migraine the more I think about having to spend my free time with Chance fucking Declan.

This is going to end horribly.

Chapter Ten

Chance

I haven't been able to get Dakota off my mind since I called her yesterday. There was something off about her and I don't know what pisses me off more; the fact that someone upset her, or the fact I care.

Shoving my phone back in my pocket, I grab my black Stetson and head out to the barn. I need to get on my horse and ride to clear my thoughts. Maybe another day of running the fence line would do me some good. Anything that gets me out of this damn office and distracts me from my so-called girlfriend.

Duke whinnies the closer I get to his stall, almost as if he knows he's going to get a good workout today. Since taking over the ranch, I haven't had as much time to ride him as I used to, or at least, not for as long as I'd like. I still get him out every day, but I miss the days when we would be out in the fields from sun up to sun down, sometimes just the two of us. Now, I spend more time in the office than I'd like. Bullshit meetings and phone calls take up more time than I expected. I have employees that take care of most of the mundane aspects, but I still like to be hands on.

It's the way my grandfather did it. The way my father did it. It's the way I do it.

I may not want to be my father, but I can't discredit the way he worked.

"Hey there, boy." I run my hand down the length of his neck. Instantly, the feeling of the pressing weight I've been feeling on my chest all day starts to ease. Duke has been with me since I was fifteen years old, and he's always had the same calming

effect on me.

I pull out the saddle and get to work on getting him ready for our day. I've left Wyatt in charge of getting the ranch ready for the gala tomorrow. He knows better than anyone how much I loathe this shit, but he also knows how important it is.

He's also the only one I trust not to fuck it up.

"Good, I caught you before you left." The man himself walks into the barn, tablet in hand.

Nothing good can come of Wyatt walking around with a fucking tablet.

"I need your signature on a few of these invoices before the deliveries tonight." Wyatt doesn't bother looking up from his screen as he swipes.

"Can't you do it?" I groan, turning back to Duke. We were so close to making it out of here, escaping this shit.

Wyatt looks up from his screen, eyebrow raised. "I'm not the owner, dipshit."

I can't contain my sigh as I tighten the last strap on Duke's saddle. "Fine, give it here."

He places the tablet in my outstretched hand. I scroll through, scanning the documents and adding my electronic signature. "Anything else?"

Wyatt takes back his device. "What are you doing with Dakota?"

"What do you mean?" I turn away from him, focusing on shifting the saddle that I already know has been placed properly.

“I mean, what’s your goal here?” I stay silent, keeping my back turned. “I know about your dinner.”

“Of course you do. I told you.”

“I also know how upset she was about Hayley.”

“Fucking hell. You gossip worse than the old ladies in town.”

“Small town. People talk,” is the only explanation I get from him.

“What does this have to do with anything? You know the arrangement. You know we need to be seen together before the rodeo, and not just at the events.”

“And if this crashes and burns like every other woman you’ve been with?”

We enter into a staring contest, neither one of us wanting to be the first to break.

I thought I’d made my intentions with Dakota perfectly clear to both her and Wyatt. We both get what we need out of the arrangement, and we move on.

No attachment. No fuss.

“Not everything crashes and burns.”

“And if you catch feelings for her? What then?”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“I don’t ‘catch feelings.’ You know this.”

“Right,” he adds, not sounding convinced. He leans against the stall door, crossing his arms over his chest. He looks relaxed, but I know him well enough to know he’s assessing me. “As long as you know what you’re doing.”

“Why do you give a shit about my feelings, anyway?”

“Believe it or not, Chance, I give a shit about you. You’re my best friend, not just my boss. But call me sentimental now that Krissy’s planning her wedding.” He gives me a smirk, letting me know his sister’s engagement last Christmas is anything but the true reason for his interest.

“Well, you don’t have anything to worry about.”

“Right,” he says again, pushing himself off the stall door. He turns to leave before stopping himself. “Make sure you know what you’re doing. It’s more than just your ass on the line here. If we lose sponsors, lots of us lose jobs.”

With that, he’s gone.

Duke huffs, nudging my shoulder with his nose.

“I know, bud. Jackass thinks he’s a know-it-all.”

I take my hat off, running my hand through my hair before placing it back on my head.

Who does he think he is? Lecturing me about feelings. As if I would want anything more than just a stress release with someone with Dakota.

With her long, dark hair and fuck me eyes.

With the way she fits right into my arms and kisses in a way that's so fucking sexy, it should be illegal.

Nope, nothing more than just a stress release.

Leading Duke out of the barn, I mount him and take off as fast as I can before anything else stops me. I don't fucking need this. I'm only doing this to save the rodeo and the ranch.

Plus, she sought me out.

I don't need this.

Fuck Wyatt and fuck the investors. I'm Chance fucking Declan and I don't do feelings.

I fuck. I make power moves in business. I do what needs to get done.

Maybe if I keep telling myself that, I'll start to believe it.

Chapter Eleven

Chance

Whiskey Falls flashes by in a blur as the limo makes its way through the main streets of town.

It's the town I grew up in. I've known most of its inhabitants either through my family's company or through school and the various activities I did as a child. But when I really think about it, I don't really know anyone. Not really. No one knows the real Chance Declan. No one except for Wyatt.

I don't know how I feel about that, now that I think of it. It's something I've always worked hard at—keeping everyone at a distance. I've found it's just easier that way. Having a stone wall around your heart and an asshole attitude is the only way I know how to be.

But now there's Dakota.

“Stop looking like you're going to throw yourself from the fucking limo,” Wyatt groans from the seat across from me. His arm rests on the back of the seat, his long legs spread into the middle.

“Stop making me go to these things and I'll stop looking miserable about it,” I bite back.

“You know I hate these things as much as you do.” Wyatt pulls at his tie, looking like he wants to rip it off.

“I know,” I grumble. Looking back out the window, the feeling of dread sinks in my stomach. All day I've found myself looking forward to seeing Dakota and spending time with her. I have no idea why. Wyatt must have gotten into my head yesterday, asking about my intentions with Dakota.

Page 25

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

I scoff at the idea. ‘Intentions.’ As if he’s some sort of chaperone needing to protect her from me.

Well, maybe he is.

I’ve never wanted to spend time with a woman outside of the bedroom before, but with her, it’s different. She challenges me in a way no woman ever has before. She would probably slap me, or shoot me, if I ever tried to give her jewelry or fly her off to a tropical destination.

Not that I’ve ever done that for a woman before, but plenty have tried to turn me into a man that would.

I also haven’t been able to stop thinking about our kiss. While just for show in the bar’s parking lot, I want to do it again. It was intoxicating. Everything about her draws me in and makes me want things I shouldn’t.

The limo pulls to a stop in front of Dakota’s house. I suck in a deep breath, looking up at the craftsman-style home in front of me. Dakota is waiting on the porch in a form-fitting red dress that leaves nothing to the imagination. The neckline is a deep cut, showing enough cleavage to drive me crazy, but still be respectable for the gala.

I wanted someone to impress the sponsors and damn, did I find it.

“Are you going to go out and meet her or just stare at her all night?” Wyatt asks with a smirk.

“Fuck off.” I open the door, not able to take my eyes off of her.

“Did you come all the way out here just to turn around and go back to your ranch?” she asks with a smirk as she walks down the stairs. Her dress has a slit at the side, giving me a glimpse of her long, lean legs and heels that defy gravity.

“Yes.”

“Why? You could have just sent the limo to pick me up. Aren’t you needed there?”

“And not make a grand entrance?” I ask with a chuckle, slowly closing the gap between us down the stone pathway in her yard.

The truth is, I needed to get off the ranch. I felt like I was suffocating with the caterers and event planners running around preparing. I had been stopped no less than ten times with questions while getting ready. If I didn’t leave, I would have been on the verge of kicking everyone out.

“Hmm... Well, you’re late,” she says, the corner of her mouth lifting in a smirk.

I check my watch. “It’s five-oh-two.”

“Weren’t you the one that expressed how imperative it is that I be ready for five o’clock on the dot?” Her words are laced with sarcasm as she takes her final steps toward me.

“Well, I apologize.” I hold my elbow out to her. “Shall we, sweetheart? We wouldn’t want to be any more later than we already are.”

“Why, Chance Declan, do you have a sense of humour in that personality of yours?” she chuckles, placing her hand in the crook of my arm.

“It’s been known to slip through the cracks from time to time, but I wouldn’t let it get around. Wouldn’t want to ruin my reputation as the town asshole, you know.”

“Of course not,” she chuckles as she climbs into the limo.

I stand behind her, watching her climb in, admiring the way her ass looks in the dress. My brain can’t help but zero in on her lack of panty line.

Fuck me, no underwear.

I look up at the sky, sending up a prayer and a curse. Reaching for anything that’s going to get me through tonight knowing she’s not wearing anything under that high cut dress. Discreetly adjusting myself—suddenly aware of how tight my pants are—I climb in after her.

“You look beautiful, Dakota,” Wyatt remarks as I close the door.

I don’t miss the blush that graces her cheeks. I look between her and Wyatt, desperate to see if there’s more to the comment than Wyatt being nice.

Wyatt is never nice.

“Thank you, Wyatt. Did he drag you along to come pick me up?”

“Yeah, someone has to keep him from telling the driver to take him out of town,” he jokes.

Wyatt also never jokes. What the fuck is going on?

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“I’m sorry we got off on the wrong foot the other night. I hope we can officially start over. I’m Dakota Meyers.” She offers her hand to Wyatt, wearing a wider smile. I can’t tear my eyes away from her lips, which are painted the same shade of red as her dress.

At the moment, all I can think about is kissing her and smudging that lipstick. I want to run my hands through her dark brown hair, letting out all the pins that hold it up into some sort of updo.

“Don’t worry about it,” Wyatt says, taking her hand and raising it to his mouth, brushing his lips against the back of her hand. “I’d be more than happy to start over with you.”

What the fuck is that supposed to mean?

“Alright, knock it off,” I growl, grabbing Dakota’s hand from Wyatt’s. I lace my fingers with hers, resting them on my knee.

“What are you doing?” she asks, tugging her hand from mine, which only makes me hold on tighter.

“You’re my girlfriend, remember? I’m supposed to hold your hand.”

“In public,” she rolls her eyes, but stops tugging. “Wyatt knows what this is.”

“Call it practice. I don’t want you pulling away from me in front of the investors, do I?” I can’t help the bite in my tone, or the surge of possessiveness I have toward her. I

find both very unsettling.

“No, we wouldn’t want that, would we, darling?”

Wyatt chokes on nothing, holding his fist to his mouth to cover his smile as he looks away.

The fucker.

I hate the fake smile she’s giving me right now. I hate that she brings out these reactions in me. I’m not like this. I’m a love ‘em and leave ‘em guy. I don’t want to hold hands or worry because my best friend kissed her hand.

Shaking my head, I drop her hand and turn to stare out the window.

I can’t do this. Who was I fooling thinking I could even pretend to be in a relationship. Everyone’s going to take one look at us and know this is all a farce.

What I can’t ignore is the hurt-filled gasp from the woman beside me. I discarded her so carelessly, but I can’t help it. I need to stop these thoughts. These feelings.

“Anyway,” Wyatt starts, picking up his conversation with Dakota. It’s something about a case, or local events, I don’t know. I can’t focus on them. I need to pretend Dakota is just another buckle bunny. She’s just arm candy to get the ranch through the rodeo and win the approval of the sponsors.

The limo pulls into the drive of the ranch, passing the large gates I have a love/hate relationship with. While I love that I can close them and shut out the world, I sometimes hate what they represent. I’m grateful for the life I have, but it comes with costs, such as an expectation of living my life in a certain way.

My dad never had that problem. He had been with my mom since they were teenagers. I don't stand a chance to live up to my parents and their lives, nor do I want to try.

I just wish everyone else would fuck off.

“Are you going to get out?” Dakota's sweet voice distracts me from my spiralling thoughts.

I look up, seeing we have stopped at my front door. A line of limos waits behind us, bringing more assholes I need to impress.

“Yup,” I grind out as the driver opens the door.

I climb out, holding my hand out to help Dakota, who gracefully places her smaller hand in mine as she slides out of the back. She takes a moment to smooth down her dress and smiles up at me, blinding me with her beauty.

The setting sun creates a perfect backdrop behind her, illuminating the red in her dark brown hair.

“Are we ready to do this?” Wyatt asks, stepping out behind Dakota, smoothing out his black button-up shirt.

“Yes, I can't wait to get this over with,” Dakota says with a smile as she steps up next to me.

The venom in her voice hurts, but I know it's well deserved. I've been an ass to her and should be thankful she didn't tell the driver to just turn around and take her home.

Which she has every right to.

I take her hand and place it in the crook of my arm as we make our way around back. The grounds behind my home have been transformed with large white tents, round tables, and a dance floor. Jazz music plays from speakers by the front where a small stage has been set up with a four-person band. Why is there jazz music at a gala for a rodeo? Fuck if I know. I assume the donors are too sophisticated for some country music, beers out of the taillights of trucks, and a fire pit.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

Which is also why I wasn't allowed to have anything to do with the planning.

People mingle and chat as the wait staff wearing white suits bring around champagne and appetizers. I know the moment we are spotted as people turn and stare, their conversations momentarily stop.

I should smile and welcome my guests, but I don't have it in me right now. Instead, I lead Dakota over to the bar. "Whiskey. Neat. Double." The bartender nods once and grabs a glass.

"Of course, Sir," he says, looking between me and Dakota.

"I would love a red wine, too, please," she says as the bartender slings a glass of amber liquid across the bar top. "You must excuse him; he's a nervous wreck at these things. Social gatherings just aren't his thing. Sometimes he forgets basic manners, don't you, babe?"

"Yup," I grunt, taking a sip of my whiskey. I down half the drink in one gulp, relishing in its smoky burn. The pain is a welcome distraction from my current surroundings. And company.

"Declan!" A deep voice rings from behind us. Recognition floods me, making me down the rest of my drink and motion for another as Dakota accepts her wine.

I turn to find a face that begs to meet my fist.

"Jones." I clench my jaw as the man approaches.

I don't like many people, but if there's one man I truly hate, it's Todd Jones. Owner of the next biggest ranch in the area, he always goes out of his way to make things difficult for me, no matter what it is.

“Fancy party you throw here. Not like the fundraiser we threw at our ranch last month, but it's—quaint.”

“I think it's lovely, don't you, babe?” Dakota asks, linking her free arm with mine.

“Speaking of lovely, who are you?” Todd's attention turns to her, and more specifically, where our arms are joined.

“Dakota Meyers. And you are?”

“Todd Jones. Owner of Three Hills Ranch.” Todd holds out his hand for a shake, which Dakota accepts, only to have him lift her hand and place a kiss on her knuckles with a slight bow.

What the fuck is with men kissing her hand tonight?

“Knock it off, Jones,” I say, pushing him away from her hand.

“Relax, Declan, I'm just being polite.” He turns to Dakota. “I swear he's such a caveman sometimes. Don't tell me the rumours are actually true and you're a couple. You are much too good for him.”

I'm a breath away from sucker punching Todd when Dakota squeezes my arm and dons her courtroom voice.

“The rumours are very much true and believe me, I'm thankful every day I convinced this man to be mine. You also don't know the first thing about me, so do not presume

you know that I'm too good for him. I think daily he's too good for me."

"He's not too good for anyone, except his own ego," Todd laughs out loud, raising his voice so everyone can hear.

"Listen, Jones." I take a menacing step toward the man, only to be held back by Dakota's grip on my arm and Wyatt's restraining grasp on my shoulder. I didn't hear my friend approach, but I'm not surprised he shows up when I need him.

"Can it, Jones," Wyatt warns.

"Or what, Winters?" Todd rounds on Wyatt, not lowering his voice. "What are you going to do? You need my money too much for the rodeo. You won't kick me out."

"Fuck this!" I brush off both Dakota and Wyatt. "And fuck you, Jones. You come waltzing in here acting like you're some hot shot rancher when all you are is a washed up wanna-be trying to be relevant."

"At least I'm trying to make a name for myself. Better than a silver-spoon fed trust fund baby that couldn't work on a ranch, much less run one."

I can feel the anger rising in my chest. I want to lay my hands on Jones, get out all the anger that's been brewing inside of me, but I can't. Not here.

Breaking my gaze away from him, I notice we've gathered a crowd around us. The very people I have to impress are now gasping, staring as if we are a circus attraction, which, to be honest, we are right now.

Todd looks smug with his chest puffed out, strutting like he's won. "Got nothing to say, Declan? Don't worry. Soon I'll have your ranch, and your woman." Todd leers at Dakota in a way that makes me want to claw his eyes out. I may not have a claim to

Dakota himself, but I won't let this snake get so much as another look at her.

Before I realize what I'm doing, I lunge forward and grab Todd by the collar with both hands, pulling him close. "Get the fuck off my property, Jones, and you can take your money with you. I don't want you to have anything to do with the rodeo; do you understand me? You won't even be able to watch from the stands after I'm done with you." I lower my voice, uttering my words through gritted teeth at his ear. "Say what you want about me and my ranch, but if you so much as even breathe in Dakota's direction again, it will be your last. Do you understand me?"

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

Todd's eyes widen at my threat but soon turn into a sneer when he realizes everyone is watching us. "I'd like to see you try, Declan. You're nothing but a selfish asshole and you'll run this ranch into the ground within a year. And when you do, I'll be there to pick up the pieces."

I rear my fist back when my arm meets resistance.

"Don't do this, Chance. Not here," Wyatt says behind me, holding me back.

Without hesitation, Todd raises his fist and hits me in the chin, taking advantage of me being held back. Women in the gathering crowd gasp around us. A man I don't recognize grabs Todd, pulling him away.

"Chance!" Dakota yells, trying to inspect my face, but I push her behind me. I don't want her anywhere near Todd.

"Get out," I seethe at the other man. "You're done, Jones. Do you hear me?"

"Chance, you're bleeding," Dakota says softly, bringing a hand to my chin.

"Fuck this." I shrug her off and turn, stalking toward the house. I rip off my tie and throw it at a waiter carrying a full tray of flutes as he walks out of my kitchen.

I barely register my name being called as I slam the door behind me.

Chapter Twelve

Dakota

“Let me go after him,” I plead with Wyatt as I place my hand on his arm, holding him back. Even though I don’t know the man at all, I know the look of one that’s about to do some physical damage, and I think there’s been enough of that tonight.

“Are you sure? He’s even more of an ass than usual when he’s like this,” he says, not looking at me. His eyes track the slimy fucker that thought he had more swagger than Chance. I’ve known men like him; hell, I’ve had to represent men like him, and they always make my skin crawl. It took everything in me not to recoil and shiver when he kissed my hand.

We watch as Todd shrugs off the man holding him, spewing curses and claiming loudly he was only defending himself against the big, bad Chance Declan.

As if. If Chance wanted to hurt him, he could have taken this rat.

“Yes, you deal with—him.” I nod my head to Todd, who is now boasting about how differently he would run Whiskey Canyon Ranch, since Chance is so incapable of doing so. “I’ll go to Chance.”

Todd is really testing my nerves. I narrow my eyes at him, cursing him in my head while taking notes of everything about him to make sure that Hammond Law never represents him or his ranch.

Wyatt nods and stalks toward Todd, grabbing him by the collar and leading him away from the crowd and through the side gate.

“What are you doing? Get your hands off of me!” Todd protests but is no match for Wyatt’s pure strength.

“Fight me, Jones, and I swear I’ll do more than just throw you out.” Wyatt gives him another shove.

“I won’t give you a cent after this! Do you hear? You’ll never be able to run your little rodeo without Three Hills Ranch!” Todd stammers as Wyatt pulls him away.

The two stop suddenly with Wyatt saying something to him I can’t make out, but whatever it is, it makes Todd stop yelling and his face turn ashen. Wyatt gives him a sinister smile before pulling him around the corner.

I want more than anything to know what Wyatt whispered to him, but the lawyer in me knows it’s better if I pretend I didn’t see it.

The rest of the guests watch in shock, chattering while the women fan themselves and act scandalized, but their eyes never leave the men as they haul Todd out of the yard. I gather this is quite a lot of drama for a rodeo gala—and for the small town.

Now that Todd has been dealt with, I need to turn my attention to Chance. Not only was he bleeding, but he’s madder than hell and is probably nothing short of a ticking time bomb inside his own house.

I follow the door he stormed through, finding it leads to the kitchen, flooding my memories of Chance and I where the chefs are now standing. I feel a flush reach my cheeks as I think of how sexy he looked standing at the counter, hands gripping the countertop.

I want nothing more than to feel those hands on me. Have them run over my body. Through my hair.

“He went that way,” a young woman in a white suit squeaks, pointing down the hall.

I give my head a shake, pulling my gaze away from the hurried chefs and waitstaff, no doubt hustling to get more food out to distract the guests from the near fight.

“Thank you,” I say, giving her a polite smile. The poor girl looks as if she has been put through the trenches and if she was outside when it all happened, she undoubtedly was.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

The woman cowers again, leaving me to wonder what Chance did as he stormed through the house. I imagine it was bit like a bear with a thorn in his paw; yelling and threatening as he barrelled through everyone.

But he doesn't scare me. I've had to deal with my fair share of people like Chance working in law. Hell, I've dealt with much worse. I know I need to prepare myself for his wrath, knowing it's highly unlikely he's cooled off during his few minutes alone.

I slip off my heels and dangle them off my finger by the straps as I stroll down the hallway, remembering the way from when I walked through it the other night.

The farther away from the kitchen I get, the more I notice the rest of the house is eerily quiet. I'm left with just the echoes of the kitchen staff working, and the faint laughs and voices from the people outside ring around me.

The only guide I have to find where Chance went is a soft light coming from under a doorway ahead of me. Taking a deep breath, I grab the knob and turn, sneaking through the door and closing it behind me as quietly as I can.

“Get out,” Chance grumbles, not looking up from the tumbler in his hand.

I drop my shoes by the door and walk carefully toward him. The room is darkened, except for a lamp on his large wooden desk. I don't take my eyes off him, but in my periphery, I notice floor to ceiling bookshelves filled with old looking books. I would give anything to know what types of books fill Chance Declan's shelves, but that's a temptation I can't give into right now.

There's a bigger one ahead of me, and I need to make sure I don't get too close and get burned.

Chance sits in an oversized leather seat, his suit jacket discarded and the top buttons of his shirt undone. He's rolled up his sleeves to his elbows, making him look every inch the successful billionaire he is.

And hot. So damn hot.

"How's your chin?" I ask, taking another soft step forward.

He grunts, taking a sip of the amber liquid in his glass, never taking his eyes off me.

I feel like I'm prey being watched by a predator.

I'm probably not that far off.

"He's an ass, you know." I stop in the middle of the room, assessing him.

He scoffs as he takes another sip. He finally breaks his gaze, looking down at the glass in front of him.

"Wyatt got rid of him. Might even have a black eye or two the way they were going."

"Good. He deserves it." His voice is low and gruff. It reminds me of the smoky, gravelly drink he has in his hand. Like a burn that is so smooth it both hurts and feels good at the same time.

"Do you want to talk about what happened back there?" I take a tentative step toward his desk; my eyes remaining focused on him. He continues to avoid mine.

“Do you think I want to talk about it, Dakota?” He slams the tumbler down, making drops of whiskey cascade on the desk around it. “If you’re looking for a guy that will talk about his feelings, you’re in the wrong place.”

“And if you think you’re going to scare me off with being an asshole, you’re wrong.”

“You should be scared,” he seethes, meeting my eyes again. “Everyone else is. The playboy billionaire with anger issues. Chance Declan, the man failing at filling his father’s shoes. The asshole farmer who’s about to lose the town’s rodeo.”

“Is that what you think you are?” I stand still, not daring to take another step further.

The office is cool, but a lone bead of sweat drips down my back. I don’t know if it’s his intense stare or what he does to me.

“It doesn’t matter what I think.” He lifts his glass and takes another sip. “It never does.”

“You’re none of those things, Chance.”

“You don’t know that! You don’t know me!” He stands, slamming his hand against his desk.

“Because you won’t let me fucking try!”

We stand staring at each other, chests heaving as our anger rises. I wish I could shake sense into him, let him see that he isn’t the asshole people believe he is.

Well, he is, but for different reasons.

Page 30

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

He's still firmly in place on my asshole-o-meter, but I can see the pain and guilt he carries along with the chip on his shoulder. I don't know why it bothers me so much that he can't see it, but everything inside me screams he needs to see himself differently. That maybe if he saw himself as more than just a billionaire playboy with a shit attitude, he could do amazing things with his ranch.

“Why do you even care, Dakota? This is fake, remember? After what happened out there, there's probably no point in even trying.”

And that was like a knife in my fucking heart.

Of course I know it's fake. I'm reminded of it every time he crosses my mind. Every time my body heats from his deep voice. When his hazel eyes always tucked under his black cowboy hat, cross my mind.

When I think of our kiss in the bar parking lot.

Believe me, I know nothing about this is real.

“You don't know that. Plus, from what I saw, it didn't look like anyone was coming to Todd's rescue. Think of it as PR. Maybe we can spin it as you only wanting sponsors that uphold a sense of integrity. A real family establishment. Just like you're trying to promote.”

“I'm not sure anyone would believe that. In case you forgot, I almost threw the first punch.”

“Defending my honour. He was clearly not respecting the fact that I’m here with you.”

“I’m sure they’ll really think this is a ‘family establishment’ with you being here as my fake girlfriend,” he sneers.

“Whether or not this is fake is irrelevant. We’ve come out as a couple, and we stay out as a couple until this is done. As far as everyone else is concerned, we are a real couple. No one needs to know otherwise.”

Chance rounds the desk so fast I barely register it until he’s in front of me. His height is imposing, especially since I kicked off my shoes. It doesn’t stop me from straightening my spine, raising my chin and meeting his gaze with my fists on my hips.

“And you think what you say goes? I could just as easily discard you like the other women. At least with them, they shut their mouths and open their legs for me.” He takes a step towards me. I instinctively take a step back.

I know he’s acting this way to make me leave—to scare me. And if I’m being honest with myself, it’s working. But I won’t let him see that. Instead, I stand straighter and square my shoulders, tipping my chin up.

“You’re being crude to push me away, but it’s not going to work.”

“You don’t have the faintest idea why I do what I do.”

He takes a step forward and I instinctively take a step back. We continue this dance until my back hits the door; his body pressing against mine, letting me feel the hardness of his chest and his lengthening arousal on my stomach. It’s a relief to know I’m not the only one angry and turned on at the same time.

I look down from his eyes, seeing a cut on his lip that has scabbed over already.
“You’re hurt.”

“I’m fine,” he grunts.

I raise my hand to brush along his chin, but he moves, not letting me touch him.

“Then let me in,” I whisper, barely a breath between our lips.

“Why do you care?” His voice is lower but still holds a hard edge. The smoky aroma of his whiskey washes over me, wrapping around me, drawing me closer to him.

“You need someone to talk to, Chance.” I draw my gaze away from his lips and focus on his eyes.

“And you think that someone should be you?” He smirks, his eyes turning colder.
“Have me spill my guts to you, divulge all my emotions, only to have you gone in a couple of weeks? I don’t think so.”

There it is. The reminder of our limited time again. I don’t know why I always feel like it’s a punch to the gut knowing our time is coming to an end, but it is.

“If not me, talk to Wyatt. Talk to someone.”

“What if I don’t want to talk?” He doesn’t give me a chance to answer before he crashes his lips to mine, winding his fingers through my hair, gripping me so tight it hurts.

I clutch at his shirt, my nails clawing along his exposed chest. I don’t fight him, instead, I give in to his kiss; deepen it, desperate to make him hurt like he’s hurt me. The taste of whiskey on his tongue is intoxicating; hypnotizing me to forget what an

asshole he's been.

His hands roam from my hair, down my sides, and to the hem of my skirt. "You've been driving me fucking crazy in this dress." His fingertips brush the skin of my thigh, leaving a trail of goosebumps.

Heat pools in my core at his caress. He has no right to be this soft and gentle with me after how he was just a moment before. It's not him, and I don't want it. I want the asshole Chance Declan. The one that uses women and tosses them aside. I want it, because I need to treat him the same way, or I'll never survive this agreement.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

I wrap my leg around his waist as his hand creeps higher, slipping under the fabric of my dress.

He curses as he reaches my ass, making me smile.

“I fucking knew it,” he groans. “Did you do this to torture me?”

“Do what?” I ask breathlessly, knowing exactly what he’s talking about. I’d purposely gone without underwear tonight. It wasn’t just because I knew the tight-fitting fabric would show my panty line—I also knew it would show my lack of one.

His hand explores higher, proving his point. “What was your plan here, sweetheart? Forgetting your panties at home. Did you think I wouldn’t notice?” he growls, dropping his lips to my ear, his breath hot on my neck. “I noticed. Everyone at this fucking party knows you aren’t wearing anything under this dress.”

Heat rushes to my cheeks. While I wanted him to notice, I didn’t realize anyone else would be looking at me that closely.

“I had to.” I whisper. “No matter what I tried to wear, there was a line. Plus, torturing you would mean you care, wouldn’t it?” I run my hands through his hair as he runs his nose along the length of my neck. “I thought this was fake.”

For once, I don’t want it to be. I wish this could be real. That I could do what I want to him, right here, right now. I wish I was the type of woman he would seek out and choose to have on his arm.

Hell, I wish I was a woman that didn't care.

"Not everything is fake, Dakota." He grinds his hardening length against me, proving his point.

I groan as I roll my hips against him.

"I want you, Dakota. You don't have to fight this."

His hot breath on my neck mixes with our bodies moving against each other, making it impossible for me to form any rational thoughts. "Chance...I...wait." I push against him. He lets me have a little space, but not too much.

"What are you waiting for, Dakota? You want this. I know you do."

"I do. No, I don't. I can't think!"

I need air. Space. A drink. Something to help me clear my head.

There's something about being in close proximity to Chance that makes my mind run in overdrive. I seem to forget the rules I set in place to avoid getting hurt—like I know he will do to me.

I know he has the ability to hurt me worse than Laughlin ever did.

"So don't think," he continues, bringing his hand up and taking out the pins in my hair one-by-one, throwing them to the ground. "You think too much."

I want to give in, let him have me.

With my hair now free, his hands are free to trail along my shoulders, down my arms

and along my sides. His hands on my body feel just as good as I imagined. No, better.

My hair brushes along my back, electrifying my already oversensitive skin. I want to do anything that will keep his hands on me. Keep his soft kisses grazing my collarbone the way they are right now. Keep the stubble from his chin leaving a delicious burn in its wake.

Can I do this? I know we have an end date. I know not to get emotionally involved.

But I also know it's too late. I'm already emotionally involved, or at least, mostly on my way there.

What really scares me, though, is that I'm on the verge of not caring. I'm ready to throw away every rule and worry I've ever had to spend tonight with Chance. I'm willing to throw myself at him just for a night to know what it's like to have Chance Declan. Have all of him.

"Help me not to think, Chance." I moan as he kisses the crook of my neck. "I'd give anything not to think."

"That can be arranged," Chance growls before sliding his arm behind my knees, another behind my back, and carries me out of the room.

I let out a small squeak as I throw my arms around his neck, holding on to him as the lifeline that he is.

I'm breaking all my rules. I'm doing everything I told Addie I wouldn't do. I wouldn't get emotionally involved. I wouldn't sleep with him. I wouldn't fall for him.

Anxiety should be filling my body with every step he carries me, but it's not. It's as if every step leaves another worry—another concern—farther behind. Instead, all I feel

is excitement and heat. Yearning. Desire.

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

When he reaches the base of his staircase and looks me in the eyes, giving me a chance to fight him, tell him to put me down and return to the gala. My brain tells me to stop him. To return to the sponsors and townspeople. To put on the show that they need from us, but I can't do that. Looking into his eyes, I know the only place I want to be is in his arms. In his bed.

With a slight nod of my head, his lips crash to mine as he takes the stairs, and I know that any sense of logic and reason I hoped for is long gone.

As of tonight, I belong to Chance Declan.

Chapter Thirteen

Chance

Dakota feels like heaven in my arms. I don't want to admit how right she feels, or how I never want to put her down.

This isn't me. I don't carry women through my house like a fucking romance hero. I don't carry women anywhere. I've never even brought them back to my house at all. My rule is their place so I can leave. Make a quick exit, usually before they wake.

The last thing I ever want is to have some love-struck bunny roaming around my property after her time is up.

But Dakota? She's different, and that terrifies me.

Pushing the thoughts to the back of my mind, I slam my bedroom door closed with my foot and stalk to my bed.

“Chance, I think...” Dakota starts as I place her down on my bed.

I silence her with a kiss. “You don’t want to think.”

“I know, but...”

“So don’t.” I drop my head to her neck, lightly biting the spot I’ve learned drives her crazy.

I’m rewarded with a groan as she arches into me, grabbing tightly onto my hair.

Whatever Dakota was going to say must have left her mind as my hand finds its way up her dress. My hand slides along the soft skin of her thigh, riding high enough to find its way back up to her lack of a panty line. I growl into her soft skin as I lift her dress up, not stopping until the fabric is thrown onto the floor.

Seeing Dakota on her front steps when we pulled up earlier took my breath away. Seeing her naked on my bed with her lush brown locks strewn over the sheets makes my heart nearly fucking stop. The only light in the room is the fading sun streaming through my window, cascading hues of pink and orange across her body.

Her big, green eyes look back at me, a mix of lust and hesitation. I need to make her stop thinking so much so she can feel.

“Chance?”

I have a feeling she never lets herself go to act on what makes her feel good.

I need to change that.

“Shhh.” I take one of her nipples into my mouth, giving it a hard suck. Her scent intoxicates me. Oranges mixed with something. Maybe vanilla? She smells and tastes like a fucking popsicle.

Her fingers in my hair hold me in place, urging me on. I know I’m on the right track when she arches her back into me as I nip at her tight bud.

I love the feeling of her writhing underneath me, and I need to feel more of it. I need to feel her skin on mine; need her soft to my hard. I need everything about her.

Pulling away, I move to the other breast, giving it the same attention while flicking her abandoned nipple with my thumb. Her moans are all the encouragement I need.

I stand abruptly, pulling at my shirt, ridding myself of my clothes as I stare at the beauty in front of me.

Dakota’s hungry eyes track me as I move. I feel the goosebumps along my body as she raises onto her elbows, trailing her eyes down my chest and to my pants. I stop as I undo the button of my slacks, raising an eyebrow at her.

“Don’t stop now, Cowboy,” she says with a smirk.

With a chuckle, I continue, holding her gaze as I drop my pants, standing in front of her in only my boxers. Dakota bites her bottom lip, taking me in.

“Something you like, Counselor?”

Page 33

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“I’d like it a lot better if it was over here,” she purrs. The sound of her seductive voice shoots straight to my cock.

Not wasting a moment, I throw off my boxers and stalk toward her, grabbing her by the ankle and pulling her toward me. She lets out a laugh as she slides across my blanket until her ass meets my thigh. Lifting her ankle to my mouth, I place a soft kiss on her supple skin. “Is this better?”

“Getting there.” Her attempt at sounding indifferent fails.

I trail my lips up her leg and along the inside of her knee. Loving the gasp that escapes her lips, I continue to work higher, tickling the inside of her thigh with the scruff of my beard.

“Chance,” she moans, arching into me.

I drop her leg and pick up her other one, following the same path. She writhes underneath me and moans at my touch. This is what I want for her. I want her to stop thinking and just let herself feel.

I avoid the place I know she wants me to touch the most. Running my lips along her flat stomach, cupping her breasts in my hands as I place kisses along her ribs.

“Chance, I think...”

“No thinking,” I say, nipping at her skin. I look up the length of her, meeting her gaze. “Do you want this?”

She hesitates, and my heart stops. I don't want this to end before it's even begun.

"I want this," she finally answers. "But this isn't me, Chance. I know we're fake, and we have an end date, but I'm not the girl that can just switch off her emotions when this is done. I can't just move on and pretend this isn't something we've shared."

I can't explain the shift I start to feel, because I don't understand it myself. I want to make Dakota feel so good she can stop thinking about everything and everyone. Just me. I don't know about emotions, or what will happen after this. I can't promise next week, let alone forever. I only ever care about what's happening in the moment. It's the way I've always been. I've never felt more than lust for a woman, and even that was usually fleeting.

But with Dakota, I don't know what I feel, but it's more than that. I can't put my finger on it, or name it, but it's something.

"If you want this, then don't worry about later. I can't promise you anything after tonight, but I can promise you right now. I can make you feel so fucking good."

I don't wait for her to answer. Instead, I suck a nipple into my mouth, giving it a hard nip before cooling it with a lap of my tongue. She grabs my hair, holding me in place while I fondle her with my other hand. Her core grinds against me, seeking relief. She feels so fucking good working her body against mine.

"Yes, Chance," she groans, throwing her head back.

"Can you let go, sweetheart? Just for tonight?" I switch to the other nipple, starting over with a nip.

"Yes," she gasps, riding me harder.

Flipping her onto her stomach, I smile as her squeaked scream fills my room. I lay my body on top of hers, guiding myself along her ass, letting her feel what she does to me.

“Good girl,” I growl, biting her shoulder. “Now, don’t move.”

I give her ass a slap as I stand, moving to the bedside table to grab a condom. She gives out a startled cry that turns into a moan, making me harder. I can’t take my eyes off her as I roll the rubber over my hard length, watching her back rise and fall with her quickened breaths. A faint red patch stains her pale cheek where I spanked her, filling me with a sense of pride.

I try to take my own advice and not think too much about why I’m feeling the way I feel. I never put too much thought into a night with a woman. If she didn’t seem interested, I moved on. Instant gratification. That’s it. I was always gone before either one of us could think too much about it.

But with Dakota, it’s different. I want her to feel good. I want to be the one to put a smile on her face and make her scream my name in ecstasy. My heart speeds up at the sight of her, the feel of her skin under my fingers. The way she moans at my touch.

But I can’t think of that now.

Stalking back to the bed, I grab Dakota’s luscious curves and pull her toward me. She gasps as her ass hits my groin, my hands digging into her hips so tightly I know if I let her go, there will be red marks there too.

“You ready for this, sweetheart?” I growl, dragging my length against her. “I’m ready for you.”

“Yes, Chance. Please,” she begs.

I don't hesitate. I slide into her, draping my body over her back. I drop my head to her back, both of us groaning at the contact, taking a moment to adjust to each other.

So good. She feels so good.

I push all my other thoughts aside. I don't need to think about feelings. This isn't about emotion; it's about release. Getting each other out of our systems so we can get through the next couple of weeks without tension.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

I hope.

I pick up the pace, grabbing a fist full of her hair and pulling. She moans as I nip at her shoulder before trailing kisses up her neck.

“Chance,” she gasps, her hips moving in time with mine.

“Shh, sweetheart. Just feel. Don’t talk.” Reaching my free hand around her body, I grab her breast and roll her nipple between my fingers. I’m rewarded with a scream and feel a tremble that moves through her whole body. “That’s it. Give into the feeling, babe. Feel what I’m doing to you. Feel how well you’re taking me.”

“Oh, Chance.”

I smile into her neck as I pull her hair harder, shifting my hips to hit the spot that rewards me with another scream. “That’s it. Feel that. Feel what I’m doing to you.”

Dakota’s breathing intensifies, her responses reduced to only grunts and moans as we move together.

I can feel my own release building, but I hold it off. I need Dakota to explode first. I need to feel her lose control around me.

I almost still at the thought. I’ve never concerned myself with the feel of a woman climaxing. I always make sure they have a good time, but then I take what I need. But it isn’t like that with Dakota. I need to feel her lose control. The sounds she’s making are like a drug to me, and I need more.

“That’s it, sweetheart. Take what you need. Ride me. Let me feel you.”

My words send her over the edge. She’s screaming my name as I slip my hand from her hair and grab her throat, tight enough to let her know I’m in control. My free hand travels down to her tight bud, rubbing hard and fast, drawing out her orgasm while withholding my own. I take pleasure in watching her come undone around me, knowing I’m the one that causing her to unravel.

Once she’s come down from her high, I let go of her throat and let her fall to the bed. Grabbing her hips, I pull her body to me, making her rise to her knees. Her still-trembling body lets me take what I need, thrusting into her at a punishing speed until I find my own release. I quickly follow, not able to hold back after the intense high of our lovemaking.

Lovemaking? What the fuck?

I lower my head to her shoulder, trying to catch my breath.

This isn’t me. I don’t have feelings during sex. Lust, satisfaction, relief? Sure. Connection, contentment—love? Never. While I know I’m not in love with Dakota, I sense that I’m starting to feel more than just a physical attraction to her.

Which is why I can’t believe the words that leave my mouth.

“Stay with me.”

She stills underneath me, her head turned to the side.

“Did you hear me?” I roll to my side, tucking her into my arms.

“I thought I heard you ask me to stay, but I must be hallucinating.”

“Don’t overthink this, sweetheart. Just go to sleep.”

I don’t want to talk about why I ask her to stay. I can’t think about my yard full of people, most likely gossiping about my fight with Todd and how Dakota and I didn’t return. I can’t think about the rodeo or the investors. I can’t think about anything, or I’ll be doing what I’m telling her not to do.

Overthink.

So instead, I’m just going to hold her in my arms and fall asleep. Pretend like nothing outside of this room exists.

For once, I’m ready to block everything out and just feel.

Another one of my rules that I’m breaking for her.

If I’m not careful, I’ll forget why I made those rules in the first place. But for right now, I don’t care.

Chapter Fourteen

Dakota

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” I groan as I scan the email that just hit my inbox.

Page 35

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

In the days since my weekend with Chance, it feels like nothing has been going my way. I lost a case that should have been open and shut, I got a parking ticket while running to pick up my dry cleaning, and now one of my biggest cases has been delayed—again.

I don't believe in karma or the universe playing tricks on me, but I have to admit something is happening since starting this agreement with him.

As if this is my punishment for breaking my rule of no hookups.

I don't regret our time together. In fact, it was one of the best weekends I've had with a man. In a very un-Chance like manner, he was very sweet and attentive. He made me meals, fed me breakfast in bed and ordered the best food in the city for dinners. Even making Wyatt meet Addie at my place so I could have a fresh set of clothes, because as Chance put it, 'there was no way Wyatt was going anywhere near my panty drawer.'

And I had to agree with him on that one.

It was even worth the slew of accusatory texts from Addie asking if I'd lost my mind and if Chance had abducted me and was holding me in his basement.

I actually had to call her on that one to assure her that I was not being held there against my will.

But, all of this doesn't mean I don't still have a nagging feeling that this is only going to end in heartbreak. More specifically, my heart being broken. I don't think Chase

has the vulnerability to have his heart broken, nor do I have the power to do so. It's highly unlikely Chance lets anyone in close enough to have his heart threatened.

Our weekend together was purely about getting each other out of our systems. Scratching an itch. All he did was help me turn off my brain; stop me from overthinking like I always do.

And did he ever.

For once in my life, I gave in and just let myself feel. Feel how wonderful it is to have his lips on mine—just like I thought. To have his rough, calloused hands run along my bare skin. Just thinking about it makes me feel his phantom touches on my sides and through my hair. I thought I was going to combust when he gripped my throat during one of our lovemaking sessions. I've never had a man do that to me before, but now it's all I can think about.

I have to stop myself from fanning my face, which I have no right reliving that, since it will not be happening again. The weekend was a one and done. I can't let Chance have any more of me than he already does, or I may never recover.

"Dakota?" Ella, the company's receptionist, asks as she pokes her head through my office door. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," I sigh, tossing my pen onto my desk. The last thing I need is to be hot and bothered at work. "The Bloomfield Farms case has been pushed back."

"Again?" Ella walks into the room with a large vase of flowers in her hands and a frown on her face.

"Yeah, uh, what's that?" I look skeptically at the rather expensive looking arrangement.

“These were just dropped off for you. It seems you have an admirer.” The frown is quickly replaced with a smile as she places the vase on my desk in front of me. “Are these from Chance?”

“Doubt it,” I grumble under my breath.

There’s no way Chance would do something like this. No matter how out of character it was for him to spend the weekend with me. Or do all those sweet and thoughtful things; this was in public. Where people would know.

No, these couldn’t be from Chance.

But at the same time, wasn’t that the point?

I pluck the card from the petals, noticing Ella looming over me, waiting for a response. We’re around the same age. She’s sweet with long, straight blonde hair and big blue eyes. She’s good at her job and has always been kind to me since I started working here. I think she’s somewhat of a hopeless romantic, judging by the way she always seems to be reading a romance novel or talking about the latest rom-com she’s watched. All of which have really ramped up since she married country star Greyson Wallace.

She could have quit her job and been a stay-at-home wife and mother to her new stepdaughter, but she said she likes to keep busy, and I can respect that.

As I pull the card from the envelope, I note the messy writing. As much as he confuses me and pisses me off, his writing makes me smile.

I let out a laugh and hold the card to my chest. Looking up, I see Ella with a bright smile.

“So, what did it say? It must have been something romantic by the smile on your face.”

Romantic? No. One hundred percent Chance Declan? Yes.

“Yeah, something like that.”

Ella keeps watching me with hearts in her eyes, her hands clasped together in front of her. “Are you guys serious? You must be. He’s never been seen with the same woman twice. I don’t think he’s ever sent flowers before.”

“How would you know that, Ella?”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“Small town, Dakota.” Ella rolls her eyes as she sits down in the chair across from me.

“Whiskey Falls isn’t that small.”

“Well, no. Not compared to other places around here, but still—people talk. Women talk. Plus, my brother’s is in the rodeo, and he knows about the girls Chance is usually seen with. They all talk when they get their hearts broken.”

“What do you mean?” I sit up straighter, taking an interest in what she might know about Chance that I don’t.

“Well, Kody is the typical man, so he doesn’t listen to their talk too much, but he gathered that Chance would have his fun and leave them. Never stayed much longer than what he wanted.”

“I see.” I look down at the card in my hands. I figured it was a big deal for Chance to ask me to stay. He’d held me tight to him, except to wake me in the middle of the night for round two. And then again, first thing Sunday morning for round three. I’ve never felt so exhausted and elated at the same time as when Chance finally drove me home late Sunday afternoon.

I knew it had been a big step for him to spend so much time with me. I just hadn’t realized how big.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be bringing up his exes with you.” Ella places her hand on top of mine. “It was thoughtless of me. I know I would hate it if someone kept bringing

up Greyson's ex to me, even though I know all about it and we've dealt with it."

And did she ever. I remember her talking last year about how Greyson's ex-fiancée had come and stirred up trouble for them when they were first getting serious. Thank God that worked out.

"No, it's okay." I give her a weak smile. "It's not like I didn't know he had a past."

"Still." She stands, giving me a sad look. "He seems different with you."

"Do you know him?" I'm genuinely curious. Ella has never mentioned his name before now, and I highly doubt she's ever been swept up in the likes of Chance Declan. She seems too sweet—and too smart—to even try.

Plus, now that she's head-over-heels married to Greyson, I know her interest in Chance is nothing more than small town gossip.

"No, just from town and rodeo events. You don't grow up in Whiskey Falls and not at least know of everyone, even if you don't know them personally. And the Declan family is pretty well known around here. I just mean, from what I see, you're not like his usual buckle bunny hanging off his arm."

"I'm not a buckle bunny," I say sternly, while recalling Chance calling me the 'anti-buckle bunny.' I try to hide my wince as the all-too-familiar stab in my heart reminds me that I'm not good enough to be one of his 'usuals.'

"I know that." She hides a smile by biting her lip. "You seem different, too, you know? Since you stepped out with him publicly, you look—happier."

"Thank you." I don't know how to take that.

On one hand, it means that what we're doing is working. People in town believe that we are a real happy couple and not just faking it with an expiration date.

On the other hand, am I also deceiving myself? Am I letting my own guard down too much in the name of our agreement?

"I'll let you get back to work," she says, standing up from her chair. "I'm really happy for you, Dakota. I'm not just saying that because I'm a newlywed and want everyone to be as happy as Greyson and I are. You truly deserve it, especially after everything that happened."

With a smile, she turns and leaves me alone, closing the door behind her.

I run my finger along the petal of a rose, thinking about her words.

I don't know if what I feel is happy, but I feel a shift in me I've never felt before. Maybe I don't know what true happiness feels like. I thought I had it with Laughlin and look where that landed me.

There's no way I could possibly be happy with Chance, is there? He's the complete opposite of everything I thought I wanted in life. High-strung. Self-centred.

But then here was another side to him I saw on the weekend. A side that he maybe doesn't show very many people, if anyone. A side that I could get used to.

Feeling the soft petals along my skin reminds me of his hands on me. While his hands weren't anything like a flower, he treated me just as gently as I'm doing with the rose.

Well, until he wasn't. The thought of those times made my cheeks heat and my core tighten.

I give my head a shake and drop my hand to my lap, recoiling as if I were burned. I have no right thinking of Chance like that, of us like that. We have an end date, and there will be no Chance or us after the rodeo. I need to smarten up and remind myself of that instead of getting caught up in fantasies. Reality is where my head needs to be. The reality that I'm nothing to Chance but a way to save his place within the rodeo and a way to let off steam.

Sitting up straighter, I vow that I'm going to remember that going forward, or I may not make it out of this agreement unscathed.

Chapter Fifteen

Dakota

By the time five o'clock rolls around, I am ready to go home, kick off my heels, and open the bottle of white wine in my fridge that has been calling my name all day. My afternoon didn't get any better since receiving Chance's flowers. In fact, it only got worse, as if the universe was reminding me that bringing anything from him into my life asked for nothing but destruction.

Pushing the doors from the office lobby open, I take a deep breath, taking in the early evening air. It is still hot from the afternoon sun, but it smells like heaven after being in my office all day.

"You know I don't like to be kept waiting," a deep voice that I know all too well shoots through my body. My eyes snap open to find Chance waiting for me, looking sexy as hell as he leans against the side of his truck. He's wearing his signature black cowboy hat and sunglasses, which shield his face from me, but I would recognize him anywhere. Recognize the voice anywhere.

I soak in his tall frame, clothed in clean denim and a button-up black shirt. As sexy as he looks right now, all I can think of is the other night, and how amazing he looks out of them.

Which completely goes against the vow I made with myself just a few short hours ago.

I catch a few women on the street looking his way and can't help but smile to myself when I realize that he never stops looking at me. Or, at least he doesn't turn his head

toward them since I can't see his eyes behind his dark tinted glasses. I can't mistake the weight of his gaze on me, and how, the closer I get to him, the straighter he stands.

No, he's looking directly at me, and I'm drinking it in, like I'm dying of thirst.

As soon as I'm within distance, he grabs me and pulls me into him; one arm wraps around the small of my back, one hand in my hair and he kisses me.

Holy hell, does he kiss me.

If there was ever a shred of a doubt in anyone's mind that we were together, this borderline obscene kiss he's giving me right now would convince them.

Hell, I'm nearly converted.

His tongue runs along the seam of my lips, demanding me to part for it. I deny him at first, needing to put up a little bit of a fight so I feel some sense of control, only to have him hold my hair in his fist tighter, letting me know he's not going to be putting up with any of my sass at the moment—which makes me smile.

I give in, knowing that we need to sell our relationship in a way that's never been done with him before. People in Whiskey Falls need to know that I am the true anti-buckle bunny and I'm going to stay around longer than any woman has before.

Not much longer—since the rodeo isn't far away—but longer than any woman has before.

“Well, hello, Cowboy,” I saw hoarsely once he pulls back, still keeping me in his embrace. “What do I owe the surprise?”

“I wanted to see you,” he answers simply, straightening and letting go of my hair, only to take my briefcase from me. “Plus, I told you in the note we were having dinner tonight.”

He opens his truck door and places my briefcase gingerly inside, still holding on to my waist.

I decide to let the command of our dinner date go, not wanting to cause a scene in the middle of the street.

“Thank you for the flowers. They’re beautiful. Plus, they caused a stir in the office. I couldn’t so much as get a glass of water without someone asking me about them.” While at the time I saw it as only adding to the disruption of my day, after that kiss, I welcome them. Even if my mind is screaming at me to stick to my vow. To remember this isn’t real.

My heart? My heart is a traitor.

“You’re welcome,” he answers simply as he helps me up into the truck, tipping his hat to me before closing the door. I take a break as I watch him round the front of his truck. I take the moment alone to calm my breathing.

This isn’t a real date.

He’s just here so people in town see us together.

The words he says to me mean nothing.

I repeat the words in my head over and over as I take in his truck. It’s so overwhelmingly Chance. Everything from the lifted extended truck with the black leather seats to the smoky and spicy scent that fills the cab surrounding me in the big,

sexy man that's climbing in next to me.

My mind goes into overdrive when I'm around him, as if it's in a constant battle with my body and my heart over what I should do. My body feels alive for the first time in my life. He makes me feel things I didn't know I was capable of feeling until our weekend together. He played me like he knew my body inside and out, when we'd never done more than that first kiss together.

At the same time, I can't help but hear the constant ringing in the back of my head that it's not real. That I mean nothing to him. After the rodeo, our time is over and we go back to being alone and acting as if we don't know each other.

But how can I do that? How can I pretend that I don't know the sounds he makes as he thrusts into me, or the way that he holds my body so tight after?

No, I can't get attached, no matter how hard he makes it. I need to place a barrier around my heart, or I'll never make it out in one piece.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“You did it again, you know,” I say as he climbs into the truck.

I know I’m being a brat, picking a fight with him; but he’s actually been nice to me today, but I can’t help it. It’s the only way I know to keep my distance from him.

“Did what?” He shoots me a curious glance as he starts up the truck.

“You didn’t ask me to dinner; you told me we were going and assumed I would just go along for the ride.”

He sighs, taking his sunglasses off and turning toward me in his seat. “Dakota, would you like to go to dinner with me tonight?”

Dammit, the way his blue eyes burrow into me are making me feel everything I’m trying to fight.

“That depends. Where are we going?” I fidget with the hem of my skirt, looking away and avoiding his gaze. I can’t let him assume that he can command me to do something, and I’ll follow blindly. I have rules. Boundaries. Expectations. He needs to respect them if he wants me to hold up my end of the bargain.

“Nothing fancy tonight. I was thinking the Lucky Dog Pub.”

“The Lucky Dog? Really?” Of all the places I expected him to say, that was the last one I was expecting.

“Yeah, why?” He glances at me before pulling into traffic. “It’s Thursday night, and I

heard that's where a lot of the locals go after work. There might be some tourists around, too, since the rodeo starts in a couple of days. Plenty of people to see us out together since the gala was a bust."

Right. This is about being seen.

Of course I was being stupid, thinking that today was about him actually wanting to see me. It's only about appearances. Needing to save the rodeo. Be the perfect, smiling girlfriend.

I cross my arms over my chest and look out the window. Any excitement about spending the evening with Chance is now long gone.

"What's wrong? We can go somewhere else if you want."

"Nope," I answer, not looking at him.

We are quiet for the rest of the short ride, the tension thick around us. When he parks outside of the town's pub, I don't wait for him to get out and open my door. I jump out, praying I don't roll an ankle or fall trying to land on my high heels, slamming the door behind me. I don't bother looking in his direction as I storm up to the large wooden doors.

"What's gotten into you?" he barks as he reaches for me.

"Nothing." I fake a smile. "And lower your voice. We wouldn't want anyone to think we were fighting."

"Are we?" He lowers his voice, just as I requested, and leans into me. An act that somehow makes me madder. "Are we fighting? Because I can't think of a fucking thing I did that would make you act like this. I bought you flowers. Sent the biggest

fucking bouquet Whiskey Falls has to offer last minute and finished up at the ranch early to surprise you for a date. Isn't that what women want?"

"Maybe the women you entertained before, but not me." I pull the large wooden door open and storm inside. Scanning the room quickly, I find an empty booth in the corner and stride over, willing myself to slow down and not look like I'm going to turn and murder Chance.

I might have gotten away with smashing Laughlin's car. I highly doubt I'd get away with assault on the highest profile citizen in town.

"Can you slow down for a fucking minute?" He growls as he slides into the booth across from me. "What the hell was that supposed to mean?"

"It means," I stress, leaning over the table to whisper, "that I'm not someone you spend money on because you want to impress them, or in this case, the people of the town. If you want to impress me, you do things because you want to, not because you feel like you have to."

"Chance!" A small, bubbly blonde bounces over to our table, a pen and paper in her hand. "What are you doing here? Oh! Is this Dakota?"

I glance over at Chance, wishing I could hurt him with a look. If this is another one of his mindless hookups, I'm going to lose it. I'm not going to sit here and have every one of his conquests interrupt one of our 'dates' every time we go out.

"Krissy," he grumbles.

"Talkative as ever, I see," she says with a laugh. "Are you Dakota? You're just as pretty as Trent said you were!"

“Why, thank you,” I answer wearily, not exactly sure who this person is and most importantly, who she is to Chance and who Trent is. “Who is Trent?”

“He said what?” Chance questions, searching for someone across the bar.

“Stand down, lover,” Krissy laughs. “I’m Trent and Wyatt’s sister. My fiancé, Brett, owns the pub and I’m helping since he’s short staffed. We’ve been so busy with the rodeo coming up.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

Ah, Wyatt. I didn't know he had siblings, but now it's all starting to make sense. If Wyatt is as close to Chance as I think he is, it makes sense that his siblings would be close to Chance, too.

“Right. I'll take a beer, then,” Chance says, grabbing a menu from the side table, clearly done with our discussion and abandoning his search for this elusive Trent.

Krissy laughs as she rolls her eyes at him.

I don't know this woman, but I like her. If she can give Chance sass and he just accepts it, she must be a good person. Or he's known her too long to continue fighting it.

“Anything for you?” she asks.

“Red wine, please, Krissy. And it's very nice to meet you.”

“You've got it.” She bounces off, leaving me alone with a very broody Chance.

No longer distracted by someone that might be my new friend, I am reminded of the argument we're having before Krissy came over. Looking at him now, I take pleasure in seeing him look uncomfortable, clearly out of his element. “It's nice to know you aren't this miserable around just me.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.” He doesn't look up from the menu.

“That's your best friend's sister, and you treated her horribly.”

He sighs, looking up. "I've known her my whole life, Dakota. She knows I'm like this. That was me being nice to her."

"Knowing someone your whole life doesn't excuse you from acting like that." I hold my breath for a moment, letting my mind catch up and my heart rate lower. The last thing I want is to cause another scene in public. People are still gossiping about the blowup at the gala and how we disappeared for the rest of the night. After I'm able to calm my face, I continue. "Did you ever think that maybe the reason you're in this situation with the sponsors is because you have a hard time treating people with respect? Namely, women."

"I respect women," he argues, but doesn't sound convincing.

"No, you tolerate them, and then only for as long as they can do something for you." I hold his gaze, noticing the tick in his jaw. I hit a nerve, but I don't care. He needs to hear what I have to say.

He leans back and motions for me to continue with his hand, as if he's now entertained by what I may have observed about him in the short time I've known him.

"You're selfish, cold, and arrogant. You're afraid to get close to anyone because you don't want to get hurt. You put on this asshole persona because then people will leave you alone and not look too closely. But too late, because I have. I see you, Chance."

He stares at me for a moment before leaning in, lowering his voice. "Oh yeah? You think you know me so well?" He spits the words at me through gritted teeth. "And what do you see, Dakota?"

"A sad, lonely man who pushes everyone away because he can't handle letting anyone in. Someone who would rather lose everything than ask for help."

He remains silent, not taking his eyes off me. The tension between us is so thick I'm surprised all the eyes at the bar aren't watching us.

"I asked you, didn't I?" he snarls.

"Only because you had your back against the wall. I bet you would have taken literally any other option if you had one."

"I have been trying," he continues, ignoring my jab. "I've been doing everything the fucking sponsors want, what I thought you wanted, and it's not enough."

"I never asked you for anything after that first night. I never asked for flowers, and I certainly never asked to be treated like one of your buckle bunnies."

"You weren't complaining about being treated like them this weekend," he lowers his voice and stares right at me.

I suck in a breath, the venom in his comment landing right in my heart. Right where I know he intended it to. His eyes are like cold steel as they look into me, his jaw ticking, teeth clenched.

I lean back into the booth, arms crossed as I look away, willing the tears from my eyes. I hate that he brought that up. I hate that he made me feel this way. No matter what is going on between us, I really thought that this weekend was different from the other women. That he meant it that I'm not like them. Now I know it, was all just a lie.

"I shouldn't have said that," he continues, dropping the stoic look on his face.

I sneak a glance over at him. If I knew him, I would have thought that a hint of regret was in his eyes. But that's impossible, because I highly doubt Chance Declan feels

regret.

“Listen, I’ve never bought anyone flowers, or done half the shit I’ve done for you. And I didn’t mean it about the weekend.”

I scan my eyes over the bar, making sure no one is paying attention to us. I don’t want to be having this conversation with him in the middle of The Lucky Dog. I don’t want to be having this conversation with him at all, but here we are, which means that I need to do damage control for anyone that may have seen us arguing.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“Say something,” he grunts. If it were anyone else, it would have been a pleading request, but I know better. From Chance, it’s a command, and one that won’t be ignored.

“And when you said you wanted to see me? Was that a lie, too?”

I don’t know which answer would be better for me. If he lied, I could tuck it away with all the other reasons I have not to trust him, and justify that our time together is just a way for me to give into all the things I’ve never let myself do before.

But if he means it, that will open me up to accepting the feelings that I have for him. The ones that I won’t even truly admit to myself that I have. I’ve been locking them up tight because no good could ever come from letting them surface and acting on them.

I let myself look into his ice blue eyes, unable to read the emotion that currently crosses his face. There was anger originally, maybe some masked indifference, but now there’s something else.

“I don’t do anything I don’t mean, Dakota. You’d be wise to remember that.”

There it is. That emotion that I couldn’t put my finger on. Whatever the unnamed emotion is, is so hot that it sets my body on fire. It can’t be desire. Surely whatever he’s feeling toward me right now couldn’t be that, but whatever it is, it’s hot. It’s sexy. And it’s aimed at me.

Once my brain catches up, I’m left wondering what it means. Does he want to see

me? Spend time with me? Did he actually want to send me flowers and impress me?

Now that the questions are creeping in, unease fills my body. I'm always able to read people, that's my thing. I can tell when a witness is lying on the stand. I can tell when opposing counsel isn't being completely honest. I can tell when someone is just an asshole.

But with Chance right now? I have no clue.

"Here are your drinks!" Krissy says as she approaches the table. "Uh, what did I miss?"

"Nothing," Chance scowls as he grabs his beer from her hand and takes a sip.

"Okaaaay," she says, drawing out her vowels, handing me my glass of wine. "Have we decided on dinner?"

"Burger and fries," Chance grunts. I shoot him a look and he reluctantly adds, "please."

Krissy looks at him, shock written all over her face, staring at him a moment before she brings her attention back to me. "Um, okay. And for you?"

"I'll have the Bacon Caesar Wrap, please, Krissy." I hand her the menu.

"Coming right up." She shoots Chance another questioning look before taking his menu and walking off.

"Do you have to be so rude all the time?" I whisper tersely.

"I said please." He leans back, taking another sip of his beer.

“Not by your own volition.”

We enter into another stare down before he leans forward, placing his beer on the table and wrapping his hand around the glass. “Look, if we are going to make this work, you’re going to have to just put up with this shit for a little while longer. I’m not going to change, so don’t even try.”

“I’m not going to try to change you, Chance. I know full well that once the rodeo is over, I’ll never see you again. It’s not worth my time. I just thought that maybe it would help if you were a better person during the time we had to spend together.”

“Well, stop. I’m not some project for you to take on, got it?”

I feel the anger rise in my body. I know I have to stop. There’s no use wasting my energy fighting with a man that has no desire to change. If he wants to be a washed-up cowboy with no one around to spend time with him, that’s on him. What he does with his life after this blasted rodeo is no longer my concern.

Plus, judging by the glances that are coming our way throughout the room, I’m doing more harm than good just trying.

“Fine. Just try to be less of an asshole to Krissy, got it?”

Not waiting for a response, I pick up my phone and start scrolling aimlessly, acting as if I were looking over an important email when, in fact, I’m trying my best not to cry. I don’t know why I care so much, but I do. It bothers me how horribly he treats those that genuinely care about him, and how much he’s just going to push them away if he keeps acting the way he does.

Taking a steady breath, I realize that it’s a lie, because I do care. I know why I care.

I just wish I didn't.

Chapter Sixteen

Chance

“And here is your food.” Krissy carefully places my plate in front of me before giving Dakota hers.

I’ve suddenly lost my appetite after my fight with Dakota, but I won’t let her know. I can’t let her know how much her attitude is affecting me.

“Thanks,” I mutter before picking up my burger and taking a bite.

Dakota and Krissy exchange some silent glance, that I’m sure uses some girl telepathy thing that I’ll never understand. Instead of trying to figure it out, I pretend I don’t notice and dive into my burger like I haven’t eaten for a month.

Without taking my eyes off my plate, I see Krissy move on to the next table, leaving me alone with Dakota once again.

“Good burger?” she asks, not touching her own food.

“It’s alright,” I mutter between bites.

“The way you’re attacking it, it looks like the best burger you’ve ever had.” The corner of her mouth ticks up, letting me know that she’s teasing.

I relax, letting my shoulders slump as I put down my food. Grabbing the paper napkin from the middle of the table, I take my time wiping my fingers before I formulate a response.

I'm not sure how to handle teasing Dakota. Pissed off Dakota, that's easy. Sassy Dakota, I'll play. Sexy Dakota, hell yeah.

Teasing or flirting Dakota? This is new territory.

"For a pub burger, it's alright. Brett knows what he's doing."

"Brett is..." Dakota trails off.

"Krissy's fiancé and the owner of the pub."

"Gotcha." She looks around the place again, as if seeing it with new eyes. "I don't know why I haven't come here more. I always just seem to end up at The Whiskey Dam. Probably because it's closer to work."

"The Dam is good if you want loud music and a place to forget. The Lucky Dog is more of a local's meeting place." I pick up my beer and take a sip, now even more fascinated with the woman across from me. She's been in Whiskey Falls for years but still acts as if she's brand new.

"I'm beginning to see that." She meets my eyes for a moment—one intense, heat filled moment that takes me by surprise—before she picks up her wrap and takes a bite.

My eyes are drawn to her mouth. Memories of our weekend together race through my mind as I watch her tongue glide over her lips, thinking of the way it ran over my body. I can feel my body reacting to her in such a visceral way that I can't ignore it.

"Wow, you weren't kidding. The food here is good. I'm going to have to bring Addie here some time." She takes another bite, this time closing her eyes as she chews.

She must be doing this to me on purpose. There's no other reason for it. She's eating a chicken wrap, for crying out loud.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asks, snapping my attention away from lust-filled thoughts that I shouldn't be having, especially since last weekend was a one-off and will never be happening again.

I let myself lose control in a way I never had before. Not only did I sleep with her in my bed, but I asked her to stay the whole weekend. I cooked for her. We talked. That's not me. I don't do those things.

"Chance?"

"Huh?" My mind is reeling and my heart sinks as the reality of our situation is coming to light. I'm in too deep with Dakota. Deeper than I ever meant to be. I think I'm starting to develop feelings for her.

I don't do feelings.

"Are you alright?" Genuine concern crosses her face, and she twitches her fingers like she's fighting to reach across the table to touch me.

This is all too much. Everything about her is just too much.

"How's everything going here?" Krissy asks, waltzing up to the table with an empty tray in her hand.

"Just fucking fine," I seethe, standing from the booth, leaving the two women gaping up at me. "Just fucking fine."

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

I storm off, not looking back. I need to get out of here. I need some fresh air before I completely lose my mind or worse, my heart.

“I thought you said you were going to play the game.”

I rest my arms on the fence and lower my head. The headache I’ve been battling since I got up this morning is only getting worse with every step Wyatt takes toward me.

“Nothing to say?” he says sarcastically.

I can feel him standing behind me. I know him so well that I can picture him with his arms crossed, legs in a wide stance, and a scowl on his face.

“I don’t play games, Wyatt.” I take a breath, breathing in the heavy, hot, summer air.

“Then what the fuck happened at The Lucky Dog last night?”

I take a moment before turning around, leaning against the fence and mimicking his stance. “Dakota and I went for dinner.”

“Right, and as I hear it, you left halfway through, leaving her to foot the bill and Krissy to drive her home after you left her stranded.”

“You really shouldn’t listen to the gossip in town.”

“I didn’t need to get it from the town. Krissy is my sister, remember? Who do you think she called to tell me what an asshole my friend is?”

“This isn’t new information,” I grunt.

“Even more so...” He looks off into the distance over my shoulder with a tick in his jaw. “It’s not going to work if you constantly fight with her while in public.”

“She started it.” I regret it as soon as I say it. It is weak and childish, but I can’t help it.

He tilts his head at me, giving me a look that just reaffirms how pathetic my response was. “Look, I can’t tell you what to do...”

“Then don’t.” I cut him off, not wanting to hear it. There isn’t anything Wyatt can say to me that I haven’t thought of myself. No reprimand. No suggestion. Nothing.

He brings his gaze back to mine and relaxes his body. I know he’s just speaking out of concern for both me and the ranch. If we lose the rodeo deal, it’s going to look poorly on the ranch, not just on me. Being a community presence is a huge factor in how we conduct ourselves. It has been for as long as my family has owned this ranch, and I sure as hell won’t be the one to lose that confidence.

“You need to fix it. I’ve heard talk of some of the sponsors not being happy, especially after the fight with Todd. Your antics last night suggest that Dakota won’t put up with you too much longer, and to be honest, I wouldn’t blame her if she pulled the plug on the whole thing.”

“She has shit to lose, too. I’m not holding her against her will.”

“No, but you have a hell of a lot more to lose than she does. The worst case scenario for her is she’s gossiped about for a little while and then people move on. She won’t lose her livelihood because she dumped you and you’re running out of time. The rodeo is next weekend, and the sponsors are still talking about pulling their support.”

I let his words sink in as the early evening heat starts to fade slightly, but not enough to be comfortable. It's adding extra pressure; the sweat from both Wyatt's intervention and the day's heat rolling down my back.

He's right, I know he is. I have more at stake. I need to try harder, not just for my company and to save my own ass, but because Dakota deserves better than how I've been treating her. Hell, I'm beginning to notice that all the women I've been with do, even if they were using me just as much as I used them.

I turn and rest my arms back on the fence, looking out over the pasture. The cows graze the grass, and for once, I find myself envious of them. They don't need to worry about much—not until they're off to fulfill their destiny as beef cattle—but for now, all they need to worry about is eating, drinking, and laying lazily in the sun.

“How do I fix this?” My voice is lower than a whisper. For a moment, I'm not sure if Wyatt even hears me.

I see him come up beside me out of the corner of my eye, resting his dirtied boot on the lower wrung of the fence, his forearms resting next to mine. He follows my lead and looks ahead at the cows.

This time there is no judgement in his voice. No anger. This is when I know that it's my friend that's next to me about to give me advice, not a pissed off ranch manager that's worried about his job.

“First, you need to apologize.”

I curse under my breath and drop my chin to my chest. I know he's right, and I know I'm running out of time.

“You know her better than I do...”

“Barely,” I mutter.

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“But you know that all the shit you would pull with your normal rotation of women doesn’t work with her. She doesn’t want to be wooed.”

“Wooed?” I ask, turning to face him, my eyebrow raised. “Did we travel back in time? I don’t fucking ‘woo’ women.”

“No, and maybe that’s your problem.” He challenges me by standing straight and not looking away. He’s one of the few men that will do that, which always makes me respect him more. I’m sure part of it is knowing each other since we were kids, but mostly because he has more balls than most of the bulls around here.

“I’ve learned she doesn’t want flowers. She doesn’t care about fancy meals.”

“She wants honesty. She wants you to be authentic.”

“No she doesn’t. Or she wouldn’t if she knew what that meant she was getting from me.”

“You aren’t giving yourself enough credit, Chance.” He looks to the side, breaking the tension between us. “I heard talk at the last auction. One that might help you.”

I wait a breath for him to continue, but when he doesn’t, I can’t help but let my snarky tone and sarcasm leak through. “Are you going to share this tidbit with me?”

“I wouldn’t start with that attitude,” he says with a smirk. “You need to make a big gesture. Something that will show everyone that you’re in it for real. You can commit. For the long haul.”

“Even though I’m not,” I say more to myself than Wyatt.

I let his words hang between us. He looks at me expectantly, as if he revealed some sort of big secret that was going to solve all of my problems. I’m not sure what it is exactly he thinks I am going to gain from it.

“What...” But then it hits me.

Commit.

Long haul.

My eyes open wide. “No. No! You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. You can’t seriously be suggesting that.”

“I’m suggesting you apologize to Dakota in a way that she needs you to; get her back on your good side and have a big gesture at the dinner the night before the rodeo starts. Anything else you think of or may have thought I implied is on you.”

The wide smile on his face tells me I inferred exactly what he wanted me to.

“You’re an asshole. You’re enjoying this way too much.”

“That the perpetual playboy is being forced into a fake relationship to save his ass? Yes, I’m enjoying this quite a bit.”

“Fucker.” There isn’t any heat in my words. I know if the roles were reversed, I would be enjoy watching him suffer.

“You know I’m right. Just don’t fuck it up—again.” He claps my shoulder and walks away.

I turn my attention back to the cows, noting that they don't have to worry about impressing anyone. Not in a way that is within their control. Lives don't depend on them. There isn't a town whose economy relies on the rodeo my ranch puts on.

I know what I need to do, but it's the last thing I want to do. I can apologize to Dakota. I can come up with some way to make her come around until the end of the rodeo.

But what the sponsors want me to do? That might be more than I'm willing to offer. More than I can offer.

Even if it's not real.

Because with Dakota, I'm starting to realize that all the feelings that are supposed to be fake, aren't fake at all.

Chapter Seventeen

Dakota

"Ella, have we received the documents for the Bronson file yet?" I can't help but keep the impatience out of my voice as I find her desk in our waiting area. It's not her fault that every file I've touched this week has gone to shit. It's not her fault that the judge that showed up to court for my trial this morning just so happens to be the same one that I always lose against. It's certainly not her fault that I can't seem to keep Chance out of my brain, no matter how hard I try.

So here I am, short with everyone, in a shitty mood, and ready for today to be over.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

Ella finishes what she's typing and looks up at me. "No, Dakota, sorry. Nothing yet. Do you want me to call their office again?" She's hesitant in her answer, and I don't blame her. I've been a down-right bitch to everyone today.

"No, it's okay, thank you. I'm sure they'll send it soon." I try to soften my voice and hide my irritation, even if it takes everything in me.

"Um, Dakota?" Ella asks timidly as I move to walk back to my office, saving her from having to be exposed to my misery any further.

"Yeah?"

"Are you okay? You seem a little—off."

I open my mouth to respond when Mike walks from his office and down the hall, not paying us any attention. Whatever is on his phone screen has him occupied, but it's a good reminder that I can't talk about anything that's bothering me here, out in the open, even if I wanted to. Which, I certainly don't.

But still, I wish I had someone I could confide in. Normally I would tell Addie, but she's far up my ass about how much of a jerk Chance is and that I'm only going to get myself hurt—which is true—but it's stopped me from really opening up to her about how I'm feeling.

That leaves me with no one.

No one but Ella, who's looking up at me with genuine concern in her eyes.

“Um, yeah. It’s been a long day.” I look toward my office, but don’t take a step.

I’m torn. I really don’t want to talk about it, but at the same time, I want that release. I want to unburden myself. Ella’s looking at me as if she could be that person.

“I...uh...” I look back at my office again. “Can I talk to you in my office?”

I don’t bother to look to check that she’s behind me. Instead, I’m scanning the hallways and offices to see who might have overheard us or seen us. Even though we aren’t doing anything suspicious. Ella helps me with cases all the time. Her walking into my office isn’t anything out of the ordinary.

So why do I feel so guilty?

Shutting the door behind us, I stalk to my seat, rubbing my sweaty palms along my thighs as I sit down.

“You’re scaring me, Dakota. What’s going on?” Ella’s voice is thick with worry as she sits across from me, eyes wide.

“I’m going to tell you something, but you need to promise not to tell anyone. Ever.”

“Is this about a case?”

“No, nothing like that.” My eyes drift to the closed door behind her. I know no one can hear me and the frosted glass of the window makes it so no one can see anything but our figures. “Promise me, Ella.”

“I promise.”

Even though I don’t know her that well, I trust her. She’s always been excellent at her

job, and everyone only has great things to say about her. I've never heard her gossip, or say things she shouldn't, which is very important when working in a law office. Most importantly, she's married to one of the hottest country stars in the world right now; that has to come with a level of trust.

"Chance and I aren't really dating." I blurt out.

Sweat drips down my back as I continue rubbing my hands along my legs. I force myself not to start fidgeting or rocking.

"What? But the dates? The flowers?"

"All fake. We're fake dating. For the rodeo."

"The rodeo," she repeats, looking at me as if I have two heads.

"Yeah. Some of the sponsors threatened to pull out because of his playboy status. He saved me from Laughlin. It was an exchange. An agreement. But then it wasn't fake, and we slept together, and now I don't know what we are." I cross my arms on my desk and lower my head, taking deep breaths.

I know what I just unloaded onto Ella doesn't make sense. Well, it wouldn't to her anyway, but it is out there. I said it. Now the burden can just leave, right?

Why didn't the burden just leave?

"Okay. So you're fake dating, but you're not?" she says slowly.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“To Chance we’re fake dating.”

“But to you?”

Pressure builds in my chest at her question. It should be fake dating to me. I shouldn’t have any feelings for Chance what-so-ever. He’s a playboy cowboy with a reputation of burning through women faster than an eight-second ride.

“I don’t know,” I finally blurt out, taking a moment to gather my breath before raising my head to look at her.

Thankfully, I don’t see any judgement on her face. I see the look of a woman who’s genuinely concerned, and a little confused—which, I don’t blame her.

“Can you start from the beginning? How did you get into this?”

So I do. I tell her about running into Chance at the bar, about Laughlin, about everything. Including our weekend together after the gala. I pour out things I haven’t told anyone; things I haven’t even admitted to myself. Like how when he’s not pissing me off, he’s the most handsome man I’ve ever seen. How there are traces of humour in him that I don’t think he lets many people see. I tell her that from what I’ve seen, he’s a really smart businessman and loves his ranch, and his employees—even though he would never admit to that.

“Well, I don’t think there’s any confusion here. You’re in love with him,” Ella says with a smirk.

“No, I can’t be in love with him! We have an end date. This will be over after this weekend and then I’ll never talk to him again.”

“But do you have to?” she asks, watching me.

“If I’m in love with him, I would kind of need to still talk to him, Ella.” My eyebrows draw together, and I can feel the ‘WTF lines’ on my forehead forming.

“No, silly,” she laughs. “Do you have to stop seeing him after this weekend? Have you talked to him about any of this?”

“Talk to him,” I repeat slowly, letting the words roll off of my tongue. “About what?”

She rolls her eyes. “About making this not fake. Really, Dakota, for someone that makes a living arguing you’re really not getting this.”

A new wave of panic courses through my body at the mention of telling any of this to Chance.

I drop my head back to my arms and take another deep breath.

“Dakota?” Ella’s voice is soft and comforting as she places a hand on my shoulder.

I didn’t even hear her get up and move beside me. This isn’t like me. I’m usually so observant. It’s my job. This is just another example of how Chance is making me feel like I’m losing my mind.

“Dakota, what’s really going on? Is there a reason you shouldn’t be in love with Chance?”

“Other than his reputation for being a woman-using manwhore who only cares about

himself?” I ask between breaths.

“But is he really that?” She gives me a moment to answer, but when I don’t, she continues. “The way you just talked about him, I don’t think he is. Or you don’t see him that way, at least.”

Her hand moves to my back and rubs in calming circles, allowing me to breathe slower and deeper.

“No, I don’t see him that way,” I whisper.

“So, what are you going to do about it?”

Her hand drops as I sit up, looking up at her. The corner of her mouth ticks up in a small, reassuring smile. All of a sudden, the pressure on my chest doesn’t feel so heavy anymore. The release of the burden I was seeking finally coming.

She’s not judging me or telling me that I’m going to ruin my life for loving someone like Chance. No, not someone like Chance. I’m in love with Chance Declan.

“I guess I need to talk to him?” I say as more of a question than a statement.

“I think that’s probably a good idea.” Movement on the other side of the glass by my door catches our attention. “Someone’s here. When you do talk to him, just be honest, okay? I might not be the best person to give advice on love since it took Greyson and I years to figure us out, but I do know that once we were honest with each other, things got a whole lot better.” She gives my shoulder a squeeze before crossing my office and gliding through the door.

I take a moment to breathe, pulling out my phone and checking my appearance in the camera app, making sure I don’t look as ragged as I feel; which thankfully, I don’t.

I know what Ella said makes sense. Just like in a case, you can't win if you don't make a good argument, and I know with Chance, any discussion we have about this is going to be an argument.

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

I'm not even sure why I'm entertaining the thought of having this discussion with him. He's made it very clear he doesn't want anything to do with me after the rodeo. That our weekend together was just a one-time thing. If our dinner together at The Lucky Dog was any indication, we probably won't even make it to the end of the weekend.

But I can't help but wonder 'what if?'

What if I tell him that I don't want it to end, and he agrees?

What if I tell him that I love him, and he tells me he loves me too?

What if I pour my heart out to him, and he walks away?

"Uh, Dakota?" Ella pops her head back into my office. "You may have that opportunity a little quicker than you thought."

The door opens wider, and Chance appears behind her, dressed in his standard black button-up and jeans. His beloved black Stetson on his head, looking every inch the sexy cowboy that he is.

"Dakota."

The rumble of his voice sets off such a conflict of emotions inside of me. I feel the rush and elation of hearing him say my name, needing to hear him say it just one more time to know that I didn't make it up. At the same time, the crushing weight of my anxiety is back, knowing that I'm going to need to have this talk with him, and I

want to do anything humanly possible to avoid it.

“I’ll, uh, leave you to it then.” Ella mouths ‘good luck’ to me before moving out of the way, leaving Chance standing there in all his cowboy glory.

Chance gives Ella a nod before crossing the threshold into my office and closing the door behind him.

I use the moment to gather my thoughts. I start to shuffle papers around on my desk before me, acting as if I have any control over the situation when I, in fact, do not.

I need to act as if I’m cool and collected, not that I didn’t just have a breakdown in my office moments before. I need to pretend that the way he strides across my office isn’t setting my body on fire. How the way his blue eyes run over my face and chest, like he knows every inch of skin he sees. I need my body to stop reacting as he comes over to me, leaning against my desk and brushes the tips of his fingers across my cheek before lifting my chin up so my eyes meet his.

“Hi,” he says softly.

“Hi,” I breathe.

My gut instinct is to turn away from him. I should pull back, yank my face from his grasp, and ask him how he dares to show up and act like he has a right to be in my office after the way he treated me the other night.

But I can’t, because my body betrays me, and I can’t do anything but sit still and look at him.

“I should have called.”

“Yes, you should have.”

The stubble on his chin is longer than his normal, and if I’m not mistaken, there are bags under his eyes that aren’t normally there. I would like to think his behaviour the other night caused him to lose as much sleep as I have, but I doubt it. I doubt anything woman-related would cause the Chance Declan to lose a minute of shut-eye.

“I’m sorry.”

“What?” I pull back, pushing my chair to roll some space between us.

Of all the words that were about to come out of his mouth, that wasn’t any of them I expected.

“I’m sorry I left you the other night. That was wrong of me. I should have driven you back to your car.”

“That’s a start,” I say crossing my arms over my chest. “You absolutely shouldn’t have left me stranded at a bar when you were the one to pick me up.”

“You’re right. That was an asshole move. I deserve to be on your asshole-o-meter.”

I narrow my eyes at him. He’s showing up here, acting sweet, agreeing with me, and remembering the made up name I use for gauge jerks.

“You want something.”

He crosses his arms over his chest, mimicking my stance, but somehow looks resigned at the same time.

“Spit it out, Declan.” I grit out, bracing for what he’s about to ask—or demand, since

I know Chance Declan doesn't ask for anything.

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“Wyatt overheard some of the sponsors talking. We’re not doing a good job of convincing them.”

“No shit.” My tone is laced with my impatience. I’m waiting for him to spit out what he came here to ask for.

I can’t believe I was just contemplating spilling my heart to him. The man in front of me that looks sexy as sin and gives no regard for anyone other than himself. He’s not here because he hurt me and left me in the pub. No, he’s here because he still needs me to save his rodeo.

“The rodeo is this weekend. Hasn’t all the money from the sponsors been given?” I ask, keeping my arms crossed and holding my sides tighter. Maybe if I hold them tight enough, they’ll act like a shield for whatever is about to happen.

“Yes, but they’re saying that this will be the last year. That they won’t be doing it again if I’m still going to be running the ranch.”

“So, find new sponsors.”

“It’s not that simple, Dakota.” He pushes himself off my desk, throwing his arms to the side as he starts to pace. “Whiskey Falls is a small town nowhere near a city. We rely on each other here.”

“You asked me to get you through this year, Chance. I’m not sure what you want me to do about next year.”

Considering we won't be together then, I add mentally.

"That's why I'm here. Wyatt came up with a plan."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"He, uh..." Chance stops and starts to rub the back of his neck. He looks uncomfortable, like for the first time he's had his iron-clad confidence shaken, which makes me all the more interested to find out what it is that Wyatt suggested to him.

"We need something big at the dinner tomorrow. Something that will really convince them that I'm not the man they think I am."

"Even though you really are," I mutter under my breath. "So, what did you come up with? A big kiss where you dip me backwards and make a show of how 'in love we are?'" I use air quotes and roll my eyes, ignoring the stabbing feeling in my heart because no matter how much I don't want it to, him being here is affecting me in a way that I have no right feeling. "A grand entrance? Do you want me to hang off your every word?"

He stops his pacing and drops his arm, looking at me. His ice blue eyes are intense and heated, making it as if all the air had been sucked out of the room. "I need to propose, and you need to accept."

I can't move. The pain in my chest increases ten-fold as I stare into his eyes, waiting for him to tell me this is some crazy joke. That he didn't just suggest that we not only pretend to be fake-dating, but that we also get fake-engaged. In public. In front of all the rodeo sponsors, contestants, and media.

But he's not laughing.

“Say something,” he demands, putting his hands down on my desk, leaning over it.

He’s not eye-level with me, and I can’t help but notice the way his shirt stretches across his broad shoulders, or how intense his bright blue eyes are against the black of his cowboy hat. His tanned skin almost shimmers in the light streaming from the window behind me.

If he weren’t such an asshole, he’d be beautiful.

“Well, Dakota?”

I lick my lips, and take pleasure in the way his eyes dart, following the movement of my tongue. When his gaze returns to mine, I know here’s a hidden passion there he doesn’t want me to know about, but it’s too late.

It’s also too bad that the more I spend time with him, the more I realize I need to train myself not to care.

“Sure, Chance. Whatever you say.” I tick up the corner of my mouth. “Over my dead body.”

Chapter Eighteen

Chance

“Over my dead body.”

Dakota’s words ring through my mind as I stare at her. Her sexy lips are tipped up in a smirk, daring me to challenge after her words.

“Dakota,” I warn, more out of her egging me on than her not agreeing to go along

with Wyatt's stupid plan. Because that's what it is. If it weren't for the fact that I am completely desperate to save this rodeo, I wouldn't have even suggested it. Hell, if it wasn't for Wyatt, I would have told the sponsors to fuck off a long time ago, but unfortunately, he's right.

Which makes me hate it even more.

Page 48

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“I’m not going to let you fake propose to me, Chance.”

“Why not? It’s not like it’s real? I’ll propose, you’ll accept, and then we will still quietly end everything after the rodeo. Just like we already planned.”

Her face pales and the smirk leaves her face. Her eyes dart quickly from mine, leaving an uncomfortable tension.

“Dakota?”

“I said no, Chance.” The finality in her voice makes me pause. She’s no longer playful or challenging. This is her no-shit court voice. The one she hasn’t used on me since the first night in my kitchen.

I straighten, looking down at her as she goes back to tapping the same pile of papers against her desk for the second time since I walked into her office. “What’s really going on here?”

“Nothing,” she says, trying to remain casual, but I know better. She’s trying too hard not to make eye contact with me. Her body is too rigid. She may not think that I’m aware of the change in her, but I am. I know every inch of her body. I know the way she carries herself when she’s giving me sass. The way her body relaxes when she’s on the couch with a glass of wine. The Dakota in front of me isn’t any of those.

“Sweetheart,” I growl, hoping to coax her out of whatever funk she’s worked herself into.

“Don’t call me that,” she snaps, finally rewarding me with laying her green eyes on me.

That was not the reaction I was expecting.

“Talk to me, darling.” I change my tactic, using the nickname she prefers to use on me, even if it’s used sarcastically when she does.

I might be an asshole, but I can’t stop doing what gets a response out of her. This indifferent shit is getting on my nerves, and anything to do with ‘us’ right now seems to be doing just that.

She closes her eyes tight, almost as if she’s willing me to disappear.

But I won’t.

I can’t.

I can’t leave her like this—not knowing what’s going on with her. Yes, it is a dumbass idea to suggest proposing to her, but it’s really the only way out of this hellhole I’ve found myself in.

I silently make my way around the desk and crouch down beside her, stroking the hair away from her face and tucking it behind her ear. Her face tightens, and I wonder if she’s trying not to cry. But that doesn’t make sense. Dakota doesn’t cry, and especially over something like this.

“You need to leave,” she whispers in a shaky voice.

“Dakota...”

“Please, Chance?”

She keeps her eyes closed, and there’s something in her voice that makes me not want to push her any further.

I run my hand through her hair, feeling her soft strands as I stand.

Without thinking, I lean down and kiss her on her head, taking a moment to breathe her in. She smells like coconut and sunshine, and I want nothing more than to spend the rest of the day with her in my arms, smelling what is uniquely Dakota all day, but I can’t.

With one last breath, I leave her. If I’m not mistaken, she lets out a shuttering, unsteady breath as I close her office door behind me, putting what feels like yet another barrier between us.

“I fucking hate these things,” I can’t help but grumble to no one, pulling at my bolo tie and fidgeting with the sleeves on my dress jacket.

I feel like I’m suffocating. Like I haven’t been able to take a full breath all night. Not since Dakota texted me just before I left to pick her up that she would be finding her own way to the rodeo kick off dinner.

Pulling my phone out again, I open her texts, checking for what feels like the millionth time to see if she’s sent an update, which she hasn’t. Instead, I’m left looking at my unanswered messages from earlier.

Don’t bother picking me up tonight. I’ll find my own way there.

I’m just about to leave to come get you.

Don't bother. I wouldn't want to be stranded again.

Page 49

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

You need to let that go. I've said sorry.

Dakota, you're still going to show, right?

Dakota, answer me!

I'll admit, part of me is worried that she's going to stand me up. I'm sure I deserve it, even though I don't know what I could have done that would have set her off so badly. Other than suggesting the proposal, I can't think of anything else that would have done it.

This is why I don't do relationships. I don't need all the bullshit that comes with trying to read minds and predict moods. She agreed to be here; she should be here. But instead, the dinner is about to start and she's nowhere to be seen.

"Declan," Beau Campbell nods as he stands beside me, overlooking the room.

"Campbell," I respond, tipping my hat to him.

A little shorter than me and about twenty years older, he's been the biggest help to me since I took over the ranch for my dad. They had a mutual respect for each other that lasted past my dad's death and included taking me under his wing for the first few months when I was struggling. I respect the man, and there's not too many people I can say that about.

"I haven't seen that pretty girlfriend of yours tonight. You haven't scared her off, have you?" He takes a sip of his whiskey, acting as if he doesn't care, but I know he

wouldn't bring it up if he didn't.

“She’s running late. Something about a case at work.” I take a sip of my own whiskey, hating that I’m lying to him, but not knowing what else to say. That maybe I did scare her off? There’s a chance she is going to stand me up? That this is all fake just so men like him won’t let my rodeo, and my town, drown?

“That’s good. You know I’m on your side, and I’ve fought for you with the other sponsors, but there’s only so much I can do.” The older man starts before turning toward me. “Now you know I don’t give a shit what you do in your free time as long as you get your work done—which you do—but the others...they need more from you.”

“Beau...” I start, but he cuts me off.

“I know, I know. Right or wrong, it’s what it is. Now be honest with me, son. Is what you have with this lawyer real?”

I hold his gaze, but don’t say anything. I can’t say anything. My mind shouts to say yes just to placate him and everyone else, but I have this feeling that I can’t shake that it’s no longer the lie it once was. I just don’t know if it’s how Dakota feels.

“Right. Well, whatever is going on, I suggest you get it figured out, and quickly.”

Beau downs the rest of his whiskey, places his empty glass on the table next to me, and stalks off with nothing more than the tip of his hat.

I turn my back to the room and lean on the table next to me, needing a moment to figure my shit out. What happens if Dakota does stand me up? How will I smooth it over with everyone here?

Normally, I wouldn't care. I would tell them to take their opinions and shove it, but it's more than just my reputation on the line. I hate the position I'm in. I hate that I've had to rely on someone to get me out of it, especially someone like Dakota, who seems to do whatever the hell she wants, when she wants.

The thrill of that would normally excite me. Tonight? Not so much. It would be a lot easier if it were some puck bunny on my arm that would be happy just to be out and seen with me. But not Dakota. She's an enigma that I don't know how to solve.

"She's cutting it pretty close," Wyatt says as he comes up behind me, leaning against the table.

"Yup," I answer, not knowing what else to say.

"Any word from her?"

"Nope." I down the last of my drink, letting the burn of the whiskey leave its fiery trail down my throat.

"Chance..."

"Don't!" I say louder than I should, knowing I am drawing the attention of the people around us. But you know what? Fuck it. They're going to find out soon enough that I can't even keep a fake relationship going long enough to count. "I don't need it from you. You're the reason I'm in this mess in the first place."

"I'm going to let that fly because you're under pressure, but we both know that's not true. I'm just the one that came up with the plan to get you out of your own mess."

"A mess that isn't anyone's business but my own," I growl.

“That might be true, but it is what it is. Now, what are you going to do to make sure Dakota shows up?”

I scoff. “You haven’t figured out by now that Dakota does what she wants? You can’t make that woman do anything.”

“Trouble in paradise?”

Page 50

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

A familiar smug voice sounds from behind me, making me wish I hadn't just finished off my drink. If this asshole's here, I'm going to need a lot more alcohol.

"I'm surprised they let you in here," Wyatt says casually, but I know better. He's on alert and faking indifference.

I turn to find the jerk smirking at me. My hand clenches, longing to repay him for the blow he dealt me at the gala. The only thing that stops me is where we are, and the fact his sister is at his side.

The pretty redhead narrows her green eyes at Wyatt, who clenches his jaw and looks everywhere but her.

What the fuck is that about?

"Nothing to say, Declan?" Todd takes a drink of his beer, clearly trying to provoke me.

"Nothing to say, Todd. She's just running late. She'll be here."

She'd better be.

"Are you sure she didn't dump your ass? She's too good for you, anyway."

"Now what would you know about that?" Dakota's sweet voice rings out beside me, her hand squeezing my shoulder.

Relief washes through me, having her by my side. I know the sweetness she's exuding right now is just for show, but I'll take what I can get right now.

"Ah, there she is. We were thinking that maybe you weren't going to show up," Todd says.

Abby, Todd's sister, is being surprisingly quiet, following the discussion with her eyes like a tennis match. I look to Wyatt, who's still acting uninterested, but I know he's paying close attention to everything, and everyone, in our little group.

"And miss the kick off dinner? Absolutely not." Dakota's smile is a little too wide, her voice a little too high pitched. "I was caught up at work, that's all." She flicks me a little look confirming that's what I'd been telling everyone.

I take her hand from my shoulder and rest it in the crook of my arm, giving it a reassuring squeeze to let her know she guessed right.

"Well, then it's a good thing you're here. We wouldn't want the talk of the town to be true about you two."

"And what talk would that be?" Here we go again with the sickly-sweet voice. I inwardly cringe at the sound.

For the first time since all of this started, I feel bad for dragging her into this. I now see how much I'm asking of her, how much she's potentially at risk of losing for being labelled just another one of my 'buckle bunnies.'

"Oh, you know. That what you two have isn't real, or that it's over already. We all know that Declan here can't keep a woman around to save his life, so the fact you've lasted this long is nothing short of a miracle."

Abby's eyes go wide, but she doesn't say anything. Instead, her gaze darts to Wyatt, who continues to act as if the wall across the room is the most interesting thing in the world while threatening to break his teeth with how hard he's clenching.

"Well, that's just silly; I'm obviously still here," Dakota jokes, tightening her hand on my arm. "Isn't that right, darling?"

"Yup," I grind out. Her nails digging into my arm tells me I should add more, so I give a tight smile and add, "Sweetheart."

"You know, I'm surprised to see you here, Todd, after what happened at the gala," Dakota croons in that fake voice of hers. "You know, Chance here is more forgiving than I would have been seeing as how you assaulted him on his own property and he certainly had a right to sue after you ruined what was a very successful fundraising event, but he's just too kind hearted, isn't that right, babe?" She gives me a look that tells me I need to play along, even though I don't know what the hell she is talking about, but she continues anyway. "It took the rest of the night after getting him cleaned up to calm me down and convince me not to get the authorities involved. Isn't that right?"

"Uh, yeah." I answer shakily, sneaking a glance at Todd to make sure he is buying it. "All me."

"Then he had enough forgiveness to let you in here and you still think that he's such a horrible person that he would fake us being in love?"

Wait, love? What?

"Well, you know, I'm just saying what the other sponsors are thinking," Todd stammers, thankfully buying what Dakota is saying.

Anyone who really knows me wouldn't buy this shit, but thankfully Todd's either too stupid or too much of a coward to challenge her.

“Well, then I suggest you leave the gossip alone then, hmm?” She slips her arm further around mine, coiling her hand around my bicep like a snake, holding tight. “Now, why don't we leave this alone for tonight and enjoy the dinner? I think we should find our tables before the food comes.”

Without another word, she leads me off away from them with her head held high.

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“What the fuck was that?” I whisper as we make our way through the crowd.

“That’s called saving your ass. Now sit down and make it through dinner like a good boy, hmm?” She looks up at me and gives me a fake smile. The smile I hate. The one that makes me want to kiss it off of her until she gives me a genuine one. One that I know I put on her face. Only me.

I do what she says and sit at our table, which so happens to be front and centre with the stage. I do what she tells me—for once—and make polite conversation and play the part of the doting boyfriend. I eat my dinner and smile when I am supposed to.

It is all boring as hell.

At least the steak is decent.

Throwing the white linen napkin on the table in front of me, I lean back and drape my arm across the back of Dakota’s chair, trailing my fingertips along her exposed arm. I smile when I feel the goosebumps erupt under my touch.

I didn’t notice it earlier when she walked up, thanks to my run in with Todd, but Dakota looks absolutely incredible tonight. Her deep purple dress is sleeveless and has a deep V. Glancing over, I have a perfect view of her breasts, and I immediately miss feeling the weight of them in my hands. Which makes me think of having her in my bed.

I lean over to whisper in her ear that we should get out of here and start our own party when Bryce McKinnon, owner of the local dairy farm, pipes up. “I’ll admit, Declan, I

didn't believe it when I heard you found yourself an actual girlfriend, let alone one you could keep," he says with a laugh, making the rest of the table follow.

I clench my teeth, biting down the automatic response to tell him to fuck off, but instead, I take a breath before answering,

She grips my thigh under the table and holds tight, making me realize I'm doing the same to her arm. I heed her warning not to react right away. I should be worried that she reads me so well, but I'm too busy trying not to reach across the table and punch the guy.

"I don't know why everyone is so shocked," Dakota says sweetly, not taking her hand from my thigh.

"This guy here?" Bennett Smith says, taking a sip of his whiskey. He's here representing the local steakhouse, who also catered the event, but it's making me regret having the contract with the company and letting them have anything to do with the rodeo. "He doesn't know how to commit, do you Chance? My money is on Dakota leaving you before the end of the rodeo. No way she's going to outlast the season."

Anger ranges within me as I look around the table, seeing the laughing faces at my expense. What they're saying may be true, but that doesn't mean I don't want to punch every one of their smug faces for bringing it up in front of Dakota.

"Dance with me," she says, giving my leg a squeeze.

I turn to her, raising my eyebrow.

"Dance with me, Chance." She stands, giving me a full view of her dress. The front is short, rising mid-thigh while the back trails low to her ankles, showing off her long,

toned legs.

My brain immediately forgets what I'm angry about. Instead, all I can think of is the way those legs felt wrapped around my hips. The feel of her skin as I trailed my hand up from her ankles, memorizing the feel of every inch of her.

I'm snapped out of my memory when Dakota's breasts fill my vision and her hands run through my hair. She lowers her head, her luscious, red-stained lips whispering in my ear. "Get up, now."

Yes ma'am.

Chapter Nineteen

Dakota

I lace my fingers through Chance's as I lead him toward the empty dance floor. Dinner hasn't technically finished, but I need to get him away from the table, and dancing is the only thing I can think of. The hired DJ thankfully sees us as we make our way, and Brett Eldredge's smooth voice comes over the speakers with his song 'Wanna Be That Song.'

"What are you doing, sweetheart?" Chance growls in my ear as he slips his hand around my waist and pulls me close.

"I'm getting you away from those snakes. You don't need to listen to their bullshit."

"They're not wrong," he whispers, and I wonder if he meant for that to be spoken out loud. He places his head against mine as we start swaying to the music.

I stay quiet for a moment, not wanting to ruin the moment of peace that has fallen

between us, but also for the moment, Chance seems to be calming as he leans on me. I might be mad at him and his arrogant attitude, but how he's being treated tonight isn't fair. He shouldn't be judged how he is as a businessman just by his dating history. Anyone who has come into contact with him can see that he's successful at what he does, and he should be judged based on that.

But sadly, that's not the world we live in.

For whatever reason, it's important to them that he also be a family man. They need to see that he can settle down and he can commit, even if the ones throwing insults at him don't deserve Chance's loyalty or attention. For the first time, I'm truly seeing the pressure that he's under, and it makes me feel for him even more. I can't imagine being told that I can't get a promotion or work on a case because I'm not married with a family. Yes, there are issues that I face as a woman in the courtroom, but nothing like this.

Playing with the hair at the base of his head under his hat, I take a breath in. He smells of the woods and sunshine, and I close my eyes, wishing that this could be real. This big brute may piss me off in ways I didn't know a person could, but I still want him to be my brute, even if it's only for a short period of time.

"Chance?" I breathe, feeling the rising pressure in my stomach. I can't believe I'm about to suggest what I am, but it needs to be done. Not just for the rodeo, but for Chance.

Page 52

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“Hmmm?” He grips me tighter, and I feel my body press even more against his hard one.

I continue playing with the strands of his hair, loving the privacy wall his hat gives us as he keeps his head pressed to mine.

“I think you need to do it.”

“Do what, love?” The dreamy tone in his voice tells me he’s just as wrapped up in our dance as I am. My body is lax in his and if I close my eyes, I can almost imagine we aren’t dancing in front of a room full of people. People that can determine the fate of his ranch and potentially affect the success of the town should it lose the rodeo all together.

My heart flutters at the use of his word ‘love.’ I know he doesn’t mean it in a way that he loves me. That’s impossible. But that doesn’t stop the way my body reacts to it, or the way my heart wants to believe that it’s true.

“You need to propose. Tonight. Right now.”

His body shoots up as he looks down at me. The curtain of our privacy is gone. I can now see how everyone is looking at us, whether they are openly gawking or trying to be discreet.

“You said no.”

“And now I’m saying yes. You need to, Chance.” I sneak a glance at our table,

finding everyone watching us with smug faces. Everyone but Wyatt, who's sending a death glare to Abby, who in turn, is acting as if her nails are the most important thing in the world.

I'm going to have to find out about that later. I can only put out one fire at a time.

"Did you get a ring?" I whisper, reaching up to continue playing with his hair.

His shoulders drop and the tick in his jaw lessens, telling me this is the surefire way to get him to start to relax.

He flicks a glance over my shoulder and nods.

I lift my free hand and cup his cheek, bringing his gaze back to mine. I stroke my thumb along his skin, feeling the rough stubble along his jaw. "What's one more lie, right?" I ask with a weak smile.

My heart breaks as I ask that, as I know I don't want it to be a lie. If Chance were to get down on one knee and propose to me, I would want it to be for real. But that's not the reality we're in right now. I have to take what I can get, and that's what's best for the town and the ranch.

He stares into my eyes for another moment. The ice blue eyes that used to remind me of everything cold and hard now fill me with hope that maybe, just maybe, we can pull this off. The longer we stand here in our own little world, the song changing to Morgan Wallen's 'Dying Man' as we continue to sway in each other's arms.

"I've asked too much of you, Dakota. I can't ask you to do this."

I can hear defeat in his voice, and I hate it. I hate all of this.

“You didn’t ask for anything I wasn’t willing to give, Chance. Yes, I may not have liked how you did things, but I wouldn’t have gone along with it if I didn’t want to.” I continue to stroke my thumb along his jaw, feeling the tension wash away with every swipe. “Ask me Chance, I’ll say yes. Even if you present me with the most hideously ugly ring I’ve ever seen.” I smile and breathe a sigh of relief when he returns it with his own.

His hand trails up my side and over my shoulder, resting on my cheek. We stand still, embracing and looking into each other’s eyes. To the rest of the room, we must look like a couple very much in love, sharing an intimate moment that they are just privy to, and that’s what we want to them to believe. In reality, we’re just working out an amendment to our agreement. And addendum that we are negotiating wordlessly.

Chance leans in and kisses my forehead while whispering, “Are you sure about this, sweetheart?”

“As sure as I’m going to be,” I answer, closing my eyes and holding on to him.

Everything is going to change in a moment. I’ll no longer be his fake girlfriend; I’ll be his fake fiancée.

Addie’s going to kill me.

After another couple of breaths, he nods and pulls a box out of his jeans pocket and drops to his knee. Holding my hand, he looks up at me with hesitation as the whole room collectively gasps. The music lowers and the murmurs start.

“Dakota...” he starts. He swallows, and my eyes are drawn to the movement of his Adam’s apple. His palm goes sweaty in mine, and I can’t help but feel bad for him. This is so out of his comfort zone and I’m sure that it goes against everything he’s ever believed about himself in relationships.

“Breathe, Chance,” I say with a reassuring smile, giving his hand a squeeze.

He takes a breath and gives me a weak smile. He clears his throat before continuing.

“Dakota. You know I’m bad at these things, but...will you marry me?”

He opens the box to a vintage looking ring. It has a marquise diamond set on a gold band, surrounded by smaller channel diamonds.

“Chance,” I say, stunned. The ring is gorgeous, and nothing like what I thought it would be. I look from the ring to him, seeing the hesitation, and if I guessed, fear, in his face. “Yes, Chance. I’ll marry you.”

Page 53

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

He slides the ring on my finger and stands, pulling me into a hug, burying his face in my shoulder.

“Bet you never thought you’d say those words,” I joke quietly as the room erupts into claps and stunned cheers.

“No,” he responds with a weak laugh. “I had sworn off those words from every coming out of my mouth.”

I pull back and look up at him with a wide smile. “Welcome to engaged life, Mr. Declan.”

“Same to you, Ms. Myers.”

“Don’t you mean soon-to-be Mrs. Declan,” the man from the steakhouse says from our side. His name escapes me, but I’ll never forget how everything he said to Chance tonight was said with a snide or sarcastic comment. “You know, seeing you on one knee wasn’t something I ever thought I’d see or hear about, Chance. I have to say, if I didn’t see it with my own eyes, I’d never believe it.”

“Well, believe it, Bennett,” Chance grits between his teeth as he slips an arm around my waist and pulls me to his side.

“I think what you meant to say is congratulations. I’m so happy for you,” I say with the widest smile I can muster, when really all I want to do is punch this guy in the balls for talking to Chance like that.

“Yes, of course. Congratulations to you both,” he replies with a slimy smile and a tone filled with anything but true happiness.

For our fake engagement.

“If you don’t mind, I would like to celebrate with a drink,” Chance says gruffly, pulling me away.

He doesn’t give Bennett a chance to answer, instead just makes a straight line for the bar at the back of the room. Or, as much as we can with being stopped every foot by another person offering us congratulations and well wishes. There were even a few marriage tips thrown in from some of the older women, which I would appreciate if we were actually going to make it down the aisle.

He signals to the bartender to get a double shot of whiskey and a red wine for me, which he remembers to do all on his own this time. He stands with his back to the wall, assessing the crowd while pulling me in close. I’m sure we look like a happy couple sharing a moment after a big event, but I know that Chance needs this to regroup.

I wrap my arms around him and place my head on his chest, listening to the quickening beat of his heart. His hand is splayed wide across my lower back as he holds me close, no doubt keeping a close eye on when his drink will be coming.

My instinct is to crack a joke and lessen some of the tension, but I know it would be too much for him right now. He just put himself out there in a way he never would have normally. Even if he were to find a woman that he could think about spending forever with, there’s no way Chance would have proposed in such a public setting. Nothing about him has ever given the impression that he’s comfortable with any of the celebrity status he’s been given around Whiskey Falls. This leads to a whole new level of resentment for everyone in the room. They’re the ones that pushed him to do

this, all because they believe in some bullshit theory that he needs to be married in order to successfully run a rodeo.

Well you know what? Fuck them.

I hold him tighter to me, wishing I could take it all away. I push aside my own feelings toward him, whatever that might be as they seem to change daily and grasp him tight like it will help me protect him in some way.

By the time our drinks come, I vow to make sure that these people will never judge Chance by some bullshit standards ever again, even if it means I'll lose him forever.

Chapter Twenty

Chance

“Are you ready for this?” Wyatt asks at my side, looking over the grandstands.

“As ready as I'm going to be.” I look down from our suite high above the stands, wishing I was anywhere but here.

The turn out for the Whiskey Falls Rodeo has been the best yet. People have come in from all over the area to see the best riders Canada and the US have to offer. Opening day's attendance last night was the highest we've ever had, and Dakota and I were able to pull off the image of two happy people that just got engaged. It killed me to don a smile and accept their congratulations, knowing it was all a lie and done just to make them feel better. But for the betterment of the community, I shut my mouth and let Dakota do the talking.

“You could look a little happier. It's a great turn out.”

“Yup.” I take a sip of my coffee, wishing there was whiskey in it.

“Today’s numbers are looking like it might beat last year’s as well. Probably because Wallace is performing tonight, but whatever brings them in, right?”

Greyson Wallace. Whiskey Falls’ golden boy.

I haven’t seen him since we were teenagers, but the asshole always had a way of making luck fall on his side. First with his ability to get out of this small town and make it in Nashville, then the way he bounced back after his PR nightmare. I heard about his fall from grace last year, and how he was able to make a comeback.

I need a little bit of that luck right now.

“Yup,” I answer again, not taking my eyes off the crowd below.

Page 54

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

We stand there silently for a moment. I know Wyatt wants to say more, but he knows me well enough to know when to keep his mouth shut. This is one of those times.

Or so I thought.

“Listen...” Wyatt starts.

“Don’t,” I interrupt, turning to him. We aren’t alone in the suite. Sponsors and their families mill about, excitedly watching the barrel racing taking place below.

“You don’t even know what I’m going to say,” he pushes, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Don’t need to. I already know I’m not going to like it.”

“And here I thought engaged life would cheer you up a bit.” He smirks.

“Fuck you,” I say under my breath, causing Wyatt to chuckle.

“Where is your blushing bride, anyway? I thought for sure you would show up together after you left so quickly last night.”

What I want to do is punch him for how much enjoyment he’s getting out of my situation.

I thought Dakota and I had taken a turn last night during the first round of competitions. She’d hung off my arm and mingled with everyone. She’d sent me

looks across the room that had my blood pulsing through my body and wanting to push her into the closest empty room. When she suggested we leave right after the last rider had gone, I thought for sure we were going to have another night like we had shared all those weeks ago at the gala.

But no, once we were in the car she wouldn't look at me or touch me, and insisted she be driven home. I haven't heard a word from her since.

"She had some work to do before coming in today," I answer, hating that I'm lying to Wyatt, but not really having another option.

"Right." He scans the room again before elbowing me in the arm and nodding toward someone that's approaching. "Buckle up."

I turn to find Greyson Wallace walking toward me with a woman on his arm. I knew he had married someone from town, but it was a bit of a shock seeing Ella from Dakota's office next to him. The beautiful blonde smiles as she looks up at her husband, her hand tucked into the crook of his elbow.

I wonder if that's how people see Dakota and I. Do they think she looks up at me with stars in her eyes, like we really were in love?

"Chance, you remember Greyson," Wyatt says, reaching out and shaking the man's hand.

Greyson nods at Wyatt, releasing his hand and turning to Chance. "It's been a while, Declan. Good to see you."

I take his outstretched hand in mine and tip my hat before turning to Ella. "I didn't realize this was your husband."

“I didn’t realize there was anyone in town that didn’t know,” Ella laughs. Her bright smile makes me wish that Dakota had the same one when people congratulated her on our engagement, not the fake placating one that she wears like a mask.

“Chance here never keeps up with the gossip in town,” Wyatt adds.

“I leave that for you,” I grit out, searching the room again.

I’ve never longed to have a woman on my arm at these events. When I did have them, they were more like an accessory. I know I’m an asshole for thinking that way, but it’s true. But not with Dakota. With her, I actually want her at my side. I want to have her as part of my conversations. I want to show her off when I have to be in public, but also have her all to myself when we’re alone.

I want her in my bed.

I want her in my life.

And that scares the fucking hell out of me.

“Thank you again for letting me play here tonight. It’s nice to have a show here in town.” Greyson looks down at Ella with the same starry eyes she’s giving him.

“No problem.”

“There you are,” Dakota’s warm voice washes over me as she takes my arm and mimics Ella. “It’s so good to see you! I’m glad you guys made it.”

“Thank you for making this happen, Dakota. We’re both so happy that Greyson gets to do this.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“Yes, thank you. It wouldn’t have happened without you,” Greyson adds.

“What?” I ask, looking down at her.

“It was nothing.” Dakota waves it off with her free hand.

“Nothing short of a miracle,” Wyatt adds. “The sponsors didn’t want anything to do with Wallace here either after what happened last year.”

“But then Dakota called them all personally and told her how much he’s changed and wants to be a part of the community,” Ella adds proudly.

“You did?” I ask. I know my eyes are wide with disbelief as I look down at her.

“Really, it was nothing.” There’s a pink to her cheeks that looks so adorable right now; I can’t take my eyes off her.

She looks away with the corner of her mouth ticked up in a shy smile and it’s then I know that I’ll do absolutely anything for her. For this woman who signed up for all my bullshit when she really didn’t have to. For the one that took the initiative to make sure Greyson was given a second chance in the community when she had nothing to gain from it other than being a good friend to Ella.

For the one that has risked everything to save me.

Now I know I’ve been doing this all wrong. Everything. The way I run my ranch and my life. Thinking that I never needed anyone at my side to do all of this with. Maybe

that was because I never knew anyone like Dakota before. Someone who could challenge me while also turning me on more than anyone I'd ever met before. Maybe it was because I've always had my head so far up my ass that I've never even bothered to look.

When I look at Ella and Greyson now, I realize I want that, but I only want it with Dakota.

"Sorry, do you mind if I steal Dakota for a second?" I ask, not waiting for a reply.

I cover her hand with mine on my arm and lead her out of the suite. She smiles but I can see the million questions racing through her mind as her eyes meet mine.

Pulling us around the corner into a deserted hallway, I back her up against the wall and press my body to hers.

"Chance, what...?"

I don't let her finish her question. I lift my hand and cup her cheek before crashing my lips to hers. She clutches at my shirt, going back and forth between pushing me away and pulling me closer until she finally gives in and melts into me.

I push her further into the wall, letting my hands roam over her body and into her hair. I grind my hips into her, letting her know what she does to me. What she's always done to me.

"Chance, we can't..."

"Yes, we can," I answer, trailing kisses down her neck.

She slides her hands around my neck, playing with the hair there. She's the only one

that's ever done that, and it's such a fucking turn on. Her having her hands on me at all does things to me I didn't know were possible.

But here she is, doing the impossible every day. Like making me want things I never thought were meant for me.

"Someone could see us."

"Then let them see. We are engaged, after all."

"Chance!" She pushes me off her, leaving us both heaving for breath.

"What's wrong?"

Tears fill her eyes, and I honestly don't know what to do. The euphoria of having her in my arms is quickly replaced by panic as I look at her on the verge of crying.

"I can't do this."

"Can't do what, Dakota?"

"This! Us!" She wipes a tear from her cheek. I take a step towards her, but she puts a hand up, stopping me. "Don't."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Page 56

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“It’s one thing to pretend that this is what we are, but it’s another for you to pull me into hallways and start kissing me like that.”

“But you like me kissing you like that.”

“Yes, and that’s the problem!”

I’ve never been so confused in my life.

“If we both like it, I don’t see what the problem is.”

Fresh tears roll down her cheeks as she wipes them away with the back of her hand. Her chest is heaving in her low cut black tank top, drawing my eyes lower.

“Stop it! You can’t even take this seriously!”

“I don’t know what you want me to do, Dakota.” I bring my eyes back up to hers and immediately regret everything that has happened. She’s falling apart and I don’t know what to do. For the first time in my life, I feel completely helpless.

She closes her eyes and pinches the bridge of her nose. “What are you doing, Chance? Why did you bring me out here?”

“I was kissing you.”

“But why?” She drops her hand and opens her eyes. “There’s no one here to see it.”

“I didn’t want anyone to see that, Dakota. That was for us.”

She remains silent, her chest heaving just as it was after we broke apart. “There is no ‘us,’ Chance. You’ve made that perfectly clear.”

“But what if I was wrong?” My heart pounds against my chest and my stomach turns as I take a cautious step toward her. I’m rewarded with her staying still, so at least—for now—she’s not pushing me away. “I’ve been thinking. A lot.”

She opens her mouth to say something, but I don’t let her.

“What if this isn’t fake, Dakota? I know I’m an asshole and I don’t deserve you, but what if...” My voice cracks as I take another step, daring to lift my hand and brush her cheek. “What if we made this real? Obviously not being engaged, that’s a little too much, but maybe date? Let me take you out?”

She looks down at her hand, admiring the ring. “I mean, it is really pretty.”

“It was my mother’s.”

“Chance, I can’t take this.”

She moves to take the ring off, but I stop her, placing my hand on hers. “Don’t. I want you to wear it. I can’t promise that I’ll ever be the marrying kind, Dakota, but I’d like to give whatever this is between us a shot.”

She looks down at our joined hands but stops trying to take the ring off. “Why did you use this ring?”

I sigh, not sure how I’m going to answer this. “After my dad died, she took it off and told me that one day she wanted me to give it to the woman that I can’t live without.

She has such high hopes for me, bigger than I have for myself sometimes, but I don't know...I couldn't see myself giving it to anyone else, even if it wasn't for real."

She's quiet for another moment before she looks up at me. "Do you believe in soul mates?"

I scoff. "That would require me to have a soul."

Dakota playfully punches me on the shoulder. "Chance, I'm being serious." She's trying to act tough, but I can see the hint of a smile coming out.

I cup her face and tilt her chin, making her look into my eyes so she knows how serious I'm being. "I can't say that I've ever really thought about it. I know that my parents were deeply in love, and it gutted my mom when my dad died. I also know that I've never felt anything remotely like that for anyone before." I take a breath, preparing myself for what I'm about to admit. "I don't know what love feels like, Dakota, but I know that what I feel for you is scary as hell. You piss me off and turn me on in a way no one else has. You also get me in a way that no one ever has, too."

"I want to believe you, Chance."

"But?"

"But...you told me you're not a forever kind of guy. I don't know what to do with this information. Do we just try until you get bored and decide you've had enough? Do you string me along for as long as it works for you? And then what? Where does that leave me?"

"When I said that, I didn't know I would end up feeling like this for you. I was still the asshole that cycled through women because I didn't know what I wanted. Now I do."

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“And what is that, Chance? What is it you want from me, exactly?”

“I want you next to me at all of these fucking horrible events. I want to take you out to dinner, have you in my bed. I want you in my kitchen in the morning. I want you telling me when I’m being an asshole. Most importantly, I just want you here. With me.”

“And the rodeo? The town thinking we’re engaged?”

“Keep the ring on and let them think that. We’ll just say we’re going to have a long engagement. We can see what happens from there.”

Silence hangs between us as we stand here in the hallway, our breath syncing and slowing. After what feels like an eternity, she takes my hand and laces her fingers through mine. “I think I can handle that, Mr. Declan.”

I lean in and give her a kiss. It’s not as heated and deep as the one we shared earlier. This one is tender and sweet. It’s unlike any kiss I’ve ever shared with a woman before. I also know it means so much more than any other kiss ever has.

I wasn’t lying when I said I couldn’t promise her forever, but maybe that’s okay. Maybe promising right now is enough.

“What do you say we get out of here and go see Greyson perform? I’ve heard he’s some country hot shot or something.”

She laughs. “I’d like that.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Dakota

Standing in front of the closed wooden doors, I can't take my eyes off the gold plaque that reads 'Private Suite.' With my hand linked with Chance's, we stand there in silence, not ready to cross the threshold and find out what waits on the other side.

Last night had been a dream. We stayed in each other's arms through the whole concert, swaying and singing as Greyson performed his heart out for the town. For one night we put everything aside, all the shit that has happened over the last few weeks, and just enjoyed being in each other's company.

When he took me back to his house last night and took me to bed, it was unlike anything I've ever felt before. When I thought he was being caring and attentive during our weekend together, that was nothing compared to the way he treated me last night. He was gentle and caring—until he wasn't—and gave me the most mind-blowing orgasms I didn't even know could physically be possible.

"Tell me something no one knows," I say, lacing my fingers through his.

We're lying in his bed, my head resting on his bicep, covered just in his sheets.

Our breaths have finally come down after our last session of lovemaking; our skin glistening with sweat.

"There's lots people don't know," he says with a chuckle.

I turn and fold my hands over his bare chest, feeling the hard muscles underneath. Resting my chin on my hands, I give him a lazy smile. "Pick one."

He rests his hands under his head, looking up at the ceiling, staying silent. He sighs heavily, and I feel my hand and head moving up and down with the movement.

“I hate ice cream.”

“What?” I pop my head up. “Who hates ice cream?”

“I do,” he says with a chuckle.

“But...how?” I ask, amazed. “I’ve never known anyone who didn’t like at least one flavour of ice cream.”

“Not me.”

“Is it all sweets?” I place my head back on my hands, looking up at him.

“No, I like cookies and pie just fine. I don’t know, maybe I just don’t like frozen foods.”

“Huh.” Of all the things I am expecting—or hoping—Chance would tell me, I wasn’t expecting that.

“What about you?” He asks, bending his knee, further encasing my body against his. I can feel his arousal, the hardness lengthening under my stomach, as he lifts his hips and rolls into me.

“I...uh...” His movements leave me temporarily dumbstruck as my body starts to remember the way he made me feel not that long ago.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“Come on now, Counsellor, don’t hold out on me now.”

The smile on his face doesn’t help restart my line of thinking. He looks so happy. So peaceful. This is a side of Chance I don’t think anyone’s ever seen before. It makes me extremely happy that I get to be the one to see him this way.

“Let me see...” I tilt my head to the side, letting my cheek rest on my hands, enjoying the rise and fall of his bare chest. “I’ve always wanted to use my law degree to help animals.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Maybe do some pro bono work to help with animal cruelty cases? Work with shelters and things to help save animals? I just hate that a lot of time they have no one to fight for them, and they just get caught up in paperwork and legal jargon.”

He lifts his hand from behind his head and sweeps a lock of stray hair from my face, tucking it behind my ear. “You have a big heart, Dakota Myers.”

“I don’t know about that,” I chuckle. “I’m sure there are a lot of people I’ve faced in the courtroom that would disagree with you.”

“Nah, they’re just intimidated or upset because you kicked their ass.” He continues running his fingertips through my hair. “Don’t get me wrong, you’re a badass and scary as hell, but you also have a huge heart.”

“Are you scared of me, Mr. Declan?” I raise the corner of my mouth, hoping he’ll take the challenge.

“Terrified.”

In one quick move, he flips us, and I find myself underneath him. Caught up in a tangle of sheets, I laugh until he kisses me senseless, and I can’t remember what it was we had been talking about.

He held me until the morning, and didn’t let me out of his sight, not even when we had to stop at my place this morning so I could change.

Now, as we stand at the doors, with everyone that we’ve spent weeks trying to impress on the other side, we’re frozen.

I clutch his hand tighter, feeling my palm get sweaty despite the cool air being pushed from the air conditioner into the narrow hallways.

“Hey,” Chance turns to me, sweeping my hair off my shoulder and cupping my cheek. “You look beautiful.”

“Oh, yeah?” I smile up at him, feeling the heat of a blush under his palm.

I didn’t think much about the outfit I was putting on before coming here. We only had enough time for a quick stop at my house as we were running late as it is. Under Chance’s watchful eye and roaming hands, I was only able to throw on a fresh pair of jeans, black tank top, and blue button-up shirt, which I’ve tied at my waist. He told me it was appropriate for a rodeo, and I believed him. It was hard not to when he wouldn’t stop touching and kissing me.

“Yeah.” He leans down and whispers. “You’ve got a glow to you. Did something

happen to put a smile on your face?”

“Oh, you know, nothing special.” I shrug, looking up at him through my lashes.

“Nothing special, huh?” I can feel his smile along my neck as he places kisses along my skin. “I’ll need to try harder tonight if last night wasn’t memorable.”

I trail my fingers along his broad shoulders, feeling the muscles I’ve spent hours burning into my memory. The hard divots and bulges earned only from the endless hours spent on the ranch.

The dip of his head hides us from view, giving me enough courage to tilt my head back and truly give into the rush of the moment. I’m no longer worried about the people on the other side of the door. All I care about is the feel of his short beard along the column of my neck and his hands over my body.

I’m immediately transported to last night. The rush of his calloused hands over every inch of my skin. The way he held my breasts and rolled my nipples until I almost came from just his touch.

I suppress a moan as my body heats. I can feel the outline of his erection as it presses against my stomach, releasing a new wave of desire through my body as he clings on to me.

“For fuck’s sake,” Wyatt’s annoyed voice sounds behind me.

Chance nips at my neck before standing with a smile. “Problem, Winters?”

I turn to see Wyatt roll his eyes. Over his shoulder is the open door to the suite with a mix of people both openly gawking and those trying to appear uninterested.

I know this is why we're here. We're supposed to be showing all these people how madly in love we are, but for the first time, I don't want it. I want to be back in his bed or under the cover of his hat and have this just for us.

"You'd better get in there. Bronc riding is about to start." Wyatt turns and walks back into the room, leaving us standing on the threshold.

"Shall we do this?" I ask, looking up at him.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“I don’t think we have a choice,” Chance grunts, taking my hand once again and facing the suite.

I straighten as I face the room, pulling every ounce of fake confidence I’ve learned over my years in the courtroom. Taking my first step into the room, I act like I own it. It’s a trick I learned long ago after I first passed the bar. If I enter the courtroom as if I’ve already won the case, I have the upper hand. I’m applying the same theory to the sponsor’s suite at the rodeo.

Walking through the crowd, we say hello and nod at the other investors. People I recognize from the previous events fill the room, sending watchful glances as they follow us through the crowd. Chance stops us behind a row of seats overlooking the arena.

I watch as I see the cowboys preparing and the horses in the chutes. I don’t know all the terminology or order of a rodeo, but Chance filled me in on a little of the basics on the way here.

“Drink?” he asks, giving my hand a squeeze.

I nod with a smile as he leans down and gives me a quick kiss before making his way to the bar.

“Still ‘together,’ huh?” Laughlin says, making air quotes.

The sound of his voice makes me cringe. I don’t know how I ever tolerated the whine in his voice.

“What are you doing here?” I let my gaze fall to the crowd below, seeing the families laughing and enjoying themselves as the bronc riding event gets ready to start.

“Willis and Taylor are sponsors. Didn’t you know that?”

I can feel the heat of him at my side. My skin starts to crawl knowing that he’s that close to me.

I turn, taking a step back and meeting his eyes, barely registering the blonde on his arm. Recognition flickers to my brain, remembering her face as the woman from the night at the Whiskey Dam. “What do you want, Laughlin?”

“I’m just curious. Where’s your boyfriend?”

“Fiancé, actually. And we aren’t joined at the hip, unlike most people.” I make a point to let my eyes trail to the blonde at his side.

“Fiancé. Right,” he says disbelievingly as he throws his arm over the woman’s shoulder. “And don’t be jealous, babe.”

“Don’t call me ‘babe’ and I’m anything but jealous of anything you have.” My eyes trail over the room, searching for Chance and the promised drink.

“Whatever you say,” Laughlin says with a chuckle.

“Problem here, Dakota?” Wyatt asks, appearing at my side. He eyes Laughlin up, moving protectively to my side. “Chadwick.”

“Winters,” he replies. “No problem. Just saying hi to an old friend.”

“Bullshit,” I say under my breath.

“I suggest you move along, Chadwick. The event is about to start. I’m sure your friend here wouldn’t want to miss that.”

“Come on, babe. We should go find better company, anyway.” Laughlin shoots Wyatt a final look before towing the blonde away from us.

“I had no idea he’d be here,” I say, turning back toward the crowd below.

“Doesn’t matter.” Once satisfied Laughlin is far enough away, he continues. “Have you seen Chance?”

“He went to go get drinks. He couldn’t have gone far. It’s not a big room,” I chuckle.

Wyatt is quiet for a moment before muttering, “ah shit,” under his breath.

I turn to follow his line of vision, stunned at what I’m seeing.

He’s speaking with a tall brunette, and one that looks so familiar, but I can’t put my finger on it. He can speak with women, that’s not the issue. What gives me pause is the way she places her hand on his arm and laughs with him, as if she knows him—intimately.

It surely must be a mistake. There’s no way Chance would kiss me one minute and then let another woman have her hands all over him the next. Not after his confession of his feelings for me and the night we spent together.

“Who’s that?”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“Stephanie King. She’s a local vet that works with the rodeo when it’s in town.”

I turn to him, noticing how he’s not taking his eyes off her. “Something I should be worried about?”

“What? No,” he breaks his gaze away and looks down at me. “No. Chance and Stephanie are just friends. That’s all.”

“I didn’t think Chance did friends, other than you,” I laugh, bumping my shoulder into his.

“Not many.” He smirks.

“So what’s the deal then? You didn’t seem too happy to see her.”

“You’re about to find out; they’re heading this way.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chance

“Thanks again for inviting me up to the suite, Chance. I know things have been a little—awkward—since everything happened.”

Stephanie sneaks a glance across the room. I’m sure she doesn’t want me to see, just like she doesn’t want me to notice any of the other times she did it, but she can’t hide it from me. I’ve known her too long to hide something like that from me.

“I told you, what happened has nothing to do with me. I stay out of shit like that.”

“Even when it involves your best friend?” she asks with a smile.

“Wyatt doesn’t tell me what to do—or who to talk to.”

My eyes look up and lock with Dakota’s across the room. She’s laughing with Wyatt and raises an eyebrow at me before turning her attention back to my friend.

I don’t miss the concern that crosses her face when she first spots me with Stephanie. I hate that she would doubt me, but I don’t blame her. This is the first time I’ve ever regretted my past. I don’t want there to ever be a time when Dakota doubts me, no matter how justified it may be.

“So, do I get to meet her?” Stephanie asks playfully.

“How about now?” I turn and grab our drinks from the bar. Handing Stephanie hers, I turn and grab Dakota’s wine before making our way over.

We cross the distance of the suite, greeting Dakota and Wyatt as they whisper about something he doesn’t seem too happy about.

“Do I want to know?” I ask Dakota as I pass her the wine.

“Nothing to worry about,” she answers with a smile.

“Dakota, I’d like to introduce you to Stephanie King. Stephanie, this is my girlfriend, Dakota.”

“Girlfriend? I heard you were engaged.” Stephanie shakes Dakota’s hand but turns to me.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Everything with Dakota being real is so new; I forgot we are supposed to be engaged.

“It’s still so new. Takes a while to get used to,” Dakota says, shooting me a glare that said she won’t forget it later.

Stephanie turns her attention to Wyatt and drops her smile. “Wyatt.”

“Stephanie,” he grunts, barely looking her way.

Seeing my friend so uncomfortable shouldn’t bring me joy, but it’s a little payback for the hell he put me through when this whole shitshow started. Sure, it meant that I ended up with Dakota for real, but that doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy watching him try to act like Stephanie isn’t in the same room as him.

“I brought Stephanie over here because she’s a vet that works with the rodeo when it’s in town. She also heads up a group in the area that works with local shelters to rescue animals or rehabilitate them if the owners can’t,” I say to Dakota, ignoring the ‘fuck you’ glare I’m getting from Wyatt. He didn’t know I had invited her, and he certainly doesn’t know I am hoping that she and Dakota will talk about possibly working together.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“That’s amazing. I would love to hear more about it.” A genuine smile crosses Dakota’s face, and it gives me a sense of pride knowing I’m the one that helped put it there.

“I’m hoping you’ll do more than just hear about it. Chance here tells me you’re looking to help with a problem I’m having with a so-called farm that we believe is neglecting animals. I would love to see if that’s something you would be interested in helping us with.”

“Yes, I would love to speak with you about this.”

Dakota lets Stephanie pull her aside, but not before mouthing a silent ‘thank you’ to me.

“Did you actually just do a good deed?” Wyatt asks, taking a sip of his beer.

“Fuck off,” I grit while sipping my whiskey.

“Did you have to do it with my ex?”

I smile. “That was just an added bonus.”

“Fucker.”

We make our way over to the viewing area and for the first time since we got here, I can feel myself relax. The sponsors all came through with support, the riders and animals all came without issue, and we have a record-setting attendance. By all

accounts, the rodeo has been a success. What's the most shocking the most to me is that none of it matters as much as it would have last year. Now, the only thing that feels like real success to me is having Dakota for real, and that scares the shit out of me.

I push the thoughts aside and focus on the cowboy lowering himself down inside the chute. His hand wraps around the bronc rein as the horse moves under him, anxious to get out.

I sympathize with the horse.

"What do you figure?" Wyatt asks, nodding his chin at the arena.

I watch the way the rider sits on the wired horse. "The bronc looks like a wild one and the rider looks a little green. I give him three seconds."

"I don't know if you're being an ass or generous with this one."

"You know I'm always right, though." I take another sip of my whiskey, not taking my eyes off the duo.

With a nod of the rider's head, the chute opens and the horse bursts out. The energy and screams from the crowd drift through the air, and for the first time in a long time, I find myself excited to watch the event. Every buck of the horse reminds me of coming here and standing next to my dad, cheering on the riders and the animals. But he wouldn't watch from all the way up here; he would always be down in the stands or roaming around the back talking to the riders and handlers. He would only come up to the sponsor's suite to shake hands and have the obligatory drink before returning down to the grounds.

And what do I do my first year running it? I hide in the suite.

“Well damn, nearly three seconds on the dot. How the fuck do you do that?” Wyatt asks.

“Sixth sense, I guess.” I down the rest of my drink, focusing on the burn as it slides down my throat.

Wyatt spent just as many rodeos by my dad’s side as I did. We watched the same riders, cheered for a lot of the same animals. I don’t know what it is that makes me different, but I’ve always been able to tell which one would win. A lot of the time, it’s the animal.

“I need to get out of here.” I hand Wyatt my empty glass, not waiting for a response.

Searching the room, I brush through the crowd until I reach her, taking her hand, startling her.

“Chance, hi,” she breathes.

I look into her striking green eyes for a moment before turning to Stephanie. “Sorry to cut this short, but there’s something I need to show Dakota.”

“Of course.” She smiles at me before turning to Dakota. “Thanks for giving me your number. I’ll get in touch soon.”

Dakota gives a hurried wave as I pull her from the suite.

“Chance! What’s happening? Where are we going?”

I must seem like a maniac, pulling her through the crowd without reason, but I just can’t handle being in there when I know that’s not where I’m supposed to be. Not where Dad would want me to be.

I don't know if it's the rush of having pulled off this fake engagement or seeing what it takes to actually put this on and the pride in the result that goes with it, but I now see why Dad didn't want to be cooped up in that suite the whole weekend like I have been. It's not only getting to meet the people who put it on face-to-face, but it's the rush of seeing things at ground level. The energy around the riders and animals as they wait for their turn in the arena.

Page 62

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

I remember being a boy and feeling the buzz in the air while I walked around the off limits areas, seeing what the audience couldn't. The cowboys that needed to be mended but were too tough to say they were in pain, no matter how bad the injury was. The way the animals needed to run to work off the energy after a ride.

Bursting through the doorway that keeps the separate suites from the general admission stands, I stop and let myself take it in for a minute. The chatter and cheers from the crowd roars through the space as another rider prepares to leave the chute. The smell of beer and barbecued meat fills my nose as I close my eyes. I want nothing more than to show Dakota the rodeo that I grew up with. The one that I loved until I thought I was too old to enjoy it once I started to see the business side.

“Chance?” Dakota’s worried voice and hand on my arm pull me out of my thoughts. “Are you okay?”

I open my eyes and look down at her. “Yeah, I...” I look around, not knowing how to explain this to her. Everything has changed so quickly in the last year; it’s been a long time since I’ve felt everything was ‘right.’ With my dad dying, taking over the ranch, needing to run the rodeo, plus everything with Dakota, I realize that I’ve been everything but ‘okay.’

“Chance, you’re worrying me.”

I pause and look over her shoulder. “You need pulled pork.”

“Sorry?” My answer only adds to the concern that’s etched across her face.

“It’s the best in town. I made sure Buck came back with his truck.”

“Buck and the truck?” She tilts her head and studies me before lifting her free hand and placing the back of it against my forehead. “Are you feeling alright? How much did you have to drink?”

“No, nothing like that.” I shake her off. “He’s got the best pulled pork you’ll ever taste. He’s been coming to the rodeo since I was a kid.”

I lead her through the crowd and get in line.

“But the events?”

“It’s the rodeo clown show now. We’ve got time. Unless you want to see grown men tell bad jokes and shoot free stuff into the crowd.”

“What comes next?”

“Mutton Busting”

“And that is?”

I look down at her, eyebrow raised. “You really haven’t been to a rodeo, have you?”

“I mean, I came once with Addie when I first moved here, but we didn’t really do much other than drink and watch the hot cowboys.”

“You what?” I know she has a past, but I don’t want to think of her as being anything like a buckle bunny or even just hooking up with one of the guys on the circuit. The relaxation that I’ve achieved is quickly being replaced with wanting to punch out any rider that may have even been in the same room as her all those years ago.

“Relax, cowboy, I never went after any. Anti-buckle bunny, remember?” She laughs, pointing at herself.

“Right.” I feel better hearing her say that, but I can’t help almost breaking a tooth with the way I’m grinding my jaw together.

“So tell me,” she says, moving closer to me and laying her head on my shoulder. “What is Mutton Busting?”

“Kids riding sheep.” I let out a loud exhale, letting the relaxation back in.

“Aw, that sounds really cute!” We take a few steps closer in the line. “What else is there?”

I think back to the schedule that I approved just a few days ago. “Barrel racing and then the bulls.”

“Barrel racing is the women, right?”

“Yup.” We take another step in line.

“Why did you want to leave the suite?”

Normally the number of questions she’s asking would drive me crazy. I never liked having in depth conversations with the women I was seeing. Hell, there wasn’t usually a whole lot of talking going on at all for our time together, but with Dakota, it’s different. Part of me likes that she wants to get to know me. It’s been so long since anyone has even tried that I almost don’t know what to do with it. The old Chance would say ‘fuck it’ and walk away, but I can’t do that. Not with her. I want her to get to know me. The real me, not the one I put on for the guys at the ranch or the one for the people in town. The real me. The only other person who knows this

side is Wyatt, and even he doesn't know everything.

“My dad would never spend more than one event up in the suite. He'd only go to placate the sponsors and pay his dues. The rest of the time, he was out here with the crowd or behind the gates.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“He sounds like he was a good guy.”

I look up at the sky, squinting at the bright sun. “He was. We didn’t always see eye-to-eye, and I hate the fucking awful house he built just to impress people, but he was a good man.”

“I wish I met him,” she whispers as she gives my hand a squeeze.

“Oh, he would have loved you,” I chuckle, thinking of how much he would have fucking loved watching her make me squirm or standing up to me. He always hated the women I was seen out with and the ones he saw at events. He always wanted me to be with someone like Dakota, someone he knew wouldn’t put up with my shit.

“And your mom?”

“Don’t worry, she’ll love you, too. But you don’t need to worry about that anytime soon. She doesn’t come around here much anymore.”

We stand in silence for the rest of our wait. I didn’t expect to feel a weight lifted off me by sharing the small snippets of my life with her, but I feel it. Maybe this asshole I’ve been for so long was just because I was missing someone to share with. Someone to have at my side and appreciate me for who I am, not because of who my family is.

Maybe I just needed to be with someone that made me feel free.

My shoulder is knocked, as someone passes by me and spills beer all over my shirt. Dakota jumps back, still holding my hand, and manages to miss most of the liquid.

“Fucking hell, watch where you’re going.”

I lift my eyes and feel the need to pour the rest of his beer all over him.

Nope, guess I’m still an asshole.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Dakota

“Okay, you need to get that stupid smile off of your face,” Addie says, throwing a French fry at me.

“You don’t need to resort to throwing food.” I pick up the fry that landed on my breast and eat it. “Plus, you’re the one that suggested burgers, fries, and ice cream. Those things make me happy.” I avoid her gaze; instead I focus on the cowboy dressed in black on the screen that reminds me a lot of my boyfriend, who may be the one making me smile like a loon since this morning.

Twice.

“We both know it’s not Yellowstone that’s making you smile, nor is it the fried food.” She rolls her eyes and puts her plate down on the coffee table. “All right, you can talk to me.”

“About what?”

“Don’t play dumb; I know you want to gush about your ‘fiancé,’ so I’m giving you the chance. Come on, lay it on me.” She moves her hands in a circular motion, encouraging me to speak.

“Why? So you can just tell me I’m being an idiot and wasting my time?” I roll my eyes. “Plus, you know we aren’t really engaged. We are...seeing where this goes.”

“While his mom’s ring is on your finger?”

I hold out my hand and look at it. It really is a gorgeous ring. It’s vintage and unique. It’s so unlike anything you would buy in a store.

I love it.

I’m going to be heartbroken when he asks for it back.

If he asks for it back, but I can’t let my heart go there.

“It’s just for a little while longer. It’s just easier to keep it on.”

“For him or for you?”

I drop my hand and narrow my eyes at her. “I thought you said you were going to be nice.”

“I never said that,” she gives me a sly smile that makes me throw one of my fries at her.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

We both break out laughing as she eats hers off her lap.

“Seriously, though. What’s happening? Do I need to worry about you?”

“Not unless you hear of me dying of too many orgasms.”

“Ah! I did not just hear that!” Addie covers her ears with her hands and scrunches up her face, making me laugh even harder.

“No, everything is...good. I mean, Chance is really opening up to me and I think we’re hitting a groove, and not just in bed,” I add, just to wind her up.

“I’m going to ignore that. But really, I just can’t reconcile the asshole that picked you up that night with the one that you’re telling me about now.”

“I know; I can’t explain it, but it’s true. Last week at the rodeo he was—different. The last day it’s like something changed. He took me out into the stands, got me the most amazing pulled pork you have ever tasted in your life—seriously, it was better than what was offered in the sponsor’s suite. Then he took me and introduced me to some of the riders. I even got to pet some of the horses!”

“That must have been the highlight.”

“It was one of them. But then he also told me about his dad and how they would walk around the rodeo grounds together and I don’t know, it was different.”

“There you go with that dreamy look again.”

“Did I tell you he introduced me to the woman that heads up the local animal rescue organization? He invited her specifically to introduce her to me.”

Addie’s eyes open wide with her mouth agape. “Did you tell him about your dream?”

“I did. That morning, actually.”

“Wow.” She leans back against the couch, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Yeah, wow.” I eat another fry, thinking about everything that happened over the course of my time with him. It seems like it was so long ago, but really, it’s only been weeks. “Yes, Chance can be an asshole, but he’s also so much more.”

“I’m starting to see that,” she answers, still stunned.

“So I would like it if you laid off a little on the hate-train. Chance is a good guy—mostly.”

“Fine. But no promises when he’s around.”

I laugh. “I’ll take that.”

I pick up another fry when both of our phones make a high pitched sound, screens flashing at us from the table.

“What the hell?” Addie says, as we both grab our phones.

ALERT: EMERGENCY ALERT

The town of Whiskey Falls has issued a wildfire alert for everyone in town. Everyone is being asked to evacuate. Take your pets, important documents, medication, and

food and proceed to the HILLSIDE RECREATION CENTRE in Cedar Valley Springs...

“Wildfire, here in Whiskey Falls?” I stand, dropping the rest of my fries to the ground as I scan the alert on my phone.

“Do you think it’s that close?” Addie’s eyes meet mine, the panic all over her face.

“I’m sure they’re just being cautious, but we should get moving. Why don’t you go home and gather your things and I’ll pick you up in twenty minutes?” I stand cleaning up what’s left of our meal and rush into the kitchen. “I’m going to call Chance and grab what I need. We’ll go together. I don’t want you to be alone.”

Addie rushes up behind me and pulls me into a hug. I know this is one of the moments when we need to switch on being strong for one another. Addie’s alone in town and hasn’t made all that many connections other than me. She’s scared, but I won’t let her go through this alone.

“Hey, we’ll be okay.” I hug her back quickly before putting her at arm’s length, making sure she’s looking me in the eyes. “I just need you to go home and pack a few bags, okay?”

She nods with tears in her eyes before grabbing her purse and rushing out the door.

Now that she’s gone, I give myself a moment to feel how scared I am. Rushing for my phone, I call Chance, praying for him to pick up.

Page 65

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“Dakota, you need to get out of town,” his gruff voice sounds on the other end.

“What about you?” I place my phone between my ear and shoulder, grabbing the first bag I see, and rush to my bedroom to pack spare clothes.

“I’ll be fine. I need to stay and get the animals sorted.”

“But you are going to evacuate too, right?” I push down the bile that’s rising in my throat. I try not to think of Chance at the ranch, fighting to get everyone and everything organized with the fires so close. “Chance? How close is the fire to you?”

“Close enough,” he grinds out. I can hear yelling and animal sounds in the background. “Do you have someone to get out of town with? Where’s Addie?”

“I’m picking her up as soon as I’m done.” I finish throwing all the clean clothes I can into the bag and move to the bathroom for toiletries. “Will you meet me at the evacuation site?”

Chance’s phone is muffled, but I can hear him yelling on the other end.

I close my eyes and focus on my breath, trying not to worry about him. I don’t want to keep him on the phone long and waste any precious moments that he might need to get himself and everyone else to safety, but I need to know he’s not going to do anything stupid at the same time.

“I have to go. Get yourself out of town and text me when you get there; do you hear me?”

“Yes, Chance, I hear you.” I stop for a moment and brace myself for my next question. “You are leaving, right? You’ll meet me there.”

“Dammit...” The line goes muffled again before he comes back. “I have to go. Dakota, I’ll try, okay? That’s the best I can promise you right now. What you need to do is get the hell out of town. Now.”

“Okay,” I whisper, feeling a tear fall from my eye.

I know what his answer means. He’s not promising that he’ll get out of town, or that he’ll even try.

“Dakota, I...Fuck. You know I’m not good at this stuff but...I love you. Or I love you as much as I know how to love. I just want you to know that, okay?”

“Okay,” I say slowly, too stunned to say anything else.

Chance loves me? And he decides to tell me this now?

The line goes dead, and I take a second to stare at the screen.

Did that just happen? Chance said he loves me in the middle of a fucking wildfire evacuation?

Rushing through the house, I throw my work documents into my briefcase and load up the car. The air is thick with smoke and ash falls like rain. I can’t see any flames, but the dark smoke hovering in the air tells me the fire is close. I back out of my driveway, giving my house a lasting look, hoping it’s not the last time I’ll see it.

After picking up Addie, the drive out of town to Cedar Valley Springs is quiet. The traffic is slow moving as everyone in town makes their way out and to the shelter.

Addie wrings her hands in her lap as she looks worriedly out the window.

I don't dare say anything. Mostly because I don't want to try to break the silence that we have as it is calm, but also because I am afraid that I will let out all the pent up emotion if I voice my concerns about Chance. After relaying our phone call—minus the 'I love you' part—she seems satisfied with the slightly modified version that he is going to get the animals taken care of and then head out of town. I'm hoping that if I tell myself that enough, I'll start to believe it, too.

Once we finally make it to the shelter and check in, we are given cots set up in the activity centre, along with hundreds of other people from the town. Addie and I can't do anything other than sit down on them and decompress, looking around, trying to see who we can find, or in my case, who isn't here yet.

Addie and I are checked in at the shelter.

I can't help but stare at my phone, willing those three little dots to come up, letting me know he is going to message me back.

But he doesn't. The text is delivered but unread.

"I'm sure he's just sorting out the animals or on his way here now," Addie says with a weak smile.

"Dakota!" Krissy's blonde hair bounces in her ponytail behind her as she rushes through the crowd and throws her arms around me.

I do the same, letting myself lean into her for a moment.

"I'm so glad you made it okay. Where's Chance?"

“He, uh, was just getting everything together at the ranch. Is Brett here with you?” I’ll admit, I’m trying to deflect any more questions about Chance.

Page 66

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“Yes,” she sighs. “He wasn’t too happy about leaving the bar, but what can we do? We locked it all up and did the best we could.” She shrugs.

“I’m sorry; I don’t think you two have met. Krissy, this is my friend Addie.” I introduce the two and let them talk while I keep my eyes scanning the room. I recognize a lot of the people here, but none of them are from the ranch.

“Dakota, do you need anything? They have coffee and tea over in the corner. I think they also brought out some snacks, but it wasn’t much from what I could see. I heard they are getting more things coming within the hour.”

I shake my head. “No, I’m not hungry.” At the mention of food, the burger and fries I ate earlier threatens to come up as more people walk in the door that aren’t from the ranch. Surely I should be able to recognize someone from there by now. Will they be going to a different evacuation spot? Where will they bring the animals?

Most importantly, why didn’t I think of this earlier?

“Hey,” Krissy says gently, placing her hand on mine, taking a seat next to me on my cot. “What’s going on? What aren’t you telling me?”

“Have you heard from Wyatt?”

“He texted me about ten minutes ago that they were just leaving the ranch. Why? Have you heard something?” Panic rises in her voice.

“No, I’m sure they’re fine. I just... I don’t know. Chance sounded off when I called

him after getting the alert. I'm just anxious for him to get here, I guess."

"I'm sure they're fine. They're tough cowboys, after all." Krissy gives me a smile, letting me know that she meant for me to laugh, but I just can't find myself able to do it. "Seriously, what's going on Dakota?"

"I'm worried he's going to do something stupid."

"What do you mean?" Addie asks, moving over to sit on the other side of me.

"He, uh, told me he loved me on the phone."

"What?!" Krissy and Addie both exclaim at the same time, gaining us a few wide eyes from the people around us.

"Before he hung up the phone, he said he loved me, or that he thinks he loves me with how much he knows about love, but I don't know. Who says that out of the blue, in the middle of a fucking wildfire evacuation if you're planning on seeing the person soon?"

They both stay silent, looking at each other past me, stunned.

"Please say something," I plead.

"I've got nothing," Addie says.

Krissy takes a moment before speaking. "I've known Chance my whole life. I know he talks a big game, but he has a big heart."

"Deep, deep down," Addie adds. I throw my elbow into her side before she adds a whispered, "Sorry."

“He doesn’t show it often,” Krissy sends a pointed look at Addie. “But when he does, he’s all in. I’ve seen it with his friendship with Wyatt, and with the men on the ranch. He knows how to love, Dakota, he just doesn’t have experience with it. If he says he loves you, he means it.”

“I hope it’s enough for him to come here and be safe with me,” I whisper, staring at the door.

“One thing you need to know about being with a cowboy, the ranch is always going to be tied with being the most important thing in his life. That land has been in his family for generations. He’s not going to leave it without a fight.”

“That’s what I’m scared of.”

“But now you’ve also given him something else to fight for. Once he’s sure the ranch, cattle, and men are safe, he’ll come to you. I know he will.”

“That’s what I’m scared of,” I whisper.

What if the ranch isn’t safe? What if he gets all the men and animals out, but it’s the land he stays behind for?

What if he doesn’t leave at all?

Looking down at my phone, I see my text to Chance is still unread. No response. No calls.

“He’ll be okay,” Addie says, knocking her shoulder into mine.

Page 67

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“He better be.” I look up at the door once more, seeing a face I recognize from the ranch.

Luke Caraway walks in with his girlfriend, Cassidy, on his arm. They stand in line to check in as I push myself to standing.

“Be right back.”

I leave Krissy and Addie as I rush through the people and cots, making sure not to take my eyes off him so I don't lose him in the growing crowd.

“Luke!” I yell, getting his attention as I push through the last of the people making the barrier. “Luke! Where's Chance? Did he come here with you?”

“Sorry, Dakota, I haven't seen him since he sent all of us away. We got the last of the cattle we could into trailers, but the last I saw, he was trying to drive the rest to the farthest corner of the pasture.”

“What?” My heart sinks. “He didn't leave with you guys?”

“No, ma'am.” He takes his hat off and gives a sad look to Cassidy. “He said we all needed to leave and that he would take care of it.”

“And you let him?” With my voice raised, I can't help but grip my phone tighter in my hand, not knowing if I want to hit Luke with it or call Chance back and demand he to get over here now.

Rationally, I know I shouldn't be yelling at Luke, but he's all I've got to take my frustrations out on right now.

"You know how he is. The more we stood there and fought with him, the more the livestock was going to be in danger. I'm sorry, I did the best I could do and then I needed to get Cassidy out of town."

"I'm sorry. You're right. It's not your fault. There's no fighting him when he gets his mind stuck on something." I look at his girlfriend, her face drained of all colour but I can tell she's trying to put on a brave face, like everyone else in the room. "I'm sorry; this isn't the best introduction. I'm glad you're both here safe."

"Thank you," she says quietly.

"Please let me know if you hear from him."

Luke tips his hat in acknowledgment and they both move forward in line for their turn to check in.

Glancing down at my phone in my hand one more time, I unlock it to see the message still unread. "Chance, where are you?"

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chance

The air is so hot and thick, I can barely breathe.

The only thing saving me right now is the bandana I found in the barn while herding out the rest of the cattle. I managed to dunk it in the trough before mounting Duke. It smells like the worst fucking thing I've ever put near my nose, but it's better than

inhaling all the smoke and ash.

“That’s the last of the group,” Wyatt yells over the roar of the nearby fire.

I brace myself for the heat and smoke as the fire gets closer to the ranch. What I never thought of is how loud it would be.

Lowering the bandana from my mouth, I immediately start coughing as the thick air invades my lungs. “Take this up to Beau Campbell’s land and head to the shelter!”

“What about you and the rest of the cattle?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve got it covered.”

“The fuck you do! I’m not leaving you here alone, Declan.”

“I’m not alone.” I tilt my head to Duke and the cows.

“Now you tell jokes? Your timing fucking sucks.”

“I mean it, Wyatt. I only trust you to make sure those loaded make it to Campbell. Then you need to get to the shelter to make sure Dakota and Addie are all right.”

“I’m not their fucking babysitter.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“And you’re not mine, either!”

We stand there for a few moments seething in a prideful pissing match while our world burns around us. I don’t want to, but my mind immediately goes to Dakota. Even though I knew she was putting on a brave front—most likely for Addie—she was scared. She may be able to fake it for her friend, but she can’t with me.

I also know she wanted me to follow her to the shelter, but I can’t. I can’t keep her and the farm safe and at least with her the next town over away from the fires, I know she’s protected. Scared, but safe.

“What about Dakota?” he asks, visibly calmer, but knowing him, he’s anything but.

“What about her? She’s got to be safe at the evacuation site by now.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.” He crosses his arms over his chest, glaring at me.

“She’ll be fine.”

He doesn’t say anything. Instead, he just stands there, saying wordlessly that he doesn’t believe me.

“She’s better off this way, Wyatt.”

“And what the fuck does that mean?” And there’s his temper again.

“It means that she’s better off without me!” I yell, throwing my arms open wide.

“That’s bullshit, and you know it.”

“You know what? I can’t do this right now. I need you to do what I say. You’re the only one I trust.” And I don’t just mean with the cattle. Of anyone I know, he’s the one that I trust to keep Dakota safe if I can’t be the one to do it.

“And what about you?”

“I can’t leave the rest of the cattle and the land here alone to burn. I need to do what I can to save it. Either we leave now, or we don’t have a hope to save anything.” I look behind me, seeing the orange of the fire getting closer. I won’t have his life hanging in the balance with mine. He has parents and siblings that rely on him. Care for him. He needs to make it out more than I do. “Go. Make sure your family is safe and at the shelter.”

“Dammit!” Wyatt takes off his hat and turns his back to me for a moment before rushing and engulfing me in a hug. It’s so unlike him; I just stand there with my arms to the side until he slaps my back and pulls away. We haven’t hugged since we were kids. We’ve punched each other when one of us went too far, or slapped each other on the back as a way to say well done, but hug? Never.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” he says before stepping back, putting his hat back on his head. Without another glance, he runs to the truck and starts it up, pulling away with the trailer of the most valuable cattle I own.

I don’t waste time thinking about what the fuck just happened. I can’t, especially with how he was acting, like he wouldn’t see me again.

Which very well may be the case if I don’t get my ass out of here.

Loading a cart with as much feed and water as I can, I hook it up to Duke's harness and give him a pat as I survey the barn to see if there's anything else I'll need. Grabbing a buck knife, I place it in its leather sheath and shove it in my jacket pocket before mounting Duke.

Moving on borrowed time, Duke and I heard the cattle slower than normal. Our zig-zag direction bogged down by the cart and the thickening air. The smoke gets heavier and heavier the longer we move. The bandana around my mouth has lost its dampness, and now just smothers me with every breath I take. I push through, guiding Duke as we make our way to the farthest corner of my land, praying that this will be enough to save us all.

After what seems like hours, I manage to drive the remaining cattle into the open land in the corner of the property. It's not enough to save us completely, but it's the closest thing to a firebreak that I have, and there's a fence that will at least keep the cattle contained on one side.

Jumping down from Duke, I look over the land and am mostly happy that all animals seem oblivious to the danger that surrounds them.

I, on the other hand, am not.

The bright orange of the flames tear through the trees quickly, lighting up the darkened sky. Looking up, the normally star-filled sky is hazed over with the smoke, blocking out all of the sight that normally brought me so much peace. No matter what happened during the day, sitting on the back porch with a whiskey in the rocking chair always seemed to calm my nerves. It was the only way that I could truly wind down at the end of the day.

It's something like that, that I should have told Dakota when she asked me to tell her something no one knows about me. Not that I hate fucking ice cream. Which I do, but

it was such a trivial answer compared to everything I could have told her.

Like how I love the way her eyes shine in the sunlight, or the way her body feels against mine. I even love the way her hand just fits perfectly in mine, too.

There are more practical things, like I do actually like food other than steak. No one knows that I can make a pretty mean lasagna. I've never even let Wyatt know about that.

Now that I'm left here with nothing but my thoughts, I realize how stupid I was to not let her in. I thought the part of me I had given her was enough, and maybe it is for her now, but it's not enough for me. I see that now. Faced with the reality that I might not actually make it out of here tonight, I know that what we have is a fraction of what we could have had. Now that I've had a taste of it, I want more. I want it all with Dakota.

Opening my eyes, I turn and unhook the cart from Duke but leave his harness on, in case there's any chance the two of us need to make a run for it. I get to work on setting up the water in rations for the cows, making sure they drink it all before the night is through. I do the best I can to set up camp while keeping an eye on the herd, making sure none of them stray off or get spooked by the flames and run.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

Duke keeps a watchful eye on them as well, but I can tell he's getting nervous with the fire. The heat has intensified the closer it gets, and I start to sweat through the layers of clothes. It's now that I'm standing in between my animals and the fire that I realize I might not have made the best decision. In the moment, all I could think about was saving the cattle. If there was any chance that I could ensure all the animals get through this, I had to take it. While I don't regret saving them, I am very aware this means that I also might not make it out alive.

Pulling out my phone, I see the unopened text from Dakota. The preview shows me that she made it to the shelter, which makes me sigh in relief.

She's safe.

I swipe past the list of unanswered calls, mostly from Dakota. Two from my mom, no doubt hearing about the fire and checking in on me. A few from the neighbouring ranches. I was so consumed in my plan that I ignored the buzzing of my phone all night. I needed to push aside anyone or anything that might have been a distraction, or offering an alternate plan if I was honest.

But I need to hear her voice one more time. I hope it's not the last time.

Tapping the call button, I'm surprised I have enough service in the back acres for the call to go through. It immediately goes to voicemail, and I smile at the professional tone of her recording. After the beep, I pull down the bandana from my face and forget all the bullshit that let me push her away. I push aside my pride and whatever else made me an asshole to everyone else and finally say everything that I should have said to her before.

“Dakota, I’m sorry that I’ve been such an asshole to you. You deserve better. Hell, you deserve better than me, but for whatever fucked up reason, you choose me anyway.” I suck in a breath, immediately feeling the burn of the smoke as it pours into my lungs. I let out a cough. “When I told you I loved you before, I meant it. I love you, Dakota Myers. I don’t know what’s going to happen after tonight, but I need to let you know that. We may have started because some asshole wanted to be a prick to you in a bar, but I’m glad it happened. I’m glad that Laughlin was a douchebag that never figured out how to get his head out of his ass because it meant that it brought you to me. I know that sounds fucked up, but everything about this situation right now is fucked up.”

I go silent for a moment, staring at the flames in front of me. I lose track of time and the recording cuts off. I redial quickly, hoping I keep cell service while I have it. I listen one more time to her sweet voice before I’m prompted by another beep.

“Listen, I hope to God that I get to tell you all of these things in person, but if I don’t...I just want you to know that I love you. Wyatt will look after you, so just do what he says. I know that’s going to piss you off to no end, but just do it for me. Please?” I chuckle, knowing how hard she worked to get me to learn to say that word, which only makes me cough again. My words are now broken up with coughs as the smoke gets hotter and thicker, ash falling down all around me. “I have to go, but know that I love you, and I’m sorry.”

I have just enough time to grab Duke’s reins before all hell breaks loose.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Dakota

“What do you mean he stayed?”

Krissy puts a hand on my arm, because I'm sure she can feel how much I want to punch her brother right now.

"He said he needed to stay behind and save the rest of the cattle. I tried to talk him out of it..."

"You didn't try hard enough! Fuck, Wyatt, I can't believe you just left him there!"

"I didn't have a choice, Dakota! You know how he is once he gets his stubborn-ass head on something!"

We're drawing a crowd in the middle of the shelter, but I don't care. Anger like I've never felt before is burning through my body. Partly because Wyatt had the audacity to just leave him at the ranch. Most of it is because I did too.

"I need to go." I fight the urge to run through the crowd and mow down anyone that might be in my way. Every cell in my body screams that I need to get to Chance. I just found him; I'm not going to lose him.

Krissy holds on to my arm tighter, standing in my way. "Hold on there. You're not going alone, Dakota."

"I can't stay here!"

"No one's asking you to," Brett, Krissy's fiancé, says from my side. "We just need a plan before we run into the fire."

Guilt burns in my chest as I look around the room. I should have gone to the ranch to make sure that he left. To make sure that he was okay. But instead, I was too focused on myself and Addie that I just trusted that he said he was going to meet us here or alluded to it. Mostly just told me what I wanted to hear, but I believed him.

Dammit, I shouldn't have believed him.

“What was holding him back? Why didn't you load all the cattle into the trailers that you had?” I ask; trying to will myself to calm down. Just like in the courtroom, I know that getting upset isn't going to help anything or get me where I want to be.

“They wouldn't all fit. We only have enough trailers to work the auctions and transport small amounts at a time. There's never another situation like this where we would need to move all of them. Chance made the decision to put the most valuable stock we have in the trailer and bring them to the Triple Acres Ranch,” Wyatt answers.

“That's good; Beau will take good care of them.” I start pacing the area in front of me, steepling my hands in front of my lips. “Where do you think he is now?”

“The back corner of his property. He said he was going to take them the farthest away from the flames that he could. There's a clearing there without any trees along the property line; I'm pretty sure that's the spot he would have gone.”

“Were the flames really that close?” Brett asks.

We all hold our breath and watch as Wyatt nods his head.

Page 70

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

I hold back my tears and resist falling to the cot behind me. Breaking down and crying won't do me any good, and it certainly won't save Chance.

We just found our way past all the bullshit; I can't lose him now. No matter how stubborn and bullheaded he's being about needing to do all of this alone.

I need to think. There has to be some way that we can get to him without the fire closing in on all of us.

I turn to Wyatt, and pray that he has the answers I need. "Which way is the fire spreading toward the ranch?"

"It's spreading east. Last I saw, it was a few kilometres out, but the wind was starting to pick up. I don't know how quickly it moved after that."

I nod, wracking my brain for anything.

"Is there a creek in the back?" Addie asks. "Somewhere he might have led the animals to that would create a sort of barrier?"

"No, not a creek; that's on the west side of the property."

If the fire has a creek and they're in a clearing, that may have bought him some time, depending on the conditions.

"We need to find someone to help us get the rest of the cattle out of there. Wyatt, do you know of anyone that might have some trailers available? I know everyone's

moving their own stock, but there must be someone that maybe has a smaller herd?"

"It's possible. I can start making some calls," he answers.

"How many trailers do we need to get the rest out?" I ask, stopping my pacing.

"At least four."

"Then start and see who can spare some. Can we use the trailer that you've already transported some of them in?"

"We just have the one, but I can get it back from Campbell if I leave now."

"Give us the number for the neighbour that borders his property line and anyone you think might be free to help. We'll do the rest," I order Wyatt, not wanting to waste any more time. "We can't leave Chance there, especially if the fires are moving as fast as you say they are."

We have a crowd gathering around us now, concern etched on everyone's faces.

"What's going on?" Tess, the owner of the local cafe, asks.

"Chance is stuck at the ranch with some of his herd. We're trying to see who can help get the animals out," I reply.

"Chet Thompson's farm supplies all the dairy to the cafe. I bet he has a trailer. Let me call him," Tess says excitedly.

"Yes, please! And find out how many he has. We need three more." I watch as she moves away, taking out her phone and tapping quickly.

“I think I may know someone that has another trailer,” another person says.

“Me, too!” calls someone else.

Krissy and Brett take over, keeping track of how many trailers we are able to pull together, ushering everyone able to help over to one side.

“What do you need me to do?” Addie asks.

I try to calm my thoughts and think rationally about anything else that might need to be organized. All I can hear is the pounding of my heart in my ears, and my body becomes so jittery, and I start to shake out my hands.

“Let me think. Can you gather up some food and water to take with us? I don’t know what state Chance is going to be in when we get there. He likely hasn’t eaten since this morning.”

“On it.” She moves without question, dodging people as she rushes to the table that houses all the food that has been gathered for the evacuees.

My phone dings from my pocket. A new rush of adrenaline courses through me as I pray that it’s Chance.

But it’s not.

Page 71

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

Wyatt: Here's the number for the neighbour that borders Chance on the east side.

A following text comes through with a number that I don't hesitate to call.

I pray that the call goes through in all the chaos.

I also pray that he's not someone that Chance regularly pisses off.

I breathe a sigh of relief when the phone starts to ring, which is quickly replaced with fear when it continues to ring. Just as I'm sure it's about to be disconnected or go to voicemail, a hurried, gruff voice answers the phone.

"Yeah?"

"Is this Kit Matthews?"

"Look, if you're trying to sell me something, we've got a bit of an emergency going on here."

"No, it's nothing like that. My name is Dakota Myers and I need your help. More specifically, Chance Declan needs your help."

A sigh comes through the speaker. "What did the fucker do now?"

"He couldn't get all of his cattle out before the fire started closing in. We believe he herded them to the southeast corner of his property, which borders yours. We need your help getting him and the animals out."

A string of swear words sounds next as the phone ruffles and it sounds like he's moving. "Stubborn-ass fucking cowboy. Never did have his head screwed on straight."

I relay that we're working on getting trailers and should have enough to get the animals out safely. "We just need your okay to enter your land and get them."

"I'll do you one better, I'll meet you there. Just make sure the asshole doesn't do anything else stupid until we get there."

The line clicks and I look down at the screen of my phone. Only minutes have passed since finding out Chance is likely cornered on his property, but it feels like it's been hours.

"Dakota! We've got it organized! We need to get moving!" Krissy yells.

"I grabbed what I could," Addie says as she reaches me, her arms laden with bags filled with items. "They also threw in some first aid supplies, just in case. I don't know how to use all of them, but hopefully we don't need it."

We'd better not need it.

"I've got my truck ready to go," Brett says. "I can take the four of us. Everyone else that can help will meet us at the ranch next to Chance's."

"How....?"

"Whiskey Falls is a small town, Dakota. We're family. No one is going to leave Chance behind." Krissy places her hand on my arm and for the second time tonight, I fight the tears in my eyes.

I might not have grown up here, but it's easy to see that the town is a family. When it matters the most, they rally together and take care of their own.

I stand up straighter, knowing that I'm also not doing this alone. I have an army full of people that are ready to ride into the fire and get Chance out. We won't lose him, or any of the animals tonight.

“Let's go save our cowboy.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chance

“Come on now, Duke. Don't be like this,” I run my hand along his flank while holding his reins tight in my other hand.

I resist the urge to cough, as it only seems to agitate him more. The burning in my lungs is getting worse with every breath I take, but I need Duke to calm down or I have no hope of avoiding a stampede of cows along with him.

Duke huffs and blows air at me, trying to take a step back.

“Just let me put this on you. It's for your own good.” I try to talk in my calmest voice, but the closer this fire gets, the less I'm able to maintain it.

Page 72

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

I know he doesn't understand a word I'm saying, but if I talk, I distract him, and that's what I need if I have any chance of saving him surrounded by this smoke.

Moving slowly, my hand runs along his side and up his neck, trailing my damp bandana as I go.

“There you go, boy. That's good. Just stay still.”

Everything goes well until I go to put the damp cloth over his eyes, causing him to rear back.

“Fuck!” I use both hands to pull back on his reins, holding him close to me.

The cows are starting to move erratically, their moos getting louder as they become more agitated.

The heat of the fire is close to unbearable. Sweat soaks every inch of my shirt. The urge to shed off my layers is hard to ignore, but I have to. If the fire gets any closer, I'll need everything I can to keep it away from my skin.

I won't run and leave these animals, not unless there's no hope of saving any of them.

Even then, I'm not sure I could ever leave Duke.

Which brings me back to my task of getting this wet bandana around his eyes.

Taking a shallow breath, I will us all to just calm the fuck down.

“Come on, Duke. Just let me put this on you. It’s best you don’t see it. Hell, I wish I couldn’t.” I stroke my hand along his coat. “This is just my luck, isn’t it? I finally start to do what everyone in town wants me to do—what Dad wanted me to do—and I’m about to lose it all. The ranch. The rodeo. Dakota.”

My hand stops moving as a pang shoots through my heart.

I’m going to lose Dakota.

Or more accurately, she’s going to lose me.

Duke whinnies and starts to pull back, but I hold firm on the reins and start petting him again.

“It’s fine. She’ll move on. I was never part of the long term plan for her, anyway. Who was I to even think I could do the forever kind of stuff? I’m not built for that.”

Or, I didn’t think I was. Not until I started seeing her as anything other than a sassy annoyance. But then she made me open up to her. She made me talk to her about things that weren’t superficial.

She made me care.

“At least Mom’s ring is safe,” I add, slowly moving my way from Duke’s side and petting his neck, making sure to wet the hair of his mane. “I guess it’s hers now. No one else to give it to.”

But maybe it was always going to be hers.

I hadn’t thought about what would happen to the ring once we decided to try ‘us’ for real. Not that it had felt fake at all since the weekend of the gala.

“What do you think, Duke? Would I have proposed for real if we didn’t get stuck here?”

Duke huffs.

“You’re right. I would have found some excuse not to.”

I look over my shoulder, seeing the fire burning near the edge of the clearing, moving fast as it tears through the last of the barrier.

I had spent a good half an hour trying to saw through the cow fencing with the knife I had grabbed from the barn, but I wasn’t able to make it through. If I had thought more clearly, I would have grabbed the bolt cutters instead of grabbing the first thing I saw.

“I guess none of it matters now. That fire isn’t going anywhere, and neither are we.” Moving slowly, I keep talking while I move my hand closer to his head, making sure to rub his ears. “There’s a lot of ‘would haves’ when you have time to look back on things, I guess. Like how I should have come to my senses about Dakota earlier instead of spending so much fucking time pushing her away. I probably shouldn’t have spent so much time with women I don’t remember just to forget everything I’d fucking failed at.” I move slowly, cover his eyes with the bandana, and sigh with relief when I tuck it into his harness, holding it in place.

He shifts uncomfortably, getting used to his blindness, but doesn’t rear back again. I move my hand down his neck, petting his hair to keep him calm.

“I guess if this is it, at least we’re here together, huh? I couldn’t have asked for a better horse. You’ve been with me through a lot.” I think back to the rides we took when I couldn’t handle any more of Dad’s lectures on how I needed to get my life together, and how I wasn’t going to be able to run a ranch if I was out sleeping with

half the town.

Page 73

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

Guess he wasn't wrong on that one. Not fully, anyway. It never impeded my ability to run the ranch. Just the rodeo.

There were also all the rides after Dad died. When running the ranch suddenly all became too much. When there were too many questions I didn't have the answer to. Hell, I still don't have the answer to.

“What do you think Dad would have done, huh?” I ask, continuing to stroke his hair. I can feel him calming under my touch, the reaction causing the cows around him to start calming among the chaos as well. “He's probably looking down on me calling me every name in the book, but I know he would have done the same. There's no way he would have left any of you behind. Although, I'm sure he would have remembered the fucking bolt cutters.”

A roar of the fire bellows across the field, making me jump. Duke rears back and the cows paw at the ground.

I suck in a breath and regret it as I begin what feels like an endless cycle of coughing. Each rise of my chest brings a new wave of burning down my throat and into my lungs, starting the cycle all over again.

This isn't how I thought I would go. Being caught in a wildfire wasn't in even on my radar of possible scenarios that would end my life.

But here I fucking am.

I herd Duke and the cows into as much of the corner of the property as I can, hoping

that even an extra couple of inches will provide some relief for us. The heat and smoke are overwhelming, and the more I move, the more lethargic I feel myself getting. I know I can't afford to stop, or I might lose consciousness and then it will have all been for nothing.

"This hasn't been for nothing, right, Duke?" I ask between coughs, placing my head on his neck. I hold on to his mane as if he's the only thing holding me together. "This isn't it."

Blinding light flashes through my closed eyelids. The fire must have jumped. It's here now.

The odd sensation is that the heat didn't come with it. It still feels the same level of hell that I've been feeling for the past hour.

"Chance!"

Dakota's voice rings through my head. Now I'm imagining things.

"Chance! Answer me!"

More lights and sounds of voices fill my head. I can hear what sounds like more people calling my name, but I can't bring myself to lift my head to face it. Mostly because I'm not sure if I can handle it when I find out it is just a part of my imagination.

"Cut the fence, Wyatt! Hurry!"

Of course Wyatt would bring cutters.

"Kit, do you have that side?" Now I'm imaging Wyatt's voice.

Wrapping my arm around Duke's neck, I let him shoulder my weight and keep me upright as I fight to remain where I am. I can't fall. If I fall, I'm dead.

I hear the movement of the cattle and I know I should lift my head to make sure they aren't going to scatter, but I can't do it. I can't move. If this is it, there's nothing I can do for them anyway.

"Chance! Talk to me!" Dakota yells.

I guess there's no harm talking to her since it'll be the last chance I get. Even if it'll only be in my mind.

"I never should have treated you the way I did," I confess. "You didn't deserve any of that."

I don't know if she hears me, the imaginary Dakota in my mind, but it feels good to get the confession out. Even if it means I start a new round of coughing.

"We're coming to you, Chance! Just hang on!"

I chuckle. Hang on. If only she knew I was literally hanging on to Duke for dear life.

Laughing. That's something else I should have done more. Another thing that Dakota let me see I am capable of.

"Kit, can't you move these cows any faster?" her impatient tone rings over the deafening flames.

"You're more than welcome to try to move this thousand-pound calf yourself there, Darlin'," Kit's sarcastic tone hits my ears and I groan.

Even that old asshole is in my hallucination now?

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“If that thousand-pound cow doesn’t haul ass so we can get Chance out of there, I’ll gladly be eating it as a steak dinner,” Dakota answers.

There’s my girl.

I drown out the noise in my head, trying to focus on anything else, including the suffocating heat that seems to get more intense. The noise of truck engines and metal against metal compete with the sounds of voices and the fire in my mind, getting more and more confusing as the minutes pass.

“Chance! We’re almost there! Just hang on!”

“Hang on,” I chuckle. “If you only knew.”

There’s more bustling and movement behind me, but I can’t find the energy to look. I can’t find the energy to do anything. Duke shifts underneath me, and I know he wants to move. I’m just happy I got the bandana on his head so he doesn’t have to see what’s coming.

“I’m sorry, Duke.” I hold on to his mane tighter. “I’m sorry I brought you into this. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Duke snorts.

“Yes, I also know you would have been pissed if I left you behind.” I cough and shuffle my feet and almost lose my balance if it weren’t for Duke grounding me. “I guess we’re both assholes then, eh?”

“Chance, do not fall! We’re almost there!”

“I’m sorry, Dakota. So sorry for everything.”

I feel my hold on Duke slip as my knees buckle under me, and all I can feel is falling.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Dakota

I watch the rise and fall of Chance’s heartbeat on the monitor, trying to find solace in it. It’s been over twenty-four hours since we pulled him from the ranch after he fell to the ground, and he still hasn’t woken up.

“You need to eat,” Wyatt barks from his chair in the corner of the room.

“So do you.” I don’t have the energy to fight him. Not anymore.

We’ve been doing a lot of that since we got to the hospital. Being argumentative seems to be the way we both handle guilt, and we’re just lucky enough to be stuck with each other while we wait for Chance to wake up.

Because he will wake up.

Other than the breathing tube under his nose, it just looks like he’s sleeping. He has the same child-like expression on his face that he does when we spend our nights together. Like it is the only time he truly doesn’t have a care in the world. And maybe that is true.

For once, I want to wake him up and not let him have that rest. I need to know that he’s going to be okay. That he’s still going to be the same asshole I fell in love with.

“You’re not going to do him any good if you don’t take care of yourself,” Wyatt says in a tone that makes me want to punch him.

“Don’t you have family you can go and annoy?”

“Don’t you have ambulances that need chasing?”

I stand and face him, pointing my finger at him. “Fuck you with the lawyer jokes. Fuck you with trying to boss me around and get me out of this room, and you know what, just FUCK YOU!” I yell.

He stands and crosses the distance between us, towering over me like he’s trying to intimidate me. “Do you think you’re any better? You’re not going to make him wake up by staring at him or holding his hand.”

“Maybe not, but I’m going to be here for him, whether you like it or not.”

“Can you both knock it off?”

I spin around, eyes wide, as Chance starts to cough. The sound is both welcoming and alarming. He’s awake, which is the biggest thing, but the cough sounds so horrific and painful it has to be torture for him.

Rushing to his side, I place my hand on his shoulder, trying to stop him from sitting up. He swats my hand away while still coughing and sits.

Page 75

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“You should lay down.” When he doesn’t listen to me, I roll my eyes and focus on pouring him some water.

Stubborn-ass cowboy.

Wyatt moves to my side as I pass Chance the glass, urging him to drink slowly.

“You’re really fucking stupid, you know that, right?”

“Wyatt!” I gasp.

“What? He knows it, we all know it.” He narrows his eyes at Chance. “You almost got yourself killed, just like I said you were going to.”

“Can we save the ‘I told you so’s’ for later?” Chance’s voice is rough and gravelly, like he’s smoked a lifetime of cigarettes in a night.

“No, you need to hear this. You scared every last person in town with your dumbass plan. Not to mention risking your horse and cattle. And you didn’t even bring fucking bolt cutters with you when you fled to the fence? What was your plan once you got there?”

“Didn’t have one.” Chance thrusts the glass at me before lowering himself back onto the bed.

“Not now,” I seethe. Running my hands through Chance’s hair, I try to comfort him as he covers his eyes with his arm.

“If we all had to rush back into the fire to save his ass, he can listen to this.” He gives me a side glare that tells me to shut up. “You’re reckless and you’re a fucking idiot. When I left you, I assumed it was because you were smart enough to get your dumb ass out of the fire, not stay like some damn martyr.”

Chance remains silent, except for a small cough.

“Well?” Wyatt demands.

“You’re right.”

Wyatt and I both stare at him, not believing we’re hearing him admit that.

“This is enough for now. Wyatt, go take a walk. We can finish this later.”

“How about you both go for a walk?” An older nurse suggests as she walks into the room. “Now that Mr. Declan here is awake, I need to run some tests.”

I nod, leaning down and kissing him on the forehead, too grateful to have him back to think about how he hasn’t said a word to me since he woke up.

Wyatt and I walk in silence to the elevator. I need coffee desperately. And food, but I’m feeling prideful, and I won’t eat because Wyatt had all but ordered me to earlier.

“He needed to hear it,” Wyatt says gruffly as we stare at the screen of the elevator, waiting for it to reach our floor.

“Are you trying to convince me or you?”

“Both.”

The beep of the elevator and muffled hospital sounds hang between us as the numbers on the screen tick by.

How many fucking floors are in this building?

As the doors finally open, we shuffle inside and don't say another word. I move to the farthest corner away from him. It may be childish, but after the way he spoke to Chance, I can't risk lashing out at him. I need to save all my energy for getting Chance home.

Home. I don't even know where that is anymore.

The hospital cafeteria is eerily quiet, with only a few employees sitting quietly at tables.

Walking briskly, I leave Wyatt behind and go straight to the coffee machine. I need the biggest cup they've got, even though I know it will most likely taste terrible.

I don't look for him as I pay and make my way to an empty table as far away from everyone as I can get. Taking a sip of the overly bitter coffee, I wince and try to pretend it's my favourite latte instead.

I take another sip, realizing that no amount of wishing will make this one of Tess' lattes.

Page 76

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

A wrapped breakfast sandwich is tossed in front of me a moment before Wyatt lowers himself into a chair at the table.

I lock eyes with him, eyebrow raised.

“Eat,” he commands before unwrapping his own and taking a bite.

I watch him, taking another sip of my coffee and avoiding the sandwich.

He sighs. “Seriously, Dakota. You need to eat something.” He stares at me for a moment longer and sighs. “Come on. I promised Chance I would take care of you.”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t need taking care of. I did just fine before you both came along.”

“Clearly,” he says dryly before taking another bite.

“I’ll eat if you promise to lay off Chance. At least until he’s better and can fight back.”

Wyatt looks between me and the untouched sandwich. “Deal.”

Satisfied that he’s telling the truth, I unwrap it and take a big bite, which I immediately regret. The egg tastes like rubber, the English Muffin it’s on is stale, and the cheese tastes like it might possibly be expired.

“This is disgusting,” I say, fighting to swallow the nearly inedible food before

chugging my coffee. The bitterness of the drink is a thousand times better than this 'food.'

"I know." He sits back, giving me a shit-eating grin.

"And you talked me into eating it anyway?"

"If I have to eat this, so do you. They charged me an arm and a leg for it." He chuckles.

I laugh, crumpling up my napkin and throwing it at him, which only makes him laugh harder.

"Well, this is it." I step into the small hotel room, hoping that if I act overly cheery that it will lessen the blow that this will be our temporary home.

Chance crosses into the room with a scowl on his face.

"I know it's not much, but it's better than sleeping on the cots in the shelter. While I'm grateful, they weren't the most comfortable." Or the chair in his hospital room, but I don't mention that.

Closing the door behind him, I try to see the room from his perspective. There's a single queen bed in the middle of the room with standard wooden nightstands on either side. There's small, rounded table with two chairs, and a desk with a rolling chair. A door to the bathroom is on the far wall, which is tiny, but functional and clean.

There are a few piles of bags on the table. I ran out and got some clothes and food before picking him up from the hospital. I had to guess on his size, and I hope I guessed correctly. The clothes he was wearing the night of the fire had to be

destroyed by the hospital, so Wyatt brought him some of his until we could get others sorted.

Chance hasn't said a word since I got to his hospital room. Other than needing time to recuperate from the smoke inhalation, he's thankfully all right. While it's pissing me off he hasn't said anything, I tell myself it's because his throat must be in a lot of pain, not because he doesn't want to talk to me.

"I thought you would probably want a shower and settle in. I can go grab dinner. There's a diner around the corner that has decent food and they've been giving a discount to all the evacuees." I walk into the middle of the room, shuffling through the bags on the table to distract myself. "I had to guess on your size and what you would wear, but it's a start at least. There's a big box store on the edge of town, and a mall in the next town over..."

Chance covers my hands in his, forcing me to look up at him.

"I don't care about food or clothes right now." He pulls me into him and wraps his arms around me.

I've tried to be so strong since the night of the fire. I haven't broken down or cried. I've been so focused on what needed to be done in order to get Chance out of there or how to get him home from the hospital. But now that he's here with me, holding me, I find myself letting go.

The tears flow freely as he holds me closer. I can't stop the sobs that erupt from my body or the way I cling to him. I hate he smells like Wyatt's cologne, and not of the whiskey-sunshine smell that I associate with Chance, but he's here. He's holding me. He's alive.

"I'm so sorry," he says, kissing the top of my head.

“I want to be so mad at you for making me think you were leaving the ranch and meeting me at the shelter, but I can’t. I’m just so grateful to have you here with me.”

“I know,” he whispers into my hair.

I punch at his chest without any heat, letting my fist graze off his chest. “Why did you stay? Why didn’t you call for help right away? I know the other ranchers would have come with their trailers after unloading their own cattle.” I punch him again, this time with a little more strength behind it. “Why did you stop fighting? Why didn’t you fight for yourself? For me? For us?” I’m back to sobbing now and collapse back into his arms.

Page 77

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

“Because I’m a coward, Dakota. That’s why.”

“I listened to your voicemails.” I whisper, burrowing into his chest. “I’ve listened to them over and over since the night of your fire. You were saying goodbye to me.”

I hear him suck in a breath, but he doesn’t say anything.

I look up at him, wiping my eyes. “Why would you do that? Why wouldn’t you get out of there? Leave the cattle, take Duke and ride? I know that the animals and the land are everything to you, but you’re everything to me, Chance! I fucking love you!”

He strokes the hair away from my face, wiping at the tears on my cheeks with his thumbs. “I know.”

“And yet, you stayed.”

He looks at me for a moment longer. “Like I said, I’m a coward. I thought you would be better off. I thought that I was doing the right thing.”

“Well you were wrong!” I explode back, putting space between us. “You don’t get to make that decision; do you hear me? We are in this together. We are together. That means you can’t run around playing cowboy and throwing yourself into literal fires.”

“Not playing. I am a cowboy.” A smile hints at his lips, which makes him look both adorable and increases my urge to punch him for real.

“I mean it, Chance.”

He takes a step forward, placing his hands on my shoulders as he dips his head and looks into my eyes. “I’m sorry, Dakota. I know I was wrong now. I shouldn’t have stayed at the ranch, and I shouldn’t have done it alone. I can’t thank you enough for what you did to get me and the animals out of there. And I want you to know that I meant every word I said in those voicemails. I love you, Dakota. For real. I promise I won’t go anywhere again.”

He’s so sincere, and I can tell that he’s not lying to me, but at the same time, I can’t help remembering when he told me that he’s not a forever kind of guy. That he doesn’t do long term relationships.

I look down at the ring on my finger and question what this all really means.

“I’ve been thinking about that.” He tips his chin at my hand. “You should keep it.”

“Chance, it’s your mom’s. It should stay in the family.”

“It will, because I mean it when I say I’m in. I’m not going anywhere. We should do this for real. All of it.”

“You can’t mean...”

He takes my hands and kisses my knuckles. “That we get married. Yes, yes, I do.”

My mouth hangs open, staring at him. I don’t know what to say.

“Not right now, obviously.”

“But what about you not being a ‘forever kind of guy?’ You were very clear that marriage was never in your future.”

“Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I just needed to meet the right person for me to see forever with.”

“How would we?” My gaze drifts past him out of the window. The town that we called home is utterly damaged. We might not even be able to go back to the life we once had.

“We’ll figure it out.”

“Half the town is gone.” My mind catches up with what’s happening. “The town! I didn’t fill you in on everything. There’s so much destruction.”

Now that the fire has been controlled, police and fire have gone in and have started updating people as they find out what’s been saved and what is damaged. “The rodeo area is gone.”

“I know. Wyatt told me. When the police couldn’t get a hold of me, they called him.”

“I’m so sorry, Chance. Everything we worked for is gone.”

“No, it’s not. As much as the sponsors were wrong in what they demanded, it brought me you, and I can’t be upset about that.”

Excuse me while I swoon.

“And your house...”

“Is gone. I know.”

“How are you not upset about this?”

“The arena can be rebuilt, and so can my house. Plus, you know I hated that house anyway. Our old family house was saved. We can live there while we rebuild the main house.”

“What about Wyatt?”

He wraps his arms around me again. “Well, I heard your house survived without any damage...”

I smile, thinking I know where this is going. “It did...”

“And since we will be getting married, that usually means that the couple lives together.”

“This is true.” I smile, wrapping my arms around his waist.

“So that would leave your house empty.”

“I guess we could accommodate him. Since we’ll be kicking him out of his house and all.”

Chance smiles and lowers his mouth down to mine. The smell of smoke and ash clings to him, mixed with Wyatt's cologne, but the touch of his lips is all Chance.

He doesn't hold back as his tongue grazes my lips, forcing me to yield to him. My hands roam to the front of his shirt, clinging to him as if he would fade away if I let go.

"You said something about a shower?"

"Hmm...yes, I believe I did."

He backs me up into the bathroom and slams the door behind him before showing me just how much he means it when he says he's become a forever kind of guy.

Epilogue

Chance

One Year Later

"Can you believe that? I didn't think he was going to stay on for the full eight seconds the way that bull was bucking!" Dakota exclaims from the window of our owner's suite.

She looks so fucking adorable in her denim skirt, tight black tank top and pink cowboy hat. We even had her fitted for her own shitkickers once she moved onto the ranch full time. I wanted them for practicality. She wanted them for some fashion statement.

Watching her now as her attention is fixated on the grounds below, I've never been more happier that I insisted on having this private suite added in the plans for the

rebuilding of the arena. Wyatt hadn't been joking when he said it had all been lost. Everything that made the arena unique from the old wooden signs to the original bleachers was gone. What was left standing wasn't salvageable.

Instead of throwing in the towel—like I wanted to many times—I took the opportunity to rebrand and build bigger and better grounds that expanded more into my land to have a bigger fair.

Wyatt thought I had lost brain cells in the fire, but Dakota thought it was a great idea. I'll never forget the smile on her face when I let her help design the market grounds, that also now boast the town's farmer's market as well.

“Chance, come over here and see this. The next one looks like it's going to be a good one.” She looks over her shoulder and gives me her ‘come fuck me’ eyes, and I'm lost.

Closing the distance between us, I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her close to me, letting her feel exactly what she does to me. I don't look at the action below, instead I lower my head and press kisses along the column of her neck, smiling as she places her hands on mine.

It's been like this since we eloped last fall. I haven't been able to keep my hands off her.

After we were let back into Whiskey Falls after the fire, and saw the complete devastation, I was completely lost. My whole world had literally gone up in flames. The rodeo arena, our main barn, and the main house were all lost. It was a miracle that the old house had been spared.

It was Dakota that held me together and showed me that we could rebuild. She stopped me from wanting to give up and hide away from the town. The same town

that came together and saved me that night when I thought they would be more than happy to let me burn.

We should have probably had our wedding here in town where everyone could have come, but that wasn't us. Instead, we ran off to Manning Park and had a small ceremony at Lightning Lake in Manning Park. Just us, the Justice of the Peace, Wyatt, and Addie. No one else even knew until we got back home.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 am

Much to my chagrin, the town threw us a party when they found out. A real small town surprise reception. Surprises like that would normally piss me off but seeing the shock and love in Dakota's eyes made me grin and bear it for the whole evening.

Also thanks to Dakota, there's a brand new arena that was finished just in time for the rodeo to start, and the finishing touches are being done on our brand new house this coming week. A house with a wraparound porch with a swing that isn't going to be flashy and meant to impress people, but one that's going to be perfect for a family.

Because now I want one of those. Who knew.

"Chance, you aren't even watching the performance," she laughs, leaning into me.

"I'm watching the only thing I'm interested in." My hands dance across her stomach, sliding underneath the fabric of her shirt.

"You're so lucky you made these windows one way." She drops her head onto my shoulder and gives in to my touch.

"You'd be getting this either way, sweetheart," I growl in her ear. "But no, no one sees what's mine."

Reaching down, I pull up her skirt to find she's not wearing anything underneath. I growl again, knowing she did this on purpose to drive me wild.

"Have you been walking around the grounds here all day without panties on, sweetheart?"

“Maaaaybe,” she says, drawing out the vowel to taunt me.

I nip at her shoulder as I unbuckle my belt, letting the sides hang as I reach for my zipper. “You’re going to get it for that.”

Bending her forward slightly, I press into her, moving slowly as I hook her leg over my arm and slide in.

Dakota moans, reaching back and knocking my hat off so she can run her hands through my hair. She grips on tight to the point of pain, but I let her. I actually welcome the pain. It adds to the thrill of pleasure I take from my wife.

My wife. That’s something that even a whole year later, I’m still getting used to saying.

“Yes,” Dakota moans as I thrust inside of her.

Taking my free hand, I gently slide it up her side and cup her breast, tweaking her nipple in time with the motion of my hips.

“Chance, Chance,” she chants, her breath becoming heavier and heavier.

I hold back the rush of my orgasm, needing her to let go first.

“Come for me, sweetheart. Let me feel you.”

Holding myself back to the point of pain, I pinch her nipples and bite down on her neck, knowing the spots that drive her wild.

“Chance. Fuck. I can’t.”

“You can, and you will.”

With another hard tweak and thrust, she falls apart, squeezing me and allowing me to follow her in her rush.

“Fuck, babe,” I whisper, just as the crowd erupts in sounds and applause below us.

“Even they’re impressed,” Dakota laughs as I lower her leg.

“If only they knew.” I kiss the spot on her neck that is most definitely going to leave a mark. I should be ashamed, but I’m not. Dakota’s mine and everyone who isn’t aware is going to fucking find out.

“We should get down there,” she says lazily, holding on to my arm.

The reflection of light off her wedding rings catches my eye in the reflection of the glass, and I smile.

If she hadn’t grabbed my arm that night in the bar to save her from her douche of an ex-boyfriend, I wouldn’t know what it was like to truly love someone and let myself be loved. I would have remained in that horrible mess of a shell that I was, being alive, but not truly living.

Dakota rocked my world and turned it upside down. I may still be a stubborn asshole of a cowboy, but I’m her stubborn asshole of a cowboy.

And we wouldn’t have it any other way.