



The Outlaw's Code (Western Oath #3)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: CALDER:

When I wake up, I'm face down in the dirt—head bleeding, no memory. Just a photo of a woman I don't recognize.

They say I had a name. A life. A girlfriend waiting.

But none of it feels right.

What does feel right is Shane—the man who keeps showing up at my door with steady hands and quiet eyes. He's not part of the life I'm supposed to remember. But I lean toward him without thinking.

If forgetting brought me to him, I hope I never remember.

SHANE:

I know who Calder is. Seen him around town—rugged, straight, completely off-limits.

So when I find him unconscious on Stratton land with no ID and no clue who he is, I figure he'll be gone as soon as he remembers.

But every day Calder stays, it gets harder. The way he lingers feels less like confusion and more like choice.

I should keep my distance. I've been here before—falling for a straight guy, hoping for something that never comes.

Now I'm not sure what would hurt more: giving in or letting go.

This is the third book in the Western Oath series. It can be read as a standalone with no cliffhanger.

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SHANE

“Looks like one of the worst storms we’ve had in years.” My cousin Levi’s voice cracked over the two-way radio. “Can you go check on the fencing near the western range?”

“Already on my way.” It was all I said before taking off in one of the UTVs we had stowed away inside a barn.

The plan was to wait out the storm and then check on the property, the usual M.O.

for situations like this. Although, this storm had seemed much worse than we’d expected, the winds picking up much faster than before.

At one point, I’d been worried about the animals in their barns, fearing that we’d either have to turn them loose or evacuate them to higher ground.

Thankfully, none of the barns had taken too much damage. But that didn’t mean the rest of the property had been spared.

As I drove across the ranch, I watched the sky above.

There was some leftover cloud cover, and the wind was still sharp.

I didn’t want to end up stuck somewhere with nowhere to hide out, just in case the storm doubled back for us.

I brought my attention back to the path in front of me, just as I made my way over a hill?—

What is that?

There was a solitary horse I didn't recognize. It looked nervous, maybe confused, standing next to a twisted tree, obviously damaged in the storm. There was a saddle on its back?—

A saddle?

A rider?

A missing rider. I parked the UTV and quickly went to work, looking for the missing rider. The horse calmed down as I approached, and I tried to make out its previous tracks in the mud. I followed a shaky lead down to a lake on the property, keeping my eyes peeled for any signs of struggle.

And there he was, face down by the lakeshore.

My breath caught in my throat as I approached him.

I'd never seen a dead body before, and hadn't exactly prepared to see one today, either.

My hands went for his shoulders and I turned him onto his side, letting him rest on his back.

The man's face was matted with blood and mud, his features unrecognizable in the moment.

I carefully wiped away at his skin, just enough to make out his eyes and nose, just enough to check if he was breathing?—

Calder?

My breath caught in my throat again, but this time for a different reason.

I recognized this man. Calder was a cowboy I'd seen around town here and there.

He'd even worked at Stratton Ranch a few times, picking up seasonal gigs when he could.

We'd never spoken much, mostly exchanged nods and polite hellos and goodbyes.

Still, I knew him. And I remembered pretty much everything that I'd learned about him over the years.

It was embarrassing but the first time I'd come across him, I'd thought he was the most handsome man I'd ever seen in a cowboy hat.

But I also knew that Calder was straight. Which meant it didn't matter how handsome I thought he was, it was a dead-end crush.

I took a steadying breath as I reached for his neck, my fingers searching for a pulse.

It seemed cruel that I was the one who found him like this, going from appreciating his every smile to desperately wondering if he'd ever smile again.

I somehow managed to keep myself calm as my fingers shifted to his wrists, searching for a pulse there too?—

“Shit!” I suddenly jumped away from him, as he sat up with a loud cough. The coughing continued as he brought a hand to his chest.

“Are you okay?” I scrambled back towards him. “It looks like you were maybe knocked off your horse during the storm?—”

“She’s gonna kill me...”

“What?”

“She’s gonna kill me...” he repeated, his eyes looking past mine. “Whoever she is.”

“You’re not making a lot of sense right now, Calder. I’m pretty sure something happened to your head.” I grimaced before busting out the two-way radio.

“Hey, Levi. I found someone. Near the lake area. Possible head injury.”

“Got it. I’ll be right over.” Levi’s response was short and to the point.

I looked back over at Calder then. “Do you remember anything? About the accident?”

“Accident?”

“How you got to the lake? You were facedown when I found you,” I continued.

“Your horse is fine, by the way. They’re just a little ways up.”

“My horse. Right. Sure.”

“You don’t remember being on a horse?”

Calder shook his head, his eyes wide. “I... don’t remember anything.”

“Short term memory loss,” I murmured, while shifting closer to him. “It’s going to be all right. That just means you hit your head extra hard. But we can help.”

“What’s your... who are you?”

“I’m Shane. Shane Stratton,” I replied. “We’ve worked together before, at Stratton Ranch. We weren’t super close or anything, so you might not remember me. I mean, even if you had all your memory working right now.”

“And you said my name is... Calder?”

“Yep. It’ll all come back to you. Don’t worry.”

“Calder...” he repeated to himself, under his breath. “Calder...”

And then, without another word, he slipped back into unconsciousness, his body slumping against the wet ground.

“Calder?” Levi said, as he stood next to Calder on the couch.

We’d brought him into the main house, carefully moving his body indoors.

Levi was cool and collected during the whole thing, which was expected.

It probably helped that he ran an emergency rescue company, Big Sky Rescue.

He was used to helping people like Calder, still unconscious, still covered in mud.

“He’s been on the ranch a few times,” I replied, my eyes watching Calder for any sign of wakefulness. “Seasonal work mostly.”

“Hmm.” Levi hummed before he searched Calder’s pockets. He pulled away from him, disappointed. “No wallet there. Did you already search his saddlebag? I put it on the living room table.”

“Not yet.” I hastily made my way towards the living room table, jumping into action.

I gingerly dumped its contents onto the table, but there wasn’t a wallet anywhere to be found.

The only thing of note was an oilskin pouch that had quietly plopped onto the wooden table.

I opened the pouch, slipping out the only thing that was inside: a worn photo of a woman with her arms draped around Calder’s shoulders.

I brought the photo back to Levi. He hummed again as he took it between his fingers. “This was the only thing he had on him? Really?”

“Pretty much.”

“But you recognized him from the ranch?” Levi’s eyes met mine. “Do you know if he has a wife or girlfriend?”

“I think it’s safe to assume that he’s straight, so sure.”

“I wouldn’t say it’s safe to assume anyone’s straight these days.” Levi playfully winked in my direction. “But we should probably see if we can figure out who she is? She might live in town for all we know?—”

“Safe to assume who lives in town?” my uncle, Joseph Stratton, stepped into the room, his usual scowl in place. He stopped a few feet away from Calder on the couch.

“Who is this? What trouble have you two brought to my door?”

“No trouble here, Dad.” Levi waved his hand. “Just someone we found put out during the storm. It looks like he hit his head. Probably fell off his horse.”

Joseph shot Levi a withering look. “Then take him to a hospital. We don’t need the scandal of a random cowboy dying in our home.”

“Can’t we use one of the doctors here instead?” I pressed. “Please? I can already tell that he’s having memory problems, and if we move him again—I’m just worried?—”

“Fine.” Joseph turned his growing ire towards me. “But if the doctor recommends we move him to the hospital, that’ll be it. No further discussion.”

Joseph left the room, not sparing either of us another glance.

A few moments later, one of Joseph’s private doctors came to greet us.

Joseph was generally a healthy man, but he was getting older, and as the patriarch of the family he always liked to play his cards close to the chest. We didn’t suspect he had any health issues, but we honestly would’ve never known if he did.

It was one of his ways of maintaining control of the ranch, by keeping us in the dark. Still, I was grateful that he was sparing someone from his personal staff for the sake of Calder.

A woman with a bright smile greeted us before walking over to him on the couch.

She checked his heartbeat, his temperature, and shone a light in his eyes.

She then spent a few minutes just observing him, like she was waiting on something

to be revealed.

When she was finished, she came back over to us, her expression neutral.

“Pupil reflexes are good. So, possibly no brain damage,” she continued. “I’m guessing he has a concussion. Joseph said he fell off his horse?”

“We think so, yeah.”

“Okay. In that case, unless one of you wants to play babysitter for the next few days, the hospital should be able to watch him?—”

“I can play babysitter,” I casually volunteered, my hand already up in the air. “I mean, I don’t mind watching him, if he needs to be watched.”

“Good.” The doctor nodded before jotting her number down on a piece of paper. “Here’s my number. If anything changes, if he doesn’t wake up sooner rather than later, just let me know. We can handle things discreetly, the way Mr. Stratton prefers.”

As the doctor left the room, Levi quirked his eyebrows in my direction.

“What? What is it?”

“You’re going to play babysitter?”

“What about it?”

“For a guy you barely know?”

“He needs someone to look after him, Levi?—”

“And you really wanted it to be you?”

“I’m just trying to do the right thing. When I found him, I thought he was dead.”

“Right...” Levi nodded, his tone still lined with suspicion. “Let me know how it goes, yeah? We can put him in one of the open cabins we have near yours.”

Calder.

There was something cold settling in my stomach, something I couldn’t explain.

Levi had helped me get Calder settled into one of the open cabins, unclaimed for the season.

He was resting now on a warm bed instead of a couch.

I’d thought about stripping off his clothes and getting him properly cleaned up.

Instead, I’d opted for a wipe down of sorts, cleaning off every part of him that was visible, his arms, his face.

He looked so much better not caked in mud, his expression betraying nothing except being sound asleep.

I just want him to make it.

I’d kept the doctor’s number close by, just in case, even as the thought of calling her made me feel so much worse.

I watched Calder, then, noting the way his chest was rising and falling in time, nothing about his breathing seeming ragged or wrong.

There was a slice of moonlight cutting across his nose?—

Moonlight?

I looked outside the nearest cabin window.

Shit.

How long had I been watching over him? It was almost afternoon when we'd first found him by the lake. How much time had passed since then?

I hadn't even noticed it at all.

Because it didn't matter. Not when I needed to make sure Calder would be okay.

He took in another breath, and I took one in, too. It didn't matter how long it took for Calder to finally wake up. When he did, I was going to be there, waiting for him.

The wind howled outside, a haunting reminder of the way things had come to be. I quietly cursed the wind as I kept my eyes on Calder, willing him to wake up at any moment.

Please wake up, Calder.

Please.

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CALDER

“Calder?”

There were warm eyes looking down at mine.

Eyes I didn’t recognize but seemed to know me all the same.

I winced at the light that hit my eyes next, my hand going up to shield my face from it.

A few seconds later and my eyes started to adjust, the burning becoming more tolerable.

When I lowered my hand, the stranger was still there, still staring right at me.

“Calder? Are you awake?” His voice was hopeful. “I’m so happy you’re finally?—”

“Who’s Calder?”

“What?”

“You keep calling me that name,” I replied. “Is that me? Am I Calder?”

“Yes. You’re Calder.” The stranger offered me a small smile. “And I’m Shane. Shane Stratton.”

“Do we know each other?”

“Not really, no. We’ve seen each other around the ranch.”

“I wish I could remember...” My words trailed off, as I fully took in the stranger.

He was tall, with a lean build, muscles hidden beneath his clothes.

He was beautiful, too, in a classic sort of way, rugged enough to be on a carton of cigarettes but soft enough to be in glossy magazines.

His hair was perfectly trimmed and neat, but his eyes reminded me of nature herself: still, yet with a wildness behind them always.

“The doctor said you have a concussion. I think short term memory loss can be a side effect of that.” He nodded to himself as he spoke. “I should let her know you’ve woken up.”

“How long have I been out—Fuck!” I tried to sit up, but just as I did, the world went dark around me. Shane grabbed my waist and steadied me, gently helping me lie back down.

“Take it easy, okay?” Shane frowned. “I’ve been looking into it and the best thing for a concussion is to get some rest.”

I shakily gave him a thumbs up, as the world filled in with color again. When my eyes blinked open a little while later, Shane was holding a photo in front of my face. “Do you recognize her? We found this photo with the rest of your belongings.”

“She’s pretty.” It was all I could think to say, as my thoughts swirled together. “And we look pretty close in that picture, don’t we?”

“We were thinking she’s maybe your girlfriend?”

“Or my wife?” I playfully shrugged. “Or just a random woman I took a photo with. Maybe that’s my thing. Taking photos with strangers.”

At least, I hope she’s a stranger.

I hadn’t felt anything at all for the woman in the photo.

And while it was true that she was pretty to look at, the thought of feeling nothing for the woman who might be my wife or girlfriend was making me nauseous in ways I couldn’t explain.

Even if I couldn’t remember my name or my address, or even where I’d grown up, I would think that soulmate-love-of-my-life type of love was the sort of thing I’d feel in my veins, no matter what.

“Taking photos with strangers and carrying those photos around? Quirky,” Shane said, with a bemused look. The expression quickly faded as he went on. “More than likely, she means something to you. Something important.”

“Yeah. Maybe so.” I closed my eyes, suddenly feeling tired all over. “I’m sure it’ll come to me.”

“I’m sure it will.” I heard Shane’s footsteps heading for the nearest door. “In the meantime, I’ll go check in with the doctor. Give you your space. Remember, take it easy.”

“Take it easy. Got it. I’ll just sign up for the 5K instead of the 10K.”

“Very funny,” Shane said, not sounding amused in any way, shape or form.

That night, I dreamt for the first time since arriving at Stratton Ranch.

In the dream, I was riding my horse, hard, like I had somewhere to be.

The sense of urgency reflected in everything around me, the trees, the air, the sun, the grass.

Everything felt like it wanted me to go faster and faster, charging on until I made it to my destination.

There was dust burning my eyes, but I didn't care, the same way I didn't care about the heat that made its way down my neck.

Suddenly, my horse came to a stop. We were at the beginning of yet another trail, but this time, there was someone waiting for us.

They were all the way at the end of the trail, silhouetted by the sky, sitting on a horse of their own.

It looked like a man's figure, but I couldn't tell if I recognized him or not.

As I stared at the stranger, something twisted in my chest, something that left me breathless.

Was I... excited? Had I been expecting him at the end of the trail?

Who is he to me?

Feeling a newfound determination, I began to race towards the man cloaked in sky?—

And then I woke up, greeted by the cabin ceiling.

I groaned as I closed my eyes again, desperate to get back to the mystery man at the end of the trail.

I briefly wondered if he was real, someone I'd met long ago that my brain was aching to remember.

No matter what I did, though, I couldn't get back to him or back to sleep, my mind racing with one too many thoughts.

Instead, I watched the world outside my cabin window, the wind rolling through the fields, the birds stopping by to visit on a perch.

Everything felt familiar here, which would've made sense.

According to Shane, I'd worked here sometimes, depending on the season.

Even so, there was something else about Stratton Ranch, something I wasn't able to put my finger on.

Shit.

Maybe it'd come back to me someday, just like Shane said.

"Don't—Okay, maybe we should—Hold on?—"

Shane was back in my cabin, watching me take my first wobbly step. It'd been a few days since I'd been on bedrest, and I was ready to test my legs.

Or at least, I thought I was ready. Shane already had his hands out, like I was bound

to fall over any second.

“I’ve got it... I’ve got it...” I held up a hand as I planted my feet on the ground.
“Shit. Okay. I think we’re good.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Shane let out a sigh of relief. “Okay. Good.”

“Hey, can I shadow you today?”

“What?”

“You know, follow you around. See what you’re up to,” I continued. “I know I’m not supposed to be doing too much physical stuff. But I’d like to leave the cabin, get outside a little bit. And it’s not like I know anyone else here, so...”

“You sure?” Shane hesitated. “I don’t have the most exciting day planned.”

“You said I used to work on the ranch, right?” I reminded him. “If you’re doing work around here, it’d probably be pretty interesting to me, whatever it is. And who knows? Maybe it’ll shake something loose out of my memory, too.”

“Good point.” Shane nodded. “All right, then. Sure. Just promise that you’ll tell me if you need to sit down. Or lie down. Or pass out.”

“I’ll definitely tell you if I need to do one of those things. Or maybe all three at the same time.”

“Uh-huh.” Shane’s face stayed stoic and still.

A few minutes later and we were outside the cabin, the fresh air hitting my grateful skin.

Shane started up a UTV, with me slipping into the passenger seat.

Shane had a confidence that permeated through everything he did, even the little things, like maneuvering his vehicle around turns on the ranch.

It was obvious that he’d been a cowboy for a long time, his comfort hinting at things coming second nature to him.

Eventually, we arrived at a barn with several hay bales outside of it. Shane parked the UTV and motioned for me to follow behind him. When I was standing next to him, he nodded up at the barn. “I’m going to move some hay bales into the barn for safekeeping?—”

“ We’re going to move some hay bales into the barn for safekeeping.”

“I thought you said you wanted to shadow me, Calder.” Shane raised an eyebrow. “Since when do shadows move hay bales?”

“Come on. It might jog some memories, remember?” I said, already moving towards a stack of hay bales, grabbing it on either side. “This’ll go faster with two people, anyway.”

Shane kept a watchful eye on me, as we completed the task, one hay bale at a time.

As we moved the bales, it felt like my body knew exactly what to do, even if I couldn’t remember why.

It was like my muscles had a memory all of their own, snapping into action in ways I couldn't comprehend.

My body knew that it was comfortable here, comfortable working next to Shane, comfortable in the barn.

"What's next?" I asked, as we headed back to the UTV, already sitting down in the passenger seat.

"I was going to go check on the horses," Shane replied. "Are you still feeling okay?"

"Never felt better."

"You've never felt better than post-concussion?"

"If I had ever felt better, would I even remember it?" I joked.

Shane cracked the slightest of smiles. It felt like winning something, making Shane smile. I had a feeling he wasn't the biggest fan of things like smiling or letting loose, so it was like the tiniest bit of sunlight shining through.

When we got to one of the horse stables, Shane casually walked the premises. I followed behind him, the steps feeling familiar to me, too. I watched as he looked over the horses, each of them seeming so comfortable with his presence.

"Is this something you do often?" I asked as we walked together.

"Whenever I can," he answered. "It's one of my favorite parts of ranch life, I think, working with the animals. They... sort of keep me calm."

"Keep you calm? Is there a reason you usually aren't?"

“Oh. Right. You probably don’t remember meeting Joseph Stratton.” He let out a pained laugh. “My uncle can be... a lot. He owns the place. Working for him, working with him... I try to keep my distance when I can.”

“But why put yourself through any of it?”

“Because of Levi and Cole. We all take care of each other. Levi and Cole are brothers, and even though I’m their cousin, I’ve always been like a brother to them, too.”

“Huh.”

“Huh what?”

“Nothing. It’s just...” I stopped and started. “That’s very noble of you, Shane. It’s admirable.”

He shrugged. “They do the same for me.”

“Doesn’t make it any less admirable.” I smirked. “Just take the compliment? Please?”

“Compliment taken,” Shane said, turning his attention back to the horses.

I kept my eyes on him as he did, feeling something strange bubbling up through my chest. We were basically complete strangers as far as I knew, and yet, there was something about Shane.

Maybe some kind of tension, maybe some kind of warmth, maybe some kind of tenderness.

I was just so comfortable around him, all the time, from the first moment I’d woken

up on the ranch.

Or maybe I was just like the rest of the horses in this stable, comforted by Shane's presence because he was comforting .

He'd clearly gone out of his way to check on me after my accident, keeping watch until I opened my eyes.

For someone like Shane, making sure people were taken care of seemed to be second nature.

Which meant that I was probably reading into something that wasn't there.

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SHANE

“Steak and potatoes for breakfast. My favorite.” Calder playfully winked at me.
“Seriously. Thanks for this, Shane.”

I was doing my usual daily routine, dropping off a hot meal, along with some supplies and firewood for Calder’s cabin.

As he seemed to be recovering just fine, I tried to keep my distance from him as best I could.

My system was efficient, not leaving much time for catching up or small talk.

I wasn’t interested in getting to know Calder any better than I had before, images of us exchanging polite greetings still stuck in my head.

But lately, the way he’d look at me sometimes...

No.

I knew there wasn’t anything to it. If anything, Calder seemed like he was just a natural flirt, training his attention on anyone who happened to be around.

Which meant that I needed to treat him accordingly, as an overly flirty person who just happened to be staying on the ranch for the time being.

Besides, I knew he had someone waiting for him. That woman in the picture.

And as soon as he could remember her name, he'd be on his way home to her.

"Can I shadow you again today?"

"Oh. Uh..." I paused for a moment, thinking through my response. "I don't know if we should. Last time was fine but today I'm?—"

"Come on, Shane," he pressed. "I understand I can't be out there every day, but don't I still have the right to go outside?"

"Of course, you can go outside?—"

"What are you up to today?" He cut me off, as he moved closer to me. "Whatever it is, I want to help. You don't want my help?"

"It's not that I don't want your help, Calder," I replied. "What I want is for you to get well. And I don't want to do anything to hinder that?—"

"If I start feeling like I can't handle it, I'll let you know, ASAP. I promise."

"Calder—"

"Please, Shane? Please."

"Fine. Okay," I relented. "But you better tell me if you start feeling under the weather. I'm going to feel awful if I somehow make things worse for you."

"You have my word." Calder beamed. "Now, let's get out there. I'm going a little stir crazy being cooped up in this cabin."

Calder was good at farm work.

Frustratingly good.

I quietly watched him as he reset a fallen gate, balanced a post on his shoulder, looped a rope like he was born to do it...

It was hard denying him access to the farm when it just seemed like it was his calling.

I'd somehow managed to keep to myself as we worked alongside each other, keeping our conversations short.

But it always felt like Calder was trying to pull more and more out of me, asking follow-up questions about things I'd said, providing his own running commentary on whatever we were working on.

That was frustrating to me, too. While a part of me wanted to answer his every question, I needed things to stay the way they'd been before.

We weren't friends. We'd barely been co-workers.

We weren't anything.

And that was how I needed it to be.

"Are you going to help me move this panel or just keep standing there?" Calder said with a grin, breaking me out of my thoughts. "Actually, I think I can get it!—"

"Wait, Calder!—" But it was already too late.

The panel had been resting alongside a barn, but the size of it was deceptive.

I'd moved panels like it before but unless Calder knew its exact dimensions, trying to

move it himself would've spelled trouble.

As he picked it up, it wobbled in his grip, his legs almost going out from underneath him.

I rushed into action, steadying Calder from behind, one of my arms wrapping around his waist, while the other reached for the side of the panel.

When I was sure it was safe, I helped guide the panel down towards the ground, my arm still wrapped around Calder.

We stayed like that for a moment, Calder in my arms, hearts beating fast as I tried to regulate my breathing.

Warmth.

I'd felt it then, so close to Calder. There was something between us, something fleeting, a spark of electricity underneath my fingertips, but what if it was all in my head?—

I practically scrambled away from him, letting him go. When I did, he turned around, his eyes meeting mine. There was an expression I couldn't read on his face, half confused, half something else.

"Sorry," I apologized immediately. "I didn't want you to hurt yourself. I should've given you more space. I?—"

"It's fine. You were just trying to help," Calder's words were distant, even though he was standing right in front of me. "Thanks."

There was an unnamed tension between us, as Calder's gaze broke away from mine.

Shit.

Does he know?

I'd always been attracted to Calder, but I'd gone out of my way to hide it.

Of course, now with us being in such close proximity, it was probably more obvious than ever.

It didn't matter how much I tried to keep my distance, it didn't matter how much I'd thought Calder may have been flirting with me or looking at me differently.

Calder was never going to be interested in me, not like that.

"We should get you back to your cabin. I don't want you risking any other injuries?—"

"You're right. I should head back," Calder interrupted, his tone warming a bit. He looked over at me then, a curious look in his eye. "But... I don't really want to. Maybe we can find something else for me to do? Something that involves less panels?"

"Maybe we could feed some of the animals?"

"Sounds perfect." Calder's smile was wide.

Oh.

Maybe he doesn't know?

Or maybe he didn't care. For all I knew, Calder was flattered at the idea of me having

some stupid crush on him, a straight guy having his ego stroked by someone like me fawning all over him. I inwardly kicked myself for wasting any time even thinking about it.

“Right. Let’s head over to the stables.” It was the last thing I said as I turned away from him, willing myself to not spare him another damn thought.

The sun was setting as I drove the UTV back to Calder’s cabin.

We’d finished the rest of my to-do list for the day, mostly in silence since the panel incident.

I honestly just didn’t have anything else to say to him, embarrassment still just underneath my skin.

I’d felt something between us that wasn’t there, projected my thoughts onto Calder with an uncomfortable ease.

And now, all I wanted to do was head home to my cabin and forget the whole thing.

“Do you remember your dreams, Shane?”

“What?” Calder’s question knocked me back down to Earth.

“Your dreams? Do you remember them?” He sighed. “What about having the same one, over and over? Has that ever happened to you?”

“Are you sure you’re not starting to remember things?” I pressed. “You might not be talking about dreams, at all?—”

“I can tell that they’re dreams,” he replied, shaking his head. “They have this...

dreamlike quality about them. Fuzzy, correct but not in the right ways. Emotionally correct, maybe.”

“What’s happening in your dreams, Calder?”

“I’m on a horse. And there’s this trail.

And it’s always the same...” His words trailed off.

“There’s always someone waiting for me at the end of the trail.

There’s a silhouette of a stranger, a man.

But I never see who he is. I always try to ride towards him, but I can never get there.

But there’s this feeling that I can’t explain, like, I’m so grateful that he’s there. I think he’s there for me.”

“You think he’s there to help you?”

“To save me, maybe.”

“Are you in danger in this dream?”

“Maybe it’s not about saving me in a literal sense.” Calder shrugged. “I don’t know. He’s good. I can tell that much.”

Calder turned to look over at me. “What do you think it means?”

“I don’t know if it’s wise to ascribe meaning to our dreams?—”

“But if you had to take a guess?”

“Maybe it’s someone you know, an old friend. But because of your memory issues, you just can’t remember right now. If you feel like they’re going to save you... maybe your brain thinks that, too. That once you remember them, you’ll be saved.”

Calder hummed, like he was thinking it over. “What do you dream about, Shane?”

“I don’t really have dreams. Not like that, anyway.”

“What kind of dreams do you have then?”

I hesitated for a moment before letting the truth spill out of me.

“I... dream about other things, daydreams. About having my own piece of land someday. Something in my own name, not Joseph Stratton’s.

A place where I can put down roots. The kind of land that goes on for miles, as far as the eye can see.”

“That sounds beautiful, Shane.” Calder offered me a warm smile. “I hope you’re able to get it someday. And I hope you let me visit.”

“You’d want to visit my farm?”

“Uh, of course? Why wouldn’t I?” He chuckled. “I bet you’d run a tight ship, but you’d still spend time with the horses. I can picture it now. You, calm as ever. Happy.”

“You care about me being happy?”

“Uh, of course. Why wouldn’t I?” Calder playfully repeated himself. “It’s a good thing, being happy, Shane. And I like how it looks on you.”

I didn’t know what to think. Suddenly there were images of Calder standing next to me on the farm, us overlooking the land, us feeding the horses and cattle.

I’d never pictured anyone else beside me in that daydream before, no one at my side to help me build.

And yet, for the first time, here I was, daydreaming about me and Calder working together to create something real from my dreams, something tangible and?—

No.

I needed to let it go. It didn’t help that having someone next to me was a terrifying prospect, a new responsibility that I’d never counted on.

I didn’t know what to do with someone like Calder. And he didn’t know what to do with me.

Daydreams were meant to be daydreams and nothing more.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:48 am

CALDER

“You stare at him. A lot.”

“What?”

I was minding my own business, standing outside my cabin, waiting for Shane to pick me up in his UTV, a routine I was becoming accustomed to.

He'd dropped off supplies for my cabin earlier in the morning, gently placing things in the middle of the room, setting a meal for me down on the stove.

He'd been so quiet that I hadn't even heard him come in, and I wondered if that was the point.

Is Shane trying to avoid me?

“You stare at him. Quite a bit.” The stranger squinted at me before a playful grin broke through. “Hi! I'm Virgil Stratton. And you must be Calder.”

“Were you standing there before or—where'd you even come from?—”

“Don't mind that. I'm everywhere. I'm nowhere.” He shrugged. “But you? You're here. Isn't that interesting?”

“Only because I fell off my horse and forgot everything about my life.” I tried to laugh about it.

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“You think I’m faking it?”

“I think something else drew you here. Something even you haven’t figured out yet.”

“Right…” I took a step away from him and leaned against the cabin.

“Why do you stare at Shane so much?” He took a step towards me, closing the distance between us. “Why do you think?”

“I don’t stare at Shane that much,” I said, lying through my teeth.

The old man was right. I had been staring at Shane way too hard lately and I knew it.

Ever since I’d lost my grip on that panel, I couldn’t stop thinking about Shane’s grip on me.

I’d been watching the way he carried himself, the way he moved, the way his muscles worked underneath his clothes.

I’d even been thinking about ways to get into his head, to make him talk to me more, to draw things out of him that he wanted to keep secret.

But I couldn’t make any sense of it. There was a woman in that photo they’d found on me, a woman who it seemed like I knew well. If I was so invested in her, how could I be attracted to?—

What did it mean if I was attracted to?—

“Things can change.” Virgil interrupted my racing thoughts. “Nothing needs to stay

the same. No matter how much it might feel necessary that they do.”

“Uh, thanks.” I nodded at his advice. “Wait. Does this mean you’ve been watching me?”

“Don’t take it personally.” He smirked. “I watch everything. It’s the only way to stay one step ahead.”

“One step ahead of what?”

Virgil laughed as he walked away from me. “Eyes ahead, Calder. Eyes ahead.”

What a strange man.

I was tempted to follow him, ask him questions that were burning through my brain. But in that same moment, Shane showed up on his UTV, handsome as ever, cowboy hat firmly on his head. “Hey. You ready to go out?”

“Do you know a guy named Virgil Stratton?” I asked as I walked up to the vehicle. “Because he just magically showed up outside my cabin.”

Shane grinned, a genuine expression. The sight of it made my heart skip a beat. “Sounds like you met Virgil. He’s an acquired taste.”

“I take it you’re a fan?”

“I respect him,” Shane replied. “He does his own thing. Doesn’t give a damn about anyone’s approval. He’s a breath of fresh air.”

“Breath of fresh air? Sure. That’s one way to put it.” I let out a small laugh. “But I’m sure I’ll get used to him, soon enough.”

Is it just because this is all I have?

I watched Shane as we did saddle work, setting equipment up on one of the horses.

He was being particularly kind to the horse, his usual sweetness with them amplified.

He murmured the name Ursula as he continued to work with her, and she was calm as ever.

I was mesmerized by him, unable to look away even if I wanted to.

There was just something about him, something shining all the way through.

Is my mind playing tricks on me?

I couldn't even remember my damn name. It would make sense that my feelings were all mixed up and wrong, too, with nothing to base them on.

The way I was feeling about Shane was probably a side effect of that.

It was probably the same reason I felt so strangely at home on Stratton Ranch, even though I'd only worked here a few times.

It was like something was settling in my bones about this place, something all too familiar.

"Her name's Ursula?" I asked, desperate to get out of my head, hoping to make conversation.

"Yep. Ursula." Shane smiled. "She's my cousin's favorite horse. But you want to know a secret?"

“What’s the secret?”

“I think she’s everyone’s favorite horse.” Shane let out a light laugh. “There’s just something about her.”

“You light up around all of them,” I replied. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you light up like that around another person. At least, not yet.”

“People are a little more complicated. But Ursula? She’s nothing but peace.”

I walked up to Ursula, standing next to Shane.

As he gently stroked the horse’s neck, I followed suit, our hands inches away from each other.

I looked over at him, distracted by the look on his face, all serenity and smiles.

I found myself smiling, too. I was so focused on Shane that I didn’t even notice when our fingers crossed each other’s path, fingertips tangled just for a moment.

Warmth.

I’d felt it, then, so close to Shane. There was something between us, something fleeting, a spark of electricity underneath my fingertips, but what if it was all in my head?—

I moved my hand away from his, my heart racing inside my chest. Shane was staring over at me, something unreadable on his face.

But a few seconds later, he went back to work with Ursula, as if I’d faded into the background of the stable.

I was grateful for his lack of attention, barely able to process what'd just happened to me?—

Happened to us?

Had Shane felt it too?

Had Shane felt anything ?

Nothing made sense anymore.

I'd tried and failed to get to sleep, tossing and turning, my brain refusing to settle down.

When I was finally able to get any sleep, I had that same dream again.

The trail, the horse, the cowboy, the silhouette.

This time, I got off my horse, deciding to charge right at the stranger.

I was tired of not knowing who he was, my memories feeling like they were trying to creep into the edges of my mind.

I just didn't want to be in the dark anymore.

“Hey! Hey!” I called out to the stranger, my feet pumping as fast as they could. “Who are you? What's your name?”

The stranger said nothing. I continued to run.

The trail felt like it was extending and contracting at random intervals, leaving me

unable to tell if I was getting any closer or if the stranger was getting further away.
“Hey! Come on! Just tell me your name!”

Again, not a word.

Suddenly, I was close enough to make out his face.

“Shane?” As soon as his name left my mouth, I woke up in my cabin, my sheets stained with sweat.

What the hell?

I searched my useless mind for an explanation, something I could hold onto.

But there was nothing, just blank memories, feelings and connections that I didn’t understand.

It was like I was being tortured, someone playing a twisted game that I’d never agreed to.

I jolted up out of bed, briskly walking to my cabin door, my fingers wrapped around the doorknob.

I needed to talk to Shane. I needed him to explain?—

Wait. Explain what, exactly? How he ended up in my dreams? As if he had any control over it.

What is going on with me?

I moved away from the door, walking backwards until I landed on my mattress.

I just needed to get some sleep. Real sleep.

Everything is going to make sense in the morning.

I pulled the covers over my head, soothing myself with what I knew was a lie, repeating it over and over like it was the only thing I had to hold onto.

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SHANE

I felt like I was losing my mind.

The way Calder had looked at me after our fingers touched...

But I knew that I was just projecting again. So, why couldn't I stop doing it? And why couldn't I stop thinking about him?

I shook my head as I stared down at the Canyon Creek Diner menu. I'd come out here to avoid Calder for a few hours at least, giving him some excuse about needing to do some work in town. I just needed some space today, some time to get any thoughts of him out of my system?—

“Virgil told me about that cowboy of yours.”

Jolene was suddenly standing next to my booth, a pot of coffee in her grip. “Said something about memory trouble?”

“Right. Calder.” I groaned. How was talking about him going to help me stop thinking about him?

“Virgil told me he keeps staring at you.”

“What? Why is Virgil staring at me?”

Jolene huffed. “Not Virgil! Your cowboy. Calder.”

“He’s not my cowboy—wait. He’s been staring at me?”

“Un-huh.” She grinned. “Staring at you like someone who’s trying to figure out why the rules don’t make sense anymore.”

“Rules?”

“Shane. You’re the smart one. Don’t make me spell this out for you.” Jolene poured me a cup of coffee, her attention still on me. “And don’t be stupid. This is a sensitive situation, sure. But you know better than to let a good thing pass you by.”

“Jolene, Calder’s not?—”

“Nope. I’m not doing this with you.” Jolene waved off my words. “Do you want your usual? Two eggs, three pieces of bacon, hash on the side?”

“Maybe a stack of pancakes, too.”

“Of course. Anything for you.” Jolene playfully pinched my cheek before she made her way to the kitchen counter.

That was the sort of thing I allowed from people who’d known me my whole life, although, there was really no stopping Jolene’s cheek pinching either way.

By the time she’d returned with my food, I was ecstatic about the chance to chow down, eager to get Calder off my mind, even if it was only until the end of the meal.

And then, he would occupy my mind all over again.

“How’s Calder?”

It was the first question Levi asked me as soon as I stepped into his office. I was still trying to avoid Calder, wanting to kill more time before I ended up around him today. I'd decided to check in on Levi, giving myself something to do in the meantime.

Of course, I hadn't been expecting him to bring up Calder, first thing.

"He's fine. Why?" I replied, my tone slightly off.

Levi noticed. He looked up at me as he leaned across his desk. "Shane?"

"Yeah?"

"You do realize that I haven't seen Calder since you decided to play babysitter."

"I mean, he's been on the property the whole time."

"Right. And you've been territorial. The whole time," Levi replied, with a smirk. "No one else gets to hang out with him, except for you. Not to mention you two are always hanging out together, anyway."

"I don't know if I'd call that being territorial. He needs someone to look after him, at least until he's got his memory back?—"

"I have another theory."

"Which is?"

"That you like spending so much time with him," he continued. "That you don't want anyone else getting in there, cutting into your days together. My theory is that you don't want anyone else taking him away from you?—"

“Stop.”

“Stop what?”

“You’re wrong.” I let out a deep sigh. “Calder and I aren’t anything, Levi. Not even friends. I’m just his caretaker and I’m doing my job. You know me. I’ve always been a thorough worker when it comes to my assignments.”

“But you assigned yourself to Calder, Shane. Didn’t you?”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

“Huh.” Levi stood from his desk, coming around the side of it. He took a seat on its wooden edge. “And I thought you were supposed to be the smart one.”

“You’re the second person to say that to me today.”

“Was the first person who said it Jolene or Virgil?” Levi chuckled. “Either way, they’re right. This is... extremely uncharacteristic of you, Shane. And may I dare suggest you seem a little flustered during this discussion?”

“I just came here to check on you, see how things were going. I didn’t ask for all of this.”

“You don’t have to ask me to care about you, Shane.” Levi playfully shrugged. “I’ll do that, free of charge, forever.”

“Okay, well, it seems like things are good here, so I guess I’ll head out?—”

“Shane?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re smart. Don’t be dumb.”

“Is there a script all of you are working from or what?” I rolled my eyes before I walked out of Levi’s office.

It was frustrating hearing the same thing twice in one day, especially when I’d wanted to avoid thinking about Calder today.

I wanted to brush off Jolene’s words and Levi’s, but instead, I felt them digging deep inside, tunneling underneath my skin.

Still, I knew something that they didn’t. I knew that Calder was straight .

It was an important piece of the puzzle that everyone seemed to be conveniently forgetting, except for me.

Honestly, it was all I’d been able to think about, the impossibility of the situation, the way nothing could’ve ever come from it.

It was the exact type of thing I’d been trying to shove all the way down, forcing a door closed between us, regretting that it’d ever opened in the first place.

The sooner I stopped thinking about Calder, the better.

I was on my way back to my cabin when I spotted Calder.

He was tinkering with something mechanical, a box of borrowed tools at his side. He was so focused that I wondered if I’d be able to sneak past him into my cabin, completing my goal of avoiding him for the day. I took a few steps in his direction,

staying quiet, my head held low...

But of course, as soon as I got a few steps away from him, he looked up at me with a grin. "Shane! Hey! There you are."

"Here I am." I tried to hide my unease. "How, uh, how has today been for you?"

"Same old, same old." He shrugged. "Except for this thing. I heard it rattling and decided to come check on it. Looks like the generator might be about to go on the fritz."

"Have you worked on generators before—" The question came out before I could stop myself.

But Calder just smiled. "You know, it's the strangest thing. I can't seem to remember..."

"Sorry."

"No worries." Calder playfully knocked against the generator. "This might drive me crazy, though. I feel like I'm so close but still so far away." He looked back up at me. "What were you up to today? Handling business off the ranch?"

"Something like that, yeah."

"Do you have anything left in the tank? I could use some help down here."

"Oh... uh..." I hesitated, trying to come up with a good excuse.

"Wait. Do you not know how to fix a generator?" Calder's mouth fell open. "Sorry, that's just really surprising. You seem like you're the whole cowboy package."

“I know how to fix a generator, Calder.”

“Prove it.”

I inwardly groaned. Even though I needed to keep my distance, my pride wasn't going to let me pass up an opportunity to show Calder that I knew what the hell I was doing. Conflicted, I took a seat next to him on the ground, reaching for the toolbox. “Here. Let me get a good look at it first...”

Calder shifted closer to me, his body way too close to mine. “What do you think?”

My mind blanked at the question.

He smelled so perfectly earthy, the scent warm and refreshing.

“Shane? What are you thinking?” Calder's eyes were on mine. His gaze was soft but focused, almost like he was trying to memorize what was right in front of him.

Which was my face.

Is Calder trying to memorize my face? Why?

“I'm thinking that I need to... do... something.

” My words came out vague, as I forced myself to concentrate on the task at hand.

After about thirty minutes of silence, the deed was done, the generator no longer making any strange noises.

I immediately stood from the ground, wanting to put as much distance between us as possible.

“All right. I’ll be seeing you,” I said, already walking to my cabin.

“Tomorrow, right?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yeah. You’re still letting me shadow you, aren’t you?”

“Sure. Of course.” I nodded, still unsure. “Tomorrow it is, then.”

I continued moving away from him, getting back on the main trail.

Fuck.

Why’d he have to look at me like that?

There was a storm brewing inside me with every step away from Calder, one that was getting harder and harder to ignore. I didn’t want to know what was going to happen when it finally touched down, when the winds picked up, when the sky darkened overhead.

I just quietly hoped that we’d never have to find out.

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CALDER

Shane would barely look at me.

He was talking to me, so that was at least something .

But trying to keep eye contact with him seemed impossible, his gaze leaving as soon as it met mine.

It'd been like that ever since he'd fixed the generator and tried to get away from me as quickly as he could afterwards.

It was like Shane had become allergic to me overnight, everything about him a little more distant than usual.

Today, we were on a supply run to a ranching co-op.

We'd been riding in Shane's car for hours, the sun setting behind us now.

I'd turned on the radio, letting country classics fill the silence between us, twangy guitars and heartfelt lyrics abounding.

And even though Shane wasn't looking in my direction, I'd practically been staring at him, somehow trying to read his mind.

Suddenly, the truck bumped and banged.

“Shit.” Shane’s tone was calm, even as he cursed.

“What? What is it?” The trail ahead of us was muddy and narrow.

“We need to stop here for the night.” Shane was already pulling his truck off the road, headed for a clearing.

“Not worth it, as is. Last time I was over here, it was full of little cracks and ditches. Easy to avoid when you can see where you’re going.

Not so much when there’s mud everywhere.

It’ll probably be clear by the morning.”

“By the morning?” I pressed. “Wait. Does that mean we’re spending the night out here?”

“There’s no point in risking it. We’re not even halfway there.” Shane shrugged. “It’s annoying but that’s why I always have camping gear, just in case.”

A few minutes later and the car had come to a complete stop.

Shane casually leapt out of the truck and moved towards the back of it, pulling out various camping supplies.

I watched him as he worked, his confidence radiating off him like usual.

Shane didn’t seem rattled by the situation, at all, treating it like it was just another part of his workday.

“Has this happened to you before?” I asked, leaning against the truck.

“Never.”

“Always a first time for everything,” I muttered. “Do you need me to help? Grab stuff out the back?”

“I think I’m good here,” Shane replied. “But could you start building a fire? Wherever looks good to you. We can get started on setting up camp soon.”

He didn’t even look at me as he handed me some gear for the fire, his focus still on the back of the truck. “Thanks.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” My tone was deflated as I started looking around for somewhere to build the fire. I could’ve sworn I’d felt something between us, some kind of spark, but Shane made me feel like it’d all been in my head.

Maybe it is all in my head.

My very concerning, still not fully healed head.

That would’ve explained why I was attracted to Shane, despite the woman in the photo.

It would also explain the dream of him at the end of some trail, like a romantic end to some cowboy western.

Besides, it was more obvious than ever that Shane wasn’t interested in me, possibly less so now than ever before?—

Shit.

Maybe Shane knew exactly what I’d been thinking.

Maybe he just wasn't interested in me the same way.

Is this Shane's way of blowing me off?

I got on my knees with the supplies Shane had given me, setting the kindling up a few inches away. When it was ready, I lit a match, tossing it onto the sticks in front of me. I blew gently at the base of the fire once I saw the first few flames licking at the wood?—

But just like that, the fire was gone, the wind blowing it right out of existence.

I couldn't help but let out a pained laugh, the situation resembling the one between me and Shane a little too closely.

I lit the match again, and the same thing happened, the wind taking it all within seconds.

I laughed again, like a maniac, as I tried to keep the fire going for the umpteenth time.

The universe seemed to have a sense of humor, and a dark one at that.

"Uh, you okay over here?" Shane's voice interrupted my moment of madness.

"Just trying and failing to start a fire."

"Here. Let me try." Shane crouched down next to me, soon lighting a match of his own. He then stacked logs on top of the fire, parallel to each other, before adding more on top of them. It was something I hadn't even thought to do, probably another result of my memories still being fuzzy and faded.

"Is this just how it's going to be now?" I murmured, suddenly feeling tired and worn.

“Sometimes, I know exactly how to do things. And other times, what, I’m just hopeless?”

“Worse comes to worst, you can always learn again, Calder. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Nope. But there is something wrong with me?—”

“There’s nothing wrong with you, Calder.” Shane finally looked over at me, his expression unreadable. “You’re not your condition, you know.”

“Are you done being mad at me? Or whatever this is?” I was grateful for his gaze, some part of me feeling calmer for it.

“I was never mad at you.”

“You wouldn’t even look at me, Shane.”

“That wasn’t—it’s not—” Shane started and stopped. “Look, do you want something to drink?”

“Like water?”

“Something a little stronger than that.”

“Oh. Yeah. Obviously.” I let out a light laugh. “Honestly, I was hoping you’d ask.”

“What is this?” I sniffed at the thermos before swallowing down a swig. Shane and I had gathered around the fire after he’d finished setting up camp, expertly putting together a tent and rolling out the blanket.

“An acquired taste.” Shane smirked in my direction. “How do you like it?”

“It tastes like whiskey and... cream? There’s something sweet in this.” I frowned before taking another sip. “Pretty disgusting, but I’m worried it’s growing on me.”

“They call it a Cowboy Cocktail.” Shane settled a little closer to the fire. “I had my first one years ago. I thought it was pretty bad too, until it started tasting pretty good.”

“I was expecting straight whiskey from you.”

“Then I’m happy to defy your expectations.” The smile lingered on his face. “I don’t like being too predictable.”

“Yeah, you are full of surprises...” My words trailed off as I spoke. “How’s your farm coming along, by the way? Any closer to it?”

“I haven’t really started looking,” he admitted. “I don’t know. I talked to my accountant and my finances are looking good. I just...”

“You just what?”

“Dreaming is one thing. Making it real is another.”

A lump formed in my chest, as images of Shane at the end of that trail ran through my mind.

Dreaming is one thing. Making it real is another.

“I think you just have to pull the trigger on it, Shane,” I replied. “You’ll never know how far you can fly if you never jump.”

“You’ll never know how far you can fall, either.”

“You’re not going to fall.” I shook my head. “You know that. You’re way too smart for that.”

“What about you?” Shane turned to look at me.

“What about me?”

“How’ve you been? I know I was kind of quiet today, and I was M.I.A. the day before, so we haven’t had a chance to talk lately,” he went on. “How are your memories? Anything coming back?”

“I... actually, yeah.” My voice was low. “Something about the woman in that photo you showed me.”

“Oh? What about her?”

“We’re not together.”

“What?”

“I mean, I think we were together, before,” I explained.

“But we went through a breakup. I don’t know how long ago.

I do know that it wasn’t our first. I think we were off and on or something, always kind of together, always kind of not.

Whatever it was, it wasn’t... stable. I wasn’t able to just relax and... be... like this.”

“Like this? Like what?”

“Calm. Like I am when I’m around you,” I murmured. “I’ve never been this calm around anyone before, Shane. Not that I can remember.”

“We should... get to sleep. I think you’re a little more tired than you realize,” Shane said, already moving away from the fire.

“Wait. Shane. I—” I poured water on the fire, making sure it was all the way out.

I even moved dirt around it for good measure, my heart beating rapidly in my chest. By the time I reached the tent, Shane was already under the blanket, his eyes staring up at the ceiling.

I didn’t say a word as I joined him under the covers, slipping into place beside him. Our shoulders were side by side, his gaze straight up. I reached for his hand, linking our fingers together...

Shane didn’t pull away. I slightly shifted beside him, not stopping until I was leaning over him, just enough for our faces to be inches from each other’s.

Staring at his skin, I gently pressed a kiss against his neck, his chin, his cheek.

His eyes met mine, as my lips hovered over his.

I softly brushed my lips against Shane’s, my hand squeezing his, our chests seemingly beating in time?—

“Calder. Don’t.”

“Shane?” I said his name, confused. “You don’t want me—you don’t want to?”

“You’ve been through a lot. You’re not thinking clearly.”

“Actually, I think this is the only thing that makes sense.” My voice was low.

“You’re saying you don’t feel it, too?”

“Goodnight, Calder.” Shane closed his eyes tight, like he was willing me to disappear on the spot.

“Goodnight, Shane.” I rested my head on his shoulder, fingers still intertwined with each other’s.

I didn’t know if he’d forgotten we were holding hands, or if it was supposed to be my consolation prize.

Because Shane Stratton was never going to give me any more of him, or give anything more to us.

We were warm hands under a cold blanket, and that was all we were ever going to be.

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SHANE

I couldn't stop thinking about Calder's lips on mine.

I'd wanted him to take things further, to end up tangled in each other's arms. I wanted to kiss down his naked chest, to feel him pressed against me bare.

The thoughts had been swirling around my head all day, embarrassing and constant.

I was torn between the urge to ask Calder for a do-over, one where I kissed him instead, and the urge to never speak to him again.

Calder hadn't mentioned a thing since yesterday, shadowing me like things were still normal.

The only differences in him were almost imperceptible, him standing a little closer to me, asking questions like he wanted to keep talking to me instead of having the information.

It was the sort of thing it was impossible to call him out on, the sort of thing that could've just been in my head.

We were working in one of the barns, restacking feed, moving bales of hay inside. I was grateful because it was our last task for the day, which meant I'd finally be able to get some time away from Calder. I just needed to clear my head, and then I'd stop thinking about him so much?—

“On your left,” Calder said as he brushed past me. His skin was on mine for only a few seconds, but it felt like he’d started a fire. I groaned, a part of me desperate to throw myself into his flames, another part trying to pretend I hadn’t felt anything.

“You doing okay, Shane?” Calder asked as he casually lifted his t-shirt, wiping sweat off his forehead.

“Stop.”

“Stop what?”

“You know what you’re doing, Calder.”

“What am I doing, Shane?” Calder closed the distance between us. I tried to take a step away from him, but he gently grabbed onto my waist, holding me in place by my hips. “Please. Tell me what I’m doing.”

“You don’t just get to have things because you want them.”

“I know that. You think I don’t know that?” Calder scoffed. “But the problem here is that I know that you want me, too. You’re just...”

“I’m just what?”

“I don’t know. You just keep pulling away from me. Or trying to.” His eyes locked on mine. “Is that really what you want? To stay away from me? Because all you have to do is say the word and I’ll leave this alone. I swear I will.”

“I...” The words wouldn’t come to me. I hesitated as I stared back at him, my stomach twisting itself into knots. In that moment, I wanted him more than anything I’d ever wanted before. I just needed him to read my mind. I needed him to?—

Calder closed the distance between us again, this time pressing his lips against mine.

Grateful for his mind-reading, I kissed him right back.

Calder smiled against my mouth before he deepened the kiss, his tongue finding mine.

A few seconds later and he'd pressed me against a wall, his chest pressing into mine, his hands still on my waist. He slid his palms up to my hair and I moaned as he pulled at the strands, the sound quickly captured by Calder's mouth.

"Off, take this off," Calder instructed, his fingers already underneath my shirt, pulling it over my head.

I did the same to him, grabbing for his clothes, twisting the fabric in my hands.

It felt like we were desperate for each other, unable to go another minute without feeling each other's skin.

Calder repeated the same motion with my pants, pulling them off me before I even knew they were gone, my hands reaching for his jeans at the same time.

"Wait, wait..." I was breathing, hard and heavy.

"What? What is it?"

"We should... uh... move..."

"You're right. We should." Calder grinned, something mischievous behind it.

Before I had a chance to ask him what he was thinking, I felt him grab for my hips

again.

He playfully knocked me over into an unsuspecting bale of hay, and then he was on top of me.

He kissed me again, as he readjusted himself, his thighs resting on mine.

It felt like I was covered in Calder, in the best possible way, our warmth reflecting each other's.

Calder brought his mouth to my neck then, biting and sucking at my skin with determination, completely focused on it.

“Calder, what are you doing?”

“Making sure everyone knows that you're mine.”

“Don't,” I groaned. “Everyone's going to have a million questions.”

“Why does that matter?” Calder stopped what he was doing. He looked right at me, a question behind his eyes. “This is real, isn't it? We're real?”

“Yes... This is real. We're real.”

“Then, let me have what's mine.”

“Is this how it's going to be with you?” I smirked. “Your way or the highway?”

“You don't like things my way?” Calder shot me a faux frown as he lowered his hand, not stopping until his fingers were wrapped around my shaft. I opened my mouth to say something, but my response was cut off by Calder casually stroking my

cock. “You don’t want to give me exactly what I want?”

“You’re so...” I moaned, as Calder continued stroking me, his fists steadily pumping up and down the length of me. “Fuck...”

He pressed soft kisses against my neck as his hand kept working, even as precome spilled from my tip.

I shivered underneath him, his thumb running across the head of my cock, using the precome to stroke me even faster.

My hips involuntarily bucked against his grip, my body feeling like it was at his mercy.

But the truth was that I wanted to give Calder everything he wanted, as long as he wanted it from me.

“Calder... Calder...” I moaned his name, my body so close to the edge. “I’m going to...”

“Good,” Calder said as he continued playing with my cock. “I want you to come for me, Shane. I want to see what you look like when you let yourself fall apart.”

“Calder...” It was all I could think to say as my shaft hardened in his hands, the tip of my cock exploding against his fingertips. My breaths came out ragged as my come quickly filled Calder’s palm, his hand still stroking me.

“Fuck. You look so perfect right now...” Calder was staring down at me. “Do you know how fucking beautiful you are, Shane Stratton?”

“Don’t.” I was uncomfortable under his gaze, my eyes breaking away from him.

“Don’t what? Tell you the truth?”

I rolled my eyes as I shifted down his body, not stopping until my head was at his waist. I went straight to work, my mouth taking his cock between my lips.

Calder groaned at the feel of it, steadying himself against the bale of hay.

The angle I was at made his already oversized shaft feel even bigger inside my mouth, the size of him stretching my lips.

I didn’t mind the feel of it as I eagerly bobbed my head up and down the length of him, his precome already landing against my tongue.

“Fuck... Shane...” Calder groaned. “That feels so fucking good...”

I kept going, a part of me warming at the praise.

I wanted to make Calder feel good, and I wanted him to know that I could make him feel good.

I picked up my pace, moving my lips up and down his shaft faster and faster, my hands braced on either side of him.

Calder’s waist began to meet my mouth, his hips pumping against me in a steady rhythm.

My mind went fuzzy, as thoughts of Calder inside of me played behind my eyes, his motions feeling like a tease of something else to come.

“Mine... you’re all mine...” Calder’s body began to tremble, his come spilling right into my mouth. I didn’t hesitate for a second as I swallowed down every last drop of

him, already obsessed with the way he tasted. I whimpered when he moved away from me, his cock slipping out from my lips.

Suddenly, he was pulling me back up next to him, our bodies side by side on the hay bale. There was light coming into the barn, a soft gold as the day came to an end. Calder rested an arm around me, his face nestled against my neck. “Fuck. I’m glad that worked out the way I wanted it to.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, if I’d kissed you like that, and you told me you weren’t interested, I’d probably have to find another ranch to stay on.” He chuckled. “There’d be no coming back from that level of embarrassment.”

“Did you really think there was a chance that I didn’t want you?”

“Uh, yes?” He chuckled again. “You’re a hard man to read, Shane. Has no one ever told you that before?”

I playfully shrugged as I brought a hand up to Calder’s face. I absent mindedly traced his cheek with my thumb. “You know how to read me though.”

“Hell yeah, I do. You’re becoming a second language to me.”

Something in my chest bloomed at the idea of Calder learning how to read me. I’d never felt this close to anyone before, this understood— “Shit.”

“Shit, what?”

“What if when you get your memories back, you change your mind?” My eyes went wide. “Even after we just... did this...”

“I’m not going to change my mind, Shane.”

“You don’t know that?—”

“Yeah, I do.” He placed another kiss against my neck. “What did I just tell you? You’re mine, Shane. All mine.”

I tried to relax against him, tried to be comforted by his words.

But all I could think about was the unnamed woman in the photo, the one Calder was off and on with.

Even if they’d been off the last time he’d seen her, he was still carrying her picture, wasn’t he?

What if he’d been on his way to get her back?

What if the storm was the only thing that’d kept them apart?

What if when Calder remembered his old life, there wasn’t any room for me in it?

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CALDER

I was standing in front of my cabin, taking in the morning air.

It somehow felt fresher than ever before, clearer, cleaner.

My chest was tight with something, like I needed to be unburdened.

I knew that it wasn't regret because I hadn't regretted anything with Shane, not a single moment of it.

Still, there was something building inside me, something that needed to be confronted.

After Shane and I were together last night, a flood of memories had come through once I was back at my cabin.

I suddenly remembered my apartment in Bozeman, all the art on the wall that looked like images of a place just like Stratton Ranch.

I remembered the pinball machine I'd spent way too much money on, my favorite pair of work boots, the pair I needed to throw out ASAP.

I even remembered my truck, with its cracked windshield, something I'd been meaning to get fixed for the last few weeks.

I'd just been so busy with work that it'd slipped my mind, a to-do list item that kept

getting pushed down the list.

And then, I remembered Vanessa. The woman in the photo.

Memories of her came through loud and clear.

We were toxic for each other, the perfect mix of excitement and explosive arguments.

There were memories of us fighting outside her favorite bar, fighting outside my favorite bar, fighting outside nearly every establishment that would have us.

The fights were followed by making it up to each other with expensive gifts, expensive trips, trying to put a band-aid over the latest injury we'd caused.

The pattern was always the same, with her accusing me of holding something back from her, never being my true self.

I'd accused her of finding reasons to push me away, to leave because of things she'd only imagined.

But now I knew that Vanessa hadn't imagined anything.

She was right. I had been holding something back from her, because I'd been holding something back from myself, too.

All that was left was to tell her the truth.

I found Shane in the afternoon, fixing a loose fence post farther out in the pasture. I quietly snuck up behind him before tightly wrapping my arms around him. "Guess who?"

Shane grinned. “Oh, my God. You make me feel like we’re in high school.”

“That reminds me. Do you already have a date to prom?” I smirked. “Because I think it’d be pretty cool to show up in matching tuxedos.”

“Ha. Ha,” Shane said, right before I turned him around to kiss him, deeply.

I placed my hands on his waist, still holding him against me.

Shane melted in my grip, something in him seeming to shake loose, getting more comfortable with my touch.

A few seconds later, though, I could tell his defenses were right back up.

He broke off our kiss, taking a step or two away from me, for good measure.

“So, yesterday in the barn...,” he started, his eyes avoiding mine.

“Yeah?”

“You’re sure it wasn’t a mistake?”

“Shane—”

“How’s your memory?” Shane nodded at my head. “Anything else come back to you?”

“Nothing that changes anything between us,” I replied. “I remembered more of what my life was like before, sort of in a wave.”

“And... you remembered more about the girl in the photo?”

“Her name’s Vanessa. And yes, I remembered more about her. Mostly how unhappy we made each other. We were like fire and ice. All the fun was in the smoke, the chaos.”

“But you were off and on?”

“Right. And?”

“You kept going back,” he murmured. “There must’ve been something about her that made you want to stay.”

“And something about her that made me want to leave.” I took a step closer to him, closing some of the distance between us. “Where’s all this coming from, Shane?”

“I just don’t want it to be a mistake,” he quietly admitted. “I’m not—I don’t open myself up to people that often, Calder. Sure, I’ve had nights with people, here and there, but nothing like that. Nothing like us...”

Shane suddenly shook his head. “Never mind. Forget I said anything. I’m just being stupid. That’s all.”

I gingerly grabbed both of Shane’s hands in mine, putting them together and bringing them up to my mouth. I softly kissed his skin, my eyes locked on his. “You’re not being stupid. And nothing between us was a mistake.”

“Come on. We have a post to fix.” Shane moved his hands away from me, but I still caught the smile on his face, the expression lingering.

“Who’s that?”

Shane and I were headed back to my cabin, when we noticed a white SUV pulling up

on the gravel. We slowly approached the vehicle, and I tried to get a good view of whoever was in the driver's seat. A woman stepped out of the car, her thin, sleek heels seeming so out of place on the ranch?—

Shit.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

It only took my brain a few seconds to connect the dots, images of our fights quickly playing like a projector in my mind.

Vanessa.

She was beautiful, a high fashion model dressed in designer clothes and dripping with expensive jewelry.

She walked like she owned the world, and for all I knew she did, my memories still cloudy around her family background or how we met.

Everything about her seemed perfect, but in a curated way, like everything had been decided by committee.

She seemed like an impossibility, something put together, something too good to be true.

Was anything about her real?

Had anything about us been real?

“Calder?” Vanessa's eyes went wide. “Calder? Calder!”

I didn't move. I didn't breathe.

Vanessa took all the initiative, briskly walking towards me. By the time she was standing in front of me, her arms were already wide open. "Calder! Oh, my God!"

I didn't reach for her. Still, she reached for me, taking me in her embrace. "Calder! I was so worried about you!"

She quickly pulled away from me, fire in her eyes. "What the hell is wrong with you? You can't just disappear on me like that. Do you know how hard it was to track you down? I had to hire someone to figure out where you could've gone off to?"

"I didn't remember anything."

"What?"

"I didn't disappear on you," I clarified. "I just didn't remember anything. Doctor said it might've been a concussion. My short-term memory was affected."

"Oh." She calmed down for a moment. "Wait. Shit. Do you remember me? Do you remember us?"

"I remember you, Vanessa. Not everything. But I know we were together?"

"Yeah, you better remember me," she joked, wiping a tear out of the corner of her eye. "We've been through so much together, Calder. I was so worried it was all over, just like that."

"But it was over, wasn't it?"

"What are you talking about?"

“The last time we talked, it was just to argue,” I continued. “I can’t remember anything other than that. Just another one of our fights.”

“So?” Vanessa laughed it off. “That’s just our love language, Calder. Some people have gifts, acts of service. We have shouting at each other until one of us backs down.”

She placed her hands on my shoulders. “But none of that matters, right? Because when we’re together, it’s like we’re in a world of our own. People just don’t understand us.”

People just don’t understand us.

My heart ached at her words, knowing they weren’t true. At least, not anymore. There was someone who understood me, someone who made me feel the exact opposite of what Vanessa made me feel; someone safe and calm.

“Vanessa, I?—”

“On the way home, do you want to stop at that greasy spoon place you like in town? With that super snarky waitress.” Vanessa rolled her eyes. “I’d rather get some sushi, but I know how much you like your mom-and-pop type places.”

“I don’t—I’m not?—”

“You’re not coming back with me?”

I was spiraling in real time, my thoughts fuzzy and so far away. I spared a look behind me, expecting to see Shane still standing there. But Shane was halfway across the pasture, standing and staring. His eyes moved from Vanessa to me, his face blank.

And then, he started to walk even further away from us.

“I just need time,” I murmured. “Vanessa, I still don’t have all my memories back. This place has been good for me. I just need to finish getting better?—”

“Fine. We can shack up here until you’re feeling better.” She nodded. “Do you have your own cabin, at least? I can’t handle a roommate situation right now.”

“I... yeah.” I started to head towards my cabin, still not processing a single thing. Vanessa was at my side, her hand reaching for mine.

Fuck.

This was wrong. All of it.

My chest went tight as I tried and failed to come up with the right thing to say, my mouth and mind tangled up in an impossible mess.

Vanessa had agreed to take the bed, while I slept on the couch.

She didn’t seem happy with the arrangement, but I reminded her that I didn’t fully remember us yet.

Sharing a bed would’ve been unfamiliar to me, not to mention uncomfortable and awkward.

We’d spent the better part of the night chatting about the sort of food I’d been eating on the ranch, how absurdly rich the Strattons were, how bored Vanessa would be if she actually lived in a place like this.

All of the conversation felt so shallow, so hollow.

I wondered if this was how I'd always felt with Vanessa and had just been pretending like I didn't.

It was obvious why a part of me wanted her on my arm, especially with how beautiful she was.

Vanessa was the perfect shield against any difficult conversations, any concerns about anything deeper.

She simply wasn't interested in discussing it, and if she was, it was always on her terms.

And the few times she'd tried to get more out of me, I'd pushed her away.

That night when I finally fell asleep, I had the same dream of Shane, my cowboy waiting for me at the end of a trail.

I raced towards him again, desperate to talk to him.

He rode away from me without looking back, the distance between us only growing wider.

The trail turned into the forest, the forest turned into the desert, the desert turned into a frozen tundra.

I was chasing Shane through it all, until we were back where we started, the trail ahead of us.

"Shane? Please, wait. I just want to talk to you—" But as soon as I said it, he was gone again, images of forest greenery opening up ahead. I wanted to chase him but suddenly I was too tired, everything felt like it was closing in around me.

I'm going to lose him.

I felt it in my bones.

I was going to lose Shane Stratton forever.

And it was all my fault.

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SHANE

Vanessa.

I'd frozen in place when I'd seen her. She was perfect, flawless smile, trendy clothes.

I didn't need to see anything else to understand why Vanessa and Calder made sense together.

It was too easy to imagine them walking into any bar, anywhere, and being the center of attention.

It was like getting a glimpse of their life together, Vanessa always on Calder's arm.

I'd walked away from them without even realizing it, only stopping when Calder looked back at me for a moment. It felt like there was an apology behind his eyes, something he couldn't figure out how to say. But I didn't need to hear an apology from Calder.

I didn't need to hear from him ever again.

This was my fault, anyway. I knew whatever we'd had was temporary, that he couldn't have made any promises about anything between us being real. How could he? He barely knew who he was, no matter how confident he was when we were together.

Still, I didn't know what to do with myself.

I felt my heart cracking to pieces in my chest, and it made me feel like a complete idiot.

How was my heart broken over something that never was?

It was the equivalent of being heartbroken after waking up from a dream.

Calder was never an actual possibility, just a momentary figment of an overactive imagination.

When I made it back to my cabin, I tried my best to not think about Calder.

Instead, I tried to think about my future, the land that would one day be mine.

I thought about the open pastures, the rolling hills, the fence posts, the barns.

I thought about having my own claim, away from Stratton Ranch, building something just for me—

But everything was tainted. Each piece of my future was fine on its own, but not as good without Calder.

It was impossible to imagine it without him, his smiling face surfacing in my thoughts no matter how much I tried to forget his features.

I groaned as I fell into a nearby chair, my head resting in my hands.

God.

It hurts so much.

When is it going to stop hurting?

“Shane? Shane!” Levi’s voice was on the other side of my door. “I know you’re in there. Open up.”

I groaned as I walked towards the door. When I opened it, I couldn’t hide the annoyance in my voice. “What do you want, Levi?”

“Saw the SUV.”

“Yeah?”

“Saw the girl,” Levi said as he let himself into my cabin. “Was that Calder’s...?”

“Girlfriend, it looks like. Vanessa.”

“They’re actually together?”

“Off and on. He thought they were off, but I guess they’ll be back on soon enough.”

“Uh-huh...” Levi eyed me up and down. “And? How are you taking it?”

“What are you talking about?” I shrugged. “Why would I care about Calder and Vanessa getting back together? Good for them.”

“Shane.” Levi stared over at me. “You know I’ve known you since we were kids, right? Which means I can tell when you’re lying, too.”

“Did you bring anything to drink?” I sidestepped his question, my chest suddenly aching. “I could really use something strong right about now.”

Levi produced a bottle of bourbon he'd been keeping behind his back. "I've got you, Shane. Always."

We passed the bottle back and forth between us, sharing quiet swigs.

I couldn't think of anything to say, but I was grateful for the company.

The pain in my chest hadn't gone away, but it was much more manageable with someone else around, my attention focused on Levi instead.

Levi had been looking over at me every so often, like there was something on his mind.

"What? What is it?" I pressed. "I can tell you're thinking something. Just spit it out."

"It's just..." Levi hesitated. "I don't know. I'm just shocked, that's all."

"Shocked about what?"

"I don't know. Everything felt like it was lining up..."

"And by everything you mean me and Calder?" I scoffed. "That wasn't real, Levi. It wasn't anything."

"You don't believe that, Shane."

"Maybe I don't know what I believe anymore." I shook my head. "Nothing... nothing makes sense to me right now."

"Are you still thinking about getting your own land?"

“Yep. Why?”

“What do you see when you think about it?”

“What?”

“You know what I mean, Shane.” Levi took a swig of bourbon. “When you think about your dream coming true... are you still all alone?”

“Does it matter? Even if he’s all I can think about, it’s not like I can convince Calder to stay. He’s happy where he is.”

“You really think he’s happy with her? You said they were off and on,” Levi replied. “That doesn’t exactly sound like happily ever after to me.”

“I never should’ve done this to myself, Levi.” I let out a wounded laugh. “I don’t know what the hell I was thinking. Why would I let everything get tangled up like this?”

“You didn’t let anything happen to you, Shane. This is just what happens when you fall for—” Levi stopped himself, mid-sentence. “My point is that it can’t be helped.”

“So, what now? We just keep drinking until I forget all about him?”

“Actually...” Levi placed the bottle behind him on the couch. “I think we’ve both had enough. The room is starting to feel a little too hot.”

“The room’s getting a little wobbly, too,” I tried to joke, tried to ignore the pain in my chest.

“I’m sorry, Shane,” Levi started. “I know how it feels when you think you have

something, someone. And then everything just... blows to pieces right in front of you.”

“I’ll be all right. I think.” I shrugged. “I was fine before Calder showed up. I could always go back to that.”

“Sure, you were fine. But were you actually happy?”

“Does it matter?” My voice was low. “As long as I’m getting by, the rest I can figure out as I go.”

Levi shot me a concerned look but didn’t add anything else to the conversation, like he wanted to give me some space.

The quiet settled between us, as I let the alcohol work in my system, warmth flooding my veins.

It couldn’t hold a candle to the warmth I’d felt around Calder, but it was a good enough substitute for now.

And as I melted against the couch, I wondered if this was how it was going to be for the rest of my life.

Good enough.

Only good enough.

Never great. Never perfect. Never what I wanted.

Not without Calder by my side.

I wasn't able to sleep. Not really.

Not even with the bourbon in my system.

I'd only been able to close my eyes here and there, my brain too restless to slip into the deep sleep I so desperately needed.

I'd been staring at my bedroom ceiling, idly wondering what Calder was up to, where he was.

I'd half been expecting him to show up at my cabin door after Levi left, useless words pouring out of his mouth, explaining how his promises weren't really his .

He'd want me to know that the Calder at Stratton Ranch wasn't the real Calder, not the one that mattered.

I groaned as the wind rattled the windowpanes, the pain in my chest radiating throughout the rest of my body.

What the hell is wrong with me?

I'd never let anyone get to me like this, not before Calder.

I'd always had my head on my shoulders when it came to romance, when it came to love.

I'd never fallen for anyone before, always quick to call things off or step to the side when things took up too much of my time.

I was pragmatic and practical, not the kind of person who tossed and turned in bed because some cowboy had broken their heart.

And yet, no matter how much I tried to remind myself that I was a person who always put logic first, the pain remained.

I couldn't stop thinking about Calder and Vanessa, if they'd already decided to drive home together.

What if Calder wasn't even on Stratton Ranch anymore?

What if he was long gone, back in the city, already forgetting all about me?

Could Calder forget about me?

I couldn't forget about Calder, no matter how hard I tried.

I had a feeling Calder was going to haunt me for the rest of my life, some part of me always hoping that he was somehow right around the corner.

I'd be looking for him forever, wanting to know that he was okay, wanting to see him even if he never wanted to see me again.

It was going to become like breathing to me, holding out hope, wondering if he was thinking about me, too.

Finally, I closed my eyes.

But I didn't dream, the darkness taking over me as I slipped underneath it.

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CALDER

I never planned on going back.

I woke up on the couch, a feeling of certainty settled in my chest. Memories had floated through with the morning, everything finally snapping into place.

Without uttering a word to Vanessa, I dashed out of the cabin, not stopping until I reached the stables.

I swiftly saddled my horse and headed out to the southern ridge of the ranch, memories still playing like a movie in my mind.

It was overwhelming, everything swimming through my brain at once.

I felt like I needed to be somewhere where I could just breathe, where I could just be.

I never planned on going back to Vanessa.

That last argument between us was going to be our final conversation.

I didn't have any intentions of talking to her ever again, blocking her on my phone that morning and getting ready for work.

I'd been working on a nearby ranch, the storm throwing me off my path, somehow bringing me towards Stratton.

There was nothing left of Vanessa and me, which had felt like there was nothing left of me, either.

Or at least, the me I'd been pretending to be.

The old Calder had been committed to something false, an image he wanted to project for other people.

I was so invested in the falsehood that I'd lost myself in it, thinking it was real.

It was like a magician falling for his own tricks, forgetting that he'd orchestrated every moment.

Is it cruel of me?

Creating that same world of illusion for Vanessa, pretending so well that she'd fallen for it, too.

No wonder we were on again, off again. Each time she'd figured out the trick, I'd change things up just enough to keep her hooked, to keep us going.

At the time, I'd just thought it was us against the world, that our love was tumultuous because it was fated.

If it was true love, it wasn't supposed to be easy, it was supposed to be epic.

But nothing could've been further from the truth.

I took a deep sigh as the wind hit against my face, images of Shane hitting me at the same time.

My Shane. My cowboy.

It'd been so simple with him, so easy, so real.

I remembered moments with him long before my accident, our polite exchanges, the way I couldn't get him out of my mind.

I'd been attracted to Shane before but knew that I would never act on it, too ashamed of who I was to ever admit it.

I'd convinced myself that he represented a forbidden fruit, my desire for him a part of me I was never going to let come to the surface for air.

But even when I thought Shane was just tempting eye-candy, I never could've imagined just how perfect for each other we were. He'd gone from a daydream to a real flesh and blood connection, something in his soul always quieting mine.

I took another deep breath as I stared out at the ridge.

I needed to talk to Vanessa.

But I knew now that I didn't just need to tell her the truth. I needed to apologize to her, too.

I needed to make things right.

"Hey! Calder. There you are." Vanessa beamed as I stepped back inside the cabin. "I was just looking for you?—"

"We need to talk, Vanessa."

Her smile quickly faded. “Talk about what, Calder?”

“I just... can we go somewhere?” I pressed. “I don’t think we should have the conversation here.”

“Greasy spoon place? In town?”

“But you don’t even like that place?—”

“It’ll be my last time going, won’t it?” Vanessa’s eyes glistened with tears. “I think it’s only fitting as a place to remember you by.”

“Vanessa...”

“Come on. Let’s go.” She grabbed her keys, soon playfully shaking them. “We can save all the sad shit until there’s pancakes in front of us.”

I followed Vanessa out to her SUV, sliding into the passenger seat.

A few minutes later, we were pulling up to Canyon Creek Diner.

The car ride had been filled with songs from one of Vanessa’s playlists, pop music bouncing around the vehicle.

When she cut the music off and opened her car door, the finality of the moment hit me like a ton of bricks.

This wasn’t just about ending things with Vanessa. It felt like closing the door on my old life.

Vanessa and I found a booth near the back of the diner, far away from anyone who

could've overheard our conversation. There were still tears in her eyes, but her expression was neutral, like she was mourning something she'd mourned before.

"There's someone else, isn't there?" She started. "Did you meet him on the ranch?"

"Him?" I was nearly stunned into silence. "Wait, Vanessa. Did you know...?"

"I don't know. Maybe." She let out a wounded laugh. "I thought about asking you, but I didn't know if you really knew, either. Besides, we always got back together and there weren't other girls in the picture so... I was happy, I guess, for the lack of competition."

I smiled over at her. "There's no competing with you, Vanessa. What we had..."

"Stop. You don't have to do that."

"Do what?"

"Try to make me feel better about this." She shook her head. "Calder, I'm happy for you. I really am. You have every right to be happy, to be yourself. And yeah, we've had our time together, but we don't have to pretend like it was all sunshine and roses."

"Sure, but?—"

"We were a goddamn mess, Calder Hayes, and you know it." Vanessa laughed again. "This was doomed." She leaned across the table. "I know you blocked me, by the way. What the hell? Were you just going to never talk to me again or what?"

"I think that was sort of the plan, yeah."

“Asshole.” She smirked. “You’re supposed to break up over pancakes, everybody knows that.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Are you really going to be okay?”

“Uh, yeah.” She wiped a tear away from her eye. “Like I said, Calder. We were doomed. I knew this was coming, I just didn’t know when. I just...”

“You just what?”

“I just hope it works out for you. That’s all.” She smiled. “I want the world for you, Calder.”

“I want the world for you, too, Vanessa.”

“That seemed intense.”

Virgil was suddenly sitting across from me in the diner booth. Vanessa had left a few moments ago, hugging me goodbye before walking out of my life forever. I’d been finishing off the rest of my breakfast, staring down at my plate so much so that I hadn’t noticed Virgil until he spoke.

“You have got to stop doing that,” I murmured. “And what? Were you watching me again?”

“I see all.” He playfully shrugged. “So, was that your ex-girlfriend?”

“Yep. Sure was.”

“Did you break up with her because of Shane?”

“Not just because of Shane, no,” I replied. “There were a lot of things that weren’t working between us. They never were.”

“Hmm...”

“What?”

“I can see why you and Shane get along so well. You seem like a very pragmatic person.” Virgil grinned. “Shane’s our smart one. Well, except when it comes to you, maybe.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s difficult for someone like him, so wound up, always.” He shook his head. “He’s a perfectionist but you can’t be a perfectionist when it comes to matters of the heart.”

“Matters of the heart?”

“Matters like you, yes.” Virgil nodded. “Which reminds me, do you need a ride back to the ranch? Pretty sure your ex-girlfriend was your ride here.”

“Shit. You’re right.” My eyes went wide at the realization. “Was she really just going to leave me here?!”

“To be fair, you did just break up with her.” Virgil laughed. “That’s the least she could’ve done, in the grand scheme of things. One time, Jolene got so upset with me, she burned down my shed.”

Virgil nodded across the room at a woman standing behind the counter. “Couldn’t ask for a better woman. Honestly, she could burn down the whole ranch if she wanted to.”

I had a million follow up questions but decided against them.

Instead, I stood up from the booth, already heading out to the parking lot.

Virgil was right behind me, and soon, we were driving back to Stratton Ranch.

I tried to run through the conversation with Shane in my head, rehearsing what I was going to say, things he might say in return.

I needed him to know that I’d spoken to Vanessa, that I remembered everything now, that I knew that he was the one for me.

A chill went through me, then, just as Virgil turned down the road.

Shit.

What if Shane doesn’t feel the same way?

What if I’d blown up my world, all for nothing?

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SHANE

I'd watched Vanessa's SUV leave that morning, with Calder in tow.

It was hard to describe what it felt like watching Calder go back to his old life, a place I never could've followed him.

Everything between us had just been a detour on his way back to Vanessa, on his way back to the way things were meant to be.

I was broken in a way I'd never been before, despair threatening to sink me down to the ground.

The ache in my chest was only getting worse, no matter how much I tried to ignore it.

But this was how it was going to be.

An ache in my chest. Calder happy, somewhere else.

I decided to throw myself into work, ignoring my stomach being in knots, my dry throat scratchy with something I couldn't name.

Heartbroken, I found myself pounding nails into a fence post that didn't really need fixing, tightening bolts on a gate that no one really used.

The work helped take my mind off Calder temporarily, the pain in my body returning as soon as I remembered that he'd existed.

Still, there was enough work to do on the ranch that I knew I could find ways to give myself some reprieve from Calder for a few minutes at a time.

Maybe it's time to buy that land.

It was an errant thought, but one that became increasingly louder at the front of my thoughts.

It didn't help that I was still here, memories of Calder around every corner.

Maybe if I changed my surroundings, there was a chance that I wouldn't be so haunted, with less of Calder to remember.

Maybe I could get over him completely, with so much new work that would go into running my own farm.

I simply wouldn't have time to think about Calder, my bones sore after every day, my mind only focused on what I needed to do next.

It was a blissful thought, having no time or room to still be in love with Calder?—

In love with Calder?

I inwardly groaned at the realization.

Shit.

I was in love with Calder.

I stopped what I was doing, setting down my tools. I took a seat on the ground beside them, as I rested against the side of a barn.

This is a disaster.

Was that why I'd felt so awful? Because I was in love ?

And what the hell was I supposed to do about it?

The man I was in love with had just driven off with the love of his life.

Was I supposed to chase after him? Was I supposed to ruin things between him and Vanessa just so I could feel like I had a chance?

I closed my eyes, letting the truth settle over me.

There's nothing I can do.

I was in love, and it didn't matter at all.

Because Calder was gone.

"Shane?"

I was back outside, busying myself with work. I groaned at the sound of Calder's voice, annoyed with myself for being so desperate to hear his voice that I was fully hallucinating.

"Shane...?" His voice got closer to me, followed by the sound of quiet footsteps. I turned to look over at him, watching his slow approach, his hands down at his side.

"What do you want, Calder?" My tone wasn't welcoming. "Did you forget something at your cabin?"

“What?” Calder paused for a moment before his face lit up with a realization. “Oh. Did you think I left earlier?—”

“You did leave. With Vanessa.”

“We just went to Canyon Creek Diner,” he replied. “We just... needed to have a conversation.”

His eyes locked with mine, something serious behind his gaze.

“What kind of conversation?” I finally stopped what I was doing. “What did you two need to talk about?”

“I needed to let her know the truth. About who I am. Who I’ve always been.

” He took in a deep breath. “And what I want and don’t want for my future.

” Calder closed the distance between us.

“Shane, before I met you... I wasn’t being honest with myself, about anything.

I wasn’t ready to admit how I really felt or what I really wanted. But now that I know you...”

He paused, like he was thinking through his words.

“Shane, I don’t want to hide who I am anymore.

I don’t want to pretend to be anything I’m not.

And when we’re together, I don’t have to pretend about anything.

You make me feel so... accepted. So calm. Like I don't have to be anything other than myself when we're together. ”

Silence filled the space between us, as Calder had an expectant look on his face.

“Shit.” He took a step away from me. “You don't feel the same way, do you? I just embarrassed myself. I'm sorry. I can have my stuff out my cabin ASAP?—”

“Sorry. I was just...” I shook my head, trying to shake out my thoughts at the same time. “Calder, I thought I was never going to see you again. And now, here you are, saying that you... want to be with me?”

“Yeah. I want to be with you.” Calder let out a shaky laugh. “That's all I was trying to say, all rambling aside.”

“I want to be with you, too, Calder—” Before I had a chance to finish my response, Calder's hands were on my waist, pulling me closer to him. His mouth was on mine then, as we both smiled into the kiss.

“You really thought I was never coming back?” he whispered, his forehead pressed against mine.

“Whatever you decided, I just wanted you to be happy.”

“I wouldn't have been happy without you, Shane,” he murmured. He brought his lips back to mine and I melted against him, relief flooding my system.

Just then, something crossed my mind. “Wait.”

“What is it?”

“We should, uh, relocate,” I replied. “Us hooking up once on the ranch is a fluke. Twice and people might start thinking we prefer to hook up outside.”

“Don’t we?” Calder smirked.

I playfully rolled my eyes as I took his hand in mine, walking us over to my cabin.

“What did you think? The first time you saw me?” Calder asked as he sank down on my couch. He held a cup of freshly brewed coffee in his hand. “You can be honest.”

“The first time I ever saw you? Or the first time I saw you after your accident?”

“Both.”

“The first time I ever saw you...” I let my words trail off as I thought about the question.

“I think, the first time I saw you, I thought you were the most gorgeous man I’d ever seen.

And when I saw you after your accident, I thought the same thing.

But I was also terrified that I was never going to see you again. Both times.”

“The first time I saw you, I thought you were... handsome.” Calder lightly chuckled.

“But I don’t know if I was willing to admit that part to myself just yet. I just liked looking at you sometimes. More than I liked looking at other people.”

“Happy you came to your senses.” I smirked before my expression turned serious.

“Seriously, though, Calder. I thought I was going to die or something, when I thought you left. I didn’t know what was happening to me. Everything just felt so dark.

Empty.”

“That’s how I felt when I thought about leaving you behind,” he murmured. “Shane, it felt awful. Just thinking about having a future without you.”

“Have you ever felt anything like that before?”

“No. Have you?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I feel kind of stupid, though. Not realizing what it was.”

“What it was?”

“Are you really going to make me say it first?”

“Say what first?” Calder grinned. “I have no idea what you could possibly be referring to, Shane Stratton.”

“You’re ridiculous. You know that, right?”

“Ridiculously hot, according to you.” Calder shifted closer to me on the couch, his arm wrapping around my shoulders. “Nice cabin, by the way. It’s exactly what I was expecting.”

“Meaning?”

“It’s neat. Tidy. Organized.” He nodded. “All very you. Everything’s exactly where it’s supposed to be.”

“That’s me. Everything exactly where it’s supposed to be.”

Calder moved even closer to me, his chest pressing towards mine. “Is that how you feel right now? Like everything’s exactly where it’s supposed to be? Do I fit in with your life, Shane? With you?”

“Like the missing piece to a puzzle,” I said, breathless. I could barely handle being this close to him without touching him, every part of me aching for it. Calder seemed to be reading my mind as he gingerly pressed a hand to my face, thoughtfully brushing my skin with his fingers.

We stayed like that for a moment, staring into each other’s eyes.

I turned my head into his palm, gently kissing his hand, kissing his wrist, kissing his arm.

Calder stopped me when I got to his elbow, instead encouraging me to press my back against the couch.

I did what he wanted me to, resting against the couch, my attention on his every move.

Calder shifted into my lap then, chest close to mine.

He placed a hand on either side of my face before he bent close to me, his mouth meeting my own.

I let out a sigh of relief as we kissed, so glad for the physical touch, each part of me singing with excitement.

Calder seemed to feel the same way, as he deepened the kiss, his tongue slipping between my lips.

I groaned as his hands slid up to my hair, gripping it tight.

It felt like he was loosening something inside me, something I'd been holding back for much too long.

"Calder..." I groaned again, as he moved his attention down to my neck, kissing and sucking my sensitive skin.

At the same time, he started to buck his hips against mine, grinding himself against me in a steady rhythm.

I whimpered, feeling perfectly helpless, my cock growing hard beneath him.

Calder picked up his pace against me, teasing me as his lips moved back to mine, capturing my every groan in his mouth.

A few seconds later and Calder's hands were sliding underneath my shirt, his fingers quickly finding my nipples. He took each one between his fingers, still grinding against me, now playing with my chest in time with the rest of his movements.

"Fuck, Calder..." I moaned his name. "Are you trying to make me come on myself or something?"

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“Or something.” Calder let out a gentle laugh. “I want to bring you right to the brink, Shane. I want you begging for me to fuck you.”

“If that’s all you want, I can make that happen for you right now.” I was laughing now, too. “I want you inside me, Calder. I want you to fuck me.”

“Good. But not good enough.” Calder playfully winked. “Come on. I think you can do better than that.”

“Calder...”

“Yes, Shane?” Calder moved even higher up my lap, his hips grinding against me even more intense than before.

“Fuck. Can you at least...” I struggled to find the words, but somehow, Calder understood.

He reached down between us and pulled down my fly, letting my boxers breathe.

My cock was still straining against the fabric of my boxers and Calder pulled those down too, just enough for my shaft to spring up between us.

He started to move again, and I felt completely at his mercy. “Calder... fuck...”

I shivered as my orgasm threatened to take over my body at any moment, no part of me able to resist any part of him.

“That’s it, baby. Come for me...” Calder murmured. “I want you to come for me, Shane.”

I shivered again, this time for good, something breaking inside of me.

As I came, white strings sprayed against Calder’s shirt and pants, my head thrown back in pure pleasure.

I’d never felt freer than in this moment, no part of me worried about the future, the present, the past. I was just happy here with Calder, pleasure freely cascading through every inch of me.

When I finally came down, Calder was still in my lap. His eyes were watching me closely, like he was studying me, waiting for something. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I’ve just...” Calder paused. “I’ve just never seen you look like that before. I didn’t think you could be any hotter and then you just... were.”

“Flatterer.”

“Truth teller,” Calder corrected. “You have no idea how miraculous you really are, Shane Stratton. How the hell did I get so lucky to have you?”

“I don’t know how many people would consider having a serious accident lucky ...”

“They would if they knew you were waiting on the other side of it.” It was the last thing Calder said before he kissed me all over again, his hands resting on my shoulders as he did.

This was pure torture.

After Calder and I had hooked up on the couch, we'd decided to break for lunch.

I'd cooked something rustic yet delicious, chicken breasts with roasted veggies and mashed potatoes on the side.

Calder ate it like it was the best meal he'd ever had in his life (with all compliments to the chef).

Afterwards, we spent the rest of the afternoon lounging around the cabin, getting to know each other better.

Calder had perused my bookshelf, and he'd talked to me about some of his favorite pieces of art, ranging from films to actual paintings.

At one point, he joked about us being a pair of cultured cowboys .

It was kind of funny, finding out how much we really had in common with each other.

In a real way, we were perfect on paper, the best possible couple.

Of course, that also made things a little more tragic, realizing that we never would've gotten together if Calder had never had his accident, had never had a chance to be who he truly was.

By nightfall, I'd cooked us another meal, this time a steak and veggie stir fry with fresh vegetables from one of the ranch gardens.

And now, we sat in front of the fireplace in my cabin, watching the fire grow, watching each other, too.

I wanted so badly to run my hands through his hair, to pull him close to me.

But I had a feeling that Calder wanted to take the lead, his earlier words about wanting me to beg for it still ringing in my ear.

I groaned, as the memory made my cock twitch in my pants.

“What are you thinking?” Calder’s question was quiet as it floated over to me.

“Happy thoughts.” I smiled before I tucked my head against my arm. “What about you?”

“I’m thinking that I might try to convince you to cook for me every day for the rest of our lives,” Calder joked. “I never knew you were a chef, too.”

“Comes with the territory. I’m sure you’re a pretty good cook yourself.”

“Nope.” Calder laughed. “I don’t cook anything, Shane. Pretty good at burning things, though.”

“I could teach you.”

“Yeah, we’ll see about that.” He grinned, like there was something else on his mind.

“What? What is it?”

“Was that really all you were thinking earlier? Happy thoughts?”

“Yep.”

“Interesting.” Calder hummed. “I was hoping you’d be in more of a begging mood by

now.”

“You think I don’t want to touch you?” I playfully scoffed. “Calder, I want to touch you so bad I feel like I’m losing my mind?—”

“That’s all you had to say, baby,” Calder cut me off as he gently nudged me down to the floor.

When I was in position on my back, he climbed over me, his mouth covering mine.

I moaned under him, something tingling down my back, something eager and warm.

Calder pulled off my shirt before pulling off his own.

Then he moved away from me, just enough to pull off his pants and boxers.

Following his lead, I did the same, pulling off the rest of my clothes as quickly as I could.

There was a flurry of clothes around us as Calder brought his chest back down towards mine.

We kissed and it was impossibly electric, each second of it reverberating through my skin.

He broke off the kiss suddenly, though, as he made his way down my body, not stopping until his lips were wrapped around my cock.

“Calder... Calder...” I bit my lip as he bobbed his head up and down the length of my shaft, his mouth eagerly taking in every inch of me.

He stopped for a few seconds, coming back up towards my chest, his fingers slowly sliding into my mouth.

When his fingers were wet enough, he moved back into position, his lips getting into place around my shaft.

And with his now wet fingers, he circled my tight hole, gently playing with it. I whimpered at the feel of it, my body overloaded with pleasure. Calder continued teasing my waiting hole, his mouth still working on my cock.

“Wait... I’m going to... I’m too close...” I murmured, as a familiar sensation came over me. “Calder, I’m going to...”

He didn’t say anything in response, but I felt him pick up his speed, his mouth moving in record time.

I tried my best to hold back from coming for him, but I couldn’t help myself.

My come spilled out of my cock and landed near the back of Calder’s throat.

He swallowed my come without any hesitation, his tongue sliding across my tip like he wanted to make sure he got every drop.

“Are you trying to kill me?” I whined. “Calder, you can’t keep doing that to me.”

“That’s one theory.” Calder smirked as he looked up at me.

“But I want... you should...”

“What was that, baby?”

“I don’t want to be the only one who gets to come,” I finally managed to get the words out. “I want to make you come, too. Please, Calder. Let me make you come. I want you.”

Before he could say anything in response, I shifted up, now resting on my elbows. “Please, Calder. I want you. Don’t you want to be inside me, too?”

“More than anything, baby. More than anything,” Calder said before he offered me a hand off the floor. “Come on. Let’s go to your bedroom. I’ve been dying to see it.”

When we got to my bedroom, Calder gently sat me down on the edge of my bed. He took a moment to look around the room, a small smile on his face. “So, this is where the magic happens.”

“Please, never say that again.” I groaned. “And I try to keep the magic to a minimum.”

“Really?” Calder tilted his head. “Why? You could really clean up, Shane. You’ve seen yourself, right?”

“Calder, you’re—” I stopped myself, mid-sentence, heat rushing to my cheeks.

“What were you about to say?” he pressed. “Come on. You can tell me.”

“I was about to say that you’re the only person I’ve ever felt any magic with,” I admitted, my voice low. “So, why would I be chasing after a bunch of random guys?”

Calder bent to kiss me, not saying a word. I kissed him back, as he softly pushed me against the bed, not stopping until my back landed on the mattress. When I was in place, I watched as Calder walked over to my nightstand.

“Second drawer,” I said, almost at a whisper. “I should have whatever you’re looking for in there.”

“Indeed, you do.” Calder smiled as he pulled out a condom and a small bottle of lube.

When he came back over to me, he grabbed hold of my waist, cautiously shifting me until I was on my chest. He then reached for my thighs, pulling me into place until I was on my hands and knees for him, my fingers pressed against the bed sheets.

And then, his mouth was on me. I gasped at the feel of his tongue against my sensitive hole, my hands twisting into the fabric underneath me.

He drew small, lazy circles around me, pushing me into oblivion, my body way too overwhelmed by the sensation.

I felt myself getting hard again, almost by force, my cock having no other choice but to respond to Calder’s touch.

“Calder...” I whimpered. But me calling out his name wasn’t met with words.

Instead, Calder opened the lube, spilling some onto his fingers before he slid one of them inside me.

He fingered me slowly at first, my hole adjusting to him.

As soon as I was ready for another finger, he happily obliged, sliding another one deep inside me.

“Calder... I can’t...”

“Yes, you can, baby,” he replied. “You’re doing such a good job for me, Shane.

You're doing so good."

I groaned, as he fingered my hole, my hips rocking back and forth to meet his hand. The tip of my cock was already leaking precome, my body shuddering all over again. It was embarrassing how easily Calder brought me over the edge, how easily my body wanted to give him everything.

"Calder! Calder..." I cried out his name as I came for him a second time tonight, my come shooting streaks across the bed.

Before I was able to recover from the orgasm, I heard Calder opening a condom and sliding it down his shaft.

It wasn't long before he slid inside me, my breath catching in my chest as he did.

"Calder! Fuck!" I was gasping for air as Calder's hips bucked against mine, the length of him slamming into me all at once. "Fuck!"

I eventually managed to take in a few breaths, as Calder expertly fucked me from behind.

His hands were on either side of my waist, keeping me in place, making sure I took in every inch of him exactly how he wanted.

In that moment, I couldn't think of anything else but Calder, my brain going blank, forgetting the rest of the world.

Suddenly, he pulled his cock out of me.

"Wait. Don't—" I whimpered, but Calder was already switching our positions again.

This time, he wanted me on my back, as he situated himself between my thighs.

He then slid his cock inside me again, our eyes meeting each other's as he did.

He moved his hands to my thighs now, keeping a hold on me, keeping me in place.

"I love you," Calder said, his voice clear. "I love you, Shane Stratton."

"Calder...", I groaned, barely able to think with his shaft buried so deep inside me. "I love you, too... but..."

"But?"

"Why would you say it right now?" I asked, curious. "You're never supposed to say, 'I love you' for the first time during sex."

"Shit. Really?" Calder's eyes went wide.

And I broke into a laugh, unable to help myself in the moment. "Yes. Really."

"Welp, cat's out of the bag." Calder laughed right along with me, his hips still moving at a steady pace. "Sorry not sorry."

Our laughter swirled against each other's, melting, melding.

Calder began to move even faster against me, his thrusts becoming punishing in the very best way.

A few more thrusts and his hips went still, his chest over mine as his breaths came rapid and ragged.

We kissed until his heartbeat settled down, until there was no way of discerning where he ended and I began.

“Is it okay to say, ‘I love you’ right now?” he whispered, his face so close to mine.

“Yes.”

“Then, I love you, Shane Stratton,” he replied. “I love you so much. And I couldn’t be happier than when I’m at your side.”

“I love you, too, Calder Hayes. More than you’ll ever know.”

CALDER

“I feel like I haven’t seen you fully clothed in days.” I grinned as I looked over at Shane. He was getting dressed for the day, complete with his blue jeans and cowboy hat in place.

It’d been a whirlwind since we’d confessed our love to each other, everything fitting together like it’d always been that way.

I’d been staying over at Shane’s cabin, practically moving all my stuff into his bedroom closet.

We’d still been finding work to do around the ranch, but so much of our time was spent in Shane’s bed that everything else felt like a blur.

“I feel like I haven’t seen anyone else but you in a few days,” Shane replied, a thoughtful look on his face. “Maybe I should check in with people.”

“They’ll understand.” I playfully shrugged. “It’s normal, I think. The honeymoon period and all that.”

“I think it’s a little more serious than that,” Shane replied as he walked over to me. “I have a feeling we’re going to be that annoying couple who’s all over each other, all the time.”

“I promise not to be annoying around your family, at least.”

Shane laughed at that. “Are you serious? They’re some of the worst offenders. They’re all disgustingly in love with their partners.”

“Disgustingly in love, huh?”

“You know what I mean.” Shane offered me a quick kiss. “Hey, you need to get dressed, too.”

“Why? Do you need my hand with something?”

“Something like that,” Shane said, his tone vague. “Wear something sturdy, good for the elements.”

“Are you taking us surprise camping or something?”

“I’ll tell you more when we get there.” Shane turned to leave the cabin. “I’ll be waiting for you in the car.”

“But if you wait to tell me when we get there, how am I supposed to know what to wear—Shane!” I called out for him, but it was already too late.

I shrugged, heading for the closet, quickly searching through my clothes.

I decided on a comfortable jacket, layering it with a shirt underneath.

I pulled on a pair of work boots, and soon made my way to Shane’s car, with him already waiting in the driver’s seat.

“Where are we going, Shane?”

“You’ll know when we get there.” There was a light smile on his face as we headed

towards the nearest trail.

“Is that the Yellowstone River? Over there?” I pointed out my window, amazed at the view. We were clearly heading away from Stratton Ranch, but not too far, since I could still see it in the distance behind us. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

When I looked over at the driver’s seat, Shane simply nodded.

He then turned up the radio, the car filling with old school country, men singing about thunder and lightning, relationships that were so powerful they shook the world underneath them.

He seemed nervous about something, his grip on the wheel a little too tight, his eyes staring straight out at the road.

I leaned back in my seat, concern filling my features.

A part of me wondered if Shane was taking me somewhere remote so I wouldn’t make a scene, just so we could talk .

My stomach roiled as I thought about him wanting to put the brakes on our relationship, wanting to slow down until he was more comfortable with?—

No.

I took a deep breath, steadying myself. I knew that Shane wasn’t like that. He was open, honest and direct, traits that I loved about him. If Shane wanted to talk to me, he would’ve just done it back at the cabin, no need for any of the dramatics.

I let the music float over me then as I took in the view from the road.

It really was beautiful out here, wherever Shane was taking us.

About half an hour later, Shane came to a complete stop, right beside a cluster of tall trees.

I hopped out of the car right after him, following him to a clearing just beyond the trees, a seemingly unending amount of acreage suddenly revealing itself to us.

“Whoa.” It was all I could think to say as I looked around the clearing, a sense of awe washing over me.

I’d seen plenty of beautiful country before, but somehow this felt different.

My gaze went up to the sky, spotting an impossible blue, which matched the just as impossible green of the trees behind us, the Yellowstone River off in the distance only adding to the majesty that surrounded us on all sides.

“Do you like it?” Shane’s voice was quiet, his nerves showing.

“How could I not?” I shook my head. “This place is... perfect. Is that why you brought me out here? Because you wanted me to see it?”

Shane let out a deep sigh. “I’m so happy you like it, Calder. Because it’s... what I bought.”

“Wait. What?” My eyes went wide. “Oh, my God. Shane, this is your land?”

I couldn’t contain my excitement, my arms wrapping around him. “Shane! You did it! This was your dream! You really made it happen. You did it.”

Shane wrapped his arms around me, tight. “It’s going to be a lot of work, getting

everything ready, setting up structures. I'll also need to figure out the logistics of where the barns will go, where I'll put the horses?—"

"Yeah, but you already know what you're doing. You've got this." I pulled away from him, wanting to look at his face. "And it's not like you have to do everything alone. Your dream doesn't have to just be your dream, Shane, now that we're together."

"You'd really help me? Because you don't have to, Calder. You never said you wanted any part of this?—"

"I'm saying it now," I cut him off before pressing a soft kiss against his lips. "I want to be a part of this, Shane. I want us to build something that's ours."

"I want us to build something that's ours, too." He grinned against my mouth. "It feels like the only thing I've ever really wanted, in a long, long time."

We stayed there that way for a moment, a comfortable silence building around us.

Eventually, we turned away from each other, just enough to take in the view around us, the breeze blowing gently through the grass.

It was easy for me to imagine our lives out here, working side by side, building something from the ground up.

Although, it was always easy to imagine myself next to Shane.

I honestly couldn't imagine myself anywhere else.

"How would you feel about me having a farm?" I asked, when we were back at Shane's cabin. "Just a place to grow some veggies, maybe. So, we can have them

fresh, whenever we want.”

“That sounds like a good idea to me.” He nodded as he pulled out a map of his newly purchased lot. He was drawing something on it, and when I looked over his shoulder, I realized it was my garden. “Anything else you were thinking about?”

“An area for the horses, definitely.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve already got that covered.”

“What if I wanted to raise rabbits?”

“What kind of rabbits?”

“Flemish Giants.”

“Are you talking about those huge, dog-sized rabbits people keep as pets?” Shane seemed amused by the prospect. “Are you raising them just to keep on the property?”

“Maybe. We could also take them on the road, put them in a few shows.” I shrugged. “Honestly, I never thought I’d ever get this far.”

“This far, meaning?”

“You just letting me have whatever I wanted.” I laughed. “The rabbit thing was always something in the back of my mind, but I never thought anybody would take me seriously.”

“Be careful what you wish for, Calder,” Shane said as he added a place for the rabbits to his map. “I personally think raising rabbits is right up your alley.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Matches your quirky personality.” He smiled. “You seem exactly like the kind of person who’d have rabbits like that.”

I smiled right back at him, just as another idea popped into my head. “Wait. What about guest cabins?”

“Like to rent out to strangers?”

“No, just for friends and family.” I shook my head. “We’re not trying to run a bed-and-breakfast type deal, are we?”

“Nope. The thought of having to deal with strangers on a regular basis makes me a little nauseous.”

“Same.” I nodded in agreement. “Okay, so we have the garden, the rabbit area, the horse barn... anything else we should add in the meantime?”

Shane seemed hesitant as he looked over at me. “What do you see? When you think about your dream house?”

“My dream house?” I hummed, thinking it over.

“I think I see windows, big enough to let in all the natural light I could ever want. I see a porch, where I could just catch up with people over beers or over tea, whatever they prefer. I see white pillars, but not to be pretentious, just to be classic, you know? I want people to see the house and just know that it’s home to someone, that someone really cares about the place.

Painted bright blue, maybe, something to match the skies out here. ”

When I finished talking, I brought my gaze back to Shane. He nodded towards the map, where he'd drawn a sketch of the home I'd described. "Something like that?"

"Wait. Shane..." I looked between the map and Shane, my eyes moving fast. "Is that... what are you..."

"It'd be ours, if that's what you want," he said, voice clear as day. "Is that something you want with me, Calder?"

I didn't answer with my words. Instead, I practically leapt into Shane's arms, wrapping myself around him tightly.

"I'll take that as a yes?" He smiled at me.

"Yes! Obviously. Yes." I let out an excited laugh. "Oh, my God. We're going to build my dream house."

"Together," Shane added. "Your dreams and mine. We can do it all, Calder, as long as we're doing it together."

SHANE

“You don’t need to be so nervous,” I said as I watched Calder out of the corner of my eye. “Everyone already likes you.”

Calder and I were getting ready for the annual Stratton Ranch bonfire, where all the family would be gathered around. I turned to look at him fully as he finished getting dressed, fiddling with his shirt for the millionth time. I walked over to him, my eyes meeting his in the bedroom mirror.

“Calder?”

“Yeah?”

“No one’s out to get you,” I reassured him. “They just want to officially meet you.”

“You don’t think that makes it worse?” he grumbled. “What if their expectations are way too high? What if I’m better off as an idea than an actual person?”

“Oh, wow. That’s pretty philosophical.” I hummed. “I guess, in a real way, most of us are better off as an idea than actual people, especially if you consider moral goodness?—”

“Or you can just tell me I look good and I’m not going to make an ass out of myself?”

“You look perfect.” I kissed him on the cheek. “And you could never make an ass out

of yourself.”

“Much better.” Calder smiled in the mirror before he smiled over at me. “Okay. I think I’m ready.”

Suddenly, his face fell. “Wait. Shit. Will Joseph be there?”

“Probably not. He likes to know that we all get together, but he prefers to keep to himself.” I shrugged. “I think people being too joyful around him makes him ill.”

Calder nervously laughed. “Okay, good. In that case yeah, I think we’re good to go.”

I offered Calder my arm, and he placed his own through mine.

A few minutes later and we were out the door, heading towards the UTV.

When we pulled up to the main cabin, it looked like the bonfire was already in full swing.

There were some people gathered around a fire pit, while others were seated on nearby benches.

After we parked the UTV, Levi was the first to greet us, offering us drinks in each of his hands.

“Calder! Hey!” Levi beamed over at him. “How do you feel about drinks made by a burgeoning, amateur bartender?”

“What does that mean?” Calder looked at the drink now in his hand. “Does that mean it’s amazing? Or kind of off?”

“You tell me.”

Calder nervously took a sip of the drink. “Um, it tastes all right to me?”

“Good! That was a test, and you passed.” Levi laughed. “That was made by my sister, Amber. She’s taken up bartending as a hobby and she’ll be delighted to know that you already know how to preserve her feelings.”

“But I actually don’t think it’s bad! In fact, it’s kind of growing on me.” Calder took another sip.

“I like him. I knew I’d like him.” Levi laughed again before he turned his attention on me. “And? How are things going with your new piece of land?”

“No big news yet, but we finalized the map. We know exactly what we want to build and where.”

“Good. I’m happy everything’s coming along for you—” Levi was interrupted by Cameron showing up at this side.

“Shane! And you must be Calder.” Cameron reached out to take Calder’s hand.

But Calder seemed stunned in place. “Uh, are you... you’re not...”

“Cameron Clarke? Yep. That’s me.” Cameron chuckled. “Sorry, it’s probably weird, randomly meeting me here. I haven’t been around the ranch as much lately because I’ve been off filming season one of a crime thriller for a streamer. Fingers crossed for season two!”

“And fingers crossed for an Emmy!” Levi added. “That’s what those are called, right? Emmy’s?”

“Yes, those are called Emmy’s.” Cameron grinned before he sweetly kissed Levi. “Look at you! You’re learning.”

“Sorry. I wasn’t expecting to meet anybody famous,” Calder replied, belatedly shaking Cameron’s hand.

“Oh, I’m not famous around here.” Cameron smiled. “Which is exactly how I like it. No one being fake around me. No one kissing my ass just because they’ve seen me on TV.”

“Uh, why is everyone congregating over in this corner, all of a sudden?” Dylan’s voice broke through the conversation, as he came to stand beside us. His eyes immediately landed on Calder. “Hey! Calder, right?”

“That’s me.” Calder sheepishly shrugged. “The one everyone seems to already know somehow.”

“You’ve been the trending topic in the family group chats, not gonna lie,” Dylan continued.

“With how mysterious Shane is about everything... this man basically talks in riddles until he gets to know you. And even then, you still need to make sure you listen pretty close.” Dylan then leaned closer to Calder, like he was sharing a secret.

“But not with you, huh? Seems like you cracked the Shane code pretty good.”

“Dylan, what’s going on—Oh. Calder.” Cole approached us now, giving us a quick nod. “Nice to finally meet you. Heard a lot about you. We should have some one-on-one time, so I can make sure you’re actually good enough for Shane.”

“I... uh...” Calder blushed a deep red before he looked over at me, like he was quickly drowning. I pulled him closer to my side and said, “Okay, I think we’ve had enough of the meet and greets. He needs to think we’re normal before you all bombard him with the reality of your... uniqueness.”

“Are you calling us weird?!” Dylan dramatically gasped, as he placed a hand across his chest. “But I’m one of the normals!”

“Baby, you know there are no normals in this family,” Cole casually reminded him. “If you were normal, you wouldn’t fit in.”

“Who wants marshmallows?!” Amber called out from across the field, waving her arms wildly. “Come get your sticks while the getting is good!”

“How’s it going? What’s your temperature?” I asked, as Calder and I sat around the fire pit, marshmallows on our sticks.

“I don’t know if I was expecting it to be so... lively,” he started, with a smile. “I don’t know. I guess I was worried everyone would be so serious, sizing me up before I had a chance to speak. Well, I mean, Cole does actually seem to be sizing me up...”

“He’s harmless,” I insisted. “He just wants to see what you’re made of, if you’ll back down when challenged. He knows the kind of work it’ll take to get my ranch off the ground and knows that I’ll need the right partner to make it all happen.”

“So, he’s just looking out for you? He doesn’t secretly hate me?”

“He doesn’t secretly hate you, I promise. And when you get to know him, he’s the most loyal person you’ll ever have in your corner.”

Calder let out a sigh of relief. “Okay. Good. That’s good to know?—”

“Calder! Do you dance?” Amber was still shouting, even though we were seated right across from her.

“Um, a little? I wouldn’t say I’m the best at it.”

“Dance with me!” Amber was already out of her seat, her hand held out towards Calder. “Come on! Let’s do it!”

Calder looked at me, and I gave a nod of approval.

“Shane! You’re coming too!” Amber demanded with a wild smile. “In fact, everybody! Get up! Let’s dance! Woo!”

I followed behind Amber and Calder, as she led him out to a makeshift dance floor.

She signaled to Virgil, who seemed to be controlling the stereo for the night, while an upbeat country song blasted all around us.

Amber danced with Calder in a sort of manic rhythm, but he was able to keep up with her steps, their arms cutting through the air, their hips swinging in time.

I looked around the dance floor and caught Dylan and Cole, who were in their own little world as usual, Cole’s hands around Dylan’s waist. They were dancing to the music like it was a slow song on a Sunday night, their bodies close, their touch tender.

Levi and Cameron were matching the rhythm of the music, even though Cameron’s movements were completely unpredictable, still dancing to his own beat.

Even Virgil and Jolene had joined in the dance, her hips gyrating against his, moving around like they were thirty years younger at a nightclub.

I was solidly rocking back and forth to the music, a drink in my hand, enjoying the smell of sweet smoke in the air. I could tell that Calder had received Amber’s seal of approval after the dance was over, as she pulled him into her arms for a tight hug.

“I love him! I love him,” Amber said to me, while she offered me a thumbs up.

A few moments later and she was cuddled up next to her husband, Doug, on the dance floor, their movements slow and measured.

When she was gone, Calder moved closer to me, matching my quieter style of dance.

He reached for the drink in my hand, taking a small sip, before giving it back to me.

“You’re almost out. You want me to get you another?”

“I can get it myself. It’s no problem?—”

“I want to get it for you, Shane,” Calder cut me off, with a light smile. “Now, did you want another beer? Or one of Amber’s drinks?”

“Honestly? One of Amber’s drinks. I don’t know. I’ve never tasted anything like it before but it’s really growing on me.”

“Right?” Calder playfully scoffed. “She might have a gift for the bartending stuff.”

Almost as soon as Calder was out of earshot, Virgil came up to me. “You’re welcome.”

“For what, exactly?”

“Ha. You all think these things just happen?” Virgil rolled his eyes. “It’s such a burden sometimes, being the only one who can see in this family.”

“Is this about to turn into one of your rants about UFOs? Or the microchip thing again? Because we’ve been over it a million times?—”

Virgil held up his hand. “I didn’t come over here to argue with you, nephew. I mostly just wanted to say congratulations... while also holding out for a thank you, from

your end.”

“Thanks, Virgil.” I flashed him a genuine smile. “I might not know what you did, but I know whatever it is, it worked out great.”

“And this is why you’re my favorite.” Virgil beamed back. “Now, don’t screw this up. I love you but Jolene says I need to cut back on my meddling. She wants to spend more quality time together.”

“I think we’re all in a good place right now, so if you wanted to cut back on the meddling...”

“Oh, don’t you start with me, too.” Virgil sighed. “It’s a heavy crown but someone’s got to keep this family chugging along.”

“Yeah, but maybe you could see if the train can run without you? Maybe the tracks are good enough.”

“More than good enough, I’d say.” Virgil slapped me on the back. “All right. I’ll catch up with you a little later. I haven’t had a chance to tell Cameron the UFO story yet. He’s going to love it.”

“Uh, I don’t know if Cameron will love it?—”

“He’s going to love it!” Virgil assured me, as he made a beeline for Cameron across the dance floor.

“I never saw any of this in my dreams,” Calder murmured as he sat beside me on a bench. We’d been quietly watching the stars in the night sky, the music still blasting all around us, my family still chatting and drinking and dancing.

“What do you mean?”

“Remember how I told you that I kept having the same dream over and over? About the cowboy on the trail who I thought was going to save me?”

“Yeah?”

“It was you, Shane.”

“What?” I couldn’t help the startled look on my face. “You were seeing me in your dreams?”

“Not at first. At first, I couldn’t make you out,” he replied. “But then, I realized it was you. I kept trying to reach you, but I never could. And then after Vanessa showed up, it felt like I’d lost you forever, even in my dreams.”

“You never lost me, Calder.”

“I know.” He lightly smiled. “But even when I felt connected to you in my dreams, all that warmth... I never imagined it could’ve ended up like this, with how happy I am right now. I never saw anything beyond the trail, and you waiting for me.”

“Maybe that’s because you weren’t meant to see the rest of the dream. You were meant to live it. Out of your head, here with me.”

“I think you might be onto something,” he replied. “I haven’t even had those dreams since we’ve gotten together. It’s like my brain can’t come up with something that’s as good as the real thing.”

“I think I might know what that’s like.” I shifted closer to him on the bench, my hand reaching for his. “You’re a dream come true, Calder Hayes.”

Calder beamed over at me, before resting his head against mine.

And as I stared out at the night, my family in the background, and my love at my side, I felt a sense of peace I'd never felt before.

For the first time in my life, I knew that my future wasn't going to be lonely, that there'd be another pair of hands working alongside me every step of the way.

And no matter what storms may have come or what challenges may come, I knew who was going to be standing by my side when it was time to face them. I took in a deep breath as I thought through everything we'd been through together, how much we'd faced just to get where we were now.

And while the trail had been long, and the road had been rough...

The man at the end? He was always worth it.