



The Rancher's Code

(Western Oath #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: DYLAN:

There's nothing safe about Cole Stratton.

He's straight, untouchable, and carved from grit—the last distraction I need while trying to wrangle a wedding in the middle of cowboy country.

One, he's not into men. And two, he's a rancher who carries silence like a loaded gun.

Three weeks on Cole's land, planning his sister's wedding while he watches me like I don't belong. He's the kind of man who owns half the valley but still ropes cattle. And Amber? Full-blown bridezilla. I'm just trying to survive without getting trampled—or buried in roses.

But Cole's always there—solid, smoldering, and close enough to touch. Just being near him feels like a risk.

Get too close, and I might not walk away in one piece.

COLE:

The rules were simple: be the good son, marry the right girl, run the family ranch.

But things didn't go according to plan.

Now I'm divorced, chasing redemption, and determined to prove I'm worthy of the billion-dollar empire my father built. No mistakes. No distractions.

Then my sister drags home a flashy wedding planner from the city who turns my land into a fairytale circus. Dylan Reid is bold, stubborn, and impossible to ignore.

The tension between us crackles. Charged glances, tight restraint. The way he looks at me like I'm not coming undone. Dylan wasn't in the plan. Not even close.

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DYLAN

I'd never been to Montana before.

But I'd read about it in books, seen it on TV and in movies. I knew to expect wide, open plains and a beautiful vast sky, the sort of thing that's so perfect it had to be photoshopped.

Still, I'd had no idea how it was going to make me feel until I stepped foot onto Stratton Ranch.

The place was massive, boundless fields surrounded by endless forest. Even the air was perfectly crisp, with hints of burning wood floating in the breeze every so often. More than anything, I loved how it smelled and wondered if I'd be able to purchase a candle with a scent like that once I was back home?—

Wait.

Did they make Montana scented candles in the city?

Were people in the city even curious about what Montana smelled like?

“Welcome to Paradise Valley!” A young woman's bright voice suddenly shook me out of my thoughts.

The car I'd been riding in came to a halt a few inches away from her and the driver offered me a polite nod. I stepped out of the car to greet my new client, my mind running through her profile as I sized her up:

Amber Stratton.

Engaged to Doug Thornton.

Beautiful.

Rich as hell.

She also seemed nice enough, judging from the smile that was still on her face as I walked up to her.

"Did you find the place okay?" she asked. "I sent the driver to the airport an hour ago?—"

"Oh, it wasn't his fault. I brought like four suitcases—" I stopped, mid-sentence, confusion dawning on me. "Uh, wait. Did the driver just... drive off? With all of my stuff?"

I helplessly stared down the road as I watched the car take a slight turn.

Amber laughed; even her laugh sounded expensive. "No, silly. He's taking your stuff to one of the guest houses on the ranch."

"One of the guest houses? There's multiple?"

"Mr. Reid, it's 400,000 acres," she replied. "And the Strattons are nothing if not fantastic hosts. What else are we supposed to do with all this land? The cows and

horses have enough, don't you think?"

She laughed again and I laughed along with her, even though I couldn't imagine what 400,000 acres looked like.

Well, I guess it looks like this?

"Here, come with me." Amber linked my arm in hers. "I want to show you something."

"Uh..."

It was all I could manage to say as we walked into yet another one of the guest houses. It was too small for anyone rich to live in full-time, but with plenty of space to make someone feel very comfortable.

Except it was obvious that no one lived here at all because the entire house had been dedicated to Amber's wedding planning. There were dozens of wedding dresses in the living room alone, with various jewelry options strewn along the couch, the table, and the chairs.

There were also several women running to and fro, some with fabric in their hands, others with stacks of documents—a few of them on the phone in different languages. I saw one woman's hand shaking as she downed a cup of coffee, probably already at her caffeine limit for the day.

But it was only 9AM.

"So, this is wedding HQ." Amber beamed at me. "Don't worry. I have a room squared away just for you, so you can have your own office."

“Thank you!” I tried my best to sound unbothered by the chaos that surrounded us. “I take it you’ve already started planning the wedding?”

“Just a little bit, here and there.” She grinned before letting out a small squeal. “Okay, okay! I’m sorry to do this, and I’m sure you get this all the time, but I can’t actually believe you’re here to plan my wedding! I’ve followed all of your work on social media and just—the way you make people’s dreams come true? No wonder the Wedding Genie has so many followers! You’re amazing!”

I smirked at the title.

Wedding Genie.

I’d worked hard for my reputation as the wedding planner who could make anything happen. If someone wanted a full-blown circus to entertain at the reception? Call me. If someone wanted a celebrity who hadn’t been seen in decades to officiate? Call me. If someone wanted to have an astronaut make a special appearance from space right before they cut the cake?

Yep. They just needed to call me.

It wasn’t easy doing what I did, and while it paid well, my favorite part was seeing the look on people’s faces. It was like I was performing some sort of magic trick, pulling it off with perfect precision, making it look oh-so-simple. In reality, all of my work was the combination of years of sleepless nights, hoarding favors like a madman, and being incredibly skilled at networking. Honestly, the only real magic I’d ever experienced was the joy I’d brought other people along the way.

Which was probably why I kept at it, despite the difficulty only seeming to increase as the years ticked by. That was the problem with being the Wedding Genie. Anybody who rubbed the lamp just assumed I’d be able to create some magic for

them, too.

“And you don’t have to worry about anything, okay?” Amber continued. “My staff—any of these girls—they’re at your call and command. I want to make things as easy as possible for you, and I remember in this interview you did for Bridal Magazine where you talked about sometimes just needing more hands?—”

“What’s your dream wedding look like, Amber?”

“What?”

“Why’d you pick me to plan your wedding? You clearly have the resources to plan anything you want.” I offered her a warm smile. “But you wanted to bring me in. Why?”

“I just want... one perfect day.” Amber’s eyes shone as she spoke. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“Then, let’s make it happen.”

Oh, my God.

Amber Stratton is insane.

I was sitting in my appointed office in the guest house, trying to type up notes as fast as I could. She’d been pitching ideas for the wedding for the past hour; importing white sand from different beaches for the aisle, a floral archway half the size of a high-rise. And now, she was talking about the reception champagne being dusted with diamonds.

I paused my note taking as I held up a finger, genuinely confused about what she’d

meant by that.

“Did you just say diamond dusted champagne?”

“Yep!”

“Do you mean you want the rim around the glasses to be dusted with diamonds?”

“No, I want there to be edible diamond dust in every glass.”

“But... why? It won't show up in the pictures if it's inside the drink?—”

“If it doesn't show up in the photos, that's something they can edit in later.”

“But the costs would be astronomical. And the camera is one thing, but the guests might not even be able to see it in their glass unless?—”

“Dylan! One perfect day, remember? You promised me.” She looked sad for a moment as she sat across from me. “I thought we were on the same page about this.”

“You're right. One perfect day.” I nodded, going back to typing up my notes.

This woman is going to break me.

Being a wedding planner, I was used to high maintenance clients. I'd had people throw wine in my face, threaten to sue me, sob into my arms if we weren't able to get every detail just right.

But Amber was different.

She was unreasonable, but she was so damn kind about it, I didn't want to let her

down. This entire ordeal would've been easier if she'd been a monster. If she'd been awful, I wouldn't have cared as much about trying to inject some reality into her wedding plans.

"What do you think about the bridesmaids entering on horseback?" she casually suggested.

"Like, the horses are part of the ceremony?"

"Exactly! You get it!"

"Are the horses trained to be part of the ceremony? Am I going to have to train horses for this, Amber?"

"You can do anything, right, Wedding Genie?"

"Amber—"

"What is all this?" A deep voice rounded the corner, his frame soon entering my office.

Oh.

He was handsome in a way I wasn't expecting, with dark hair and a sharp jawline. His gaze was intense as he stared over at me, like he was cataloging me somewhere in the back of his mind. I stared right back at him, even though I knew it was completely impolite. When I got my manners back, I broke off eye contact, taking a second to take in his sun-bronzed skin and his weathered hands...

Hmm.

He must've worked on the farm. I wondered how many years he'd put in.

"Cole!" Amber shot out of her seat and into his arms. "You came!"

"Of course, I came. You made it sound like an emergency."

"It is an emergency!" She grinned. "I wanted you to meet the wedding planner."

"That doesn't sound like an emergency?—"

"Please! I know how you get when there's people on the farm that you don't know." She rolled her eyes before she nodded over at me. "Dylan Reid, meet Cole Stratton. He's my big brother and future CEO of Stratton Ranch?—"

"You shouldn't say things that aren't true yet, Amber?—"

"Whatever! Everyone knows that you're Dad's favorite." She rolled her eyes again. "Just be nice to Dylan, okay? Don't scare him off by being an asshole."

"It's wonderful to meet you, Mr. Stratton," I said, rounding my desk with my hand already outstretched for a handshake. "It's an honor to be planning Amber's wedding?—"

"That's an awfully soft hand you have there, Dylan Reid," Cole cut me off, not taking my hand at all. "Is that normal? For wedding planning types?"

"And? Just what are you insinuating?"

"Oh, I'm not insinuating anything. I'm just saying it. Seems like you'll be charging a lot of money in exchange for not very hard work. It's a good deal if you can get it, at least for you."

“You don’t think I work hard?”

“Sorry. Let me be clear,” Cole replied, with a wink. “I don’t think what you do is really work. Isn’t it all phone calls and emails?”

“Cole! What did I just say about being an asshole!” Amber whined. “What’s wrong with you?!”

Amber turned to me, pleading. “I’m so sorry, Dylan. If it helps, he’s like this with everybody. He doesn’t know when to shut the hell up.”

“I think it’s interesting that your brother seems to think that only his work is real work, whatever that work is.” I stared him down, not breaking a sweat. “Although, what’s the job description for CEO again? Isn’t it all phone calls and emails?”

A few seconds passed by.

Finally, Cole broke into a smirk. “Funny. Very funny.”

“Thanks.” My tone was clipped.

“Anyway, we should get going!” Amber linked my arm in hers once again. “Dylan and I need to head into town. We need to look at more fabrics and Dylan needs to eat something for lunch. Right, Dylan?”

“Sure. Whatever you say.” Cole and I were still staring at each other, as if we were both trying to get under each other’s skin.

But if Cole Stratton thought that I was going to blink first...

He was dead wrong.

“I’m sorry about my brother,” Amber apologized before she took a sip of her lemon water. “He’s the worst. I mean, he’s also the best. He just doesn’t know how to talk to new people.”

Amber and I were sitting in Canyon Creek Diner, a restaurant that felt like a blast from the past. It was 60’s themed, with red booths and an old school jukebox player tucked away in the corner. The menu was burgers and milkshakes, with the only option for coffee being black and hot. There were rodeo posters lining the walls, but with current dates, as if whoever owned the place allowed the local ranchers to use the place as a community corkboard.

Much like Stratton Ranch, Canyon Creek Diner was a lot more pleasant than I ever would’ve expected.

“Don’t worry about it.” I shook my head. “Cole isn’t the first guy to try to make me feel lesser than because of my job. A lot of guys like him, you know, super over the top masculine types? They just like to cut me down because I’m their polar opposite. It might be some kind of king of the jungle thing.”

“That’s not Cole’s thing at all.” It was Amber’s turn to shake her head. “He’s not like that. Not territorial or whatever. I don’t know. It comes from a good place?—”

“You ready to order, sweetheart?” An older woman stood beside us, paper and pad in hand. She wore a bright, colorful blouse with dark pants, her glasses resting against her upper forehead. “Oh! Amber! Hey!”

“Hey, Jolene!” Amber beamed. “This is Dylan Reid. He’s my wedding planner.”

“God bless you.” Jolene laid a hand on my shoulder. “You must have the patience of a saint, of ten saints. I love Amber, but she’s out of her loving mind. She’s a Stratton, though, so it’s not her fault. It’s in their blood.”

I looked over at Amber, expecting to see anger on her face. Hadn't this woman just insulted her and her family?

Instead, Amber broke into a laugh. "I'm not even the craziest one in the bunch and you know it, Jolene!"

"You're a city boy, aren't you?" Jolene brought her attention back to me. "I can feel it."

"Actually I'm from?—"

"Oh, you remind me of my ex-husband." Jolene wistfully sighed. "He was a city boy, just like you. Just an awful, terrible man. Mean, and bitter, and hateful. Really good in the sack, though. And gorgeous in the right light. What a mess."

"I'm sorry to hear that?—"

"If you try to order a latte, I'll have one of my line cooks throw you out on your ass. That's one of the perks of owning this place, I don't have to put up with anything I don't like," she interrupted me again. "But I like you, city boy. And if you're as good in the sack as my ex-husband, I should warn you to stay away from these cowboys out here. They'll be able to smell it on you. Don't let them make you stupid, you hear me?"

"Trust me. The only cowboy I've met so far doesn't want anything to do with me."

"Good! Keep it that way." Jolene chuckled. "They're not worth the trouble."

"Amen." Amber fist pumped in agreement, before she looked down at the menu. "Do you think we could split a Canyon Creek special?"

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COLE

“What did Amber want?” Levi asked, as he swayed back and forth in a hammock on the front porch of Dad’s main office. “What was her emergency?”

“She just wanted me to meet her wedding planner.” I scoffed. “I don’t know why she keeps trying to rope me in on all the wedding stuff. It’s not like I need to sign off on anything. Dad already gave her access to her wedding account.”

“You know, it’s wild to me that you’re somehow Amber’s favorite brother.” Levi smirked as he sat up in the hammock. “No offense, but you’re not exactly an open book. I don’t even know why she glommed onto you in the first place.”

“Maybe because I’ve always been honest with her?—”

“Or because you remind her of Dad.” Levi laughed. “That’s probably it, isn’t it? Same reason you’re Dad’s favorite.”

“Why does everybody keep saying that today?” I murmured, finally stepping onto the porch with Levi. “Is Dad still meeting us here or what?”

Levi gave me a playful look, the same way he’d done over a million times by now. Levi had always been that way, like he was either about to play a prank on all of us or tell the best joke we’d ever heard. I didn’t know where he’d gotten that side of him from, since our dad was more severe than anything else. Still, I’d been grateful for it,

his ability to break the tension of a difficult moment unmatched to this day.

“What would you even do? If Dad went nuts and just gave Amber the whole thing instead?”

“Amber has no interest in running the farm.”

“Oh, I’d help her. We’d have to cut you out though. Can’t have too many cooks in the kitchen. Or too many farmhands on the farm.”

“In that case, I’d just wait on standby.”

“For what?”

“For you two to file for bankruptcy.” I grinned. “Because you’d have no clue what you were doing.”

“Hey! I’m telling Amber you said that!” Levi laughed.

“Great, then maybe you can be on meet-the-wedding-planner duty.” I sighed. “All right. Time to face whatever music Dad is playing today.”

My dad walked into the office about twenty minutes later, with our cousin, Shane, by his side. Shane wasn’t fond of speaking too much, and he quietly took a seat beside me as my father headed to the front of the room. Levi offered him a playful wink and Shane returned the gesture with a small smile.

“Sorry about running late,” my dad started. “I needed to get Shane from the other end of the ranch. I figured he should be here for this too.”

“Here for what, exactly?” Levi chimed in. “Is this about you making Cole the next

CEO? Because that could've just been an email?—”

“Power isn’t given. It’s taken. It’s earned.” My dad held up a hand, cutting Levi off. “If I was interested in handing over my hard-earned empire to the child who just happened to be born first, I wouldn’t have wasted my time preparing each of you for this.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that I’m giving each of you an opportunity,” he continued. “There’s a potential land acquisition deal on the table, and whoever closes it first... they’ll get it all.”

“Are you saying that any of us could be the next CEO?” Shane asked, his voice low.

“Yes.” My dad nodded. “But it won’t be easy. It’s the McMillan property, the ones that neighbor us to the left. That land has been in their family for generations, thousands of acres of it. They’re about as likely to sell their land as we are. But... there’s still a small chance.”

“What’s the catch here?” Levi pressed. “You can’t really be saying that all we have to do is get the McMillans to sign on the dotted line and you’ll let us run Stratton Ranch?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, son,” he replied, but his gaze shifted towards me. “I only want the best and brightest in charge of this company. Which means I’m going to need you to prove that you have what it takes... or else the ranch will go to the most capable among you.”

A few moments later and Dad was gone again, after explaining more of the minute details of the potential deal. I’d barely listened to the rest of his talk, already familiar

with the details of the McMillan Ranch, including its potential sale. I'd used that time to bury my frustrations even deeper, my father's disbelief in me eating away at me from the inside out.

Now, he was turning his disbelief in me into a goddamn game ?

What outcome was he hoping for? Did he really not want me to be CEO that badly?

"Plot twist!" Levi clapped me on the back, bringing my attention back to the office.

"Can you believe this shit? I think Dad might be losing it."

"Nope. He's just testing me. Again. For the millionth time."

"I think it's fair." Shane shrugged. "It's not like Levi and I ever really got a chance to compete with you before. Not seriously, at least."

"I just don't understand where his head is at. Not that I ever fucking do."

"What ? Joseph Stratton playing mind games ?" Levi pretended to be shocked. "Who could've seen this coming?"

"How much do you already know about the potential sale? What's your strategy?" Shane casually asked. "I know you won't give me exact details. I just want to know how far ahead you are."

I got up from my seat, already heading towards the door. "Just a few steps ahead. That's all."

"Being a few steps ahead is enough to win a whole race, though!" Levi called out behind me.

“Then, I guess you better catch up.”

There he was again.

The wedding planner.

He was in my direct line of sight, walking up and down part of the property line. He was flanked by a few women who I recognized as being part of Amber’s wedding planning committee, each of them looking harried and stressed out. But if Dylan was stressed out, he was doing a damn good job of hiding it, confidence exuding from his every move.

The city boy.

He didn’t belong here. His blond hair was perfectly styled, like he’d spent time this morning in the mirror arranging every individual hair on his head. Even his blue eyes seemed out of place, seeming more at home on a beach or somewhere coastal. The way he dressed wasn’t helping things, either, nothing about him said cowboy or rugged or rustic. He was a clean dresser, his jeans probably designer, his shirt loose on his frame, obviously a stylistic choice?—

Wait.

What the hell?

Why was I still thinking about him? Hell, why was I still looking at him?

I hadn’t spoken to him since he’d first arrived. I knew he was staying on the property and did my best to stay as far away as possible, hoping against hope to not be roped into anything else involving Amber’s wedding. Even so, I couldn’t shake my bone-deep annoyance at his very existence. I couldn’t wait for Amber’s wedding to be

done, so Dylan Reid could finally just leave?—

“Don’t be mad! Don’t be mad!” Amber was suddenly by my side, her hands on my back. “We just need you for five minutes!”

“What are you—No!” I felt Amber pushing me towards the wedding planner, towards the property line. “Amber, what is this?!”

“Just five minutes!”

I thought about digging my heels in, but realized that whatever she wanted, it was easier to just get through it. I still had a few phone calls to make about the McMillan deal, so the sooner we got done with this, the better.

“Dylan! We have an expert here!” Amber flagged Dylan down and he walked up to meet her. The expression on Dylan’s face twisted for a moment when he spotted me, but he quickly recovered.

Ha.

He’s just as annoyed by me as I am by him.

Good.

“What do you think of a fireworks show? For the reception?” Amber asked, her face hopeful. “Dylan is saying that he’s worried about pyrotechnics with all the nature out here?—”

“That sounds fine to me.” I shrugged.

“Really? A 15-minute firework show sounds fine to you?” Dylan quirked an

eyebrow. “You don’t care about it maybe starting a fire? And what happens with all the noise? Don’t you run an animal farm? Or do cows and horses just respond better to loud noises?”

“Amber, a 15-minute firework show? Really?” I stared at her in disbelief. I then turned back to Dylan, more annoyance burning through my veins. “And just who the hell do you think you are? Talking to me like?—”

“Like I know what I’m doing? Like I do this for a living? Like it’s real work ?”

Our eyes locked and I was speechless. I wanted to say something to him, maybe even do something to him, but I had no idea what. It was like I was reaching to say something in a language I just didn’t speak.

“No 15-minute fireworks show,” I said to Amber. “Come on. You know better than that.”

“But Cole?—”

“Listen to the man you hired Amber. Maybe he’s good for something, after all.” It was the last thing I said as I walked away from them, my fingers slightly twitching at my side.

Dylan was sitting right next to me at family dinner.

It took all of my strength to avoid interacting with him, still wanting to correct him about the way he’d spoken to me earlier. Instead, I tried to focus on the meal in front of me, helping myself to more salad to go along with my steak. I’d stolen a few glances at what was on Dylan’s plate, seeing if there was an opportunity to mock him for being a city boy at the table, only loading up on carb-free options.

But to my dismay, Dylan's plate looked a lot like mine. The main difference was that he had a little less wine in his glass, as he seemed to take a sip nearly each time my sister pitched him a different wedding idea. I smiled to myself at the realization: Dylan appeared so calm on the outside but had a tornado of emotions hidden underneath his measured expression.

"So? Did your dad tell you yet?" My uncle, Virgil, was on my other side. Virgil had always been an eccentric in our family, still proudly wearing his rodeo championship belt buckle from 1983. Having a conversation with him was always an adventure, never knowing where it was going to end up. Once, he'd floated the idea that the government had microchipped all the cattle back in 1999, but when I tried to ask him what that meant for our ranch, he'd muttered something about how I was probably in on the plot, and he'd said too much already...

Even though I was ten years old when we'd had that conversation.

"Did my dad tell me what?" I asked, as I handed Virgil the butter.

"Who he's going to pick for CEO?"

"I don't think he's decided yet Uncle Virgil?—"

"How do you not know? It's plain as day." Virgil shook his head. "I thought you were sharper than that, Cole."

"Who do you think it's going to be?"

"Someone completely unexpected. But someone we all saw coming," he murmured. "Someone who's been waiting in the wings but loves the spotlight. A mystery and no mystery at all..."

“Can you pass me the potatoes, please—” Dylan’s voice interrupted our conversation.
“Sorry, I wouldn’t ask but they’re right there?—”

“Didn’t you already have a potato?” I asked.

“Are you potato policing me right now?” Dylan pressed. “Are you potato shaming me right now?”

“No, it’s just... I assumed city boys, like you, didn’t really eat a lot of carbs.”

“Why do you care what I eat and don’t eat?”

“Who said I care?—”

“Listen, Cole, we don’t have to like each other. And we don’t. But I’m just here to do a job, okay? I just want to make your sister happy, and then, we never have to talk to each other ever again. Deal?”

“Deal.” I didn’t like how the word came out of my mouth. It felt like it landed wrong.

“Great. Potatoes, please?”

I wordlessly handed Dylan the potatoes as he turned away from me and back towards Amber.

“Interesting...” Virgil muttered. “Real interesting...”

“What’s interesting?”

But Virgil didn’t answer, instead returning his focus to his plate, scooping a pad of butter directly into his mouth.

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DYLAN

“You just don’t get it, Dylan!”

“Amber, I promise you?—”

“You need to embrace ranch life! You need to ride a horse! You need to breathe the air!”

“I’ve been breathing the air this whole time?—”

Amber and I were going back and forth, as we stood in front of one of the barns on the ranch. I couldn’t even remember how this conversation started, maybe something about how the horses couldn’t be trained to dance in time for the reception. This was typical of my wedding planning discussions with Amber, though. She’d say something way out of left field, and I’d go chasing after it, trying and failing to explain what was possible and what wasn’t.

“But money’s not even an object!” She threw her hands up. “How is this not just a money problem?”

“I’m sorry, but there are some things that even a billion dollars can’t buy?—”

“That’s it!” Amber took a few steps closer to me. “We’re getting you on a horse.”

“What? Why?”

“Because you just don’t get it! And you’re not going to until you have an intimate experience with one of these beautiful creatures.” She nodded towards the barn. “I know I might seem crazy to you, but once you spend time on a horse, I promise you’ll get it. You’ll get me.”

“Amber—”

“Please?” She let out a deep sigh. “I just want you to understand where I’m coming from, Dylan. That’s all?—”

“What are you two fighting about now?” Cole walked up to us, a huge cowboy hat in place on his head. I wanted to believe that it looked stupid, but I couldn’t deny that it was working for him. His stupid cowboy hat and his stupid spurs and his stupid shirt?—

Shit.

He was looking at me again. Probably having the same thoughts about what I was wearing.

“We’re not fighting. Dylan is about to get on a horse.” Amber grinned. “Right, Dylan?”

“Amber—” I stopped and started, trying to find the right words. “I want you to know that I hear you, okay? But I’ve never been on a horse before, and I don’t think starting right now is going to resolve anything?—”

“You’ve never been on a horse before?”

“I’m a city boy, remember?” I scoffed in his direction. “Are you really so surprised?”

“I would say you’re full of surprises, actually.” Cole’s tone was sincere.

Too sincere.

Is he making fun of me?

I shook my head, unwilling to spend another minute thinking about him. “Look, I’m sorry, Amber, but I’m not getting on that horse?—”

“You should get on the horse,” Cole interrupted.

“What?”

“Amber’s right. Whatever you two are disagreeing about... you should still get on the horse. Just to try it.” He shrugged. “It could clear your head. Give you a different perspective.”

“And you care about me getting on the horse because...?”

“Just being a peacemaker.” Cole nodded towards the barn and walked into it. Amber flashed a smile as she followed behind him. I took a deep breath before joining them, running through excuses in my head as fast as I could. A few moments later, we all stood in front of a chocolate brown horse with expressive eyes, something about its face curious and playful.

“Ursula, meet Dylan,” Amber started the introduction. “And Dylan, meet Ursula.”

“Hi, Ursula.” I felt a little silly greeting the horse, but she seemed to recognize her name. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“You can pet her, right on the neck,” Cole said, his hand already in place. He reached to grab my hand?—

But then seemed to think better of it, keeping his palm to himself. “Here. You try.”

I stepped closer to Ursula and copied Cole’s motion, gently petting her on the side of her neck. It was calming somehow, showing her this sort of affection. Somewhere mid-pet, Ursula nuzzled against my arm, and I felt myself melt right then and there.

“Oh, my God. She likes me. That means she likes me, right?” I looked back at Cole and Amber.

“Oh, she likes you.” Cole grinned. “Ursula’s an excellent judge of character.”

“Let’s get you saddled up!” Amber nearly jumped for joy as she ran off to grab a saddle on the other side of the barn.

I nervously watched as Cole prepared the saddle.

Amber was standing in front of Ursula, cooing and petting her, like she was her favorite. I couldn’t help but smile as I watched them together, wondering if Amber’s tendency to commit to the most outrageous option applied to the way she loved Ursula as well. I imagined that Ursula was the most spoiled horse of the 21 st century, eating imported food and wearing designer horseshoes.

Definitely the happiest horse in the world.

“Here we go.” Cole finished setting up the saddle on Ursula’s back. “Come on over, Dylan.”

I tried and failed to push down my anxiety, my arms trembling a little bit as I walked

up to the saddle. “So, what do I do? Just hop right up?”

“I can help you, since it’s your first time,” Cole replied. “It can be a little tricky getting up there if you haven’t done it before.”

“Isn’t this the part where you make fun of me?”

“What?”

“The city boy who’s literally shaking before getting on a horse?” I laughed but it came out flat. “I don’t even know why I’m so nervous. Ursula seems perfectly lovely?—”

“It’s okay to be scared. You’re trying something new.” Cole smiled. “It’s enough that you’re even willing to try it. Most city boys would’ve run the other way.”

“And there it is?—”

“But you’re not like most city boys, I think,” he continued. “Which is something I… respect about you.”

“You respect me now?”

“Don’t push it.” Cole smirked. “Now, do you want my help getting on the horse or not?”

“Honestly? I’ll take all the help I can get.”

Cole nodded before he casually placed his hands on my waist. “Put your foot in the stirrup. Push up.”

I did as I was told, stepping up into the stirrup. Cole's grip on my waist only got tighter, keeping me safe until I was in place on top of Ursula. When I was settled on the horse, I looked back down at Cole at my side, his gaze piercing as it locked onto mine. As we looked into each other's eyes, it was like everything fell away for a moment, no barn, no ranch, just us...

Breathe.

I need to breathe.

I suddenly forced down a mouthful of air, having forgotten about oxygen for a full minute.

What the hell?

What was wrong with me? Cole didn't even like me. Just because he was nice to me once I forgot how to breathe?

The stress of planning this wedding was definitely getting to me.

"Let's go, girl! Come on." Amber led Ursula out of the barn and onto the ranch, directing her slow and steady. I held on for dear life, every so often making sure Cole was still by my side. If I was going to somehow fall off the horse, I wanted him?—

I wanted someone?—

There to catch me.

"You're doing so good, Dylan!" Amber shouted up at me. "How does it feel? Good, right?"

“Actually, yeah...” I smiled as I spoke. “This is... really nice. Comforting. Ursula is quite the lady.”

“That’s why she’s my favorite.” Amber smiled too.

After a few laps around the corral, we returned Ursula to her stable. Just as he’d helped me onto the horse’s back, Cole helped me off her too. Again, his hands were on my waist, and again, I felt my chest get a little too tight. It was embarrassing, but it was also a sign that I needed to maybe get some time away from the ranch.

I hadn’t crushed on a straight guy who was sort of mean to me since high school...

And I wasn’t about to start again now.

There had to be a cute, available, non-mean, non-straight guy around here somewhere...

But where?

4

COLE

“Here’s to the best wedding planning committee ever!”

Amber held up a champagne flute, encouraging all of us to do the same. All of the women she micromanaged on a day-to-day basis looked happy for once, each of them excitedly downing their drink. We’d practically taken over the local bar, Amber wanting to celebrate the work everyone had done so far with the wedding.

Everyone including Dylan. He was sitting right next to her, sipping on his champagne. His expression was somewhere between joyful and bewildered, like he didn’t know what my sister was going to say or do next. I imagined it was exasperating working so closely with Amber, and yet, Dylan was able to generally keep a calm demeanor. It was pretty impressive?—

Shit.

Am I staring at him again?

I looked away from him, cursing quietly under my breath. I was only here because Amber had dragged me here, once again involving me in her wedding planning against my wishes. Luckily, I was in between things to do, still waiting to hear back about the McMillan property. I was hoping that it’d all be a smooth transition but if it was going to be a fight, I was ready for that too.

“This is why Dad likes you so much, you know,” Levi started, as he slid a champagne flute into my hand.

“What?”

“You’re not even here right now, are you?” He grinned. “You’re thinking about the McMillan deal and how you’re going to beat us out for it.”

“Are you saying I can’t live in the moment?”

“I’m saying you don’t. Always so far ahead of everyone else.” Levi sighed. “It’s not a bad thing, except when you can’t enjoy a nice night out.”

“What’s there to enjoy? You know how I feel about this wedding.”

“Who cares how you feel about the wedding? Loosen up, man.” Levi playfully nudged me in the shoulder. “You’re saying no one over there is even catching your eye? I know you’re not ready for anything serious which is why one of Amber’s...”

Levi’s words trailed off for a moment or two. “Are they her employees? Friends? Do we know any of those women?”

“No idea.”

“We’ll just call them her assistants, then.” He laughed as he went on. “You’re not interested in any of her assistants? It’d be perfect for you. Someone to hook up with and then we’ll probably never see them again.”

I was going to say something in response but felt Levi physically turning my head back towards Amber and her assistants...

And Dylan.

“All you have to do is pick one. Any of them would be lucky to have you,” Levi said.

“You just need to start getting back out there, man. Before it’s too late.”

“Too late?”

“Yeah, before you start thinking there’s no point. Just because it didn’t work out with?—”

“If I go over there and talk to one of them, will you stop talking to me?”

“That’s all I’ve ever wanted.” Levi’s smile was huge as he finally downed his own champagne.

I moved away from Levi, heading over to my sister’s side of the bar. All of the women surrounding her were alive with chatter, all seeming buzzed from the free-flowing drinks. Just as I approached them, I noticed Dylan getting up from the table. He sidestepped me as he walked towards the bar.

Wait.

Is he avoiding me?

“Hey there,” one of Amber’s assistants greeted me with a flirty look. “You’re Amber’s older brother, right?”

“Uh, yeah. That’s me,” I answered, my attention still on Dylan.

“You’re so fucking hot.” Her words came out all at once, more slur than sentence. “I’ve seen you around the ranch. You’re like a real life cowboy.”

“Right.”

“I’ve ridden a horse or two before but never a cowboy.”

“Sure.”

“Maybe after this, you and me could?—”

“Excuse me.” It was the last thing I said, before I followed Dylan to the bar. He was sitting down now, his phone open as he scrolled down a page.

I took a seat right next to him, my eyes looking over at his screen. “You’re looking up... drinks?”

“Not for here. For the wedding,” he clarified. He then held up a glass of what looked like a Jack and Coke. “See? I’m multitasking. Drinking and working, like you’re supposed to do.”

I let out a small laugh. Dylan stopped scrolling and stared over at me.

“What’s so funny, cowboy?”

“My brother just got on my case for doing the same thing. Being here but not being in the moment.”

“I don’t get paid to be in the moment.”

“How about when you’re off the clock? Are you in the moment then?”

Dylan paused for a moment before he replied, “I... don’t know how to answer that question. I’m usually pretty busy with wedding planning. Not a lot of time to stop and

smell the roses when you're the one ordering hundreds of them."

"Is my sister making you order hundreds of roses?"

"Thousands, maybe."

"Is that... a normal amount of flowers for a wedding?"

Dylan shot me a look before breaking into a laugh. I couldn't help but laugh along with him, already knowing that there wasn't anything normal about what my sister wanted for the wedding.

"She has a really good heart, even if she's a lot," I said, with a soft smile. "She might be ridiculous, but she doesn't mean anything by it."

"I know." Dylan smiled back at me. "I'm starting to wonder if it runs in the family?—"

"Are you new to town, pretty boy?" Suddenly a stranger appeared next to Dylan, his eyes looking him up and down. "Never seen you around here before."

The stranger took a step closer to Dylan, his fists balled up at his side. His chest was puffed out, too, like he was looking for a fight. Dylan quickly picked up on the stranger's body language, and moved a few steps away from him, inching closer to me.

"I was just grabbing a drink." Dylan held up his glass. "I don't want any trouble tonight?—"

"No offense but we don't have a lot of men like you around here," the stranger cut him off. "Out here, men are still men. You understand that, don't you? What is it to

be a man?”

“And what makes you think I’m not a man?” Dylan pressed, his tone filled with annoyance.

“Because I know what you are. And what you do,” the stranger replied. “And I know it’s not right. Men aren’t supposed to do that with each other?—”

“Can’t you just leave me the fuck alone?”

“Excuse me?”

“We get it. You hate me because I’m gay. And I hate you because you’re ignorant.” Dylan rolled his eyes. “So, what? You came over here to hurt me? To prove some kind of fucked up point?”

The stranger cruelly laughed. “Who knows? Maybe getting your ass beat will get it out of your system?—”

Without hesitation, Dylan threw the rest of his drink right in the stranger’s face. The stranger reeled back, his fist aimed straight for Dylan?—

But without thinking, I was suddenly there instead. The stranger’s fist connected with the side of my face, pain springing up immediately underneath my skin and near my upper jaw. My hand then went for the stranger’s throat, pulling him up in the air, just enough to slam his side against the bar top. He wrestled against me, but I had him in my grip, slamming him one more time for good measure.

A few seconds later and he held up his hands for mercy. I let him slink down to the floor before he crawled away from us, low to the ground where he belonged.

“Shit! Cole!” Dylan grabbed me by the hand, pulling me away from the bar. He didn’t stop until we were in the bathroom, his fingers flying up towards my face. “Why the hell did you do that? You weren’t supposed to?—”

“I was just supposed to let that asshole hurt you?”

“Technically, I started it. Like, legally, I think, because I threw my drink in his face?—”

“Who cares? I wasn’t going to let him do that to you.”

“Cole—” Dylan groaned, his fingertips brushing along my cheek. “There’s no way this isn’t going to turn into some kind of bruise. I think we have to get some ice for it.”

He groaned again, his eyes meeting mine. “People are going to think you were in some kind of bar fight.”

“Isn’t that exactly what happened?” I smirked.

“Still.” He pouted, worry filling his face. “Shit, Cole. I can’t believe you did that for me. I thought you hated me.”

“You thought I hated you?”

“I mean, you were kind of an asshole to me when we first met.”

“That wasn’t about you. That was about Amber’s wedding planning. I figured if I was an asshole to the wedding planner, maybe she’d see I was serious about not being involved.”

“Sure. Right. That makes it all okay then.”

“Would you accept my bruised face as an apology for being an asshole?”

“Maybe.” Dylan grinned. “We’ll have to wait and see how bruised it is.”

I suddenly became extremely aware that Dylan’s fingertips were still on my face. A part of me wanted to turn into his palm, keeping the connection, feeling the warmth of his skin...

But that was a part of me that I didn’t understand. It was a confusing feeling, uncomfortable in the way it felt like it just showed up out of nowhere. I pushed it down as I stared back at Dylan. His eyes were on mine, too, like he was waiting to see what I would do next, waiting for something to happen in the moment.

Instead, I reached for his hand, gently pulling it away from my face. “We should see if the bar has any ice.”

“Right. Yeah. We should.” Dylan looked disappointed but it only lasted for a second, soon replaced by a warm smile. “I’m sure they’ll have something we can use.”

By the time we got back to the bar, Amber was already waiting for us. “Oh, my God! What the hell happened to you? I saw some guy punch you in the face and then you just disappeared!”

“I’m fine. I just need ice.”

“He was protecting my honor,” Dylan added. “Some asshole was being homophobic, and your brother beat him up for me.”

“Wait, really?” Amber held a hand over her mouth, tears glistening in her eyes.

“That’s so fucked up but that’s so sweet too! Come here!”

Amber pulled Dylan into a tight hug. “If it wasn’t my brother, you know it would’ve been me, right? I definitely would’ve beat up some loser for you.”

“Trust me. I know.” Dylan grinned. “I’m starting to think it runs in the family.”

I let out a light laugh at Dylan’s reference to our earlier conversation, just as pain radiated from my upper jaw. I quickly got the bartender’s attention, asking for some ice in a cloth, and they kindly obliged. As Dylan and Amber went back to wedding planning, Uncle Virgil came to sit beside me at the bar.

“Have you been here this whole time?” I was shocked at his sudden appearance.

“I’m always around, nephew, you know that.” Virgil stared at me, hard. “Did you just get into a fight over the wedding planner?”

“Over the wedding planner?”

“Now, why would you go and do something like that? Risk jail time for a wedding planner you barely know? If you know him, at all?”

“Just seemed like the right thing to do, I guess.”

“The right thing to do...” Virgil muttered to himself. “You know, some things aren’t about what they’re about.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Some things aren’t about the right thing to do... some things aren’t about winning a bar fight...”

“Whatever you say, Uncle.” I winced at the pain in my cheek, not in the mood for his cryptic words of wisdom.

Virgil just tilted his head to the side, a vague expression on his face as he watched me attempt to nurse my own face back to health.

5

DYLAN

I was trying my best to stop yawning, but I was tired, down in my bones.

It was nearly midnight, and I was waiting outside my cabin for Amber to pick me up. She'd mentioned something about seeing what the ranch sky looked like at night, wanting to coordinate her wedding jewelry with it, and wanting to get a second opinion before she committed to the idea. I would've had a proper chance to see the night sky earlier if I hadn't been cooped up with Amber in her wedding planning cabin, going through what felt like cabinets full of various necklaces, bracelets, earrings.

Thankfully, she'd allowed us to have a break for a very late dinner. And now, I was desperately sipping on a coffee, trying to wake my brain back up. This was the last thing scheduled on our to-do list for the day, and I couldn't wait to be done with it.

My bed was calling my name.

“Dylan?” A familiar voice called out from a pick-up truck. I looked over and spotted Cole, his hair perfectly windswept, his rough yet gentle hands gripping the steering wheel, his bruised cheek only serving to remind me of how willing he was to get into a fight for me—

Nope.

This can't happen.

I needed to get my shit together. I needed to drink, like, a gallon of coffee or something. My sleep deprived brain was just confused and very, very tired.

“Just waiting on your sister. She said she wanted to take me to one of the cabins on the edge of the ranch to look up at the sky,” I replied. “Because the sky is...different there... or the best there... somehow...”

“Yeah. She's not going to make it.” Cole shook his head. “Her fiancé surprised her an hour ago. Showed up back from some work trip. She sent me to show you to the cabin instead.”

“Oh.” I took a huge gulp of my coffee as I approached the passenger side of the truck. “In that case, I promise not to get into another fight on the way over there. Gotta keep your other cheek safe, just in case you want to turn it next time.”

Cole lightly chuckled. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

The ride over to the cabin was gorgeous. I stared up at the sky through the window, a smile on my face the entire time. I had no idea how we were going to coordinate Amber's jewelry with the literal stars in the sky, but she'd been right about the view. In the city, it was rare to see the sky so clearly, only hints of stars making their way through the skyscraper's lights. It was also rare for me to spend so much time looking up at the sky like this, anyway, so much of my time spent looking down at my phone or my work laptop.

I spared a look over at Cole, his attention fully on the dirt road in front of us. He was beautiful, too, against the backdrop of the night, something about the ranch speeding by his window and the little specks of light flowing through his hair every so often. I felt that chest tightening feeling again, the one I'd managed to push way down back

at the barn, the same one I'd felt at the bar when he'd taken that punch for me.

The same one I needed to find a way to numb or get rid of before I said or did something extremely stupid.

Cole was straight. It was painfully obvious. There was also the fact that I'd heard Amber mention Cole's ex-wife in passing, a detail she hadn't dwelled on because it didn't matter too much anymore. Apparently, they hadn't had any kids together, and she'd never been super close to the family.

I returned my attention to the window, not wanting to delude myself with any more thoughts of Cole?—

Oh.

It was raining.

And it was raining hard .

Cole pulled up to a remote cabin on what felt like the edge of the property line. He hastily got out of the truck, pulling open my door before motioning for me to rush inside. Once we were both in, I took a moment to look around the place, noting how small it really was.

Well, small for the Stratton Ranch, anyway.

It was a one-bedroom cabin, complete with a fireplace, a bachelor's kitchen, and not much else. There were some supplies stacked up in the corner and a few books scattered here and there, but besides that, there wasn't much else to the place.

“Was this place built just to hang out and stargaze from the front porch?” I asked, still

looking around. “I’m not used to the cabins out here being so... rustic.”

Cole laughed. “No. We might be rich, but we’re still practical. This is a resting place for the ranch hands. There are a few of these places all around the property. You don’t want people suffering with no way to get inside anywhere. Especially if they’re all the way out here.”

Cole nodded towards one of the windows. “There’s also the matter of storms taking people by surprise. We’d be stuck out in the car if it weren’t for this place.”

“Stuck?” I pressed. “Are you saying we can’t go back to the main area? Because of the storm?”

“With the way that rain is coming down...” Cole paused. “We could try but I don’t think it’d be worth it. Might as well stay put until it’s safe to go back.”

“Shit.” I groaned. “Welp, it’s a good thing I already had dinner.”

I watched as Cole put another log into the fireplace, the room feeling so much warmer for it.

I didn’t remember it being that cold outside, but maybe the storm had brought the temperature down. I felt myself shivering in my rain-soaked shirt but couldn’t think of any other options. It wasn’t like I’d brought backup clothes to the cabin, and there was no way in hell that I was going to strip down in front of Cole. I was already feeling way too weird and vulnerable around him, I didn’t need to somehow up the ante even further.

There was also the fact that one of us was attracted to the other...

And the other just wasn’t.

I closed my eyes for a moment, letting my mind drift away from thoughts of Cole, back towards wedding planning, my life in the city, literally anything that wasn't being stranded in this cabin with the cutest cowboy ever.

A few seconds later I felt Cole take a seat beside me on the floor. I looked over and noticed that he was shirtless?—

Shirtless?

I blinked a couple of times, wanting to make sure that I wasn't seeing things. "Uh, Cole?"

"Yeah?"

"Where's your shirt?"

"It's wet. I'm letting it dry a little closer to the fire." He pointed towards his shirt in front of us. "You might want to do the same. I can see how bad you're shivering from here."

"Uh..." It felt like my brain was short-circuiting as I took in every bit of his bare chest. Cole was just as hot as I'd expected him to be, his muscles toned by working on the farm, his shoulders broad and perfect. It was like he was built by and for the outdoors, the perfect image of a cowboy, even down to the way he carried himself, all rugged and wise.

"You okay, Dylan?"

"Uh..." I heard myself repeat the phrase, truly unable to think of anything else to say. Not wanting to come off as a total space case, I quickly pulled my shirt off and threw it down next to Cole's. I then crossed my arms across myself, hiding the majority of

my body, not interested in anything Cole had to say about it.

Wait.

Why the hell would Cole have anything to say about my body?

He isn't thinking about me that way.

I slowly uncrossed my arms, trying to play it cool. Cole's eyes were on me, though, his gaze lingering so long that I felt my face getting hot from the attention.

"Don't."

"What?"

"Don't be mean." I crossed my arms again. "I get it. You're all... muscly and super manly."

"That's not what I was thinking."

"Then, what were you thinking?"

"Nothing." Cole casually brushed away the topic. "Do you want to sleep head to foot? I have a feeling we're going to be here all night."

"Head to foot?"

"In the bed."

I let out a nervous laugh. "No, thanks. I think I'm good here."

“What? On the floor?”

“One-hundred percent.” I laughed again, the sound coming out cracked. “You can take the bed. I’ve heard sleeping on the floor sometimes is good for you anyway?—”

“Dylan.”

“Yes?”

“We’re both adults. We can deal with sleeping in the same bed.”

“Especially because I’m not your type!” I tried to joke around with him.

But Cole’s face remained a straight line. “Come on. You need your rest and so do I. We both have important work to do in the morning and having a bad back isn’t going to help it any.”

Is this hell?

Is this what hell is like?

I was completely unable to sleep with Cole’s body so close to mine. We’d placed a blanket between us to give us a little more space, but I couldn’t pretend like he wasn’t right there. My thoughts were running a million miles a minute as I stared up at the cabin ceiling, quietly wondering how many hours we had left until the morning.

I had no idea how I was supposed to get through the rest of the night.

“Dylan?”

“Yeah, Cole?”

“You awake?”

“Yeah, Cole.”

He shifted beside me, rearranging himself until we were head to head and feet to feet. I held in a whimper as his face appeared next to mine, every part of me wanting to reach out and run a hand through his hair or rest my head on his chest or?—

“I can’t sleep,” he interrupted my thoughts with his words. “I... don’t know why.”

“Sometimes people have trouble sleeping in strange beds,” I replied. “Something about it not feeling right.”

“I don’t really have that problem.”

“Slept in a lot of cowgirl’s beds, huh?” I laughed at my own joke. “I’m not surprised.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why aren’t you surprised?”

“Because I have eyes?” I laughed again. “When was the last time you looked in a mirror, Cole Stratton?”

“When was the last time you looked in a mirror, Dylan Reid?” His voice was low. “I saw you trying to cover up earlier. You don’t—that’s not?—”

“I get what you’re trying to say.” I offered him a small smile. “And thanks.

Sometimes straight guys are weird about giving a gay guy a compliment. They think it'll make us forget they're straight and try to hit on them or something?—"

My words were cut off by Cole's mouth suddenly pressing against mine. One of his hands went down to my waist, pulling me even closer into the kiss, Cole's tongue sliding in deep. I moaned against him, as my hands went towards him, pulling him closer to me too. Without thinking, I ran my fingers through his hair, his tongue still exploring my mouth, my leg wrapping around his waist?—

And then, it was over. Cole rolled away from me, as far as he could, even turning his back to me for good measure. "Goodnight, Dylan."

"Goodnight... Cole." I felt exposed and embarrassed, unsure about everything that'd just happened.

Why did Cole kiss me? Just because he could?

Was he willing to hook up with me just because I was there?

Still, that didn't make him not straight...

But it did make him a complete asshole.

I burned with something for the rest of the night, a mix between rage and sadness that carried me all the way through the morning. I wasn't here to be Cole's plaything during his free time. I was here to do a job that I was damn good at, a job that no one else could ever replicate. I was a one-of-a-kind someone, and Cole didn't get to treat me like I wasn't.

I wasn't going to let this cowboy make me stupid.

Even if our kiss was the best one I'd probably had in my entire life.

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6

COLE

I can't stop thinking about kissing Dylan.

Why the hell did I kiss him, anyway?

I'd never kissed a guy before. Never wanted to.

But he just kept calling me straight . It was something about the way he said it, like he was putting distance between us, like he was pushing me away from him. But it was true, wasn't it?

I was straight.

I barely even noticed when other guys were in a room unless I planned on talking to them about something. And yet, with Dylan, it was like I was hyperaware of his every move, always conscious of exactly wherever he happened to be. It didn't matter if I planned on chatting with him or not, I just liked knowing where he was?—

Shit. What is happening to me?

The morning after we left the cabin, I hadn't said a word to him. There were too many thoughts in my head but absolutely no connection with my mouth, like I couldn't figure out how to speak anymore. Dylan had tried to spark up a conversation a few times and I just let it die in silence between us. After that, I'd dropped him back

off at his own cabin before getting started with my day.

I still needed to figure out the McMillan property deal. Hell, maybe the stress of the project was getting under my skin, making me act out of character. Maybe Levi was right, and I'd simply let things go on too long, let myself be single for a few too many months. Either way, I was grateful to have something else to focus on, locking myself in my office until the late afternoon. I felt a little closer to ironing out my final offer to the McMillans, knowing they'd be overvaluing their land in the current market?—

“Cole!” Amber casually burst into my office. “Are you serious right now?”

“That door was locked.” I raised an eyebrow. “How did you get into my locked office?”

“Master key.”

“You have a master key to every room on the ranch?”

“Yeah. Dad gave it to me for wedding planning stuff. He said it makes it easier.”

“That’s a security risk, Amber?—”

“You’re a security risk!” She shouted back. “You’re at risk of ruining my wedding!”

Shit.

Does she know I kissed her wedding planner?

Is Dylan threatening to quit or something?

Shit, shit, shit ? —

“But I did exactly what you wanted me to do,” I replied. “I took Dylan to see the night sky and?—”

“And you were supposed to check out the potential flower arrangements with me today! Like, right now!”

“Don’t you have an entire team of assistants for that?”

“I don’t care what they think! I care what you think!” She pouted as she came around behind my desk, grabbing onto my arm. “Please! Can you just come look at it? It’ll take five seconds.”

I opened my mouth to protest but as soon as my eyes met hers, I felt a small smile on my face instead. In that moment, she reminded me of when we were little kids, her demanding to follow me up to a tree house or share my toys or insist it was her turn with a coloring book. Feeling suddenly sentimental, I decided to go with the flow, enjoying what would possibly be one of the last moments that my little sister was just my little sister.

Not a mom. Not a wife. Just Amber.

“Oh, my God. Are you actually making this easy for me?” Her jaw was wide open as I headed out the office door. “I thought you’d waste more time telling me how busy you are!”

“What can I say? I’m feeling helpful today.”

There were so many flowers stuffed inside the barn that I couldn’t tell what I was looking at.

It reminded me of standing too close to a puzzle, completely unable to see the big

picture. There were roses like Dylan had talked about, but other types of flowers, too, sunflowers and daisies. I was lost among the flowers, even as Amber tried to point out different sections of them, explaining her vision for how they'd be arranged on her big day. I nodded along to everything she said, hopeless and helpless...

Right until I spotted Dylan across the room. He was laughing, a perfect sound, even throwing his head back a little like he was on a TV show. There was a man standing beside him, wearing a simple tank top and jeans, the only noticeable thing about him being the shell necklace against his skin. He was about the same height as Dylan, and it seemed like whenever he spoke, Dylan laughed again.

Huh.

I turned all my attention to their interaction, the stranger every so often reaching out towards Dylan and touching him on the shoulder. When Dylan said something, the stranger would tuck their own hair behind their ear, sometimes gently biting their lower lip. When Dylan looked away from the stranger, scrolling through something on his phone, the stranger still stared at him, eyeing him up and down?—

Ow.

I looked down at my palms, now noticing that I'd been squeezing my fingernails into them, hard. But why was I clenching my fists? I wasn't mad about anything. I looked back up at Dylan and the stranger, curious about what would happen next?—

Ow. Again.

I shook my head as I walked over to Dylan and the stranger, not wanting things to remain strained because of last night. I especially didn't want to be the reason Dylan decided to bail on planning this wedding for my sister, a thought that had only crossed my mind when Amber broke into my office. I needed to apologize to him

ASAP and set things right the best that I could.

There was also the fact that I felt like I just needed to talk to him for some reason, a strange desire to inject myself into their conversation taking over me.

“Hey,” I started. “Are you good?”

Dylan shot me a confused look. “Yeah? Why would you think I wasn’t?”

Ow. For a third time.

“I was just checking in with you and—” I pointed towards the stranger.

“Alex,” he answered, with a bright smile. “I’m the flower guy.”

“Oh, so you brought all these in?”

“Isn’t it lovely?” Alex smiled again. “I’ve always loved flowers, but I love weddings even more. And it seems like your sister’s wedding is shaping up to be something truly magical.”

Alex nodded over at Dylan. “Not to mention the work of her incredible wedding planner... it’s such an honor to get a peek into Dylan Reid’s head. He’s brilliant.”

Alex paused for a moment before he added, “It’s... incredible that you’re single, Dylan. I just mean...with everything you do for others... Assuming that you are single. Sorry. My information might be outdated.”

Is Alex fishing for information? Why the hell does he care if Dylan’s single?

“Being single is pretty easy, actually.” Dylan chuckled, his attention back to his

screen. “Precisely because of everything I do for others. I have a lot on my plate.”

“Right.” Alex beamed. “Not to be too forward... but speaking of plates... there’s this Italian place in?—”

“Amber! Can you come over here, please!” I was panicking but I didn’t know why, my heart beating a little too fast inside my chest. “Sorry, I just think she really wanted to catch up with you Alex?—”

“Oh, no worries.” Alex politely nodded before he headed over to my sister, ready to meet her halfway. “Anything for the bride.”

“What was that?” Dylan pressed.

“What was what?”

“He was obviously going to ask me out.”

“And what? You were going to say yes?”

“It doesn’t matter what I was going to say. Why do you even care?” Dylan gave me his full attention. “You wouldn’t say a word to me this morning.”

“He doesn’t get to ask you out. Not right in front of me.”

“Why not?”

“Because!”

“Oh, my God!” Dylan threw up his hands in frustration. “Do you want me to set you up with one of Amber’s assistants? Because I swear, it’d be easier for both of us. If

you just need to get laid?—”

“It’s not about that.”

“Then, what is it about, Cole?”

“I... don’t know.” I let out an exasperated sigh. “I just... I don’t know.”

“Right. Of course, you don’t.” Dylan sighed now, too. “I need to get back to work, okay? I’ll see you around, Cole.”

He rolled his eyes before he stepped away from me, joining the conversation between Alex and Amber. And I stood in that same place, feeling like an idiot, my head hanging in my hands.

“You’re jealous.”

“What?” I turned to see my uncle sitting amongst the flowers next to me. “How long have you been sitting there?”

“Long enough to see what I needed to see.” He grinned. “So, a fight isn’t about a fight, and flowers aren’t about flowers.”

“I don’t really need this right now, Virgil?—”

“It’s always a worthwhile use of time to look beyond the surface, nephew,” he continued. “To stop and smell the roses, so to speak.”

“What are you talking about?—”

“You’re jealous,” he repeated, before he quietly sank into the flowers, practically

disappearing from my view. “It’s a hell of a thing, isn’t it? Makes you wonder what you’re so jealous of...”

DYLAN

The barn closest to Amber's cabin had quickly become Wedding HQ #2. While it was nice to have some space of my own to think, her assistants mostly working out of the wedding planning cabin, I felt like I was losing my mind. I'd been flickering different lights on and off, plugging them in, taking them out, trying to see which combination would be the perfect mood lighting for the indoor/outdoor reception. The lights needed to be warm but not too harsh, and definitely nothing that would wash out the effect of the sparkling night sky.

In practice, all of this just looked like me running around the barn like a maniac.

It didn't help that I was only half able to concentrate, still thinking about Cole's weirdness from earlier.

Why is he acting like that?

He wanted to kiss me but not talk to me. He wanted to ruin any chance of someone else asking me out even though we both knew Cole would never ask me out himself because he was straight ? —

Shit.

Maybe that was the problem. Cole didn't want me blabbing to anyone about kissing me. He wanted to make sure I kept it a secret and the best way to do that was to make

sure I was never out of his sight. I groaned at the realization, desperately counting down the days until I was done with Cole and Stratton Ranch. I never signed up to be a pawn in some straight guy's weird little game of I-kiss-random-people-when-I'm-bored chess?—

“Hey.” Cole’s voice interrupted my thoughts. He stepped inside the barn, wearing a nervous smile. “Are you wrapping up for the day? Or does my sister have you working through the night?”

“No.”

“What?”

“Absolutely not.” I held up a finger in warning. “I don’t have time for whatever this is, Cole! I truly don’t. Just let me do my job and you do yours.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“Yes! Oh, my God!” I couldn’t believe the question he’d just asked me. “You’ve been weird since last night and you haven’t apologized for any of the weirdness.”

“What would I need to apologize for?”

“For kissing me as some sort of fucked up boost to your ego? For chasing off a nice guy who actually knows what he wants? A guy who’s not just straight and bored?”

“You’re so dismissive.” Cole’s voice was low.

“What?”

“You keep doing this, poking and poking at me. Like I’m... doing something wrong,”

he went on. “And it’s really starting to piss me off. I’m not just some asshole, Dylan. I’m not the villain here.”

“I don’t care what you are, Cole. Just please! Let me work—” My words were cut off by Cole quickly closing the distance between us, not stopping until we were face to face. “Cole, what the fuck are you?—”

Fuck.

He was kissing me again. And here I was, melting right into it. Unlike our first kiss, this one had a different kind of heat behind it, like Cole had something to prove. His hands were tight around my waist, and I groaned against his mouth, our tongues meeting in the middle. I wrapped my arms behind his broad shoulders, linking my hands together there. As much as it felt like he didn’t want me to move away from him, I made it obvious that I didn’t want him to go anywhere either.

A few moments later, he brought his mouth down to the side of my neck, his lips making quick contact with my skin. I groaned again as he pulled my skin between his teeth, right before letting it go, his lips pressed tight along the area?—

“Cole!” I tried to move my neck away from him once I realized what he was doing. “Are you seriously trying to give me a hickey?”

“Just a habit,” he murmured.

“It’s a little possessive, don’t you think?”

“Do you really want Alex flirting with you the whole time you’re here?”

“Do you really want people asking why the wedding planner has a hickey?” I replied. “Besides, you don’t have to worry about Alex.”

“I know.”

“You know?”

“Yep. I know. Because I’m going to make you forget all about him.” Cole lightly chuckled before bringing his mouth back to my neck, planting kisses up and down my skin. His hands slipped underneath my shirt, his palms shamelessly searching my chest. I whimpered at the feel of his bare hands all over me, soon returning the favor.

Fuck.

His chest was like steel, all hard muscles. Before I had a chance to keep exploring, Cole shifted my hands away from him, placing them back around his shoulders. I was about to call him a control freak when I felt him lifting me up by the waist. I wrapped my legs around him, instinctively, and Cole brought us over to the nearest wall. With my back pressed against the barn wall, Cole kissed me again, just as deep as before. I kissed him back with just as much emphasis, losing myself in the feel of him and how effortlessly he’d carried me across the room.

“Oh. Um...” My skin was suddenly flushing, as I felt Cole hardening beneath me, my brain easily imagining every inch of him. “Did you want to stop or?”

“Did you just ask me if I want to stop?”

“I just—” The flush against my skin got even worse, words failing to come out right. “If you’re still trying to figure out if you like this—if you like me—we should probably take a breather before going too far?”

“I know what I want, Dylan.”

“Sure, you say that now?”

“I want your mouth on me. That sound good to you?” Cole stared at me, his gaze intense. “I want to come inside your mouth and have you looking up at me the whole time.”

“Then you should probably let me down so I can get to work.” I stared right back at him as he shifted away from me, giving me just enough space to let my feet touch the ground. Once I felt my shoes on the barn floor, I sank even lower, not stopping until I was on my knees in front of him. His hands were already on his belt, loosening it, his eyes never leaving mine. When he was down to his boxers, I grabbed on either side of them, pulling them towards the ground.

Oh.

Fuck.

Cole was huge . My mind ran out ahead of me, wondering how I was ever going to fit him inside me, let alone fit him inside my mouth. I flexed my jaw a few times as I stared at his cock, psyching myself up for the future workout.

“Is something wrong?” Cole asked, concern lining his question. “Sorry, I’ve never done this before with... you.”

I smiled at him, not answering him with my words.

Instead, I wrapped my lips around the head of his cock. I moaned as I took in even more of him, trying to fit as much of him as possible inside. His cock twitched against my tongue, his shaft seeming to get even harder once I’d taken every inch. I ran my tongue up and down the length of him, then, playfully swiping at his tip, shivering at the taste of precome I found there.

Cole groaned above me, his hips beginning to push against my mouth like he was

fucking me. I felt myself getting hard at the idea of Cole's cock deep inside me but couldn't do anything about it, at least not yet. I brought my focus back to Cole, hollowing out my cheeks as I bobbed my head up and down his shaft, meeting him every time his hips pushed against my mouth.

"Fuck, Dylan..." Cole groaned again. "I'm going to... right down your throat..."

I looked up at him and gave him a pleading expression, my best attempt at saying yes, please without taking his cock out of my mouth. A few moments later and he was doing exactly what he said he'd do, his come painting my tongue as his breaths came out short and jagged. I swallowed every drop of him, loving the way he tasted, the way he kept pumping against my lips until he was completely spent.

When it seemed like he was finally finished, I started to stand up from the floor?—

"Don't move," Cole instructed as he pulled up his boxers and pants. "Stay right there."

I sank back down to the floor, doing as I was told. A second or two later, Cole sank down in front of me, gently nudging me to get on my back.

"Wait, Cole, you don't have to?—"

"You don't want me to?" he asked, his hand already unzipping my jeans. "You don't want me to touch you, Dylan? To make you feel good?"

He didn't wait for me to answer, his fingers pulling down my boxers just enough to free my cock. I watched as he licked a long stripe across his hand, right before wrapping his palm around my shaft. I whimpered and whined as he stroked me, Cole's eyes never leaving mine.

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t look at me like that, Cole.” I whimpered through my words. “Not when you’re touching me like that, too. It’s too... intense.”

“But I want to watch you come for me, baby.”

“First, the almost hickey and now you’re calling me baby?” I moaned, my cock getting even harder in his hand. “Why are you doing this to me, Cole? You’re acting like... like...”

“Like what?”

“Like you want me.”

“I do want you, Dylan.” Cole picked up the pace, his strokes coming faster and harder. I shivered underneath him, my cock almost ready to explode. “I kind of thought I’d already made that clear.”

“Yeah but... how... do you want me? Just as a guy you know who blows you sometimes?”

“Stop overanalyzing everything,” Cole replied, my precome dripping down against his fingertips. “Just be here with me. That’s how I want you. Here and now.”

I trembled as I came against his hand, my come decorating his palm. He smirked down at his handiwork, before casually licking some of my come off his fingers, like it was a delicacy he’d just discovered for the first time.

“You taste really good, Dylan. Anyone ever tell you that before?”

I was still in a daze, trying to regain my composure, trying to at least get my pants all the way back on. “I don’t... what?”

“You’re so fucking cute.” Cole grinned, turning my head towards his, pressing his lips against mine. He pulled me in close as we kissed, our breathing swirling together as we both tried to catch our breath, some kind of spark hanging between us, unseen but still felt. I’d practically crawled into his lap, when we heard the sound of footsteps from somewhere outside the barn.

“Shit!” I mumbled as I quickly scrambled to my feet, pushing Cole away from me. “Shit!”

“Dylan? Are you in there?” Amber called out, stopping short of entering the barn. “I had something I wanted to run by you?—”

“Here! I’m always here!” There were nerves in my voice, but I tried to keep them at bay. “What’d you need?”

“Cole?” Amber looked right past me and towards her brother. “What are you doing in here?”

“I was helping Dylan.” Cole shrugged. “You wanted me to be more involved with your wedding planning stuff, right?”

Amber paused for a moment as her gaze went from her brother?—

Back to me?—

And then back to her brother. “Right. Well, I’m happy you’re getting... in the spirit.”

Amber cut a suspicious look back over at me, but the expression quickly disappeared. “Seriously, though, Dylan! I really need your opinion on this one.”

“What is it?”

“Coordinated releasing of butterflies and doves.”

“Coordinated? You mean at the same time?”

“Coordinated like choreography.” She grinned in my direction. “What do you think?”

“Honestly, Amber, I have no idea what that means.” As I replied to her, I spotted Cole heading out of the barn. He shot me a sympathetic look before he playfully winked.

And all I could think about were his hands on me all over again.

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8

COLE

I wanted to taste him again.

I wanted to put my hands on him again.

I wanted to put my mouth on his again.

I was sitting across from Dylan as we had lunch in one of the main cabins, the rest of the family joining us as well. Not to mention the horde of Amber's assistants, running to and fro, seemingly still on the clock even as they downed their salads and mimosas. Levi was attempting to talk my ear off about the McMillan property, trying his best to gain any sort of intel. Shane was his usual quiet self next to us, the only sound coming from him being his knife and fork scraping along his plate.

"You know the McMillans won't even take our phone calls?" Levi scoffed. "What happens when you call? Does it go to voicemail?"

"Nice try, Levi."

"Who said I'm trying anything?" There was a look of faux offense on his face. "I'm just trying to make sure we're all on the same page."

"We are all on the same page. I'm going to secure the McMillan property. And you and Shane will be a valuable part of the company, always."

“So smug! You’re so smug!” Levi playfully flexed his fists. “I can’t wait to see the look on your face when Shane and I figure this shit out.”

“Seems like I’ll be waiting a long time.” I grinned.

“Asshole!” Levi flipped me off, before taking another bite of his lunch.

Suddenly, my father appeared right behind me. Sensing his presence, I looked back at him. His mouth was in a straight line, his expression unreadable. “Cole.”

“Dad?”

“You seem distracted lately.”

“What?”

“You should stay focused. Wouldn’t want to lose what’s supposed to be yours.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I shook my head. “Haven’t you heard? I’m the only person who the McMillans will even answer the phone for?”

“I know you, Cole,” he interrupted. “When there’s something important on the line, you get soft. You crave... attention. Maybe it’s the stress. Maybe it’s self-sabotage. Either way, your last distraction was a failed marriage, and the ranch doesn’t have time for any more of that.”

My father roughly clapped me on the shoulder, soon walking away from the table.

“What the fuck? What a fucked up thing to say!” Levi started. “I’m sorry, man. I can’t even explain that one. I think he’s just getting meaner the older he gets.”

Levi went quiet for a moment before he leaned in closer. “Unless...”

“Unless?”

“Are you... distracted?” Levi grinned. “Is it one of Amber’s assistants?”

“I’m not distracted.” I stood up from the table. “And let Amber know I’ll be in my office. I need to get back to work.”

How does he know about Dylan?

Is it all a fucked-up threat?

Maybe it was just another one of his tests. Even if I landed the McMillan deal, maybe he’d still take it all away from me, say that I couldn’t be trusted to focus when it mattered.

But would he really not name me as the next CEO of Stratton Ranch? All because of Dylan?

Fuck.

I needed to calm down. I didn’t even know if my dad actually knew about me and Dylan. I had a feeling that if he’d known I’d hooked up with a man in one of our barns?—

What he would think of me?—

What everyone would say about me?—

Words escaped me, as a crushing feeling now weighed on the center of my chest. I

brought a hand up to my chest, trying to still the sudden flood, but it was no use. I was going to drown in this awful, awful feeling, and there was nothing I could do about it?—

“Cole? Cole!” Dylan’s voice floated somewhere above me, as he came around behind my desk. He gently placed a hand on either side of my face, forcing me to look up at him. “Are you okay? What’s going on?”

“Nothing’s going on.”

“Okay, well, you practically ran out of lunch, and it looks like you were just having a panic attack, so?—”

“Shouldn’t you be doing your job?” My response came out cold. “Isn’t that what Amber is overpaying you for?”

“We’re back to being mean to me again? Really?”

“It was a mistake.”

“What?”

“Everything. All of it. It was just a mistake,” I pressed. “I should have never touched you.”

“But you did touch me. Multiple times.” Dylan’s eyes narrowed. “And you told me that you knew what you wanted.”

“I was wrong.”

“Look, I don’t need some big romance from you, okay? But you can’t just act like

everything that happened between us was?—”

“There’s no point in even talking about this, Dylan,” I interrupted. “We both know this was never going to be anything real, anyway. I’m about to be the CEO of a billion-dollar corporation. Committing to anyone or anything right now besides the company is a complete waste of time. There’s also the fact that I’m going to be a walking target for gold-diggers and opportunists.”

“Is that what you think I am?” Dylan sounded hurt. “A gold-digger? An opportunist?”

“Dylan—”

“You kissed me first, Cole.” His voice shook as he spoke. “What the fuck? You touched me first!”

“I can only say I’m sorry so many times for that?—”

“You haven’t even said sorry once!” He exploded. “I don’t understand you at all, Cole! I gave you every opportunity to just... not go down this path. But you kept insisting and pushing and?—”

He stopped himself, holding up his hands. “You know what? It doesn’t matter. You’re right. There’s no point in even talking about this.”

“Dylan, I just?—”

“Nope. I’m done with this.” Dylan shook his head. “And you’re right about one other thing, too. I have a goddamn job to do.”

“Dylan. Dylan!”

I was standing outside of Dylan's cabin in the middle of the night, feeling like an idiot, chockfull of regret. Even if I didn't think we could really be together, I still shouldn't have gone about it the way that I did, being as hurtful as possible.

What is wrong with me?

Maybe my dad was right about the self-sabotaging. Because I'd called things off with Dylan, I'd been distracted the rest of the workday, just wanting to find him on the property and offer up a full apology. I just wanted him to know that it wasn't about him, it was about me, that I'd worked so hard for one thing in my life, and I wouldn't know what to do if it slipped out of my hands.

He could understand that, couldn't he?

I knew how hard he worked to become the wedding planner that he was. It was probably the only reason he was still willing to work with my sister, despite her increasingly impossible requests. He liked to push himself, to challenge himself to be even better.

Because he loved his job. Because he couldn't see himself doing anything else.

That was how I felt about Stratton Ranch.

"Dylan, please, just talk to me!" I knocked on his door for the millionth time. "You don't even have to come outside. We can just talk through the door?—"

My words were cut off by Dylan suddenly standing in front of me, holding open his door with one hand. He looked like he'd just gotten out of the shower, droplets of water still fresh against his shirtless chest, still clinging to his hair. "What do you want, Cole?"

“I shouldn’t have said what I said earlier. It all just came out wrong?—”

“I don’t care.”

“Dylan—”

“I’m serious, Cole. We don’t have to keep doing this. Let’s just end it here.” He sighed. “You could hook up with anyone you wanted to. And... I think as long as we can agree to at least be friendly around each other, so it’s not weird while I’m here?—”

“I don’t want to be friends with you.”

Dylan scrunched up his face. “Got it. Good talk, Cole.”

“Wait. Shit. That’s not what I—” Before I had a chance to finish my sentence, Dylan closed the door right in front of me.

“Shit. Shit!” I cursed underneath my breath, as I laid my head against Dylan’s door, desperately trying to think of the right thing to say.

What the hell is the right thing to say?

DYLAN

“Aw, honey. You didn’t take my advice, did you?” Jolene’s face was sympathetic. “Which idiot cowboy hurt you, huh? Give me his name and I’ll skin him alive, maybe mount his head on the wall.”

“Is it that obvious?” I sniffled over my breakfast. “Shit. I really need to get it together. I have a meeting with a potential partner in like thirty minutes.”

I took in a deep breath, doing my best to steel my thoughts. I’d hardly gotten any sleep last night, tossing and turning as I remembered the way Cole had been all over me... until he wasn’t. It had felt so natural with him, like puzzle pieces snapping into place. Even though I didn’t think it was going to be a forever kind of something with him, I still thought I at least mattered to him.

But I didn’t. I was just a mistake.

Like pouring a cup of coffee into the wrong glass. Like printing two copies of the same file.

And soon, he’d forget all about me.

“They’re assholes, all of them.” Jolene sighed. “But they sure know how to draw us in, don’t they?”

“They sure do.”

“You want to go steal some of his stuff? If you take his hats and boots, we can burn them in a pile out back. I won’t tell a soul.”

“That sounds amazing.” I half-laughed, half-sniffled. “But... could we maybe do pancakes instead? A cartoonish stack of them if that’s okay.”

“Oh, honey. It’s more than okay.” Jolene gently patted me on the shoulder. “I’ll even throw in some chocolate chips. On the house.”

I mouthed the words thank you before pulling out my phone?—

There were so many missed calls from Cole.

So many texts too.

I grimaced at the sight of it, setting my phone down at my side. If he didn’t want to be friends and he didn’t want to touch me, I had a feeling that he wanted to shut me up. Maybe he was worried about Stratton Ranch’s valuation going down if they found out their next CEO had a crush on a male wedding planner?—

Had a crush?

I let out a pained laugh. I needed to get it through my head that I didn’t mean anything to Cole Stratton. I was the equivalent of a drunken hookup at 3AM. A last call kind of hookup.

Cole probably just wanted me to sign an NDA about my time on the ranch. If he were smart, he’d put it under the guise of keeping the details of Amber’s wedding a secret, but the NDA itself would encompass everything I saw and did during my time there.

Because Cole couldn't have dirty hands.

I felt tears pricking behind my eyes at the realization, briefly wondering if any of Amber's assistants would've had to sign an NDA if they'd hooked up with Cole instead. I knew the answer was no, which was probably why everything hurt so much?—

“Dylan? Are you okay?” Alex took a seat across from me, his eyes filled with concern. “What's going on?”

“Just personal stuff.” I shook my head. “Nothing that has anything to do with us today.”

Just then, Jolene returned, setting down the huge stack of pancakes in the middle of the table. Alex looked at the plate before he looked back at me with a warm smile. “Nothing to do with us, huh? Because I'm not gonna lie, I could definitely go for a shit ton of pancakes right now.”

“You want to help me eat 'em?”

“I thought you'd never ask.”

“So, would 15% work? As sort of a referral fee?” Alex asked, before taking another bite of pancake. “We could also do it on a wedding-by-wedding basis.”

“I think 15% sounds good for now. Especially breaking into a new market. I never thought about going international before.”

“You'd be amazing at it. Trust me.” Alex beamed. “I already have a few people who'd love to work with you, but they didn't know how much time you'd be willing to spend overseas.”

I casually shrugged. “It’s not like I have anything keeping me tied down.”

Alex quirked an eyebrow. “Ah. Is that why you turned me down for that date? Because you didn’t want any… complications?”

“I turned you down for that date because I… thought I was sort of seeing someone.”

“You thought?”

“Yep. And I think I liked him more than I originally thought I did. But he absolutely did not feel the same way.” I let out another pained laugh. “Isn’t that so embarrassing?”

“You still like him, don’t you?”

“I—” I started and stopped my response, noticing someone coming over to our table. Out of the corner of my eye, I could tell they were a cowboy, with the stupid hat and the stupid boots?—

Wait.

Was that my cowboy?

I sank even further into my seat. I didn’t think I could handle this right now. I closed my eyes and hoped against hope that Cole was just here as a coincidence and not to force my hand to sign the NDA in front of Alex.

“Can you give us a sec, Alex?” Cole’s voice was stern, the question barely a question. Alex nodded with his usual smile before he stepped away from the table. As soon as he did, Cole slid into his spot across from me, his eyes burning with fire.

“Are you trying to make me jealous?”

“What?”

“Going on a date with Alex and ignoring me?” Cole pressed. “I didn’t think you were into playing games like this, Dylan?—”

“I didn’t—this wasn’t—” I shook my head. “Cole, this wasn’t a date . Alex was pitching me a potential partnership. He’s going international with his business and thought it could be worthwhile to team up.”

“Oh.” Cole seemed to cool down immediately. “Fuck. Sorry.”

“Yeah. Whatever.” I rolled my eyes. “Did you bring the NDA with you or what?”

“NDA?”

“That’s what all this is, right? You want me to sign an NDA so I can’t talk about anything that happened between us on the ranch while I was here.”

“I would never make you do something like that, Dylan. I’m not... I’m not ashamed of you... I’m not ashamed of us...” Cole looked away for me for a moment. “Did you say going international ?”

“Cole—”

Before I could say anything else, Cole’s hand was on top of mine, giving it a tender squeeze. “I’ve been awful to you, Dylan. I’m so, so sorry. I’ve been so hot and cold and...”

He took in a deep breath before he went on.

“I’ve never... felt this way about anyone before, Dylan. You drive me crazy. You call me out on my shit. You don’t give a damn about my last name or who my father is. And I’m... I think I might be... scared. About what that means. I’ve never been with a man before, Dylan. And I’ve never felt like this so... does that make me...”

“It means whatever you want it to mean, Cole.”

“Right.” Cole brought my hand up to his mouth, softly kissing my knuckles. “Can you forgive me? For being so incredibly stupid about all of this?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?” Cole stared over at me, as he began to kiss each of my fingertips. “You want me to make it up to you, baby?”

“You are so evil,” I whimpered, already putty in his hands. I managed to regain my composure enough to pull my palm away from his mouth. “What does all this mean, anyway? You’re just going to consistently be nice to me from here on out?”

“I don’t know what it means yet,” he murmured. “But I do know that I don’t want anyone else touching you, Dylan.”

“Because I’m... yours?”

“Because you’re mine.” Cole reached for my hand again. “As long as you’re here, you’re all mine.”

10

COLE

Am I smiling too much?

Shit.

I couldn't help it. Ever since finishing up breakfast with Dylan, I felt like I had a smile stuck on my face for the rest of the day. I was currently watching him dash around the barn, climbing up ladders, pulling down lights, giving out orders to the myriad of Amber's assistants. It was always so impressive watching him in action as he casually juggled an endless to-do list like it was nothing at all.

Mine.

I'd offered Dylan a ride back from the diner, which gave us a few minutes of privacy. We hadn't done more than make-out in the backseat, our hands eagerly exploring each other again. I wanted to do more with him, my body itching to claim Dylan as mine. Honestly, ever since this morning, I'd been having visions of bending him over a table, making him scream my name, making him come all over my hand as I stroked his cock?—

“Are you... smiling?” Amber asked, her tone suspicious. She'd sidled up next to me without me realizing, my brain stuck on craving Dylan.

“What? I'm not allowed to smile?”

“Not really, no. Levi smiles. Shane ponders. And you do whatever Dad does. Plan. Execute. Succeed.”

“You make me sound cold and unfeeling.”

“I feel like you used to take that as a compliment.” She smirked. “Seriously, though. What’s going on with you, Cole? What are you so happy about?”

“Maybe I’m just happy about the McMillan deal.”

“Oh? Did they agree to sell you the place?”

“It’s pretty close. I think.”

“Smiling before the papers are signed? That isn’t like you at all.” She hummed, tilting her head to the side. “Which means, this isn’t about the McMillan deal, is it?”

“Maybe I’m just coming down with something.”

“Some kind of emotion-based flu, sure—Shit! Dylan!” My sister’s response went from playful to dead serious. “The ladder!”

I looked over at Dylan, the ladder wobbling underneath him. Without thinking, I crossed the barn in a flash, steadying the ladder as best as I could, Dylan’s fingers held tight to the rung in front of him. Dylan slightly shifted and the ladder wobbled again, this time causing him to lose his grip. As he fell towards the barn floor, I reached out for him, intent on catching him in my arms.

He landed in a perfect cradle, the ladder falling down right beside us.

“Are you okay? Tell me you’re okay...” I murmured.

“Don’t—you shouldn’t—” Dylan started, his eyes wide. “We look like a scene out of some kind of romantic drama. If you don’t want people to know about us...”

“I don’t give a shit about that right now, Dylan. I just need to know if you’re okay.”

“I’m okay...” His skin flushed as he looked up at me. “Now, put me down.”

“Whatever you say, baby .”

“I hate you so much right now,” Dylan groaned, as I let him out of my arms. Amber came running up to us, then, wild with concern.

“Dylan! Oh, my God! Are you okay?”

I stepped away from the conversation, just as Dylan looked over at me, our eyes meeting from across the room. I flashed him a smile before heading out of the barn completely, thoughts of holding him in my arms all over again casually making their way through my head.

“Uh, this place is huge.”

Dylan walked through the front door of my personal cabin on the ranch, his gaze quickly taking everything in. “Like, this is pretty much a mansion huge. Did you know that you lived in a mansion? Or am I the first person to tell you?”

I looked around the room, no longer noticing the size of the place. I’d gotten used to the high ceilings, the grand staircases, the oversized windows with blinds that I could control with my voice. Honestly, I’d gotten so used to my home as just a place to get some sleep after a long day of work, there wasn’t any magic to it anymore.

There was also the fact that I hadn’t chosen any of it for myself.

“It was inherited.” I closed the door behind him. “If it was up to me, it’d be a lot more... reasonable.”

“I think it’s reasonable. And outrageous. All at the same time.” Dylan grinned. “Seriously, though. It’s gorgeous.”

He paused for a moment. “Inherited? From your Dad?”

I nodded. “He built a separate place for himself on the ranch. I think he wanted something more manageable, the older he got.”

“You really are the favorite son, huh?”

“People keep telling me that. Doesn’t feel like it.”

“Why not?”

“We don’t have to talk about that right now.”

“You’re right. We don’t. Besides, what’s the point of ruining the mood?” Dylan smiled as he closed the distance between us, his hands going up to my shoulders. “Thanks for saving my life earlier, by the way. I owe you one.”

“You owe me one?” I hummed, wrapping my arms around Dylan’s waist. “Can I cash that in right now?”

“What do you want to cash it in for?”

“You.”

“How much of me?” Dylan’s words were hesitant, his gaze locked on mine.

“All of you.” I pressed a soft kiss against his lips. “I want all of you, Dylan.”

“Take me to your bedroom?”

“Not yet, baby,” I murmured, my mouth kissing down the side of his throat. I used my grip on his waist to pull him down to the couch next to us, not stopping until I hovered over him, my body on top of his. I kissed him again, this time on his lips, my tongue deepening the kiss as it went on. I loved how he felt underneath me, his body perfectly angled against mine, our chests breathing in time.

I smiled to myself as I felt him getting harder underneath me, his cock pressing against my thigh. “Is there something you wanted to talk about, baby?”

“Nope. Can’t think of a single thing.” Dylan’s response came out breathy. “Don’t stop touching me. Please.”

I moved away from him slightly, just enough to reach a hand down between us, my palm rubbing against his still clothed cock, running up and down the length of him. “You sure there’s nothing you wanted to talk about?”

“Cole,” Dylan whined my name, and it was the most perfect sound. “Don’t tease me like that.”

“I’m not teasing you, Dylan. I’m just making you feel good.” I continued playing with his cock through his pants, feeling him getting harder and harder in my hand. “I want to make you come like this. I’m going to make you come like this.”

“You don’t want me to take my pants off?”

“No. I want to make a total mess out of you.” I kissed him sweetly on the cheek. “I want you covered in so much of your come... and my come... I want how much you

want me... and how much I want you... to be undeniable.”

“Fuck.” Dylan groaned and closed his eyes. “Fuck, I’m way too close?—”

“Come for me, baby,” I whispered in his ear. “Show me how much you want me...”

“Cole... Cole...” His breaths came out quick, his cock tensing in my hand. “I’m coming?—”

I closed my mouth over his, kissing him as he whimpered and shivered. When he was finished, I slipped my hand underneath the band of his pants, my fingers heading straight for the wet tip of his shaft. I circled it with my fingertips before bringing it back up to my lips, licking the taste of him off my hand.

Dylan blushed bright red as he watched me. “Why do you keep—when you do that it’s?—”

“Because you’re mine, that’s why,” I reminded him. “And if I want to taste you, I’ll taste you as much as I want.”

Before he could say anything else, my hands were at the bottom of his shirt, lifting it over his head. I went for his pants next, finally pulling them away from his legs, his boxers following right after. His shaft bobbed free, still wet with his come. Instinctively, I reached down and licked the rest of his come off his tip, casually cleaning him up.

“Wait, Cole—” Dylan whined again. “I just came?—”

“Don’t worry, baby. I was just cleaning you up a little bit.” I playfully winked. “I’m not interested in torturing you.”

“Could’ve fooled me.” He pouted.

“Fuck.”

“What?”

“You’re still so fucking cute.” I grinned, my eyes scanning up and down his perfect body. My grin turned into a serious line, as a thought suddenly crossed my mind. “I... uh... I think I want to try something.”

“What is it?”

“Not here.” I moved away from the couch before placing my hands underneath him. A few seconds later and he was in my arms, as I carried him to my bedroom. Dylan wrapped his arms around my neck for good measure, a bright laugh escaping his chest.

“You’re developing a real thing for cradling me like this.”

“Maybe I’m developing a real thing for sweeping you off your feet .”

Once we’d crossed the threshold to my bedroom, I softly placed Dylan on the bed. He looked right at home against my bedsheets, visions of me spooning him to sleep quickly occupying my mind. My bed was way too large for one person, something I’d never really thought too much about until right this very moment.

“This is so comfortable.” Dylan sighed, spreading his arms against the sheets. “You must sleep like a king.”

A few moments of making bed angels passed, and then he propped himself up on his elbows. “What did you want to try with me, Cole?”

“I...want to eat you out.”

“Oh.”

“Are you good with that?”

Dylan quietly nodded. “Do you want me to get on all fours or?—”

“Just face the headboard, baby,” I instructed.

And Dylan did as he was told, rearranging himself until he faced away from me, his hands and knees on the bed. I slid up behind him, lowering myself until I was at just the right angle...

And then, my mouth was on him.

Fuck.

He tasted divine.

I felt my own cock growing hard in my jeans, desperate for me to stroke it. I somehow managed to ignore it, wanting to focus on making Dylan feel amazing. I ran my tongue in light circles around his rim, trying to feel how he reacted to my every move. Feeling his breath catch in his chest, I added more pressure to the flick of my tongue, still moving in circles around him. Soon, Dylan was moaning, his hips pushing back against my mouth.

More.

I wanted to hear him moan like that more.

I moved my mouth away from his hole, replacing my tongue with one of my fingers. I slid my finger in and out of him, slowly, rhythmically, watching for his response. When he shuddered and let out a deep groan, I added another finger, repeating the same motion. His hips pushed back against my hand, and I could see that his cock was already hard for me again. I used my other hand to stroke his shaft a few times, teasingly running my thumb along his weeping slit.

“Cole... Cole, please....”

“Please what, baby?”

“Please, fuck me...” He whimpered. “I want... I want you inside me...”

I stopped what I was doing and leaned over to my nightstand. I let out a sigh of relief when I opened the top drawer and found a row of condoms and some lube from a couple of years ago, everything still unexpired. I set the condom and lube down on top of the nightstand, my hands now busy taking off my clothes. When my shirt, jeans, and boxers were on the floor, I slid the condom over my hard cock, a groan escaping my mouth as I did.

Fuck.

I want Dylan so bad right now.

I spread the lube over my fingers before placing the cap back on. I got back in place behind Dylan, once again fingering him, wanting to make sure his hole was ready for me. Dylan’s hips continued to shamelessly grind against my hand, his moans sounding more desperate by the minute. Something inside me was responding to it, loving every sound he was making, loving that I was the one making him feel like that.

Am I the only one who makes him feel like that?

The question crossed my mind, just as I brought my cock up to his waiting hole. I slowly slid inside him, my hands holding onto either side of his waist.

Mine.

A wave of possession hit me as I thrust into him for the first time, my hips steady behind him.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

I picked up the pace, thrusting inside him, my shaft pulling all the way out before slamming right back into him.

“Cole! Cole! Fuck!”

“Tell me that you’re mine, Dylan. Tell me that no one else gets to fuck you like this.”

“I’m... I’m yours...” Dylan’s breath hitched on every word. “No one...no one else gets to fuck me like this...”

Dylan shivered underneath me, and I reached a hand between us to grab for his cock. I started to pump my fist up and down his shaft as I fucked him deep, his precome leaking all over my fingertips. I could feel my possessiveness taking over again as I brought him closer and closer to coming for me, some part of me wanting him to be mine completely.

“Have you ever been fucked like this before, Dylan? Does anyone else make you feel as good as me?”

“No...” Dylan sounded like he was on the verge of tears. “No...no one else makes me feel this good...”

“Am I the only one you want, Dylan?”

“You’re... you’re the only one I...” Dylan whimpered as he came for me, his come spilling against my palm. While he was still trembling, I slid all the way out of him, casually shifting him onto his back before pushing my cock back inside him. I then held his legs up on either side of my waist as I locked eyes with him, my shaft pumping into him hard.

“What... did I tell you... about looking at me like that?” Dylan shook his head as he spoke. “You’re... going to make me think... the wrong thing.”

“And what’s the wrong thing?”

“That you have... actual feelings... for me...” Dylan let out a light laugh. “I... only belong to you... while I’m here, right? So, when I’m gone... none of this counts... anymore...”

“What if I wanted to keep you for longer?”

“Do you? Want to keep me for longer?”

“Would you let me?”

“I’d let you do whatever you wanted with me, Cole Stratton.”

Dylan’s words sent me right over the edge, my cock exploding inside him. It took me a few moments to catch my breath as I slid down next to him on the bed, his head soon resting on my chest. I wrapped an arm around him as he closed his eyes,

murmuring something about never being fucked like that in his life . He fell asleep a little after that, and I followed right behind him, my mind empty of every thought except for one.

Dylan.

11

DYLAN

It was the Big Day.

And I'd woken up next to the bride's brother this morning.

I'd rushed out of his cabin before anyone could catch us, avoiding the main routes as much as possible. It'd been a feat to make it back to my own cabin and pretend like I'd just woken up when Amber knocked on my door, but I'd somehow managed it.

A few coffees later and I was standing in the middle of controlled chaos.

The control provided by me and the chaos provided by everyone and everything else.

"The sand! Dylan!" Amber was nearly in tears as she ran up to me. She was dressed in her bare bones wedding attire, just a corset and some expensive looking stockings underneath. "It's off-white! I have no idea where the hell it came from! It's all wrong!"

She grabbed me by the hand before I could respond, dragging me over to the aisle we'd designed. "Do you see what I'm talking about?!"

"Oh, I see it. And someone's head is going to roll for it," I seethed before turning back to nice. "But I don't have time to chop off anyone's head today. Today, is all about making your special day perfect."

I snapped my fingers and a few of Amber's assistants appeared at my side. "Get this sand off the aisle. There should be bags full of different sand in the corner of the planning barn. It came in this morning."

"You already ordered backup sand?"

"Of course, I ordered backup sand." I winked. "What do I look like? Some kind of amateur?"

"I love you! I love you!" Amber threw her arms around me. "Do you think you can check on the doves, too? One of the girls just texted me that some of the animals aren't cooperating."

"Wait, just the doves? Because you just said some of the animals?—"

"I love you! Bye!" Amber ran off before I could say another word. I walked off to where we were keeping the doves for the ceremony, a close by barn. I took a deep breath before I opened the door, expecting things to be in total disarray...

And my expectations were met immediately.

There were a few doves outside of their arranged spaces, seemingly doing whatever the hell they felt like doing. I spotted one of the wranglers waving their hands, making bird calls, doing whatever they could, but none of it working. I then proceeded to watch one of the doves perfectly perch on the wrangler's head, defying him in real time.

I looked across the barn and saw one of the bridesmaids shaking her head profusely as she stared up at a horse. The horse seemed like it had the same attitude towards her, moving away from her before planting its feet.

“No! I’m not having any of this! Not today!” The words came out of me without thinking, my feet leaping into action. I ran towards the wrangler, gently cupping the dove in my hands before carefully placing the bird in a nearby cage. I repeated the action a few more times, the wrangler and I working in sync. He tried to thank me when we were done, but I was already moving over to the horse problem.

“Ursula?” I called the horse’s name, recognizing her the closer I got. “Are you really going to do this to me today?”

As if she understood, Ursula cut a look over at the bridesmaid. I took the woman in, eyeing her up and down, quickly noticing that she was wearing stilettos with diamond spikes sticking out of the sides. They were the kind of thing that admittedly looked amazing but were probably concerning to Ursula.

“You! Take those off. Put them in your hand. You can hold them as you dismount and before you walk down the aisle. And no, this is not a negotiation.”

The bridesmaid hastily obeyed, and Ursula took a few tentative steps back towards her.

“I love you. Never change,” I said to Ursula before I turned to leave the barn. Once I was outside, I accidentally bumped into an older woman, nearly knocking her to the ground. I reached out for her just in time, narrowly avoiding a potential faux pas.

“I’m so sorry! I’m sort of all over the place today?—”

“And you look fabulous darling, if you don’t mind me saying.” The woman smoothed out the front of her designer jacket. “You must be Dylan Reid, wedding planner extraordinaire.”

“The one and only.” I smiled. “And you are?”

“Amber’s future mother-in-law.” She smiled back. “Candace Thornton.”

“Lovely to meet you, Candace. I have to get back to managing things but I’m happy to chat later?—”

“Oh, I think we should chat now.” She brought a hand up to the side of her face. “There are just a few things I think we could tweak. I know it might be a little late, but I think it’d be worth it. For starters, this proposed entrance on horseback with the bridesmaids... it’s sort of tacky, don’t you think?”

“No offense to you, Mrs. Thornton, but this is Amber’s wedding?—”

“And we both want the best for her, don’t we?” She sighed. “And about all those roses... do you think we could arrange them differently? We could always make time for that?—”

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Oh, thank God.

Whatever that is, it sounds like the perfect excuse to get out of this conversation.

“Sorry. I have to—” I pointed towards the direction of the sound. I didn’t care what that sound had been, I just needed to get away from Mrs. Thornton ASAP. I’d managed to never scream at a meddling mother-in-law during my entire career and I didn’t feel like starting now. I practically ran away from her, not stopping until I’d reached the source of the unexpected booms.

Fireworks?

I’d agree to let Amber have an extremely modified version of the fireworks show

she'd wanted. Instead of 15 minutes it was going to be no more than five. Still, no fireworks were scheduled to go off until at least after the ceremony was completed, around the time of their first kiss as husband and wife.

"Why am I hearing fireworks?" I asked no one in particular, a crew of technicians standing in front of me.

"Sorry, boss. Looks like someone got the time wrong. We have enough supplies so it's not a huge deal?—"

"It better not be. I swear to God, if I have to see any of you again tonight—" I held up my hands as I took a few steps away from the situation. "Please. Just do your jobs? Please. I'm begging you."

Just a few more hours before the ceremony.

Just a few more hours to go without killing anybody.

I forced down a few breaths before I offered the crew an excited thumbs up. "We've got this, everybody! Let's go!"

I briefly wondered if they could tell I was lying through my teeth.

One perfect day. One perfect day.

I was crouching towards the ground, keeping to the back of the ceremony, out of the way of the cameras and everyone else. Breathing had become more impossible as the day had gone on, disasters needing to be dealt with and fires put out. I was anxiously awaiting another disaster around the corner as I watched the groomsmen perform an unauthorized, synchronized dance down the aisle.

Thankfully, it went off without a hitch.

As the wedding erupted with cheer and applause, I spared a look around, keeping an eye out for any loose doves or surprise nonsense. I spotted Cole from across the room, his gaze locked on mine.

Is he watching me? How long has he been staring at me like that?

The look on his face was completely unreadable, his mouth in a straight line. I didn't have time to overanalyze Cole's expressions, though, not when the wedding was still unfolding in front of me. I brought my attention back to the aisle, now spotting Amber walking down it, looking as beautiful as ever. She flashed a bright smile my way, tears spilling down her cheeks, mouthing a small thank you.

And my heart felt so full that it wanted to burst.

Even though there was a good chance I was going to pass out from the stress, nothing made it clearer that all of this was worth it. There was a golden glow spilling over the wedding now, the sun setting in the background of it all. It served as a gorgeous backdrop for Amber to exchange her vows with Doug, both of them looking like they were made for each other, goofy grins all around.

The reception would be starting soon.

I steeled myself for it as I rose to my feet. Once again, I looked around the room, catching Cole's eyes still on me. It felt like he had something on his mind, but it wasn't up to me to decode it all the way from over here. If he were trying to figure out how to let me down easy, he could save it.

I'd be leaving by tomorrow, anyway.

We didn't need to have some grand goodbye. In fact, we never had to speak to each other again.

I pretended like the thought didn't break me, my attention shifting towards the reception area, my feet already ahead of me.

12

COLE

“Where are you right now, Cole?”

Levi sat down next to me at our assigned table, a drink already in his hand. “Please, don’t tell me you’re still going over McMillan shit in your head! We’re at our sister’s wedding.”

“I... don’t care about the McMillans right now.”

“Damn. Really?” Levi chuckled. “Then, what has you so out of it? Do you actually think about anything else besides business?”

I tried to laugh along with Levi, but I could barely think. I’d been staring at Dylan during the entire wedding, watching him shift from anxious mess to confident mess back to anxious mess. He made everything look so easy, even though I could tell things were only going so smoothly because he was pushing himself to his limit. And while I was in awe of him, I knew that wasn’t why I’d been so infatuated with him.

The real reason I’d been staring at him is because I couldn’t get him out of my head.

The more I’d thought about last night, the more I realized that things I’d said in bed were things that I meant. I wanted Dylan to be mine . I didn’t want anyone else to touch him like that. I didn’t want anyone else to see him like that.

I wanted to be the person he was most comfortable with, the one he could let down his guard around.

I wanted to make him feel safe. I wanted to keep him safe.

I...

I wanted...

“It’s okay.” Shane’s voice shook me out of my thoughts, as he settled in next to me.

“What?” I shook my head, confused. “What’s okay?”

“It’s obvious you have feelings for someone, Cole,” he continued, with a shrug. “And I’m telling you that whoever it is, it’s okay. I know you might be... scared... after your divorce. But you shouldn’t be. You deserve to love and be loved. And I’m here to support you, no matter what.”

“What the hell, Shane? Where did that come from?” Levi laughed again. “Cole’s barely been back on the field, man. How would he have feelings for someone?”

My eyes met Shane’s, exchanging a quiet, knowing look.

“Oh, my God. Is Shane right?” Levi’s mouth fell open. “Cole! Congrats, man! I told you that all you had to do was get back out there!”

Levi leaned closer to me. “Are they here? Like at this wedding? Is it someone we know?”

“Let the man breathe, Levi,” Shane added.

“Absolutely not. You don’t get to breathe if you’re holding out on me!”

“It doesn’t matter.” I took a sip of the wine at the table and the taste seemed more bitter than usual. “It’s not going to work out.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m an idiot. Because I have awful timing.” I chuckled through the pain. “Because I already ruined things pretty much the first time I opened my mouth. And because...”

“Because?”

I looked over at my dad, currently entertaining the newfound Thornton side of the family. My chest tightened at the idea of ending up just like him, all business, all miserable. It was the path I’d been on my entire life, one I’d never even questioned until right now. Being like my father seemed like the perfect deal, the respect, the power, the control...

And then, my eyes drifted over to Dylan.

He was with Jolene, playfully spinning her in time to the music. They were dancing to some pop song on the reception floor and laughing their heads off. Each of them had champagne flutes, every so often posing for photos in front of the cameras. Dylan looked so beautiful that it hurt to look at him, his perfect smile, and his laughter somehow cutting through the crowd. He was everything that I never even knew I wanted, all happiness, all honesty...

“Where are you going?” Levi asked, as I stood up from the table, already heading over to the dance floor.

“I think I’m about to do something insane. Back me up when this all blows up in my face?”

“Always!” Levi applauded, while Shane gave me an approving nod. “Go get ‘em!”

A few moments later I was standing in front of Dylan, who was still dancing with Jolene. He smiled as soon as he saw me, waving a hand around the room. “I did it! I actually did it! This turned out way better than I expected! Don’t tell Amber I said that though?—”

I cut him off with a kiss, my hands wrapping around his waist, my chest pressed close to his. Dylan tried to move away from me, wide-eyed and confused. “Cole! What are you—you’re lucky barely anyone saw that?—”

“I saw it.” Jolene smirked. “And I am not above spreading some gossip when it’s good.”

“Jolene! Don’t! Cole—” I cut him off again, deepening the kiss. This time, the room fell silent around us, as I held Dylan even closer.

“What are you doing...what are you doing...” Dylan was nervous, his hands lightly shaking. “Cole, are you drunk?”

“Nope.”

“But why would you just kiss me like that? In front of everyone?”

“Because you’re mine.” I quirked an eyebrow. “I thought we already established that.”

“Oh, my God!” Amber appeared right in front of us. “Is this real? Is this actually

happening?”

“If you’re asking if we like each other, then yes?—”

“Dylan Reid is going to be in my family !” Amber squealed with excitement. “My future brother-in-law! Oh, my God! This is the best wedding present you could’ve ever gotten me, Cole!”

“Hold on. I didn’t say anything about—I don’t even know if Dylan wants to?—”

“I’d let you do whatever you wanted with me, Cole Stratton.” Dylan’s eyes were locked on mine.

And I couldn’t stop the smile that spread across my face. I was about to go in for another kiss, when I heard my uncle coughing beside us, clearly wanting our attention.

“I knew it.” Virgil grinned. “Didn’t I tell you?”

“Did you? Tell me?”

“Oh, please. I was watching you lovebirds from the very beginning. It was obvious where this was going. Just as obvious as the moon landing being fake.” Virgil rolled his eyes. “You have to try harder than that to pull one over on me.”

Virgil patted me on the back. “I’m happy for you, Cole. It’s a hard world out there. It’s nice to find someone who’ll spot you. That’s the kind of thing people spend their whole lives looking for. Smart of you to not let it slip away from you.”

“Okay, why does everyone keep talking like we’re about to get married?—”

Virgil held up his hand. “Don’t insult my intelligence, Cole. This one’s not going anywhere.”

My father had been staring daggers at us from across the room, but I couldn’t have cared less. I was back at our reception table, this time with Dylan right next to me, our fingers linked underneath it. It was freeing, no longer worrying about what my father thought about me, how he was going to punish me for stepping out of line. The only thing I could think about was Dylan, and how happy he made me, and how much I wanted him to stay.

Please, please stay.

“So, you’re a wedding planner...” Levi started. “Is this the best wedding you’ve ever gone to?”

“I’m legally obligated to always say yes to that question.”

“Smart man.” Levi grinned. “And our sister? Was she the best bride you’ve ever worked with?”

“The best bride?”

“Smartest, nicest, most talented, etc.”

“Of course.”

“Very smart man.” Levi leaned back in his chair. “So smart that I’m wondering what’s going on with you and my brother?”

“Hey! What the hell, Levi?” I laughed. “Weren’t you the one telling me to get back out there?”

“I was, but Dylan feels like a serious catch.” Levi pointed over at me. “Are you prepared for that?”

“Yeah, Cole, are you?” Dylan teased. “You wouldn’t want to accidentally throw me back out in the sea.”

“Is this how it’s going to be? All of you just ganging up on me?” I joked. “Because I don’t think I like that dynamic.”

“I won’t gang up on you, Cole,” Shane said. “If I ever have anything negative to say, I’m confident enough to say it all on my own.”

“Thanks, Shane. Always a pleasure,” I replied with a grin. Before I could add anything else, my phone started to ring in my pocket. I pulled it out to quickly look at the screen.

McMillan.

I quietly placed my phone back in my pocket. Levi shot me a suspicious look. “What was that about?”

“Nothing important.”

“Holy shit.” Levi’s eyes went wide. “That was about the McMillan deal, wasn’t it? Were they ready to sign on the dotted line?”

“And you just ignored the call?” Even Shane looked shocked. “Like it doesn’t mean anything to you?”

“What can I say? I’m trying to live in the moment.” I pressed a kiss against Dylan’s cheek. “I don’t want my whole life to revolve around work. I want... something

better for myself.”

“Boo! No work stuff allowed at my wedding!” Amber walked up to our table, a bottle of wine in her hand. “Cole, I saw you take your phone out?—”

“He’s actually not going to take the call.”

“What?” Amber paused for a moment before pulling Dylan into a tight side-hug, still in his seat. “You’re already changing him for the better! You really are made of magic!”

She then placed the bottle on the table. “If no one’s working... can we go dance? Please?”

The entire table rose to follow behind Amber, as she led us back to the dance floor. Dylan wrapped his jacket around his waist, then started pumping his arms in time to the upbeat song. Shane did his usual side-to-side step, moving just enough to count as dancing but never going overboard. Levi and Jolene were hip bumping each other and shimmying back and forth, cutting a rug like no one else out there.

All while I tried to keep up with Dylan’s moves, our bodies never too far from each other.

“Secret fireworks!” Amber pointed up at the sky, just in time to see them erupting against it. “Sorry, Dylan! I promise it’s not going to go on for too long! I just really wanted them!”

“They’re beautiful, Amber,” Dylan replied, not sparing a glance up at the sky.

“The most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.” I stared back at Dylan, before kissing him all over again, the fireworks exploding all around us.

“He’s going to disown me.”

“I mean, probably not.”

“He’s going to pull the CEO role right from underneath me.”

“Possibly, but that’d be extremely cruel.”

“He’s going to use you against me. I can just fucking feel it.”

“Cole...” We’d been in Cole’s bedroom since last night, spending the night together after the wedding. I’d wanted to do more than sleep, but I was too exhausted post wedding planning, and Cole was too wound up from declaring his affection for me publicly. Instead, we’d cuddled close until we’d both passed out, my head resting on Cole’s chest the whole night.

I looked up at Cole now, one of my hands running through his hair. “I want you to think about the worst thing that can happen.”

“That’s all I’ve been thinking about since last night...”

“I’m serious. I want you to catastrophize. Like, earth ending stuff,” I replied. “So, not just you not getting CEO but the entire ranch burning down. The city being overtaken by zombies.”

“You’re not really helping here, baby.”

“Imagine it,” I pressed. “The absolute worst thing.”

“Okay, okay...” Cole sighed. “I’m imagining Amber, Shane, and Levi getting their brains eaten by a zombie right in front of me. I’m imagining the ranch being turned into someone’s plaything, where they can pretend to be a cowboy when they feel like it and just let everything else go to shit...”

He kept his eyes on mine. “And... I’m also imagining you not being around anymore. Just completely out of my life.”

“Good.” I smiled.

“Good?”

“Now, I want you to think about you not being CEO...” I let my words trail off. “When you compare what you’re feeling right now, to what you were feeling a few seconds ago...”

“It doesn’t seem so bad...” Cole smiled a little now too. “Still sucks, though.”

“Ooh, what if your dad makes me the next CEO?”

“I think you’d be incredible at it... but I’d still have to take it from you.”

“Yeah?” I smirked. “Do your worst, cowboy.”

“Maybe I will.” Cole pulled me in close for a kiss, and I lost myself in him, somehow falling into him even more.

My stomach was in knots.

All the Strattons had assembled in the main house for Joseph’s big announcement,

even Amber and her new husband delaying their honeymoon. He'd gathered the family under the pretense of deciding who would be the next CEO of the ranch, but since he wasn't in the room yet, I was worried he'd changed his mind.

Maybe no one would get to be CEO.

And all because of me.

Would Joseph really punish Cole like that? I grimaced at the back of the room, feeling like running off into the woods. I didn't know if I'd ever be able to forgive myself if I somehow ruined Cole's future. What would he do if he weren't running this place?

"Do you believe that everyone's real?" There was an older man seated next to me, although he looked vaguely familiar?—

Oh, right.

This was Uncle Virgil, the eccentric that Cole had mentioned a few times in passing. Virgil was smiling over at me, like he knew some big secret but was keeping it to himself.

"What do you mean?" I whispered, not wanting to pull any focus from the potential announcement, assuming Joseph ever showed up.

"Doesn't matter. All you need to know is that Cole's real." Virgil nodded after he spoke. "He's as real as you and me. He's got a mind for it."

"Are you saying that some people are... fake?"

"Just not real. Figments of our collective imagination. Spill water on them and they short-circuit."

“I don’t think I know what that means, Virgil.”

“Ha. Lucky you.” Virgil crossed his arms over his chest. “I envy the ones who don’t know what I know.”

What a fascinating man.

I was ready to pick his brain further but as I turned towards him, Joseph finally walked into the room. He had a presence about him that was engaging yet slightly terrifying, nothing on his face ever betraying what he was thinking. He always looked a little disinterested and a little pissed off, to the point that I wondered if it was something he’d spent time perfecting.

Honestly, he reminded me of Cole, back when we first met.

I smiled to myself at the memory, annoyed with how much he’d blown me off but happy that there was so much more to him.

Joseph soon took his place at the front of the room, his eyes meeting mine just once.

He started to speak: “This has been... an interesting time for the Strattons. With Amber’s wedding?—”

“Woohoo!” Amber interrupted her father, pumping her hands in the air.

Joseph nodded in response, not quite smiling. “Yes. Woohoo. I couldn’t be happier for you, Amber, and I wish you nothing but health, wealth, and happiness.”

Happiness is dead last?

Crap. Cole might be in real trouble.

“Moving on, I’m sure you’re all aware of the McMillan property. We’ve been trying to be in business with the family for a long time, but they never budged on their price or their estate. That is... until now.”

Joseph nodded towards Cole. “Cole was able to get them to sign over their property, and as of last night, the estate will now be considered an extension of Stratton Ranch. According to the eldest McMillan, they appreciated Cole’s approach, treating them like the neighbors they were instead of a cold, unfeeling corporation. Something about Cole’s personal touch...”

He coughed before he went on. “Of course, this means that Levi and Shane were unsuccessful in their bids for the McMillan property.”

“Never really had a chance.” Levi chuckled. “Cole was born for this.”

“That and the McMillans wouldn’t take our calls...” Shane’s response trailed off. “But that’s Cole for you. Master negotiator.”

“Yes. My son. The master negotiator...” Joseph looked over at me again, his expression still impossible to figure out. He then brought his attention to Cole. “Cole’s negotiating skills, along with his several other good qualities, make me believe that he’s the best fit for next CEO of Stratton Ranch.”

“To the surprise of no one!” Amber shouted before leading the room in a round of applause. “Yay, Cole! We love you!”

“Nice going, bro!”

“The ranch is in good hands with you, Cole.”

“There’s something else...” Joseph held up a hand, encouraging silence in the room.

Shit.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Here it comes.

Joseph was about to ask Cole to get rid of me in front of everyone. He was going to turn me into Cole's final test, see if he were willing to play straight for the rest of his life in exchange for the job and life that he'd always wanted. And if Cole went along with it, how could I even blame him? We hadn't known each other for that long. How could he think that I was worth throwing away his dream?—

“Cole will not only be the next CEO of Stratton Ranch. He will also be the sole successor of all of my assets and properties,” he continued. “Cole will be my sole inheritor. If and when he chooses to divide up my portfolio among the rest of you will be left up to him. I trust in his judgment, completely.”

The room was so quiet it felt like I could hear everyone breathing.

“Sole inheritor?” Amber slowly blinked. “Whoa.”

“I trust Cole to be fair with how he divides the assets.” Shane's tone was confident. “And I couldn't think of a better person for such a great responsibility.”

A look of concern flashed across Levi's face, before his usual smile broke through. “You know what? Yeah. Let Cole handle all the hard stuff. I don't need anything else on my plate, anyway.”

“Called it.” Virgil nudged me in the shoulder. “I told you. Cole's real, just like you and me. Things couldn't end any other way. Joseph sees it, too.”

“Cole? Did you want to say something?” Joseph moved out of the way, before he

waved his son to the front of the room. “It’ll be helpful to get familiar with addressing the troops.”

“Yeah, I can say something.” Cole was calm, all of his earlier anxiety suddenly dissipated. He took his father’s place, taking a deep breath. “I just want to say... I love you. Each and every one of you. You’re all near and dear to me and it’s been an honor growing up alongside you. Getting to know you...”

Cole’s eyes cut over to me. “And... I look forward to the future. Leading this family. Growing and changing. I hope that I’m the man all of you expect me to be and more. I hope I live up to all of your expectations and you’ll stick by me even when I fall short. I hope... I hope I’ve earned your loyalty and your love, all of you. That’s... all I wanted to say.”

As soon as Cole was finished, the room erupted into applause again, this time everyone gave him a standing ovation to boot. Even as the rest of the room congratulated him, I felt stuck where I was, my brain going over every last word he’d just said.

I know that he’s talking to everyone he’s known his whole life...

So, why does it sound like he’s talking to me too?

Does Cole...

Does Cole love me?

“Do you think Levi was a little raw about it?”

Cole and I were driving through the open pasture, the sun setting around us. It was a golden warmth I was getting used to, set against the sky as it turned purple and blue. I took in the air around us, filling my lungs with it, still loving the way it smelled out

here. I looked over at Cole in the passenger seat of his truck, cowboy hat firmly in place, his rough hands gripping the steering wheel like he'd done it a million times before. The distant hum of crickets played in the distance, the sort of comforting symphony I'd never find in the city no matter how much I looked.

"What?" I was admittedly a little distracted by Cole, by the ranch, by everything. I was experiencing a sort of Zen I rarely got to feel, without a wedding planning worry in my head.

"Levi? Do you think he was raw about Dad leaving me everything?" Cole's lips were pursed tight. "I'd never do wrong by him, ever."

"I think he knows that, Cole. You're a good person."

"It just feels like a final test." Cole let out a slight laugh. "But the funny part is, even if my dad's still trying to get in my head... I don't care anymore."

"You don't?"

Cole shook his head. "Nope. The only person's opinion I have to care about from here on out is?"

He stopped himself, his focus returning to the road.

"Is your own?" I guessed. "Because this whole thing has taught you to... trust yourself more?"

Cole let out another laugh. "Damn. That's probably what I'm supposed to say, huh?"

"What were you going to say, Cole?"

"I was going to say that the only person's opinion I have to care about from here on

out is... yours, Dylan.”

“My opinion?”

“If you’ll... stick around to give it to me?” His tone was lined with hope. “I don’t want to get in your way though, Dylan. I know you have big dreams, just like me. I just... I want Stratton Ranch to be the place you...”

Cole sighed before he parked the car. We were in the middle of the ranch, it seemed, surrounded by nothing but beautiful greenery and the stars of the night sky now shining above us. He unclicked his seat belt as he turned to look over at me, his eyes meeting mine. “I don’t know how to say any of this without sounding... I don’t think there’s a way to say it without...”

“You want Stratton Ranch to be the place I come back to when I’m done working...” I couldn’t help but smile as I helped him work through his thoughts. “Sort of like my... home?”

“I don’t ever want to take anything from you, Dylan?—”

“I’ve never thought about it before.”

“Thought about what? Living here?”

“No.” My skin flushed as I spoke. “I never thought about... my happy ending before. I spend so much time giving people their one perfect day that I never thought about my own. I never thought about where I could belong, Cole. Not until you. And ever since I got here, even before I met you... there was just something about this place.”

“So, you could really see yourself in Montana? With me?”

“I could see myself anywhere with you, Cole.” I beamed. “That’s sort of the problem.

If you moved to Antarctica, I'd be right behind you."

"That reminds me. I've been meaning to tell you?—"

"Don't you dare." I chuckled, and soon he was laughing, too, the sound of our laughter blending together in the night. He shifted closer to me, his mouth meeting mine, his hand on my waist. When he leaned back from me, I reached my palm out for his, linking our fingers across the car's console.

A few moments passed in silence before Cole completely moved away from me. Before I could say anything about it, he was out of the car, coming around to the passenger side. He then pulled open my car door, offering me his hand again. I took his hand in mine, and he guided me towards a spot of open pasture. When it seemed like he'd found the place he wanted, he bent down on his knees, gently pulling me down with him.

When we were both lying on our backs, looking up at the sky, Cole pulled me onto his chest. "There's something else I... want to say to you, Dylan."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"I love you." The words came out clear as day. "I'm in love with you. I know that might seem fast but?—"

"I love you, too, Cole."

"Really?"

"Yes." I kissed a spot on his chest. "I love you. I'm in love with you."

"Does that mean we should figure out labels or?—"

“Later.” I shook my head. “We can do that in the morning.”

“You sure?”

“I mean, I already canceled my flight back.” I smirked. “It’s not like I have anywhere to be until the next wedding?—”

I paused before I went on. “Oh, my God. Am I going to have to plan my own wedding? Am I going to be a groomzilla to myself?”

“I’ll try to keep you in line,” Cole answered, without missing a beat. “Especially when it comes to the budget part.”

“Oh, the budget doesn’t exist. I’m getting my 15-minute firework show, Cole.”

“Dylan—”

“And have you ever heard of diamond dusted champagne?”

“Yeah, that’s enough of that.” Cole shifted down until he was able to kiss me again, interrupting all of my wildest wedding suggestions. We both smiled, our lips pressed against each other’s, my heart beating so fast that I couldn’t do anything about it. I’d never imagined that my first trip to Montana would be the one that convinced me to stay, but I also couldn’t imagine being anywhere with anyone else.

I was exactly where I belonged, right here, with my Cole, my cowboy.

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