



The Stranger's Code (Western Oath #2)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: CAMERON:

Faking it is what I do best.

Hollywood directors pay me to slip into any role and make it look effortless.

Undercover on a Montana ranch—that's how I'm prepping for my next film. No cameras, no autographs, no one looking twice at the actor trying to play cowboy.

I thought I could handle it—until I met Levi Stratton, the rugged rancher who makes stepping into character harder than it's ever been.

I'm here to learn the ropes, then vanish. Not fall for someone like Levi, with his slow smile and a way of making me forget who I'm pretending to be. Every second I stay, I risk losing more than just a role.

The lie could ruin everything.

The truth could ruin me.

LEVI:

Cameron Miller is hiding something. I can feel it.

When he shows up at Stratton Ranch, he acts like he's ready to take on the world—even if he doesn't have a clue what he's doing. He's stubborn, reckless, and carrying something he's trying too hard to outrun.

I'm supposed to be focused on Big Sky Rescue. Building something real.

Not getting dragged off course by someone who doesn't belong out here.

I should walk away and stick to the life I've built.

1

CAMERON

Fifteen years.

That was how long I'd wanted to work with Antonio Cruz, one of the most iconic directors in Hollywood history. He'd tackled every genre with immense success. Back when I was hopelessly auditioning for toothpaste commercials, he was reshaping audience expectations for big budget action movies. When I was playing minor characters in nationally touring musicals, he was accepting Oscar after Oscar for his take on the modern family drama.

Even after I landed my first big role as Gareth, the love interest in the Honeydew franchise, I never thought we'd ever work together. It didn't matter that tickets were sold out months in advance, that the meet and greets were eight hours minimum per day. It didn't matter that I'd gone from waiting tables to suddenly being waited on hand and foot, with a professional team at my beck and call around the clock. Antonio Cruz only worked with the best of the best.

And I guess I'd never felt like I was the best.

But a few months ago, he'd called me out of the blue and offered me the role of a lifetime.

I was going to be his next main character, a cowboy named Lee. I thought I was being pranked when he casually called me up, but my manager reassured me the offer

was real. Cameron Clarke was going to be in an Antonio Cruz movie.

Cameron Clarke was going to lead an Antonio Cruz movie.

Since then, I've been doing everything in my power to get ready for the part. I've been reading non-fiction books about cowboy culture, watching an endless amount of YouTube videos on ranching. The only thing I haven't done yet is spend time on a ranch for myself, which was why I was headed to Stratton Ranch right now. I needed to get into the cowboy headspace, really surround myself with them, learn how they walked and talked. I could already tell Montana was wildly different than Los Angeles, but the mountains were absolutely gorgeous.

And I couldn't get enough of that perfectly cold, crisp air.

I checked the rearview mirror before making a turn down a dirt road. I checked it again right after, quickly glancing at the new stubble on my chin, my hair tucked deep underneath a trucker hat I'd bought at a gas station along the way. If anyone recognized me, this experiment was finished before it even began. I needed to experience something authentic on this ranch, and if it meant looking a little shaggier than I was used to, so be it.

When I pulled up to the ranch, there was an older man leaning against the front gate. I parked a short distance from him and walked up to the gate. "Is this Stratton Ranch?"

The man squinted over at me. "It's a big place. You can't miss it."

"Is this... it, then?"

"Correct. You didn't miss it." He grinned. "And you are?"

"Cameron Miller," I lied. "But everybody just calls me Cam."

“Nice to meet you, Cam. I think we’ve been expecting you.” He nodded at the ranch behind him. “You’re the one who’s thinking about buying your own farm, right? The one who wanted to see what it’s like to be a ranch hand, get your hands dirty.”

“That’s me.”

“Honorable.” He whistled. He then leaned toward me like he was going to tell me a secret. “You want to know what I think, Cam?”

“What’s that?”

“I think that you’re trouble.”

“What?”

“I have a sense for these things.” He smirked again. “A real sixth sense. Now, don’t get me wrong. I don’t think you’re going to burn down barns or anything. But something tells me you’re going to do... something. I just hope I get there in time to see it.”

“Sorry, what was your name again?”

“Didn’t offer it.” He winked. “And the name’s Virgil. Virgil Stratton.”

Virgil playfully waved before he turned back toward the gate. “All right. I’ve got to go. Places to be, people to see. Let me know if you need anything, Cam. I’m always around, somewhere.”

“Uh, is there a designated place for me to park? Virgil? Virgil?” I shouted, but he just kept steadily walking away, like he didn’t hear a word I said.

What the hell?

Who was that guy?

* * *

I'd managed to figure out the parking situation at Stratton Ranch.

No thanks to Virgil.

Once I'd figured out where to park my car, I checked the email they'd sent me about my lodging. I'd opted to stay in a smaller cabin, one that was closer to the edge of the property. It was the perfect amount of privacy while still giving me enough proximity to a few other cabins, though I didn't know who they belonged to.

The cabin was rustic yet welcoming. There was a small fireplace, with wood already prepared inside. There were also pieces of wooden furniture, which looked lovingly hand-carved and homemade. The bed was comfortable, with just enough pillows and blankets, nothing overly fancy like the five-star hotels I'd been staying in. Honestly, it reminded me of being back at home during the holidays. When Mom would spend all day fussing over the family meal and making sure my bed was made, when Dad would ask-but-not-really-ask if I wanted to go bowling after dessert, a time-honored family tradition.

I smiled to myself at the memory.

Ever since my career had taken off, I hadn't spent much time at home.

When I made my way back to the main room of the cabin, I let out a gasp. I hadn't realized that the cabin's large windows provided such an incredible view of the property, everything about it feeling like I'd stepped inside a work of art. The sky

looked painted on, an impossible shade of blue. The fields were rolling and endless, a light breeze blowing them ever so gently.

I wondered what Stratton Ranch looked like at night.

Probably just as beautiful.

“Shit. Shit!” My eyes went wide just as I remembered something. “I’m supposed to be at one of the barns!”

* * *

I’d never run so fast in my entire life.

Before leaving my cabin, I’d hastily changed into what I considered my cowboy uniform, an oversized, tan hat, and a pair of fresh boots. A quick look at my itinerary for the day let me know that I was supposed to be checking out some new equipment that came in, all of it stored in one of the barns. Checking out the equipment would also give me a chance to get acquainted with some of the other ranch hands. Hell, maybe I’d even run into a real cowboy or two?—

Down?

I was going down.

My feet were off the ground, and I was hurtling towards the grass. I landed with a thump, my hat flying off somewhere to the right of me. I groaned as I turned on my side, my body stinging with embarrassment and just a little bit of pain. I spared a look at my feet, wondering what had caused my literal downfall?—

“Gopher hole.” A stranger’s voice was suddenly above me. “You’ve got to be careful

about those. They'll get you every time."

I looked up at the stranger, narrowing my eyes to avoid the sunlight...

Whoa.

He was about as gorgeous as the rest of the ranch. His eyes were a steel sort of blue and completely focused on me. His dark hair was tousled, either naturally or on purpose, I couldn't tell. Either way, it looked good on him. His black jeans and black tank top were immaculately clean, whereas his boots were rugged and worn, like he'd put them on a million times before. I knew it was rude to keep looking him up and down like that, but my brain was processing him like a natural wonder.

Of course, I had to get a good look at something so rare.

"You all right?" the stranger asked. "Your fall didn't look that bad, but you still haven't said anything?—"

"Cam."

"What?"

"My name is Cam," I sputtered out. "I'm... him. That's me."

"I'm Levi." He grinned. "I'm him. That's me."

Levi bent towards the ground, offering me his hand. "Do you need some help there, Cam? Like I said, gopher holes will get you every time. They're a real hassle."

I took his hand and pulled myself back up to my feet. "Thanks, Levi. Not a lot of gopher holes where I'm from."

“You’re the volunteer ranch hand, right? The one thinking about getting his own farm?”

“Yep. That’s me.”

“I think that’s amazing, Cam. I really do.” Levi smiled. “You wouldn’t believe how many people want to buy up farmland and don’t have the faintest idea how to do anything on a farm. It’s like wanting to run a restaurant when you’ve never worked in one. I mean, if anything goes wrong, how would you even know how to fix it?”

Levi stopped himself as he shook his head. “Sorry. You don’t need to hear all my opinions.”

“No, you’re right.” It was my turn to smile. “If I do something, I want to be all in. Being phony is so... overrated. Whatever I commit to, I want it to be as authentic as possible.”

“You sound like my kind of guy.” Levi gave me an approving nod. “Where were you running off to, anyway?”

“Oh, I just wanted to see some new equipment at the barn?—”

“Boo.”

“What?”

“Boo,” Levi repeated, flashing another grin. “How boring. Listen, Cam, you’re not going to learn how to run a farm by just staring at tractors all day. How about I give you a full tour of the ranch and then I promise you can get to the boring stuff?”

“Yeah. Okay. Whatever you say.”

* * *

Levi was straight out of a goddamn movie. Ripped from the headlines. Jumped out of the pages.

We'd loaded into his pickup truck before he sped away from the cabins. His cowboy hat was stylish and black, like the rest of his outfit. As he drove, he'd slipped it off the dash and back onto his head, which explained the perfectly messy hair. My heart raced as dust picked up around us, and yet, I couldn't keep my eyes off him for even a full minute.

He was it.

He was the cowboy Antonio Cruz wanted me to be .

I was already taking mental notes on how he talked, how he moved. Everything about him seemed like he'd grown up around cowboy culture but still had a personality all his own, like he found a way to stand out from the crowd.

Like he found a way to capture everyone's attention on the big screen.

"We have some stables over there. If you stick around long enough you might get to meet Ursula. That's my sister's favorite horse," he continued, nodding towards the stables as he drove. "You ever been on a horse before, Cam?"

"Only at petting zoos."

"You went to those a lot as a kid?"

"I worked at those a lot as an adult." I chuckled. "Anything to make a few extra dollars, you know."

“That’s the kind of work ethic that’ll take you a long way on a ranch, Cam.” His eyes were focused on the road ahead. “The best cowboys are always the hardest workers.”

“Would you consider yourself a cowboy?”

Levi laughed. “Something like that, sure.”

“Something like that?”

“I’m a Stratton. Being a cowboy is in our blood,” he replied. “To the point that I don’t really think of myself as a cowboy. I just... am. The last name always spoke it for me, I guess.”

“Wait. You’re related to Virgil?” I said, without thinking. “But you’re... uh...”

“You were going to say that I’m normal, weren’t you?” Levi laughed again, the sound of it perfect. “Don’t worry about Virgil. He’s harmless. You’ll get used to his quirks.”

“So, you like it? Being a cowboy? Being a Stratton?”

“I love it.” Levi shrugged. “But I’ve always been a nature lover. Especially at night. When everything comes together... there’s nothing like it in the world.”

Levi slightly adjusted his hat before he nodded at a trail to our right. “And there’s my favorite trail. It’s a good walk and you pass right by one of the lakes on the property. Sometimes, swans stop in.”

“Swans?!” I said, sounding way too excited.

Levi smirked in response. “Swans, Cam. Swans.”

The rest of the property tour went much the same way, with Levi pointing out various areas and me trying to remember it all. I was also trying to remember every detail about Levi that I could, taking him all in from head to toe. He was becoming my muse, whether he knew it or not, and I wanted to embody everything about him perfectly.

Although, somewhere in the back of my mind, I was already worried about how much I liked him. Even if I was studying him for a character, I needed to remain objective and detached. Which meant that I wasn't supposed to get too close to him...

Even if a part of me really, really wanted to.

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LEVI

Cameron Miller.

I'd taken a quick peek at the guest logs, curious about his full name. I'd given Cam an impromptu tour around the ranch earlier, after I'd witnessed his run-in with a gopher hole. He seemed like a nice enough guy, and I was always happy to help out a fellow entrepreneur, someone trying to build something of their own.

As the owner of Big Sky Rescue Co., I could relate to the ups and downs of building a new business. Big Sky was a wilderness search and rescue company, specializing in hard-to-reach places, the ones that required a helicopter and specialized equipment. The company was also basically my firstborn, with me putting so many hours into it that I'd lost count. I loved the work, though, even if there were constant reminders from my accountant that we still weren't in the black.

Even after three years, we were still only breaking even.

But Big Sky had to work. I wasn't interested in living solely off the Stratton name, especially with my brother, Cole, taking over as CEO and managing the ranch. I loved Cole but I didn't want to work for him or work with our father for the rest of my life. I didn't want to be next in line to inherit something, with everyone just assuming I'd patiently wait my turn.

I wanted to forge my own path forward. And Big Sky was it.

I took a deep breath as I pushed open the door to my office, ready to check my emails and voicemails?—

“You were riding around the ranch,” Shane said, his tone a question but his words very much not. He was sitting in front of my desk, his back turned to me, as he typed something on his laptop. “I saw you pass by the window in here.”

“Was that supposed to be a question?”

“I thought it was obvious.” Shane finally looked over at me and quirked an eyebrow.

“See, this is the problem with super smart people. You just expect the rest of us to figure you out.” I playfully rolled my eyes as I settled down in my desk chair. “You’re lucky I’m willing to put in the time, Shane.”

“You still haven’t answered my question.”

“I was just showing Cameron Miller the ropes. The new volunteer ranch hand?” I replied. “He’s thinking about buying a farm. He’s staying with us to see if it makes sense for him.”

“Of course. Running a farm is a serious investment. He sounds like a wise investor.”

“Is that why you broke into my office? To ask me about giving that tour?”

“How can I break into your office when you gave me a key?”

“Now look who’s not answering the question.” I grinned. “Seriously, Shane. Why are you over here?”

“I was just... checking in.” Shane looked up from his laptop. “I wanted to make sure

things were going okay.”

“Wow, that bad, huh?” I laughed, even though it sounded strained. “You’re really worried about me, aren’t you?”

“I’m not worried about you. I’m worried about Big Sky,” he clarified. “I know how much this company means to you?—”

“It takes most companies two to three years to be profitable, Shane,” I interrupted him. “I know we’re not in the black just yet, but we’re right on track. You don’t need to come check on my company like it’s on its deathbed.”

“That’s not what I—” Shane held up a hand, stopping himself. “Shit. You’re right. Sorry. You don’t need this from me. I’m sure you’re getting it enough from your dad.”

“Always and never-ending. Joseph Stratton never sleeps.” Shane and I shared a knowing look. Shane was my cousin and he knew firsthand how cutthroat my father was, how impossible his standards were for all of us.

Shane’s glance was apologetic. “Forgive me?”

“Immediately. Also, forgotten.” I snapped my fingers. “Now, if you’ll excuse me I need to get back to work. You know, so we don’t end up on that deathbed. I don’t ever want to hear an ‘I told you so’ from you-know-who.”

“Let me know if you need anything,” Shane said, already standing. “Even if it’s about balancing the budget?—”

“I absolutely won’t! Thanks! Bye!” I waved towards my office door. “See ya!”

* * *

Cameron is on a horse.

I'd stood up from my desk to walk around my office a little bit, giving myself a break. I'd been looking out the window, just to take in the view, letting my mind wander along with the rest of me. But when I passed by it for a third time, I'd spotted Cameron, looking shaky as ever on top of a horse.

He'd been here for a full day by now, doing this or that around the ranch. I hadn't been keeping up with his whereabouts exactly, only noticing him in passing. I'd been focused on recruiting clients for Big Sky Rescue, working my charm to get people to sign up. The idea was that we'd work as a sort of insurance for riskier trips, a guaranteed rescue if someone got injured while hiking on a mountain or exploring risky terrain?—

Is he about to fall off that horse?

Instinct taking over, I rushed into action. By the time I reached him, he'd righted himself but still seemed unsure. I noticed the way he sat, lopsided in his saddle. My fingers were already pointing it out when I spoke to him. "Is something going on with your saddle?"

"It was my first time putting one on," he replied, with a slight smile. "I tried to follow what the other ranch hands were doing."

"Nobody helped you out?"

"It's not their job to teach me everything. Besides, I'm here to figure things out on my own."

“Sure, but no one wants you to get hurt.” I motioned for him to come down off the horse. “Here. Let me fix it for you.”

“You don’t need to?—”

“I’ll show you how to put it on the right way.” I motioned again. “Come on, Cam. I’m not going to ask you twice.”

“What are you going to do? Come up here and get me?” Cameron laughed.

But my expression remained stern and unchanging.

“Oh, wow. You really would. You would pull me off this horse.” Cameron laughed again. “You can’t just pull people off horses, Levi.”

“If it stops you from seriously injuring yourself, I’ll do whatever I need to do.”

Cameron’s laughter slowly shifted into silence, his skin blushing a deep red. He then did as he was told, carefully coming down off the horse. I immediately went to work, readjusting the saddle, showing him where and how he’d gone wrong the first time. He listened to my every word, intently, like he was trying to memorize it right then and there. Cameron’s attention on me made me feel like the most interesting person in the world, his green eyes so bright underneath the Paradise Valley sun.

“Okay, there you go. Try it now.” I gently patted the saddle.

Cameron nodded before hopping back on the horse. There was a noticeable difference as he sat on the saddle, his stance secure instead of wonky. When he realized he was safe and sound, he grinned down at me. “Yeehaw! This is so much better!”

“Did you just say yeehaw?”

“Uh, yeah, I did.” Cameron tipped his hat towards me. “Yee, and if I may humbly say so myself, haw.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the ridiculousness of the moment. Cameron was laughing right along with me, his gaze meeting mine. “Seriously, though, Levi. Thanks for this. I’ll keep it in mind for next time.”

“No problem, Cam. Anytime.”

I headed back to my office, ready to get back to Big Sky and making it the next big thing. But as I sank into my chair, and as I prepared a new list of potential clients to call, even as I looked through a budgeting spreadsheet that my accountant had sent over that morning...

There was one image that kept running through my head.

The look on Cameron’s face when he was finally confident on the horse. His bright, green eyes. His smile that rivaled the sunlight in the valley.

Yeehaw.

I couldn’t get it out of my mind if I’d tried.

3

CAMERON

“What the hell—who are you?!”

I woke up with a start, halfway jumping out of bed. A stranger stood in the middle of my bedroom, with a huge backpack at his side. He had glasses on, but they looked designer and non-prescription, like he was wearing them to be fashionable instead of out of need. There was also the fact that his Polo shirt and pants looked designer, too, his whole outfit out of step with the rest of Stratton Ranch.

“Wait. Are you a Stratton?” I asked, before he could get a word in.

“What makes you think I’m a Stratton?”

“I don’t know. I’ve only met two and they’re either extremely normal or extremely eccentric,” I replied. “And you seem...”

“Exceedingly normal, naturally,” he joked. “And no, I’m not a Stratton. Although, it does seem like I’ve landed in the wrong cabin.”

“Who are you, then?”

“Teddy. Teddy Finch. And you?”

“Cameron Miller.”

“Nice to meet you, Cameron Miller.” Teddy smiled. “I’m a wildlife photographer. Well, an aspiring wildlife photographer. I come out to Montana from time to time because it’s teeming with beautiful creatures. Seems like the perfect place to get the perfect shot. What brings you here?”

“I’m a volunteer ranch hand. Just trying to learn the ropes of everything to do with ranch life.”

“I love that!” Teddy beamed. “What an incredible way to experience Stratton Ranch.”

He then took a quick glance around my cabin. “Ah, damn. This is definitely a cabin for the ranch hands. I swear, I could get lost in my own house if I’m not careful enough.”

“I could probably help you get where you’re going? I have a general sense of where things are now. We could maybe walk down the main trail and?—”

“I have an even better idea.” Teddy’s eyes shone with something behind them, something mischievous.

“Uh, what did you have in mind?”

* * *

“You’ve driven with Levi before, haven’t you?” I asked, as Teddy zoomed around the property. Apparently I needed to start asking questions before jumping into the passenger seat of trucks driven by mysterious men, the idea of going too fast being a foreign concept out here.

“You know Levi?” Teddy’s tone was warm. “I love Levi! He’s the main reason I’m able to come out here so often.”

“Oh.” Something sank inside me. “Is he, like, your boyfriend? Or?”

“What? No.” Teddy laughed as he took a sharp turn. “He runs Big Sky Rescue! Whenever I get into a pickle or a jam, he comes and saves me. It happens more often than you’d think. Wildlife photography can lead you to some pretty remote places.”

“He runs an emergency rescue company?”

“The only one in the region,” he replied. “I keep telling him that one day it’s going to blow up and he’ll have so much business he’ll be sick of it. Which is good and bad. Good for him. Bad for everyone else. Fantastic for me, though.”

“How long have you and Levi—Wait.”

“Wait?”

“You’re about to leave the property, I think?—”

“Right! I meant to ask you. Do you want to go on a photography hike with me? I’m trying to spot some owls, and an extra set of eyes always helps.”

“I thought you wanted me to show you to your cabin?”

“Yeah, that too. But we can save that for when we get back.”

“Teddy, this is kidnapping. You understand that, right?”

Teddy playfully scoffed. “Kidnapping? Since when do kidnappers take you to see the coolest owls in the world?”

I was about to protest my kidnapping yet again but decided against it. Even though I

was supposed to be learning the ropes of cowboy-hood, there was something inside me that wanted to learn more about Levi, too. And even though Teddy seemed slightly out of his mind, if he was close to Levi, then in a weird way I wanted to be close to him.

“You know what, Teddy? Let’s go hunt some owls.”

Teddy shot me a horrified look.

“I meant, hunt to take pictures of them! Just taking pictures.” I tried my best to calm him down. “No one’s going to hurt an owl. I promise.”

* * *

“Aren’t most owls nocturnal?” I asked, as we climbed up a steep hill. “Are we going to camp out and then wait until nightfall?”

“Nope. We’re here for the day hunters,” he replied, somewhere behind me. “Better light for the photos that way.”

“How long have you been a wildlife photographer?”

“In spirit? All my life. In practice? Two years going on three.”

“What were you doing before this?”

“Have you heard of Bubble Cola?”

“I used to love those when I was a kid! All those fun flavors. You used to work for them?”

“Sort of. My granddad founded the company. The rest of us just live off the interest, whatever the investments bring in.”

“Teddy, are you telling me that you’re a billionaire?”

Teddy waved off the question with a smirk. “Don’t act so surprised! The Strattons bring in a pretty penny themselves.”

A few minutes later and we were fully up the hill. I sank down to the ground with a sigh, my legs burning from the climb. Teddy set up his camera right next to me, pulling all sorts of gadgets out of his backpack. Just as he took his place behind his camera, I felt a drop of water land right on my forehead.

Then another.

Then another.

I looked up at the sky just as it opened up in a full-on downpour. Teddy, panicked, began packing his camera up as fast as he could. When he was finished, we bolted down the hill. Of course, this turned out to be a huge mistake. What had been steady dirt beneath us climbing up the hill now turned to mud, causing both of us to slide down the hill instead. By the time we reached the bottom, we were covered in mud, little rocks, and debris, soaked through our clothes.

Still, the storm was unrelenting.

“We need to make it back to the car!” I shouted over the sound of it.

“In this weather? The trail has probably washed out!” Teddy shouted back. He pulled a radio out of his backpack, shouting at it, instead. “Levi! We need you! It’s me and Cameron Miller! Track us and find us! Please!”

* * *

I was shivering when Levi found us.

He offered us dry towels and dry clothes before he went to work securing the tow rope to Teddy's car. Levi was methodical about the rescue, with no hint of judgment, no playful glint in his eye. It reminded me so much of when he'd adjusted the saddle on that horse for me.

"If it stops you from seriously injuring yourself, I'll do whatever I need to do."

I tried and failed not to blush at the memory. It was embarrassing being so attracted to him when I had a feeling he'd never looked at me that way once. And why would he? I was just a visitor in Levi's world. He probably had people lining up every weekday and weekend to spend a night in his bed. I wouldn't even be around long enough to get off the waiting list.

"Are you okay?" Levi's question knocked me out of my headspace. I was sitting with him, upfront, as Teddy hung out in the backseat. He was wearing over-the-ear headphones, probably listening to a podcast about wildlife photography. He seemed like the type.

"I'm fine." I shrugged. "Just happy to be out of the rain."

"You should be more careful."

"To be fair, it's not like I signed up to go looking for owls," I replied. "Teddy volunteered me. By kidnapping me."

"Yeah, being careful includes not accepting rides from him." Levi smirked. "One time, he offered me a ride to a bar in town. Next thing I know, we're out at some

riverfront, with Teddy trying to take action shots of fish.”

“Is that even possible?”

“I have no idea.” Levi laughed. “But Teddy’s a good friend of mine at this point, so it was fine.”

“He told me you run a rescue company?”

“Big Sky Rescue, that’s right. You’re being rescued by us right now.”

“So, a cowboy by blood, but a superhero by choice?” I let out a wistful sigh. “What are you trying to get out of life? A Perfect Person Award?”

“Nope.” Levi’s expression turned serious. “I’m just... trying to be happy. Isn’t everybody?”

“You’re... not happy?” I was a little shocked by his response. “You just seem like you have the world at your feet.”

“That’s not what I—I’m just mixing up my words.” Levi shook his head. “Never mind. Forget I said anything.”

I opened my mouth to say something else but soon felt Teddy tapping me on the shoulder. A few seconds later he was putting his headphones over my head, his fingers pointing to the name of a podcast on his phone’s screen.

Wildlife Photography: A Look Inside the Jungle.

Knew it.

“Give this a listen! You’ll love it. Trust me.”

I nodded back at Teddy, as I let the podcast drone on in my ears, my mind completely on Levi instead.

* * *

He isn’t happy?

I sat outside my cabin staring up at the night sky. It was brilliant and beautiful, the stars perfectly twinkling and white. I tried to remember the last time I’d been able to see constellations so clearly, but I didn’t know if I ever could. As I tried to recall the various zodiac signs beyond the clouds, my mind quietly returned to Levi.

He isn’t happy.

Had I gotten him all wrong? I’d taken him for a charming, cunning cowboy type, a rogue who played by his own rules. But maybe there was something more to Levi, something he didn’t like to wear on his sleeve. Or maybe I was just reading too much into things, wanting the character of Levi to have more emotional weight.

It wouldn’t be the first time I’d projected something onto someone that wasn’t there.

“Oh.” Levi’s voice was suddenly a few feet away from me. “Hey. I wasn’t expecting anyone to be out here.”

“Like how you’re out here right now?” I quirked an eyebrow, looking him up and down. He was wearing his usual trendy black ensemble, with a pair of old cowboy boots. The only thing different about Levi was the expression he wore on his face. He looked like he’d been thinking about something, hard.

“I was just out for a walk.”

“In the middle of the night?”

“That’s the best time to do it.” He smiled lightly. “I usually don’t have any company.”

“Did you want me to go back inside?”

Levi shook his head. He then came and sat next to me, his hands hanging in his lap. “It’s kind of nice. Having the company. Especially since you’re not going to ask me a bunch of questions about my company or the family ranch?—”

“I mean, I could, but I won’t.” I chuckled. “I’m too busy trying to remember which constellation is which.”

“Want to know which one’s my favorite?” Levi pointed towards a set of four stars, some distance between each one. “There she is. Lady of the Heavens. Andromeda.”

“Andromeda?”

“Yep. This might sound a little... you know... out there...” Levi moved his hand back and forth. “But I always liked her story. Almost killed by a bunch of angry nymphs. Got saved by Perseus and they lived happily ever after. And when she died, Athena placed her in the sky as a constellation, to honor her. It’s like a final fuck you to those nymphs, you know? They counted her out, but she still had something to contribute, she was part of something epic.”

“Are you talking about Greek mythology right now?” I was almost stunned into silence. “Levi Stratton, who the hell are you?”

Levi laughed, doubling over as he did. “Why do you sound so surprised? Did you think I couldn’t read or something?”

“I don’t know. I just wasn’t expecting...” My words trailed off as I spoke. “Most people aren’t that... layered.”

“Sounds like you go around with assumptions about people in your head.” Levi hummed. “That’s always dangerous, Cam. You never know what you’ll miss assuming things like that.”

“You’re right. I shouldn’t have assumed anything. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Levi nodded in agreement. “You should also read up on Andromeda. It’s a pretty good story.”

Andromeda.

I stared over at Levi as he stared up at the stars.

They counted her out, but she was still part of something epic.

I wondered why Levi related to that, curious about the rest of his family. Was that how he felt? Like no one expected anything from him?

I shifted closer to Levi, as crickets filled the air around us. I wanted to be closer to him, even though I knew that wasn’t why I was here. There was just something drawing me closer to him, something that may have gone beyond character work for my big break.

I wondered if Levi felt it, too, a thin piece of string that seemed like it was wrapping around him and me, too small to be seen, too small to be felt. And yet, there was

something there...

Or maybe I was just projecting again.

Just then, Levi smiled over at me, taking a break from the stars.

And I smiled right back. Projection or not, his smile was one of the realest things I'd experienced in a long, long time.

4

LEVI

I'd been watching my email like a hawk all afternoon.

I was waiting to hear back from potential clients, even as I continued to reach out to new ones. Rescuing Teddy and Cameron gave me an idea for a new angle to pitch people on, reminding them of how choppy cell service can get in more rural areas, how quickly roads could disappear in flash floods and rainstorms. It didn't hurt that I'd responded in record time to Teddy's distress call, a fact that I knew he'd be willing to attest to when asked by future clientele.

I could do this.

I could make this work.

I was so focused on Big Sky that I didn't even notice a rapping on my office door. Not at first, anyway. A few more knocks, and I finally looked up from my computer. "Come in! It's unlocked."

Cameron stepped through the door, wearing a straw hat and jean overalls, with seemingly nothing underneath.

Fuck.

Had Cameron always looked like that? His skin practically glowing, his athletic build

shining through in his shirtless ensemble. He looked effortlessly handsome, like he never had to try that hard, ever. It didn't help that he had a huge grin on his face, his eyes locked right on mine?—

No.

I didn't need a distraction right now. Besides, Cameron needed to focus, too. If he was going to gain some real-world experience, he didn't need anything throwing him off course.

I broke off our eye contact as I forced myself to cough a few times, trying to dislodge thoughts about Cameron from my brain. “Did you need something, Cam?”

“First question. Does this look okay? Or is this offensive? As in, no one has ever actually worn an outfit like this?” he asked. “I was going for down to earth but also sexy farm guy?—”

“Yes.”

“Yes? Yes what?”

“Yes, of course, people have worn that outfit before.” I desperately tried to recover, even as heat rushed to my face. “Was there something else you needed?”

“Second question.” He smirked as he held up a hand. “Will you come somewhere with me?”

“Somewhere?”

“I... want to go line dancing at a bar in town,” he admitted. “But I didn't want to tell you straight out because I had a feeling you'd say no.”

“Are you asking for a ride there? Because I have no problem dropping you off, Cam.”

“What about staying with me? Just for the first dance.” Cameron moved closer to my desk. “Please? I won’t know anyone there and I’ve never done anything like it before?—”

“Why me?” I casually cut him off. “If you want to have a night out on the town, Teddy’s probably going to be way more fun?—”

“Yeah, but Teddy’s not you—” Cameron started and stopped. “I just thought—you know what? It’s fine. I can catch a ride with someone else.”

“Cam, wait?—”

“I get it. You’re busy.” Cameron smiled. “I guess I’ll just have to be extra social and find a dance partner the old-fashioned way.”

“Cam—”

“We can catch up later, yeah?” It was the last thing Cameron said to me before he disappeared into the hallway.

* * *

“Can I get a beer please? Whatever you’ve got.”

I took a deep breath as I looked around the bar. It wasn’t hard to find out which place was having line dancing night, especially since Swanky Jack’s had been plastering ads for it all over. The room was filled with twangy country music, the sound of guitars so loud I could barely hear myself think. I gratefully took my beer from the bartender, the cold of it pressed against my hand, centering me in the moment.

As I sipped my beer, I peered through the crowd. I was looking for Cameron and his overalls, a part of me imagining him already on his third dance partner, well on his way to becoming a line dancing pro. I couldn't imagine that it would've taken very long for Cameron to find people to dance with, everything about him seeming so fun and inviting?—

“Levi!” Cameron suddenly called out for me. He walked up to me, a huge grin on his face. “You came!”

“You asked me to, remember?” I smirked. “Sorry about being late. I had some things to finish up at the office?—”

“I'm just happy you could make it.” He beamed. He then reached for my drink, casually taking it into his grip. “But consider this a tax on being late.”

I watched, as Cameron downed the rest of my beer. When he was finished, he handed me the empty bottle.

Shocked, I stared over at him. “What am I supposed to do with an empty bottle, Cam?”

“Be on time next time, and you won't have to find out.”

Cameron whooped before he headed back towards the dance floor. I followed closely behind him, the lights overhead illuminating the floor below. Cameron got in the middle of the dance floor, falling into place in a perfect line...

But that was the only perfect thing about his dancing. His movements were confident but completely out of time with the music, his steps unfocused and fully confused. Still, the way he moved was captivating, even if it was wrong from head to toe. When one of his boots landed on mine, I caught him by the waist, gently guiding him back

into the right formation.

“I love this song! Don’t you?” Cameron excitedly clapped, still in motion, even as I held him tight. “I almost saw her in concert last year, but things got too hectic.”

“I thought you’d been here for a little bit before I got here.”

“I have!”

“But your line dancing—” I couldn’t help but let out a small laugh. “Have you been following along with the people up front, at all? They’re the ones you need to watch if you’re going to learn.”

“I’m just line dancing to the beat of my own guitar.”

“Yes, you certainly are.” I pulled Cameron closer to my side. “Here. Just follow me, okay?”

A new song came on, thankfully one that I was familiar with. I moved in time to the song, kicking up my heels at the beat, playfully dipping my hat along with the chorus. Cameron was next to me, copying my every move, even as he added his own flair. Soon enough, he was nailing the dance, his movements fluid, his steps right where they needed to be.

“So, you are pretty good at line dancing, then?”

“I’m pretty good at a lot of things when I have the right teacher,” Cameron replied, still grooving along to the song. “Plus, you’re way more fun to keep an eye on than anyone else in this bar.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?—”

“Freestyle!” a voice called out near the front of the dance floor. “Grab your partner, round and round! It’s time to dance to the classics!”

“Woohoo!” Cameron’s eyes twinkled with something behind them, as he reached for my hands. “Dance with me?”

“How many beers have you had tonight, Cam?” I grinned down at him. “I’ve never seen you like this before.”

“Only one.” He scoffed before letting out a chuckle. “One beer, that is. I maybe had a few shots at the bar before getting out here to dance. I told you, I’ve never done this before. I kept imagining everyone pointing and laughing at me.”

“Nobody would ever point and laugh at you, Cam.” I eyed his outfit again, before I could stop myself. “Nothing about you says laughingstock, that’s for sure.”

“Why are you so good at dancing, by the way?” Cameron pressed. “Or is that just something cowboys are supposed to be good at?”

“I’ve done my fair share of line dancing. It’s a good way to connect with people.”

“Connect with people...” Cameron swayed his hips from side to side. “That’s a euphemism, right? For hooking up with people?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Don’t give me that, Levi. You know what you look like.”

“Tell me. What do I look like?”

Cameron brought his hands up to either side of my face, green eyes meeting mine. “I

see you, Levi Stratton. That's all I'm going to say."

I smiled down at him, my hands resting on his waist. We were way too close to each other, but I didn't care, something about our current stance feeling like second nature to me. Cameron didn't seem to mind, either, his hands going from my face to my shoulders, the gap between us getting smaller and smaller.

When the song changed again, it was like coming out of a daze. Cameron and I separated, getting back into place for another round of line dancing. Later that night, as I drove us back to the ranch, I couldn't stop smiling from ear to ear. Cameron was passed out in the passenger seat, tired from the day on the ranch and the night at the bar, none of it being helped by the alcohol in his veins.

I see you, Levi Stratton.

Something about it warmed me in such an unexpected way. I didn't want to overthink it, especially since I knew that Cameron would be gone soon enough. Still, it was nice to have a connection like this, even if it was just a temporary friendship. Cameron didn't want anything from me, not money, not access, not a meeting with my dad.

He just wanted to hang out with me, to go line dancing with me.

I looked over at him, his eyes closed as we drove down the street.

"Who are you, Cameron Miller?" I asked, underneath my breath, curiosity filling my mind.

And can you really see me like you say you do?

5

CAMERON

Oh, my God.

I'm such an idiot.

Flashes from a few nights ago played in my mind, over and over again. I was dancing at the bar, my hands on Levi's face, Levi's shoulders. I was saying things to him that I shouldn't have said, letting my thoughts escape my mouth. He hadn't seemed too put off by any of it, but there was a good chance he was just being polite. Which meant that I needed to steer clear of Levi for a few more days, keeping my distance as best as I could.

If I wasn't careful, I was going to blow this whole thing. How was I supposed to study Levi for my big, breakout role, if he kept me at arm's length? And all because of things I'd said while a little too tipsy at the bar?

Rolling my eyes at my own behavior, I walked over to the bedroom mirror. I shifted my stance, trying my best to stand just like Levi, faking his swagger. I instantly deflated when I realized how hard it was going to be, capturing even a small part of his essence on screen. The more I learned about Levi, the more I realized that he was genuinely one-of-a-kind, and anything I did would be a pale imitation?—

“Shit. It's cold in here.” I frowned, my train of thought suddenly off track. I blew a breath and could see fog, a telltale sign that something was very wrong. If I was back

in Los Angeles, I would've called my assistant, who then would've called my handyman. Hell, I might've called the handyman directly if it was this cold . Since I wasn't back in L.A., it took me a second to run through my options.

Eventually, I decided to just call the main line for the ranch. I was sure they'd dealt with things like this before. Although, I was hoping that they'd actually have a fix for the freezing cold that didn't involve starting a fire and bundling myself in blankets. A second after dialing the main line, I brought my phone up to my ear, ready to explain my situation.

Knock.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

I hung up the phone and headed towards the front door to the cabin. When I pulled it open, Levi was standing there, with a toolbox in one hand and a thermos in the other. "Hey."

"Are you... psychic? Is that another thing to add to the list of things that you are?"

Levi smirked. "Not psychic. Just made sense to check on you. I figured something may have been knocked out of place during this cold snap we're having."

When he finished speaking, he held out his thermos. Confused, I took it into my hands.

"Wait. Is this thermos for me?"

"Absolutely not." He grinned. "But you look a little cold. It's coffee. A little cream. A little sugar. A good balance."

“Sounds perfect. Thank you.” I eagerly took a few sips of coffee, my body thankful for it. I then opened my door wider, encouraging him to come on in. Levi nodded, as he stepped through the doorway.

“Oh, wow.” He blew out a heavy breath. “This place is freezing. Your heater might be a goner.” He turned towards me, with a playful wink. “Or it would be, if you didn’t have me over to look at it.”

“You fix a lot of heaters?”

“Growing up on a ranch, you learn how to fix a lot of everything,” Levi replied, already walking over to where the heating unit was stored. He rolled up his sleeves before he knelt down in front of it and popped open his toolbox. I took a seat next to him, wanting to watch him in action.

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Nah. I’m good.” He was focused on the work in front of him. He continued like that, tinkering with the heating unit, quietly solving the problem. As we sat in silence, I felt something building inside me, something that I needed to let out before I couldn’t take it anymore.

“I’m sorry about the other night, at the bar.”

“What?”

“I think I may have said some things that I—” I hesitated for a moment, my nerves getting the better of me. “Just. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize for anything, Cam,” he replied. “It was a fun night. I mean, I had fun, at least.”

Another bout of silence followed before he murmured, “Did you have fun, Cam?”

“Yeah. I had fun.” I let out a sigh of relief. “Fuck. I’m so happy things aren’t weird between us.”

“Why would they be weird?”

“They wouldn’t. They aren’t.” I shook my head. “Right?”

“Right.” In that moment, Levi twisted some knob or another, the heat inside the cabin blasting back on in response. “And there we go. All better.”

He brought himself back up to his knees. “I’ll see you around. Let me know if you need anything?—”

“Can I thank you with a hot cocoa?” I suggested, out of nowhere. “It’s only fair since I drank your coffee.”

“Hot cocoa?”

“Do you not like hot cocoa?” I laughed. “Have I finally figured out your fatal flaw?”

“I love hot cocoa.” Levi grinned, holding his hand out towards mine, helping me off the floor. “And yeah, I’ll take a cup or two. Why not?”

* * *

“What? Is there something on my face?” Levi was sitting on the other end of the couch in the cabin’s main room. He’d put his hot cocoa into his thermos and had been taking small sips of it. I’d been nursing my drink, too, with my focus mostly on Levi.

“Sorry.” I admonished myself inwardly for staring too long at him. It was a problem I’d had practically since I met the guy. “I just... got a little lost in thought.”

“Can I ask you something, Cam?”

“Sure. Anything.”

“Why a farm?”

“What?”

“Why do you want to buy a farm? I don’t think I ever asked you about it.”

“I...” I stalled for time, my brain trying to come up with a good answer. “I guess it’s because... it’s something I’ve wanted for a long time. The kind of thing I used to dream about when I was a little kid.”

“Owning a farm?”

“Yep.” I nodded along with my words. “It’s always been my big dream. I’ve been chasing after it for a bit, had some success here and there. But now? It seems like it’s all finally coming together. I’m on track to get exactly what I want... I just have to not screw up at the finish line.”

“Sounds like you’re putting a lot of pressure on yourself.”

“Pressure makes diamonds.” I shrugged, with a small smile.

“But doesn’t that get exhausting? Pushing yourself like that, all the time?”

“Yeah, it does,” I admitted. “I don’t have a lot of time to sit and think about it. Not

much of a point to it, anyway. Crying and complaining about getting exactly what you always wanted? People like that should have tomatoes thrown at them. It should be legal to hit them with a tomato when they're walking down the street."

"Remind me to keep you away from tomatoes," Levi joked, a smile on his face now, too. "What do you think would happen? If you didn't get your farm?"

"I'd feel like the biggest failure in the world."

"But you wouldn't be. And you could always try again. Starting over wouldn't mean you lost out on anything. In fact, I think it's the bravest thing you could do."

"Is that how you feel about Big Sky? You'd be okay with your company burning to the ground?" I pressed. "Isn't it your dream?"

"Oh, I'd be inconsolable."

"Huh. Interesting. Well, you know, starting over wouldn't mean you lost out on anything..."

"Do as I say, Cam, not as I do," Levi replied, a laugh rumbling through his chest. "I know what holding on too tight to something can do to you."

"Is that why you don't have anyone?" I quietly asked. "No girlfriend? No boyfriend? Because you've been holding on too tight to Big Sky?"

"Probably so. I haven't really thought about it." He hummed. "I just kind of go wherever, do whatever, when it comes to relationship stuff."

"But no one gets to lock you down?" I shifted in my seat. "You've never wanted to play for keeps?"

“I never really saw keeps as being on the table.” His eyes met mine. “What about you? Do you have anyone waiting on you to get home from the ranch?”

“Nope.” My fingers tapped alongside my mug. “I think we might have the same problem, Levi. Holding on too tight. No room for anything else in our hands.”

Levi looked like he wanted to say something but decided against it. Instead, he rose from the couch. “I should head out. There might be a client who needs me, especially with this weather.”

“I’ll walk you out,” I said, already heading towards the cabin’s front door. Levi walked beside me, something lingering in the air between us. Once we reached the doorway, I placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Thanks for fixing my heater. And for hanging out with me.”

“Anytime, Cam.” Levi patted my hand, his palm warm. “I’ll see you around, okay?”

Once Levi was out the door, I sank back down on the couch. Even though I hadn’t told him who I really was, I suddenly felt so exposed. That whole conversation was like a wet towel to the face, realizing that Levi and I had so much in common. A part of me thought about just coming clean with him, letting him know that I was here for research. It didn’t feel right playing a role around Levi anymore, like I was lying to him instead of preparing for my movie.

Still, I knew that it was best to keep the truth to myself.

How would Levi even respond if I told him who I really was?

If I told him that I was studying his every move, so I could use it for my own benefit?

Something inside me crumbled as I accepted the reality of the situation.

It didn't matter how much Levi and I connected...

There'd always be a barrier between us.

I'd always just be playing a role.

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6

LEVI

My office phone had been ringing off the hook.

It had been an otherwise calm day on the ranch, with the sky mostly clear and the weather less cold than before. Most of the calls had been potential clients returning my initial contact, wanting me to explain how things worked at Big Sky, wondering if I could guarantee their safety. It was a lot of work talking people off an invisible ledge, but I knew it'd be worth it, in the end. Nothing mattered more than building a reliable client list—

Shit.

My phone was ringing again.

“Big Sky Rescue, how can I help you?—”

“Help! I need help!” A stranger cried on the other end of the line. “I was climbing, and I fell. I think—I think I broke my leg!”

“Where are you?”

“I’m out near the pass. There’s a river... the sky’s getting darker... I think it might rain soon...”

“Just hold on. I’m coming to get you.” I spared a look outside my office window, the sky still seeming calm. “I’m coming. Just stay where you are. Don’t try to move.”

I quickly hung up the phone, my mind already racing. If this stranger really did break their leg, I was going to need help moving them. I could move them myself, but it was always safer with two people, like most things when it came to an injured person rescue. I thought about calling Shane but remembered that he was way on the other side of town, dealing with business of his own. And Cole was hosting some out-of-town investors, their obnoxious luxury cars taking up space on the ranch.

“Sorry to just barge in. I just wanted to ask if you wanted to get some lunch or—” Cameron now stood in front of my desk, a light smile on his face. His expression swiftly changed once he saw the look in my eye. “Oh, shit. What’s wrong?”

“There’s a climber. They’re injured out by the pass. They think their leg is broken.”

“Shit. Okay.” Cameron’s eyes went wide. “What do we do? What do you need me to do?”

“You don’t need to do anything, Cam?—”

“Seriously, Levi? Let me help.” He scoffed. “What? You think I can’t handle it or something?”

“I just don’t want you getting hurt?—”

“If you tell me what to do and how to do it, then I won’t get hurt,” he shot back. “It’s like I told you. I’m pretty good at a lot of things when I have the right teacher.”

“Fine, yeah, okay.” I fought past my initial hesitation. I needed someone else for this rescue or else it could go sideways. Even though Cameron wasn’t trained, as long as

he could follow directions, it might be all right. “But you’re going to do exactly what I say. Do you understand?”

“Sir, yes, sir.” Cameron saluted me before he nodded towards the door. “Now, come on! Let’s go. We have someone who needs rescuing.”

* * *

The closer we got to the pass, the darker the sky became.

By the time we reached it, the sky had opened up completely, raindrops falling all around us. It didn’t help that the terrain was rough and rugged, with jagged rocks and unmarked paths in all directions. Cameron managed to keep up with me, though, even though this hike was meant for more advanced outdoor types. He followed my every step to the letter, only stopping when I stopped, only turning when I turned.

“Do you see him yet?” Cameron asked, as we hiked further into the pass.

“Not yet,” I replied, keeping an eye out for any sign of movement. “Keep an ear out for him too. It might be hard to hear in this weather, but we might get lucky?—”

“Help! Help!” The stranger’s cries reached us. “Please! I need help!”

I followed the sound of his voice, and soon enough, we came across him. He was leaning against the side of a rock, one of his legs stretched out, the other twisted at an unnatural angle. I motioned for Cameron to move onto the other side of him, standing near his upper thighs. I counted to three, and grabbed underneath the hiker, picking up one side of him as Cameron picked up the other. The hiker screamed out in pain, before settling down, the scream evaporating amongst the weather.

“We’ve got you, we’ve got you,” I tried to reassure him. “We just need to get you in

the truck, then we'll get you to the nearest hospital, okay?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come out here alone. I don't know what I was thinking..."

"You don't need to apologize for anything. You didn't do anything wrong," I continued. "Sometimes, nature just gets the best of us. It happens."

Cameron and I carried the hiker back to the truck, carefully placing him in the back. It was a quick drive to the hospital after that, even though it felt like forever. The hiker may have been safe and sound, but I was worried about internal injuries, things we weren't able to see. I knew that time was of the essence, but I also knew that it wouldn't help anything if I showed too much concern on my face. Instead, I went into ice mode, concentrating on the road ahead and not much else.

By the time we arrived at the hospital, there was already a stretcher waiting to transport the hiker. Thankfully, Cameron had called them on the way over. As I watched the emergency paramedics hastily roll the hiker into the building, I absentmindedly leaned against the truck. It wasn't until I felt something cold being placed in my hand that I snapped back to the world around me.

When I looked over, I saw Cameron, with a light smile. "I got you a water out of the vending machine."

"Thanks." I gripped onto the water bottle, now noticing that the air was dry around us. "It stopped raining."

"Only a few minutes ago." Cameron sighed. "Shit. That was kind of scary, huh? Do you think he's going to be okay?"

"You can't internalize it."

“What?”

“We did our part. Making sure he got here safe,” I replied. “But if you think too much about it, you can drive yourself crazy.”

“Is that why you turned into a robot? During the ride over?”

“It’s just part of the job.” I shrugged. “If I want to help people, I can’t really dwell on... helping people.”

“That’s probably why you were so amazing at it.” He chuckled, a little under his breath. “No hesitation. Just jumping right in, doing what you needed to do, trying to comfort him about it.” Cameron paused for a moment, his expression shifting. “It must be nice, doing something that matters, something that really makes a difference.”

“You should know what that’s like, then.” I offered him a warm smile. “You made a big difference today, Cam. Thanks for helping me with everything.”

“Whenever you need me, I’ll be there.” Cameron beamed, before he gently knocked his water bottle against mine in a toast. “Cheers.”

We stood there in silence as we finished our waters. We watched the hospital doors, as if we were waiting on something or someone to come out, an unspoken, shared nervousness between us.

A bond only understood by two.

* * *

I couldn’t sleep that night.

And I couldn't figure out why. This wasn't my first time rescuing someone who'd sustained injuries and had to go to the hospital. Hell, I'd even rescued someone before who'd been unconscious by the time I got there, requiring a quick pulse check and CPR. And yet, I'd been pacing up and down my cabin, getting up for something to drink, mindlessly rearranging things on the couch.

I was absolutely restless. I settled down at the edge of my bed, desperately willing sleep to come, when my thoughts turned back towards Cameron. He'd been the perfect partner for the rescue mission, taking instructions to heart, doing what was required of him without throwing a fit about it. It was like we were able to communicate without communicating, speaking as much in looks and body language as we did with words. His energy matched mine perfectly, and I could easily imagine doing hundreds of rescues with him, just like that, in flawless sync?—

But there wouldn't be hundreds of rescues with Cameron.

I fell back against my mattress and stared up at my ceiling.

It didn't matter how natural things felt with Cameron, how easy it was with him. He was just passing through, a temporary feature not a permanent installation. And despite the fact that the more time we spent together, the more it seemed like he'd always belonged on the ranch, I knew it didn't matter.

Fuck.

Why was I thinking about Cameron, anyway?

Maybe because I hadn't bothered letting anyone into my world like that in a very long time.

Maybe because I hadn't bothered trusting anyone like that in a very long time, either.

I let out a deep sigh as I finally closed my eyes.

I needed to go to sleep. And I needed to stop thinking about Cameron Miller...

Even though he'd probably be running through my mind all night.

CAMERON

“...Hello?” I groggily answered my phone. I was still half asleep, sunlight creeping in through my cabin window. “Who is this?”

I’d barely gotten enough sleep last night, tossing and turning the whole time. I just kept thinking about Levi, how it felt working alongside him, how in sync we were. It seemed like Levi and I were in sync about a lot of things, in a lot of ways. There was an understanding between us that I wasn’t sure I’d ever felt before, with anyone, a kind of unspoken bond that reverberated in the air around us.

And yet, I had no idea if Levi even felt the same thing. Did he feel like we were connected like that? Or did he see me the same way he saw Teddy, as just another tourist on the ranch, someone passing through who he liked well enough?

Did I mean anything to him, at all?

“There he is! There’s my star.” My manager was on the other end of the line. “How have you been, kid? How’s life in the middle of nowhere treating you?”

“Is this a new number or something?” I pressed. “Why didn’t your name pop up on my caller ID?”

“Because I knew if I called you from my work phone, you wouldn’t have answered.” He laughed. “I know how you get when you’re researching for a role. Talking to your

manager, oh, how inauthentic! Cowboys don't have managers, right? Well, cowboys don't have potential brand deals coming down the pipeline, either?—"

"Brand deals?"

"Get this. Boot Scoot wants to make you the official face of their newest line of boots for men! They're the ones with all the cow prints and tassels. Usually, not your style, but for the right price, I think you'll like what they have to offer. I'm also getting calls from a popstar's creative directing team. She's an A lister and she wants you to be the romantic lead in her next music video. It's gonna be a western. Doesn't that sound exciting? I can't tell you who until we sign the paperwork?—"

"But we haven't even shot the movie yet. What if I show up to set and Antonio Cruz hates what I'm doing with the character? What if I'm not his perfect cowboy?"

"Oh, he's not going to replace you, if that's what you're worried about, kid. Your contract is ironclad. I should know because I wrote it." He laughed again. "Besides, haven't you been online, at all? Everyone loves you for this role. They're saying it's pitch perfect casting. There are already people making memes about elbowing to the front of the movie theater just to get a better look at your face up on the screen."

"Can we talk about this later?" Something inside me sank. "I don't know if I'm in the right headspace for discussing this right now."

"Sure, sure. We can figure all this out when you get back," he replied. "But do you think it'd be possible for you to upload a few photos of your process on social media? Maybe a picture of you riding a horse. Hanging out with a cow. The studio thinks it'd be great if people can get a little taste of you in the cowboy aesthetic?—"

"Right. I'll call you back in a few days maybe?—"

“Don’t lie. We both know I’ll be the one calling you back,” he joked. “And we’ll chat soon. Love ya, and don’t forget, nobody does this shit like you do, Cameron. So, don’t overthink it, just think it, and it’ll get done.”

* * *

“Let me guess. A city boy.”

I was sitting near the back of Canyon Creek Diner, staring at the menu but not really reading it. The conversation with my manager had only stressed me out more than I already was, my head still spinning with thoughts about Levi. I just needed to get away from the ranch for a while, try to collect my thoughts, try to calm down. I wasn’t ready to be the face of cowboy culture, let alone cowboy anything , not if it meant Levi finding out that I was just here doing research for a part.

Not if it meant Levi finding out that I’d been taking notes on him like a goddamn lab project.

I just wasn’t ready for him to find out the truth.

“Hello? Earth to city boy?” The woman stared down at me with a hand on her hip. “I don’t have all day to wait around on you, city boy. This isn’t like wherever you’re from. You don’t just get to waste my time.”

“Sorry.” I offered her an apologetic look. “My head feels like it’s in a million different places lately.”

“It’s all right, city boy.” She smiled. “I just wanted to make sure you understood the rules. I’m Jolene. I own the place. Which means that I get to make the rules. Do you understand?”

“Completely.” I nodded. “I’m Cameron. I’m staying at Stratton Ranch. Trying to figure out if I want to run my own farm someday or?—”

“You look awfully familiar, Cameron.”

“I do?” Nerves shot right through me, my heart threatening to beat out of my chest.

Jolene hummed before she snapped her fingers. “I’ve got it. You look just like Gareth! From the Honeydew franchise. I’ve never really cared for any of that stuff, but my niece is obsessed with it. Oh, if she saw you, she’d be trying to climb you like a tree. But I bet you get that comparison all the time, don’t you?”

“A few times, here and there. But I don’t know. I don’t really see the resemblance.”

“Really? You don’t see the resemblance? You might need to get your eyes checked, sweetheart, because you’re practically twins.” Jolene chuckled as she went on. “Anyway, let me get you started with some coffee. You look exhausted. But when I get back, you better have your mind made up about some food.”

“Will do. Thanks.”

Jolene playfully winked at me as she left the table, like she knew something that she wasn’t letting on about.

Shit.

Was that her way of letting me know that she recognized me? Was she trying to give me the opportunity to either lean into it or lean away from it? If so, it was an extremely considerate move, but still very concerning. I wasn’t going to last much longer in Paradise Valley if Jolene started telling people that Cameron Clarke was in town, complete with where I’d be staying for the duration of my trip.

The paparazzi would love to get pictures of me out here, playing up the cowboy role.

And the studio would love it too.

The rest of my breakfast was strained and guarded, scarfing down my food and coffee like I was on the run. I barely tasted any of it, my mind too focused on how to hide in plain sight, trying to figure out how to keep up appearances until the last possible moment. I was starting to feel like I was standing in the middle of an iced over lake, cracks growing all around me, my legs suddenly feeling heavier than they'd ever been.

Except when I broke through the ice, I wouldn't just be slipping underneath the water by myself.

I might be taking Levi with me; my lies catching up with the both of us.

* * *

"You must be Cameron." There was a man sitting in Levi's office, his attention on the laptop in front of him. He turned to greet me fully, with his hand outstretched. "I'm Shane. Levi's cousin."

I'd come over to Big Sky Rescue after my stressful breakfast, hoping that spending some time with Levi would calm me down. I knew that it wasn't fair to use him as a source of comfort when I wasn't being honest with him, but I couldn't help it. Levi was the only person at Stratton Ranch who seemed to get me, intrinsically. Besides, even if we could never be anything other than friends, a friend was exactly what I needed right now.

I took his hand, shaking it politely. "I don't know if there's a nice way to say this, but would you say you're more of a normal Stratton or an, uh, eccentric Stratton?"

“So, you’ve met Virgil.” Shane smirked. “He’s an acquired taste. It just takes some time.”

“Which means you’re a normal Stratton.” I let out a playful sigh of relief. “Phew.”

“I can see why Levi likes you.” Shane turned back towards his computer. “He told me about how you assisted him with that hiker. Sounds like it was harrowing.”

“It was.” I shrugged. “But if it wasn’t us, then who, right? Someone had to save him.”

“You’re awful helpful for a guest.”

“Should I not be?”

“I’m just not used to people from the city being so willing to get their hands dirty, maybe even bloody,” he replied. “I think there might be something else to you, Cameron Miller.”

“Something else like what?” My body felt like it was on fire. I’d come here so someone could help me calm down, not make things even worse.

“I don’t know. Something.” Shane typed something on his screen. “I think there’s something you want, but you’re not saying what it is. Not yet.”

“Well, you know I’m here to see what it’s like running a ranch?—”

“There’s something else,” he interrupted. “But I also think you seem like an honest guy. I think you’ll tell us what it is you really want. Eventually.”

“Shane? What are you doing here—Cam?” Levi suddenly stepped into his office, looking between us. “Were you two having a meeting in here or something?”

“You were the one who invited me here. Remember?” Shane quirked an eyebrow. “You said you needed help with inventory.”

“Oh, right. That was like weeks ago.” Levi blew out a breath. “Well, let’s get on it, then. Cam? Do you mind helping out?”

* * *

I was staring over at Shane, as we stood behind the office.

We were looking through first aid kits, portable water heaters, tents, tactical knives, compasses, flashlights, duct tape, fire starters, space blankets, tarps, granola bars, and a bunch of other stuff that I didn’t recognize by looking at it. The goal was to make sure everything was still up to snuff, since it would’ve been a disaster on top of a disaster if Levi needed to make an emergency shelter and the tent he grabbed on the way out had holes in it.

I was finding it harder and harder to pretend like everything was okay, my looks over at Shane getting more nervous each time. Did he already know who I was? Was he like Jolene, trying to give me the opportunity to confess? Or was Shane just unnervingly wise, the kind of person who didn’t often speak, but when they did, it was like a lightning strike?—

“Are you okay?” Levi asked, now standing beside me. “You seem a little shaken up.”

“I’m fine,” I lied. “I’m good.”

“Did you not sleep well last night?”

“I slept fine,” I lied again. “Sorry if I seem off. Maybe I had too much for breakfast. I was at Canyon Creek Diner and ordered the Canyon Special?—”

“Uh, yeah. That’ll do it.” Levi laughed. “That comes with like a huge stack of pancakes.”

“They were delicious, though.” Another lie, since I’d barely tasted my breakfast.

“In that case, since you’re so full from breakfast,” he continued. “Would you want to get something for dinner? We could go into town and?—”

“I need to pee!” I said it way too loud. “I’ll be right back.”

“Oh. Uh...” Levi watched as I practically sprinted away from him towards the nearest bathroom. When I got there, I made sure to stay for at least five minutes, wanting to make it seem like I’d actually used the facilities. The entirety of that five minutes was instead spent freaking out, wondering if Shane would tell Levi about who I really was, wondering if Levi’s dinner invitation would be rescinded as soon as I got back.

Fuck.

I can’t be like this.

I need to get it together.

Now.

I did some deep breathing, forcing down gulp after gulp of air. When I’d managed to calm myself down to a manageable level of anxiety, I headed back towards Big Sky Rescue. But when I got a few feet away from Levi and Shane, I could see them talking in a hushed tone. My curiosity getting the better of me, I stayed back, leaning against a nearby structure. I was close enough to hear their conversation but not be seen, even if I had to strain to listen.

“...It feels like I’m pushing against a tide that no one else sees,” Levi started. “All this work I’m doing, all of this client chasing. And for what?”

“To break even,” Shane replied. “To maybe even be profitable, down the line.”

“It’s just so hard keeping it all together sometimes.”

“But this is what you want, Levi. It’s your dream.” Shane moved closer to him. “I know I haven’t always been the best at supporting you, but I know how much this place means to you. You can’t just give up on it.”

“Would anyone even notice if I did?” Levi let out a pained laugh. “Dad would be annoyed that I wasted so much time on it. He’d be secretly happy I let it go, though.”

“Which is why you’re not letting it go.” Shane shook his head. “Joseph Stratton doesn’t get to be happy. Not when it comes to this.”

“It’d just be so much easier.” Levi’s sigh came out wounded. “I’m just so tired of it all, Shane.”

I sank down against the wall I’d been leaning on, not stopping until I hit the floor. I was no longer able to hear their conversation, but that didn’t stop the hurt unfurling in the center of my chest. I was on the verge of tears, thinking back on what Levi had said, the thought of him giving up on his dream feeling like a knife to my own heart.

I wanted to pull him into my arms and never let him go. I wanted to rush across the ranch and kiss him like he was mine, wanting him to feel that way, too, like even if everything else crumbled he could always come home to me?—

Shit.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

What was I thinking? Levi and I weren't together .

So, why did it feel like we were so intertwined? Why was Levi able to make me feel things I hadn't felt in years? Why did I care so much about protecting him from the truth?

I needed to put some distance between us. For my sake and for his. At least, that way, if Levi ever found out who I really was, he wouldn't be so upset with me, because it wasn't like I'd been hanging around him lately. I'd be a minor annoyance instead of a major betrayal, the difference between him stepping on a pointy pebble and someone stabbing him in the back.

I just needed to be by myself for a while.

It was the only way to protect us both from more pain.

8

LEVI

I hadn't spoken more than a few words to Cameron over the last three days.

I'd spotted him around the ranch, but whenever I approached, he suddenly needed to be somewhere else. I thought maybe I'd offended him somehow by asking him to get dinner with me, but he'd told me that he was just overbooked. Almost by magic, I'd gotten him to agree to at least attend Amber's annual fundraiser on the ranch, even if he wouldn't spend time alone with me. My sister's community fundraiser was always for a good cause, and it was a chance for Cameron to get to know more of the locals, to see the kind of people who supported ranch life.

As I stepped inside the designated barn, I quickly searched for him in the crowd. When I didn't immediately spot him, I looked around the venue, taking in the string lights that shone above us, the mason jars filled with fresh flowers on each table, the twinkling glitter that stained each glass. There was also the smell of burning wood, a comforting, warm scent, like someone was making a fire at a campsite.

"You made it!" Amber appeared in front of me, nearly squealing. "Do you like it? Tell me you love it."

"It looks incredible in here, Amber," I replied. "But doesn't it always? You're really good at this stuff."

"I know." She beamed. "But the goal is to make it a little better every year. If I don't

outdo myself, what's the point?"

"To raise money for a local cause?"

"Ha ha. Very funny, Levi." She playfully rolled her eyes. "Oh, that reminds me. You didn't have a plus one or anything for this, did you? I know you usually roll single, but just wanted to check in."

"Sounds like you're trying to figure out if I'm seeing anyone, Amber."

"What? Me?" She pretended to be insulted. "I would never!"

"Drop the act." I chuckled as I shook my head. "If I was seeing anyone, you're on my shortlist of people to tell."

"How long is the shortlist? Am I at the very top of it?"

"Amber."

"I'm legally allowed to care about my brother's life!"

"Thank you for caring. Don't you have other guests to mingle with?"

"You're right. Off to mingle, I go." She grinned. "But I'll be circling back for you, Levi. Don't think you're off the hook for one moment."

"I wouldn't dream of it," I replied, my eyes once again searching through the crowd?—

And there he was.

Cameron was wearing black overalls, with his shoulder straps covering a white t-shirt. His white tennis shoes matched his shirt underneath, but his toned arms were the center of attention, his build standing out from the crowd. He was laughing about something or another, surrounded by a small group of people, each of them now laughing right along with him.

I started to walk over to him but hesitated at the first step.

If he hadn't been interested in talking to me for the last few days, what would've changed tonight?

Instead, I chose to have a seat at my assigned table, nursing my drink as I watched him work the room. He effortlessly moved from group to group, going from ranch hands, to farmers, to some of Amber's friends, to locals we'd known for years. Each group ended up laughing with him, smiling with him, enjoying their time together. I was honestly impressed with the way he handled himself, without an ounce of shyness in the situation, like he'd done it a million times before.

But soon, being impressed by him shifted into something else.

There was a man I didn't recognize, maybe a farmer from out of town, someone Amber had invited because of their deep wallet. He walked up to Cameron as he was going between groups, getting him alone for a minute or two. While chatting with Cameron, the stranger placed a hand on the small of Cameron's back, pulling him in closer as they spoke.

And in that moment, all I could see was red.

It was such a casual movement, way too familiar, way too comfortable.

And before I realized it, I'd crossed the barn. I stood in front of Cameron, with the

stranger long gone, somewhere on the other side of the fundraiser.

“Can you come with me?” I started. “I want you to come with me, Cam.”

“Come with you where?” he replied. “And maybe. Later. When the fundraiser is done. I’m a pretty good schmoozer at these things and I like helping to raise money for?—”

“Please, Cam. Come with me. Right now?” There was urgency lining my tone, even though I couldn’t explain why. “I just... I need you.”

“All right. Fine,” he acquiesced. “But only for a few minutes.”

* * *

“Levi, where are we going?”

I had no idea. I’d been walking with no destination in mind, but I knew that I wanted to get far away from the fundraiser, far away from that stranger touching Cameron like Cameron belonged to him . When we reached one of the further barns on the property, I stopped and turned around, Cameron’s eyes meeting mine.

“Levi? What’s going on with you?”

“I...” I started and stopped, my heart hammering in my chest. “Cam, I don’t want...”

“You don’t want what?”

“I like how much you dazzle everyone, everywhere you go,” I started again. “I like how much people like you, how you try and get along with everyone. But I... I don’t like it when... the guy that touched the small of your back...”

“Oh? That guy?” Cameron waved off my concern. “I didn’t know that guy. He was definitely a little too handsy, but he mentioned writing a huge check and dedicating it to me, so whatever.” Cameron put a hand over his chest. “Wait. Did you drag me out of there because you were worried about me? Because that’s really sweet, Levi?—”

“I wasn’t worried about you.”

“Oh.” Cameron’s face fell.

“I mean, I know you can handle yourself, Cam. So, I wasn’t worried. I think I was... jealous.”

“Jealous? Why would you be jealous—” I cut off Cameron’s question with a kiss, pressing him back against the side of the barn. The kiss was deep, probably deeper than it should’ve been, but I was all out of words. I let my mouth do the rest of my talking, as my hands rested on either side of Cameron’s waist, holding him in place as my tongue explored his.

“Levi, wait—” Cameron gently pressed against my chest, breaking off our kiss.

“You don’t want to?” I murmured. “You don’t want me?”

“Of course, I want you, Levi,” Cameron replied, his voice low. “I think I’ve wanted you from the very first moment I saw you.”

“Good.” It was the last thing I said before kissing him again, my tongue excitedly parting his lips. Cameron relaxed against the kiss this time, his body melting against my own. He groaned when I started to grind into him, my hips meeting his, forceful and often. I could feel his cock getting harder in his pants with each movement, his groans getting more desperate by the second.

“Levi...” Cameron moaned my name. “Touch me. Please.”

I shifted slightly, until I was able to slide a hand between us, not stopping until my palm was right over his clothed shaft. I started running my hand up and down the length of him through the fabric, teasing his throbbing cock. Cameron shivered and gasped against our kiss, his hands flying up to either side of my face, keeping me close to him. When he began to whimper, his shaft feeling hard as a rock, I suddenly moved my hand away from him.

“No! What? Why?” Cameron whined. “Levi...”

“Take off your clothes,” I casually instructed. “I want you naked for me.”

Cameron pouted for a few seconds before doing as he was told. He slid his straps off his shoulders as he shifted his overalls towards the ground. He then lifted his white T-shirt over his head before pulling down his boxers and stepping out of them. When he was finished, he looked back at me, an expression on his face like he was trying to read my mind.

“How are you this perfect?” I eyed him up and down, shamelessly taking in every bit of him. “Fuck, Cam.”

“Is it your turn?” Cameron asked, his skin flushing red. “I don’t want to be the only person out here naked right now.”

“Is that something you want, Cam? You want to see me naked?”

“Yes,” he admitted, his cheeks burning bright. “I want to see you naked.”

“Then, your wish is my command.” I pulled off my black shirt before pulling down my dark jeans. A few moments later and I’d pulled my boxers off, too, both of us

now standing naked in front of one another.

Cameron's eyes were wide as he looked over at me, a look of concern written all over his face.

"What's on your mind, Cam?"

"You're... big," he said, his voice low. "I've never been with... I don't know if..."

"You can take me, baby," I replied, closing the distance between us. "I promise. I'll be able to fit. But you don't need to worry about that right now. Just let me take care of you, okay?" I brought a hand down between us, my palm wrapping around his cock. I began pumping my fist up and down his shaft, my mouth leaving kisses all along his neck. Cameron moaned right next to my ear, his fingertips pressed into my back.

"Fuck, you sound so perfect when you make those noises for me, baby." I continued pumping his cock, loving the way he felt in my hands. "Will you make more sounds like that for me?"

Cameron quickly obliged, his moans getting louder as precome leaked out of his tip and onto the top of my thigh. "Levi... Levi... I'm going to... I can't..."

"I want you to come for me, baby," I cooed. "I want you to give everything to me."

"Levi..." Cameron whimpered as his body started to shudder. Soon enough, there were white trails of his come spurting out of his cock, landing right on my naked skin. He rested his head against the crook of my neck as he came for me, holding me close as he came completely undone. When he caught his breath, I gently shifted his head away from my neck, wanting to look into his eyes.

“You’re so fucking beautiful. Do you know that?” I said, my gaze locked on his.

He giggled, and it was the cutest fucking sound. “Can I try something? For science.”

“What do you want to try—Cam!” I barely had enough time to respond to him before Cameron dropped to his knees. My cock was in his mouth in what felt like record time, his head already bobbing up and down my shaft.

“Fuck, Cam...” It was my turn to groan as I watched him work. His movements were needy, his tongue lapping at the head of my cock, his lips rapidly taking more of me in, inch by inch. His eyes never left mine, either, watching me as I watched him, the connection between us feeling tangible, inevitable.

“Cam... if you keep... fuck...” I groaned again, into the night, my cock getting stiffer and stiffer. Just then, my hips started to move against him, my shaft steadily pumping in and out of Cameron’s mouth, as if I were fucking him deep. Cameron whimpered at the motion but didn’t ask me to stop or move away, taking all of me in stride.

“Mine... you’re mine, Cam...” I said, between moans, my hips still bucking against his mouth. “No one else gets to touch you. No one else gets to have you. Ever. Understood?”

Cameron nodded in understanding, his response so fast and so certain.

And that was all it took. I was coming inside his mouth, my come exploding right down his throat. Cameron kept his lips wrapped tightly around my cock, swallowing every drop of my come until there was no evidence left that I’d even finished. When he was done draining me, he got back up to his feet, his arms sweetly wrapping around me.

“After the fundraiser is over, do we need to stop somewhere in town and pick up

some condoms? And are you territorial about which side of the bed you're usually on? I guess I don't have to stay the night if you have a busy morning tomorrow but?—"

"No."

"No what? You don't have a busy morning?"

"I can't do this. I'm sorry."

"Levi... what are you saying right now?" Cameron pulled away from me, looking so hurt. "You just said that I was all yours. You just called me baby ?—"

"I have to go. You should get back." I was already putting on my clothes. "I'll talk to you tomorrow, yeah?"

"You're not even coming back to the fundraiser with me?" Cameron was on the verge of tears. "What was this? Were you just bored and feeling horny?"

"Cam—"

"It's Cameron," he corrected me as he pulled on his clothes. "And I guess I got you all wrong, huh? I thought you were better than this, but I should've known. You already told me no one gets to have you. Not really."

"Cam, please?—"

"Whatever. I'll see you around." It was the last thing Cameron said to me before he stomped off in the opposite direction, his voice cracking on every word.

* * *

I'd fucked up.

Big time.

I'd fucked up so badly that I'd barely been able to sleep. The way Cameron had looked at me like I'd betrayed him, like I'd hurt him to his core. I couldn't find the right words last night to tell him that I was just scared, that I'd never felt like keeping someone before, that wanting him to be mine and only mine was terrifying. I wanted Cameron in a way that felt permanent, like I never wanted him to go.

But what would that mean for me? What would that mean for Big Sky Rescue?

He was right about me not being able to hold anything else as long as I was holding onto Big Sky. I just felt like if I didn't put my all into it, there was no chance of it succeeding. It'd been my dream for so long, even if it exhausted me, I just wanted to make it come true. And when Cameron went back home, how was that going to work? Was I supposed to take time away from my company to visit him? Would he be willing to come back to Montana to visit me?

I wanted him, desperately, but I didn't want to fuck things up for either of us.

And yet, I felt like not even trying was the worst possible option. I didn't even know if he could ever forgive me after what I'd done, pushing him away like that. He was all I wanted, and there was a good chance he'd never even talk to me again.

Fuck.

I needed to tell him how I felt. I needed him to understand.

And I needed him to be mine .

I took a quick trip into town, just long enough to buy the biggest bouquet the local flower shop had for sale. The shop girl had referred to the chosen bouquet as a “marriage saver” and I’d learned that it was possible to spend thousands of dollars on flowers. Still, any price would’ve been worth it, if it meant putting a smile on Cameron’s face after being the asshole who’d made him cry.

I was walking up to Cameron’s cabin, bouquet in hand, speech mentally prepared. But just when I was about to knock on his door, my phone vibrated with a text. I hastily checked the message, just wanting to make sure it wasn’t any sort of emergency?—

“What the hell?”

It was a message from Teddy, with a link to some article. The attached photo was of Cameron, which made me click on it instinctively.

YEEHAW! RISING STAR CAMERON CLARKE ATTENDS COWBOY FUNDRAISER

“Who the hell is Cameron Clarke?” I dropped the bouquet in my hands as I stared at the cabin door of a complete and total stranger, a man I’d been certain about only seconds before.

CAMERON

“Levi?” I stepped outside of my cabin that morning, finding flowers on my doorstep.

They were in a huge bouquet, but there wasn’t a letter or note with them. Confused, I brought the bouquet inside, wondering if they were maybe from Amber instead of Levi, wanting to thank me for helping her raise money last night. I set the flowers down in the living room before I flopped down on the couch.

Last night was truly awful.

Was there anything more embarrassing than literally throwing my arms around a man and assuming we felt the same about each other? I cringed away from the memory, how hopeful I had been, how badly I wanted Levi to take me back to his cabin. I saw it all as some kind of happily ever after even though I knew I was still lying to him about who I was. But if our connection was real, wasn’t that part forgivable?

He could forgive me, couldn’t he?

Bzz.

Bzz. Bzz. Bzz.

I reached for my phone, still lost in thought. “Hello?”

“You should’ve told me you were planning this!” My manager’s tone was happy and light. “This is great press for the movie and for you personally! Everyone loves a star with a heart of gold.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, please. This fundraiser headline. Don’t pretend like you didn’t know!” He laughed. “I couldn’t have done a better job myself. I’m also loving the overalls look. Very chic. I feel like if we play our cards right, you could get one of those social media sponsorships for whatever brand that is in the photos?—”

“Oh, my God.” My heart sank as I looked up my name. An article popped up as the first result, with a photo from the fundraiser. I placed my manager on speaker so I could still hear him, even though he now sounded like he was a million miles away. “No, no, no. No one was supposed to—how did these pictures even get out?”

“Someone tagged you on social media. I think they meant it as a joke, like, doesn’t this guy look so much like Cameron Clarke? But then an eagle-eyed pop culture journalist realized that it wasn’t a look-a-like,” he explained. “But you don’t need me to tell you all this, Mr. Mastermind.”

“This is bad. This is very, very bad.” I was spiraling in real time. “Is there a way we can bury this?—”

“Why would we want to bury it? Everyone loves that you’re in Montana right now! And that you’re helping the local community. This is literal gold, Cameron. We’re going to be printing money over here?—”

“I have to go.”

“Wait, can we circle back about that music video real quick? That popstar is dying to

work with you now and even agreed to increase the daily rate?—”

“I have to go!” I quickly hung up the phone, all the air in the room disappearing. I sank back down on the couch, my hands pressed against my knees. I had no idea what I was going to do, where I was going to go first. Was I supposed to just pack my bags and never come back? Would anyone here trust me anymore?

Would Levi trust me anymore?

Levi.

I forced myself to get up from the couch and headed for my front door. I needed to talk to Levi before he saw the article, assuming he still hadn’t seen it. It was going to be bad, but it was going to be even worse if the truth didn’t come from me. And even though I grew more anxious with every step, I eventually made it outside, my head on a swivel as I searched for any sign of Levi.

* * *

I hadn’t been able to find Levi anywhere, almost like he was hiding from me.

Is he hiding from me?

I checked various barns, Big Sky Rescue, Levi’s cabin. I was now walking up to the Stratton’s main cabin, which seemed to be reserved for family only. When I got there, I noticed Virgil sitting out on the front porch, as if he’d been waiting for something. When he spotted me, his face broke out in a wide grin. “There you are, trouble.”

“I can’t do this today, Virgil, I need?—”

“You’ve caused quite the commotion, haven’t you? I knew you would. Although, I

didn't think Levi would be so affected by you."

"Affected... by me?"

"Yes, you've cast a spell." Virgil nodded. "But are you a good witch? Or a bad witch?"

"I think, technically, I'd be a wizard..."

"Virgil, who are you talking to—Oh." Jolene stopped herself, mid-sentence, as her eyes met mine. "Well, if it isn't the rising superstar himself."

"Hey, Jolene." I waved awkwardly. "How have you been?"

"Virgil was right about you. Which pains me to say, because I hate admitting when Virgil is right about anything," she replied. "But what's worse is the number you've done on Levi."

"I didn't mean to?—"

"If you were studying cowboys for your movie, I think your lessons are complete. The one thing about cowboys? They're total heartbreakers." She shook her head. "And if you're looking for Levi, I think it's best if you give it some time."

"Well, now, Jolene..."

"What, Virgil?"

"These things have to play out on their own, don't they?" He looked over at her. "It's not up to us to decide how it goes."

“I don’t care. He hurt Levi!” she snapped back. “You know how protective I get.”

“He’s done with that now. No more hurting Levi,” Virgil murmured. “I’m right. Aren’t I?”

“Do you know where he is, Virgil?”

Virgil motioned with his head, pointing towards the back of the main cabin. “Been there all morning. Ever since he found out. You should say something to him.”

“Something nice. Something honest,” Jolene chimed in. “Or else.”

I cautiously walked past Jolene and Virgil as I made my way around the side of the main cabin. Within seconds I spotted Levi, working on what looked like an old car engine or something. His hands were dirty from the work, and he seemed completely focused on it, barely even noticing as I slowly approached him.

“Levi?”

“Cameron Clarke,” he replied, his tone pointed. “Is there really anything you need to say to me?”

“Levi, I’m sorry?—”

“Don’t.” He held up a hand. “You just wanted to be immersed in cowboy culture for your breakout movie role. You never planned on sticking around or ever seeing us again. Why not lie to us? Why not treat us like stage rehearsal? Even though this is our actual lives. The rest of us aren’t playing pretend.”

“That’s not fair.” I took another step closer to him. “Levi, what we have is real. The connection you feel between us. No, I’m not trying to buy a farm, but everything else

about me is the same?—”

“Why me?”

“What?”

“Why’d you spend so much time with me, Cameron?”

“Because we got along so well and I?—”

“Is that all? Because we got along so well?” He pressed. “Just tell me the truth, Cameron.”

“That is the truth, Levi. I’ve enjoyed every second I’ve spent with you.” I hesitated to go on, not wanting to see his reaction to my words. “But I also... wanted to base my character in the movie off of you. The way you are. I thought you were perfect, Levi. Made for the big screen. Everything about you... the way you walk, the way you talk, the way you think. You’re perfect, Levi Stratton.”

Levi let out a pained laugh. “You don’t see how fucked up that is, Cameron? Fuck. Is that why you let me—last night when we—did you just want to know how I would kiss you? How I would touch you? For your fucked up character research?”

“You don’t get to talk about last night,” I shot back. “You’re the one who pushed me away. You’re the one who tried to turn everything between us off like a faucet?—”

“Yeah? And you put the final nail in the coffin.” Levi moved away from the engine he’d been working on. “I trusted you, Cameron. I let you in. I wanted you. I was falling?—”

He suddenly cut himself off as he shook his head. “It doesn’t matter anymore. None

of it matters anymore.”

“Levi, don’t do this,” I begged. “We can fix this. Just talk to me?—”

“There’s nothing to fix, Cameron Clarke,” he replied, his tone dejected. “You and me? We never had anything between us. Because I don’t know you, Cameron Clarke. I don’t know you, at all.”

“Levi? Levi!” I shouted after him, as he turned to walk away from me. A part of me wanted to go after him, but I knew there was no use.

He wasn’t going to come back to me. No matter how much I wanted him to.

I watched Levi Stratton walk out of my life, I sank down to the grass below me, my hands catching my fall. All I could think about was the connection between us, that piece of invisible string being cut and frayed, fizzling out into nothing.

Fizzling out inside my chest.

10

LEVI

I'd never felt like this before.

Like I was hollow from the inside out, something missing inside my chest. I tried my best to ignore the feeling, to bury it down deep inside. But nothing seemed to be working and the feeling remained throughout the day and long into the night. It ached worse when I thought about Cameron, his lips on mine, his bright smile. But it only ached a little less than that when I wasn't actively thinking about him, almost like his impact on me was impossible to escape.

Focusing on Big Sky Rescue provided some temporary relief, my thoughts too concentrated on work to be sidetracked by Cameron. It still felt like I was drowning, though, water rising all around me despite being on dry land. One of the most frustrating parts of all? I wanted to talk to Cameron about all of it, to get his opinion, and ask for his advice. I wanted to confide in the one person who held my head underwater and forced water right into my lungs.

This is hell.

"Where are you right now?" Shane's question cut through the darkness in my head.

"What?" I looked at him from across my desk. "What do you mean? I'm right here."

"No. You're not." He eyed me up and down. "Do you want to talk about it?"

“Absolutely not?—”

“Fine. Then, I’ll talk about it,” he interrupted. “You’ve been moping around the ranch for days. You’ve also been moping around town, too, since Jolene says you came into her diner, ordered a single egg for breakfast, and then just left.”

“I just wasn’t feeling very hungry, but I didn’t want to insult her?—”

“No appetite. Moping around. Burying yourself in work,” Shane continued. “You’ve practically been living in your office?—”

“Since when is that a problem? Don’t you want me to get this place into the black?”

“Levi.”

“Shane.”

“Do you really need me to say it?”

“Say what?”

“This is not how you are after a breakup, if you can even call them that. You usually just drift apart, maybe have a loud argument, and never talk again. But does it ever affect you? Nope. You go back to whatever you were doing, like nothing ever happened. But with Cameron? It’s obvious that something is different.”

“I just need more time to bounce back, that’s all?—”

“What if you can’t bounce back?” Shane cut me off again. “What if you’re not supposed to?”

“Shane, he lied to me?—”

“Did he?” Shane pressed. “I never got the sense that Cameron was a liar, Levi. Maybe not exactly truthful about why he was here. But do you really feel like he lied to you about who he was? How he felt about things?”

“It’s over, Shane. It’s done.”

“Levi—”

“Drop it. Please?” I pleaded. “It’s hard enough just thinking about him—I can’t?—”

I let out a tired sigh. “I don’t know what’s going on with me, all right? But I need to get past it. Just... give me some room to get past it.”

Shane nodded. “Got it. I’ll give you some room to get past it. Besides, I’ve already said what I needed to say.”

* * *

“Cameron Clarke, you’ve done really well for yourself recently, haven’t you?”

I was holed up in my bedroom, watching an old interview of Cameron’s from a few months ago. My brain was betraying me. It desperately wanted to see him again, even though I knew I didn’t want to. This felt like a happy medium, keeping my distance while still getting to see that perfect smile and hear his perfect laugh. I felt pathetic in a way that was new to me, still spending my time thinking about an ex?—

Not even an ex?—

Instead of just moving on with my life already.

“Yeah, it’s been a whirlwind, really. I’m thankful for everything, every opportunity.”

“And you’ve been taking every opportunity! Your manager sent us over a bit of your schedule. When do you get to sleep?”

“Sleep isn’t really my thing. Who needs it? I’ll sleep when I’m irrelevant.”

The interviewer laughed, her teeth pearly white. “But what about making time for more important things? Like romance?”

“Saying romance is more important than sleep might be controversial.” Cameron grinned. “I’m not sure the science backs you up on that one.”

“Seriously, Cameron. There have been rumors about you online that you’ve been seeing a runway model, Dan Monroe? How is that going, if it’s going?”

“We didn’t manage to stick the landing on that one ,” he joked, but he still sounded hurt. “I’m not afraid to admit that I wanted it more than he did, I think. That’s sort of a problem of mine. Thinking there’s some sort of deep connection when sometimes it’s just... not there.”

“But if you found the one, some deeper connection, would you make room for it in your life?”

“Oh, I’d do anything to keep it in my life. Anything.” Cameron grinned again. “One thing about playing these characters, getting into them the way I do with immersing myself and research... it makes me crave something real when I’m off set. I’ll always want the real thing, at the end of the day. Always ? —”

I cut off the interview, not able to handle looking at Cameron’s face for even one more second. I stared at my blank screen, my mind racing with a million thoughts.

Even if Cameron hadn't been honest with me, thinking back on the way he acted, the things he'd said...

Hadn't he really felt that connection with me? Like there was something deeper between us?

He'd seen me and I'd believed him. We'd been in sync, and it felt like magic. Even when our bodies were aligned, it felt more like we were just finding our way home?—

But he'd lied to me. How was I supposed to see past that? Even if I wanted to be with him, how was I ever supposed to trust him again?

Although, hadn't I hurt him, too? The night that I'd pushed him away?

I briefly wondered if that made us even, in some strange, cosmic sense. We'd both hurt each other, but maybe that meant we'd be able to move past it, our mistakes canceling each other out.

Or maybe I was just making up excuses for myself, giving myself a reason to go running back to him.

None of it mattered, anyway.

Tomorrow, Cameron would be leaving Stratton Ranch for good.

And we'd never see each other again.

11

CAMERON

Good riddance, Stratton Ranch.

I was packing my bags to leave for good, a part of me relieved, a part of me completely devastated. I hadn't spoken to Levi since our argument behind the main cabin, the conversation successfully breaking me into pieces. I didn't understand how he could so easily throw away everything we'd had like it was nothing, like I was nothing.

Like I never even mattered, at all.

Thankfully, I didn't have that much to pack since I'd left the majority of my life back in L.A. I groaned inwardly when I thought about heading back to the city. I was going to be stepping into a press cycle, doing promo for the movie, riding off the goodwill of the leaked photos from the fundraiser. I wasn't in the mood to be everyone's favorite cowboy, no matter how much my manager tried to hype me up about it.

I just wanted to be with Levi.

I let the treacherous thought cross my mind as I finished zipping up my last suitcase. I was never going to be with Levi. I was never even going to talk to him again. And the sooner I accepted that, the easier things were going to be?—

Shit.

My phone is ringing.

I picked it up, half expecting it to be my manager. “Hey, I just finished packing. I should be heading back soon. I just need to bring everything to my car?—”

“Cameron! Oh, thank God!” Teddy’s voice sounded frantic. “I need your help! My bike crapped out on me on this trail. Can you come pick me up? I didn’t bring enough water for a walk back and I don’t want to pass out by trying it.”

“That’s really more of Levi’s department?—”

“I think his phone is off the hook or something!” Teddy replied. “And his cell doesn’t seem to be working.”

“Shit. What do you need me to do?”

“Here, I’ll send you the coordinates. Just put them into your GPS.”

“Got it. I’ll be right there.”

I impatiently waited on Teddy’s text. When I received it, I immediately went into action, rushing out to my parked car. Even as I drove to Teddy’s location, Levi was on my mind. I wondered why he wasn’t reachable, worried that he’d decided to close Big Sky Rescue. But why wasn’t his cell working either?

Was Levi okay?

I tried and failed to stop thinking about Levi. But by the time I reached Teddy’s location, I was completely frantic, my thoughts spiraling towards the worst-case

scenario. Had Levi gone out on some hike and needed rescuing himself? How long had he been M.I.A.? How many supplies had he packed, when was the last time anyone had seen him?—

“Teddy?” I stepped out of my car, trying to quiet my thoughts. I looked around, noticing how quiet and calm everything seemed to be. “Teddy, where are you?”

There was no response.

I checked the coordinates he’d sent again, even re-entering them on my phone. Just then, a familiar truck pulled up a few feet away, Levi at the wheel. He had a serious look on his face, his brow creased in thought. When he spotted me, his expression shifted into confusion, but he didn’t leave the scene. Instead, he parked right next to me and got out of his car, too.

“Where’s Teddy?” he asked. “Have you already found him?”

“I think he sent us the wrong location,” I replied. “I called out for him but didn’t hear anything?—”

“Maybe he passed out from the pain.”

“From the pain?”

“Yeah. He said he ran over something with his bike, and it sent him flying. He was worried he broke an arm.”

“That’s not what he told me?” I held up my phone for emphasis. “Teddy told me that his bike crapped out on him, and he just needed a ride back to the ranch. And he told me that he couldn’t contact you?—”

“Teddy couldn’t contact me?” Levi scoffed. “But he always carries his satellite phone. Even if I wasn’t at the office, he has a direct line to me?—”

Levi sighed with a sudden realization. “Teddy.”

“What? What is it?”

“I bet Shane put him up to this.” Levi groaned. “That asshole really thinks he knows what’s best for me. I’ll need to talk to him about that when I get back.”

“I don’t understand. Are you saying Teddy faked an emergency call? And Shane put him up to it?” Puzzled, I went on. “Why would they even do something like that?”

“Because... I haven’t been myself lately.”

“You haven’t?”

Levi stared over at me. “No. I haven’t.”

There was a silence between us, our eyes locked on each other. Levi didn’t move an inch, didn’t say another word. I felt like I was breaking inside as he looked at me, everything in me falling to pieces all over again. “Levi?”

“Yeah?”

“I...” I took a cautious step towards him. “I’m sorry. I know you probably don’t care, and you don’t want to hear it. But I am sorry. From the bottom of my?—”

“I’m sorry, too.”

“What?”

“You weren’t honest with me, but I wasn’t honest with you, either,” he continued. “But maybe that’s because I wasn’t honest with myself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you scared me, Cam. I don’t know. I’ve never felt the way I felt around you. Not about anyone. I’ve never... missed anyone the way I’ve missed you. I’ve never... wanted to be kept. Or to keep. It’s different with you.”

“It’s different with you, too, Levi,” I admitted. “Or at least I thought it was. Sometimes, I can jump the gun about how I feel about people. But I... I thought we were on the same wavelength. It was pretty special.”

“Does it have to be all past tense?” Levi asked, his tone quiet. “Is that what you want, Cam? To leave us in the past?”

“I want what you want, Levi. Whatever that is.” My voice trembled as I spoke. “Whatever you want to make of us.”

“I just want—” Levi started but just then, his phone rang out from his pocket. He hastily answered it, bringing it up to his ear without checking the screen. “This is Levi—Wait. Teddy? Where are you?”

I watched Levi, trying to gauge his emotions as he spoke. His expression went from concerned, to aggravated, to relieved, to wholly annoyed. A few minutes later he hung up the phone without saying anything on his end.

“What’s going on? Where’s Teddy?”

“We need to head back to the ranch.”

* * *

“Don’t be mad at me. No one gets to be mad at me.”

Teddy motioned for us to step inside his cabin, as he spoke. “Seriously. We’re all going to have a laugh about this later, anyway.”

“You called in a fake emergency, Teddy,” Levi replied. “That’s not exactly a laughing matter.”

“But I called it in for a good reason! Which has to count for something.”

“A good reason?”

“So, it occurred to me that I might be... the source of strain in your... relationship?” Teddy guessed as he looked between us. “I was the one who texted Levi about your true identity being revealed in that article. But here’s the thing. I assumed that Levi already knew who you were! I thought you two were keeping it a secret from the rest of us.”

“I can see how you might think that,” I chimed in. “Levi and I were spending a lot of time together.”

“And... I was also the one who took the photo of you, Cameron,” Teddy continued. “The one that ended up in the article? I wasn’t the one who posted it or tagged you in it. But still. If it weren’t for my excellent photography skills, we wouldn’t be in such a mess.”

“And what does any of this have to do with you calling in a fake emergency, Teddy?”

“I decided to do us all a favor.”

“A favor?” Levi quirked an eyebrow. “What kind of favor?”

“Well, I wanted you two to make up, so I gave you an excuse to be in the same place at the same time with minimal distraction. And...” Teddy pulled out his phone. “I was also tracking you in real time. Not like with any kind of gadgets or anything. I mean, I did put a small tracker on the back of your truck, but nothing more hi-tech than that. Nothing you can’t get rid of?”

“Get to the point, Teddy.”

“Right. So, I was tracking you in real time so that I could post about it online as a satisfied customer. I wanted to show everyone how fast you respond to emergencies. Thankfully, you responded in your usual time since it was a live video. And ever since I posted it a few minutes ago....”

Teddy held out his phone so we could see his screen. “It’s already at a few thousand views. And I expect it to keep climbing.”

“So, your favor was giving me a test and hoping that I passed?”

“My favor was a bit of viral marketing, my friend.” Teddy beamed. “If people keep watching and sharing this video, who knows how many potential clients you’ll be able to reach. I know you love a good cold call, but there are other ways to sell yourself these days. And Big Sky Rescue deserves all the eyeballs it can get.”

“That’s... actually a good idea, Teddy. Thanks.” Levi relented. “Even though I hate the whole way you went about it.”

“The ends justify the means, and all that.” Teddy waved away Levi’s concern. “And? How about you two? Is it fixed?”

Levi and I looked at each other, and in that moment it felt like we were speaking a language of no words, understanding each other without a single sound.

Teddy laughed lightly in response. “Right. I’ll take that as a yes, then.”

* * *

“Do you think Teddy’s scheme is going to work out?”

I was sitting on Levi’s couch, sipping on a glass of wine. Levi’s cabin was about what I expected, just as stylish as he seemed to be. There were thoughtful accents all around, colors that went well together, pieces of art adorning his walls. He was the perfect, soulful cowboy I’d imagined him to be, the rogue constellation lover who looked up at the stars at night.

“I have no idea.” Levi laughed before he sank down next to me. “It’d be nice if it does. If it doesn’t, that’s fine, too. I’m not giving up on Big Sky anytime soon.”

“I’m happy to hear that.” I smiled over at him. “I think it’s really incredible, how much you’re willing to do to make your dreams come true.”

“Same thing you had to do, right? With your acting career?”

“Something like that, yeah.” I shifted closer to him on the couch, our hands touching. “So, how do you think this is going to go? Do you want to try getting to know each other all over again?—”

My words were cut off by Levi’s mouth on mine. He broke our kiss just long enough to say, “God, I missed you, baby.”

And that was that. I was lost inside our kiss, in the very best way, exploring his

mouth with my tongue. He explored my mouth right back, our tongues rolling against each other. I felt his hands on my waist, pulling me into his lap. My legs were on either side of him as our kiss continued, my fingers running through his dark hair. He moaned at the feel of it, the vibrations reverberating in my own mouth.

“Should we—” I was out of breath, excitement building too quickly in my chest. “Do we need to talk about?—”

“I don’t care.”

“What?”

“I don’t care about what happened in the past with us, Cam. The past is the past. All I care about is our future together. All I care about is making this work with you.”

“That’s all I care about too, Levi,” I murmured. “All I care about is being with you.”

“Then, be with me.” Levi smiled up at me before he pulled me closer, pressing his lips against mine all over again. I melted into him, our bodies perfectly aligned, my hands resting on his shoulders. As I sat in his lap, Levi’s hips thrust up towards mine, effectively grinding against me as I stayed in place. I whimpered at the feel of it, Levi’s cock getting harder underneath my ass.

“Do you have a condom?” I asked, between desperate whines.

“In my bedroom. Come with me?—”

“No. I want you to bring it back here,” I replied. “I... I want you to take me, right here.”

“Making demands already and we’ve only officially been together a few hours.” Levi

smirked.

“I think we both know we’ve been together a lot longer than that, Levi.” My skin flushed red. “Or was that a totally crazy thing to say?”

“Not totally crazy, at all.” Levi softly kissed me on the cheek. “You’re right. In a way, we’ve been together a lot longer than that. We’ve wanted each other.”

Levi gently pulled me off his lap before he walked away from the couch. When he came back, he set a condom down on the table in front of his couch, along with a small bottle of lube. He then put me right back into place on his lap before he pressed kisses on the side of my neck.

“Mine.” His voice was low as he spoke. “All mine.”

“All yours, Levi.” I slipped my hands underneath his shirt, encouraging it to go up over his head. Levi grinned against my neck, letting out a small laugh.

“You are so impatient, baby.”

“I’ve waited a long time for this. I deserve to be impatient.”

“There’s value in taking our time, you know,” Levi whispered before he tugged at the bottom of my shirt, pulling it away from my skin. When I was shirtless, he leaned forward, bending just enough to take one of my nipples between his lips. He licked at the sensitive bud, and I gasped at the sensation, a pleasurable chill running down my spine.

He then moved over to my other nipple, repeating the same motion, and I watched him in awe. A few seconds later he slid a hand between us, his palm running the length of my cock through my pants. I whimpered as I got harder at his touch, every

part of me coming to life for Levi. He started to grind against me again, and I could hardly stand it, my body already way too close to the edge.

“Take everything off,” Levi casually commanded. “Then, get on your hands and knees for me on the couch.”

He shifted away from me, giving me enough room to do as I was told. I obeyed his commands, pulling off what was left of my clothes, letting my pants and boxers fall to the floor. I got into position for him, my hands and knees pressing into the couch cushions, anticipation flowing through my veins.

“What are you going to do—Levi! Fuck!” I moaned at the unexpected feel of his mouth against my hole. He ran his tongue in circles around my entrance, teasing me perfectly, as I crumbled underneath his touch. I pushed my hips back against him, trying to get more of his tongue on me, trying to feel him even deeper. Levi took me up on what I was offering, his fingers gripping my thighs, tight, as he licked me faster and harder.

I shivered, my cock leaking precome against the couch cushions. It was embarrassing how easily Levi turned me on, how quickly he’d learned how to press all of my buttons. But just as I was ready to go over the edge for him, Levi’s mouth moved away from me. I opened my own mouth in protest, but soon felt lube dribbling down my entrance, Levi carefully rubbing it in and around my tight hole.

Then, he pressed a finger inside me. I bit my lip as he slid his finger in and out of me, stretching me out. Another finger joined the first, his moves cautious, even more lube being applied as he opened me up for him. I relaxed against his hand, his fingers moving inside me easier and easier, my body prepared to take all of his cock.

“Levi...” I groaned. “I... I want you... please...”

“Just making sure you’re ready for me, baby,” he cooed. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t hurt me. Please,” I begged. “I need to feel you inside me.”

Levi playfully kissed my thigh before he slipped his fingers out of me. I heard him pull off the rest of his clothes then as he settled in place behind me again. There was the sound of a condom wrapper being opened, the condom being rolled down Levi’s shaft...

Suddenly, he was pressing inside me, his tip stretching me even further than his fingers. I let out a deep moan at the feel of his cock, my hole not used to feeling so full.

“That’s it, baby. You can take it...” Levi murmured. “Take all of my cock, baby...”

Levi’s movements were slow and measured as he slid the rest of his shaft deep inside my entrance. When his whole cock was buried deep, he paused, letting me get a feel for the size of him. I appreciated the pause as my body adjusted, my fingers gripping against the couch in pure pleasure. Another minute or two and he began to move, cautiously pumping the length of him in and out of me, his hands holding onto my hips.

“Levi... Levi...” It was over for me, and I knew it. I was putty in this man’s hands from here on out. So much of me already felt like it belonged to him, and now he had my body, too, already possessing my heart and my soul?—

My heart and my soul?

Fuck.

The timing for this couldn’t have been worse.

“I love you,” I said it low, half hoping he wouldn’t hear it. “I love you, Levi. I love you.”

“Cam—”

“You don’t have to say it back.” My words came out staggered, Levi’s hips still moving against mine. “I just... I just felt it...”

“I love you, too.” Levi didn’t hesitate, a hint of a smile in his tone. “I love you so much, baby.”

Levi picked up his pace, his hips thrusting his cock into me at a steady rhythm. I was overwhelmed by it all, the perfect way he fit inside me, the fact that he so casually said that he loved me too. A few more thrusts and I was coming for him, making his couch a mess, my cock spurting come directly onto the cushions. Levi didn’t last much longer behind me, his hips going still a few seconds later, his come spilling inside me.

When he was finished, he pulled out, rolling off the condom and throwing it away. When he came back to the couch, he pulled me right back into his lap, this time our naked bodies splayed against each other.

“Good?” Levi asked, before he pressed a kiss against my forehead.

“Amazing,” I replied, burying my face in the crook of his neck. “God, Levi. How are we ever going to get anything done?”

“We’ll figure it out.” Levi grinned. “Sleep’s not really my thing, anyway. Who needs it? We can sleep when we’re irrelevant.”

“Did you just... quote something I said in an interview?”

“Sure did.”

“You’ve been watching my interviews?”

“What can I say? I’m a pretty big fan.” Levi grinned again before his mouth found mine, his touch sending sparks straight through my chest, and all over my body.

12

LEVI

“How long can I stay in Montana? Or I guess how long can I stay out of L.A. before it becomes a problem? Contractually?”

Cameron was on the phone as we hiked up the ridge, clearly having a conversation with his manager. “No, I’m done with the research part. I just like it up here. So much so I might actually have you look up some real estate for me. Or send some ideas via your assistant.”

When we reached my favorite spot, I motioned to Cameron to get off the phone. He understood the signal and quickly wrapped up his call. “I’ll talk to you later, all right? I promise. No more disappearing off the face of the Earth.”

Cameron moved closer to me before he spoke, “Sorry about that. Just tying up some loose ends.”

“Is your manager losing his mind? About you still being out here?”

“He thinks I should be capitalizing on more opportunities.” Cameron sighed. “He doesn’t get it, really. Doesn’t understand how I went from a workaholic to being so obsessed with nature.”

“Obsessed with nature? Is that what we’re calling it?” I smirked.

“Whatever.” Cameron playfully rolled his eyes. “I just told him that I fell in love with Montana.”

“You don’t want to tell him about us yet?”

“Do you?” Cameron seemed nervous to ask the question. “If we go public... I mean... do you really want that kind of attention?”

“We don’t have to tell the whole world everything. We can keep some things just for us.” I gently brushed his hair back just enough. “As long as people know you’re taken, that’s all I need them to know.”

Cameron lit up and reached for my hand. “This is your favorite view, right? Of Paradise Valley?”

“It is.” I turned to look out at the view, admiring the way the light rolled across the hills, the way birds flew through the sky. “This place has always felt like my own slice of heaven. Nothing ever came close.” I paused for a moment, my gaze landing on Cameron. “Well, not until you, that is.”

“Flatterer.” Cameron playfully nudged me in the arm. “It really is beautiful, though. You’re lucky you got to grow up like this, seeing views like this whenever you wanted to.”

“Lucky is a tricky word, I think.”

“How come?”

“Because I always felt like I was the second choice,” I admitted, the words just flowing through me. “It was hard, Cam, growing up as a Stratton, but being the second born son. My father wasn’t a kind man, never easy to get along with. But it

felt like he reserved a certain amount of scorn just for me. I think he thought he was building character, trying to toughen me up for the world. But all it did was make me feel... unsafe.”

I took a deep breath before I went on. “I tried to work my way around it. Kind of became the jokester in my family, always charming, always on. It was the only thing I knew how to do, the only way I could defuse some of the pain he chunked onto me. But when I had the chance to create Big Sky, I knew it needed to succeed. I couldn’t let every awful thing he said about me be right. I needed to prove myself to him, needed to earn my last name.”

“Levi...” Cameron squeezed my hand, tight. “That was way too much to put on you. You were just a kid.”

“I know.” I shrugged. “Doesn’t change much. That drive is still inside me, pushing me on. I don’t know how to get rid of it. I... don’t know if I ever will.”

“Maybe you don’t need to get rid of it. You just need to tame it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Instead of letting it drive you with the negative, let it drive you with the positive.” Cameron smiled. “You deserve to be successful because you worked hard for it, Levi. That’s why you strive for it. Because you know you can do it, not because of anything your dad said to you.”

“I can try that, yeah.” I tossed the idea around in my head. “I can’t promise it’ll stick, though.”

“Then, we’ll keep trying different things, until we find something that sticks.”

“Thank you, Cam.” My voice was quiet. “For being here. For listening to me.”

“I’ll always be there for you, Levi. Whenever you need me to be.”

* * *

Holy shit.

I’d logged into my work email a few minutes ago to find rows and rows of emails. There were emails from interested, potential clients, emails from people asking if I taught safety classes for outdoor explorers, and a few more emails from admirers saying they’d seen photos of me on the website and wanted to have my number on hand in case of emergency.

It was almost an overwhelming amount of attention, a new problem arising as I realized I might need to hire someone to help out in the office to keep everything straight. Still, I was grateful for the influx of potential new business, and even if the attention didn’t stay at the same height, it was going to be a nice boost for Big Sky in the interim.

Maybe even enough to get us into the black for the very first time.

“Is Teddy secretly a marketing genius?” Shane stepped into my office, a puzzled look on his face. “I’m usually so good at reading people. Did I get him wrong?”

“I think Teddy’s whole thing is being unreadable,” I joked, before I motioned for Shane to come look at my computer. “Seriously, though. I can’t believe his video is getting Big Sky so much attention.”

“I saw and I’ve seen,” Shane replied. “You should make hay while the sun is shining. I could help you put together a course if you want. Something people can sign up for

online, either take in person or stream it.”

“You’d help me with that?”

“I’d help you with anything. You know that.”

“Right.” I smirked. “Up to and including my personal, romantic relationships.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Please. You expect me to believe that Teddy hatched that plan on his own?”

“I just said that he was a marketing genius. Is it so hard to believe that he’s just a genius , in general?”

“You’re the smartest person I know, Shane,” I replied. “But one day, I’m going to catch you red-handed.”

“No. You won’t.” Shane’s tone was matter of fact. He grinned over at me. “And I’m happy things are working out with you and Cameron. It would’ve been a shame if things had turned out differently.”

“And? What about you?”

“What about me?”

“I mean, Cole has Dylan. I have Cam. Amber has Doug. And you have?”

“A thriving personal life that’s none of your business.”

“Ha! You think you get to shut me out after meddling in my life?”

“You don’t have any proof of that,” Shane said, already moving away from my desk. “Anyway, I should get started on the outline for your safety course. I’ll have a draft of it in your inbox soon?—”

“It’s coming for you next, Shane!” I shouted, as he hightailed it out of my office. “I can feel it in my bones!”

I laughed to myself once I heard Shane slam the front door. I was only joking but a part of me wondered if I was right, if Shane was somehow next in line to fall in love with someone completely unexpectedly, to have his life changed so suddenly and so permanently for the better.

Nah.

I shook my head as I brought my attention back to my emails.

Shane was way too smart for all of that.

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“I don’t believe in luck. A man has to make his own luck. And if a man can’t make his own luck, he’ll have to steal it from someone else, no matter what it takes. You can’t last out here without any luck—Shit.”

I looked down at the script’s pages, wanting to start from the top. Levi sat across from me at the dining room table of the main cabin, with a small smile on his face. “That was really good, baby. I know you messed up a little at the end?—”

“I’m still in the discovery stages.” I sulked. “This is always the worst part. Just getting the lines down. Once I have the lines down, I can start adding my own spin on things, saying things how my character might say them.”

“Is all acting like this?” Levi asked. “Because this seems stressful as all hell.”

“It’s mostly my process. I have a thing about embodying the character.”

“Or just taking cues from your boyfriend and adding that to the character.”

“That too.” I chuckled, still looking at the pages. “It’s not my fault you’re so perfectly cinematic.”

“And it’s not my fault that you’re so beautiful.” Levi reached across the table, resting his hand on top of mine. “How about you take a break from those pages and?—”

“Oh, my God, Levi. You are going to sabotage me!” I playfully pulled my hand away from his. “Maybe we can take a break together later.”

“You promise?”

“I promise to think about it.” I smiled over at him. “Speaking of breaks, are you sure it’s okay that I extend my stay at the ranch? Only until I can find a place of my own.”

“You think I want you going anywhere?”

“I just want to make sure I’m not overstaying my welcome.”

“You’re not overstaying anything, baby.” Levi smiled right back. “And if anyone has a problem with it, they can take it up with me.”

Levi bent across the table to gently kiss the back of my hand. I felt something warm inside me, a security forming around my decision to stay in Paradise Valley for good. Hollywood could wait a little longer for my return, especially since the Antonio Cruz western didn’t start filming until later this year. I was also inadvertently building a profitable mystique around my career, my choice to move to Montana seeming inexplicable to those who didn’t know about my whirlwind romance with the perfect cowboy.

“And trouble sticks around...” Virgil entered the dining room with a smirk. “Happy to see you made it through.”

“Don’t mind him,” Levi quietly mouthed.

“Hey, don’t put any ideas in his head.” Virgil laughed. “I’m a pretty worthwhile guy to listen to. It’s not my fault I always see things coming. Call it a side effect of the chip.”

“The chip?”

“Oh, we’ll have plenty of time to talk about that later.” Virgil nodded towards a

window. “But I just wanted to let you two know that I think the party is supposed to be outside, not inside. Amber’s been setting up for the last half hour.”

“Then, outside we go,” Levi replied as he got up from the table. “Thanks for the heads-up, Uncle Virgil.”

“Just keeping an eye out, as always.” He nodded. “Vigilance serves us all.”

* * *

“Shane was right. I’m starting to like your uncle,” I started, as we stepped into the backyard. “He’s one-of-a-kind?—”

“There he is! Oh, my God!” Amber ran up to me, her arms already outstretched. “Cameron Clarke! I can’t believe I didn’t recognize you at my fundraiser! I’m practically obsessed with you!”

She took me into her arms and kissed me on both of my cheeks. “Welcome to Stratton Ranch! I can’t believe you’re here! And I can’t believe you’re with Levi!”

“Uh, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Levi, be serious. He’s Cameron Clarke. He could date anybody he wanted to.”

“That’s not exactly true?—”

“Don’t be humble. You don’t have to do that here.” Amber took my hand into her own. “We respect your artistic side, Cameron. Be as free as you want to be.”

“Okay, that’s enough of that.” Cole stood in front of us. “Apologies on behalf of my sister. We love her but she’s yet to understand that not everyone’s a hugger. Or a cheek kisser.”

“I don’t mind, really.”

“So, you’re Cameron Clarke,” he continued. “Thanks for your help with the fundraiser. And sorry about how it turned out.”

“I’d say it turned out pretty well, actually.” Levi beamed beside me.

“Is that Cameron?” A new voice entered the conversation. A few minutes later, there was a man standing next to Cole, their hands casually finding each other’s.

Got it.

This must be Dylan.

“I’m a huge fan of your work, but don’t worry. I’m normal about it. Unlike Amber,” Dylan said, laughing as he spoke. “And I just so happen to be a wedding planner extraordinaire, if you ever happen to need my services?—”

“Baby, they just started going out?—”

“I didn’t say anything about getting married tomorrow,” Dylan gently pushed back. “I’m just letting Cameron know that he has in-house options, just in case. I planned Amber’s wedding. She loved it.”

“He’s right. I did,” Amber added, before waving at the bonfire behind her. “Do you know what else I love, though?”

Amber moved closer to the burning, wooden logs, soon picking up a long, skinny stick. “S’mores! Come on, everybody!”

“We’re still going to have actual dinner, right?” Dylan asked. “As in, we’re going to eat something after this?”

“With Amber? It’s a coin toss.” Cole shot his partner an apologetic look. “But we can always raid the fridge right after.”

The group of us crowded around the bonfire, each with our s’mores sticks held in the flames. There was chatter in the circle, Amber and Doug detailing a recent trip they’d been on, time spent in love and in Greece. I listened to every bit that I could, enjoying the way everyone bantered back and forth, the bond they had so evident between them. When Shane eventually showed up to join the group, Amber threw a few marshmallows at him for being late.

“Take these things seriously!” She playfully scolded him. “One day, you’re going to miss something important!”

“Sorry! I was busy!” Shane replied, while expertly dodging marshmallows, like that wasn’t his first time having to do it.

Even so, Amber forced us all to scoot over just enough to make some room for Shane to join us.

“Running late, hmm?” Levi’s tone was mischievous. “Does that have something to do with your thriving, personal life?”

“Levi, you’re literally never going to know.” Shane smirked back. “Don’t waste your time worrying about it.”

“You’re going to slip up one day, Shane. And I’ll be there?—”

“Except I’m never going to slip up?—”

Levi and Shane went back and forth, their voices escalating. Even as they did, the rest of the circle continued with their separate conversations. I smiled to myself as I thought about how often Levi and Shane had talks just like this, playfighting like

siblings, as everyone just carried on. I was back to listening in as much as I could, feeling like I was in the middle of a movie set about a family that loved each other dearly, despite their differences, despite an overbearing father figure who'd tried his best to break them apart?—

But this wasn't a movie set. This was real life.

This is my life.

By coming out here to Montana to research for a role, I'd ended up snagging the part of a lifetime. I didn't have to play a character anymore, no more worrying about getting my lines right or making sure I hit my mark. There wasn't anything I needed to do here other than be myself and be the best that I could for Levi. My heart warmed as I imagined our future together, with me helping him make his dream come true with Big Sky Rescue, me returning from filming movies or TV shows and plopping down beside him in bed, Levi visiting me on set when he could, wherever I was in the world...

It was a vision of a beautiful life together, that small, invisible string still wrapped around us at every turn.

For the first time ever, I felt like I was home .

“What are you thinking about?” Levi whispered, so only I could hear.

“You,” I answered, honestly. “Us. Everything.”

“Good thoughts, I hope?”

“Only the very best.” I smiled over at him before kissing him, his lips sweet from the chocolate and marshmallow.

Sweet.

That was exactly what it was going to be from here on out with Levi, with whatever came our way. It didn't matter how hard things ever got, because we'd always have each other, we'd always have this.

I'd always have my perfect cowboy, and he'd always have me.

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