

*Proposed*

*to by the*

**LUMBER JACK**

**OLIVER LOVE  
AMARETTI**

# Engaged to the Lumberjack

Loved by Lumberjacks

Ama Retti and Olive Love

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

ENGAGED TO THE LUMBERJACK

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Written by Ama Retti and Olive Love.

# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Epilogue](#)

To everyone who loves age gaps, lumberjacks, and  
fake marriages :)



# Chapter One

## Cole

I could watch Zoe shake her hips and sing into a wooden spoon all night.

Dropping my tool bag, I lean against the kitchen's door frame and secretly drink her in as she twirls around the diner's kitchen, flitting from shelf to shelf and grabbing ingredients.

Even in a hairnet and a batter-stained apron, she's still the sexiest thing I've ever seen, with a crazy curvy frame, skin as caramel brown as the chocolate cake batter she's stirring, and hair as curly as the chocolate shavings sitting on the countertop. The chocolate smells almost as delicious as she does, and I bet she tastes just as decadent.

*"Cuz now I see... he loves that pickup more than meee,"* she belts along with the radio as she pours the batter into a greased bundt cake pan.

"Impossible," I say in what I thought was a whisper.

She jumps, splattering the last drop of batter onto the metal table and flicking a glob of it from her spoon onto my cheek as she whips around.

*"Cole,"* she breathes with a sigh of relief before her eyebrows knit and she frowns. "What did I tell you about sneaking up on me? I thought you were an intruder."

I follow her worried gaze out the pitch-black back window. Still, all I can see is a reflection of ourselves beneath the fluorescent lights.

The diner's been closed for two hours now, but that doesn't stop Zoe from working. In fact, whenever I show up to do some minor repairs at Over Easy diner—a grease-slicked shack that needs a major overhaul—Zoe's always here.

She's either in the kitchen or she's on the floor serving hamburgers the size of your head and refilling coffee mugs.

She's often whipping up some new recipe to convince the owner, Connie, to improve the outdated menu.

This time it looks like a new dessert.

"Were you going to fight me off with that?" I smile, gazing down at the dripping spoon she's holding in front of her like a weapon.

Her lips twitch, and then she can't help but smile back. "Yes. I could fling batter into your eyes before escaping through the back door."

"Good plan," I chuckle, wiping my cheek with my thumb before popping it into my mouth.

Zoe follows the motion, her eyes lingering on my lips before diverting to the radio.

*"And that was 'More Than Me' by the Twynam Twins,"* the radio announcer says cheerily. *"Stick around because we have more Twynam tunes coming up after this commercial break, right here on Give Me More 94 F.M."*

"I missed my favorite part," Zoe sighs before she tiptoes in an attempt to turn the volume down just as an advertisement for an auto shop blares out of the speakers.

Coming in behind her, I reach over her head easily and turn the knob. Her ass brushes against my front, and I'm thankful I'm wearing thick work jeans with a heavy-duty zipper. It could be my excuse if Zoe questions me, but she doesn't. In fact, I swear for one brief second, she leans into me, giving me the courage to linger for a second longer than I need to. But then, like always, she freezes, her back going rigid.

I never know how to read her. Does she genuinely like my attention? It feels like she does, like she's warming up and about to surprise me with a touch or look, but then it's like someone flips a switch and she shuts her emotions.

Lately though, her 'off switch' has been malfunctioning. The more she gets to know me, the longer it takes her to shut down on me.



That's all the encouragement I need not to back down. Zoe's getting more comfortable with me.

"What's your favorite part? Will you sing it for me?" I ask, gazing down at her. I love seeing her looking up at me from this angle. Her face is downright angelic, with round green eyes and Cupid's bow lips.

She flushes and drops her head.

I tip her chin back up to look at me. The tip of my thumb grazes her bottom lip and it takes everything in my power not to pull down on it—not to slide it between her lips and feel that sweet little tongue swirl around it.

"I've already heard you sing most of it," I point out.

"The lyrics are a little cringey," she says with an embarrassed smile.

"More embarrassing than your hairnet?" I quip and quickly step back as she grabs a rag to whip my arm in retaliation.

"Hey, Netty's off-limits." She pats it self-consciously.

"Sorry Netty," I say, following her to the oven. I open the door and she slips the bundt pan inside before taking two fully baked cakes out. "Now, what's your favorite part of the song?"

"*Why?*" she asks, brows crinkling. Her eyes bore into me like she's trying to find some ulterior motive. Like someone wanting to know more about her is unusual. Maybe it is.

"I know you have good taste. If it's your favorite part, it must be good."

"And how do you know I have good taste?"

I nod at the chocolate shavings and empty batter bowl beside her hip. "Because I've literally tried a dozen of your recipes. This is another one, isn't it? One you've been working on to convince Connie to put on the menu?"

Immediately her eyes light up like they always do when we talk about her recipes.

"I've been telling her for months now that people are tired of only choosing chocolate or yellow cake to go with their

dark roast coffee.” She gazes pointedly at the two cakes she’d just pulled from the oven. “People want variety. I know we don’t get enough customers to justify fifteen desserts, but what’s just one more on a busy Sunday afternoon? It could help bring in new business, especially during tourist season.”

Connie certainly could use the extra business. The Over Easy diner is a staple in Moonshine Creek. Still, lots of its loyal patrons have passed since its opening over fifty years ago.

The newer generations want something fresh, and the elderly Connie seems to have trouble accepting this, even right down to the ancient building she constantly has me patch up. Truth is, patches won’t cut it anymore, and Connie’s stubbornness aside, the money just isn’t there for repairs.

Any money made goes towards keeping Zoe employed. The rest is spent on supplies and Connie’s medical bills. She’s pretty secretive with her health, as is her right, but I’ve seen her in the hospital enough times when I’ve visited Buckee to know that she’s getting worse.

Even if I hadn’t noticed her hospital stints, I would’ve figured out that something was up with Connie, given Zoe’s insane schedule. There are dark circles around her sage-green eyes, and she’s lost so much weight that her apron strings, which barely used to meet around her back, are now double-tied.

I know Zoe loves Connie—who’s become somewhat of an aunt-like figure to her, the diner, and its few regulars whom she never wants to let down. But it’s obvious that she’s over-exerting herself and for very little payoff. I’ve done repairs in the tiny, super messy back office. I’ve seen the pay stubs, and they’re downright criminal. There’s no way Zoe can take care of herself—much less her son—on that salary, even *with* decent tips, which are probably rare in a small town like Moonshine Creek.

“I spent all morning making these,” she says. Reaching for the chocolate shavings, she pinches a few between her forefinger and thumb. “Here, taste.”

The excitement on her face is downright adorable. If she were thinking clearly, would she have willingly put her fingers in my mouth?

I don't hesitate as I lean forward and hold her wrist before taking those sweet fingers between my lips. When I do, Zoe's face turns from giddy excitement to something else that makes her lips part and her chest rise and fall quickly. The chocolate tastes even sweeter on her skin, and I can't help but lightly suck her fingertips.

When I pull away, her hand still hovers, seemingly frozen, until I take it in mine and gently pull it back down and hold it. It's so soft in comparison to my own.

"Delicious," I say after it's all melted. "You soaked it in rum?"

"Yes, overnight." She nods, shyly slipping her fingers from mine. "I know we don't carry alcohol, but that rum's a top seller at the bar next door. I think it'd intrigue some of the patrons there. I'm going to make the chocolate cake more interesting by topping it in whipped, rum-infused coffee frosting and chocolate shavings."

"I'll be the first in line."

Her smile falters. "Just don't tell Connie."

"Another secret menu item?" I smirk. I wonder how long it will be before Connie notices that the increase in sales is due to Zoe. Zoe breathes new life into this dilapidated diner.

She nods before taking the batter bowl and other dirty dishes to the sink.

I get there before her and grab the pull-down faucet sprayer, but she tries to stop me.

"I can do that."

"I know you can," I say, ignoring her and giving each dish a blast. "But now you're totally free to give me that concert."

She throws me a look. "You really aren't letting it go, are you?"

I shake my head. “Nope.” Besides, I know that she needs a break. She’s been working non-stop all day.

Sighing, she turns her back to me as she feigns straightening up a shelf.

“The part that says, *three-hour road trip, and the only thing I rode was that damn truck.*” Even as she sings it, a dark blush creeps across her cheeks.

A lot more would be getting ridden if we were on a three-hour road trip together.

*You can ride me anytime*, I want to say. I’m sure she can read the thought based on the look in her eyes, but I don’t want to come on too strong so I decide to go with a tamer response.

“I didn’t know you were such a fan of the twins,” I tease.

“Well, I am,” she says as if daring me to speak a bad word against them or their— according to her—cringey lyrics.

“I am too. In fact, I’ve met them.”

Her fingers freeze on the flour bag she’s rolling up. “No way. When? I won tickets on the radio last month. They’re having a concert right here in Moonshine Creek.”

I remember that night. I was tinkering around with a busted table while Zander snored peacefully in a booth, and Zoe frantically prepped food while dialing the radio station over a hundred times until she finally got through.

Her scream that startled Zander awake was piercing enough to shatter glass.

“I know. My cousins Ash and Kai act as their bodyguards as a side gig.”

Her eyes drift up and down my massive frame now and I can already hear the question forming on her lips.

“I’m more invested in woodworking.” I smile.

“B-but you’d be the perfect bodyguard. You’re... massive. And it’s not just for anyone. It’s for the twins. *The twins!* I can’t believe you’d turn that down.”

“I’d have to be offered to turn it down. However, I am interested in being someone else’s personal bodyguard one day.”

“Really?” She arches her brow. “If the twins aren’t good enough, what artist is?”

*You.* Chefs are artists too.

I shrug. “My future wife. I’ll guard her. Protect her. My body would be her shield. Hers to do with it as she wishes. But my body isn’t for hire. And definitely not by the twins.”

Her lips fall open as she grapples for a response, but a tiny dirty blonde head pops into the kitchen before she can speak.

“It’s 10:46,” Zander, Zoe’s six-year-old son, says sleepily.

Zoe’s eyes flicker from me to him guiltily before she trots to his side.

“I’m sorry. I got carried away on a new recipe again,” she says, bending down to his level. “Just let me clean up the kitchen while the last cake bakes, and then we’ll head home, okay? Why don’t you lay back down in the booth and get some sleep until then?”

Zander doesn’t return her smile, nor does he move his feet even when Zoe whips around and begins hurriedly putting the ingredients away. He remains rooted to the spot, staring at me as I finish the last dish.

“I didn’t know you could tell the time now, buddy,” I say, drying my hands before guiding Zander back into the dining room as Zoe mouths “*thank you*” over her shoulder.

She never has to thank me for anything because I’ve never been more invested in helping where I can. Given her tight budget, Connie didn’t hire me to fix anything tonight... or for the past month. It’s Zoe and Zander that’s kept me here every night fixing whatever I can pro bono.

But it’s not just their company I want to keep. It’s also their safety. Moonshine Creek may have a low crime rate but danger still exists. I can’t sleep knowing they’re here all alone

after closing. It's only a matter of time before some degenerate catches on to their routine and takes advantage.

"I learned it last month at school," Zander says as we slide into opposite sides of the booth. "Do I have school tomorrow?"

I shake my head. "Tomorrow's Sunday."

"*Oh.*" He folds his arms and rests his chin on them glumly.

"What's the matter?"

"My friend Uriah says on Sundays his family goes fishing."

I nod. "Okay."

"And on Sundays my friend Aria and her family go to their cabin by the lake."

"Wait," I say, confused. "Didn't you just say that Aria goes fishing?"

Zander sighs like he can't believe I can't keep up with him. "Noooo... I said that *Uriah* goes fishing. Keep up."

I hold in a laugh at his adorable energy. "I'm sorry. My mistake." They both had a drawn-out '*ria*' sound. And really, '*Ur*' and '*Ar*' are basically the same sound.

Zander sighs again. "Yeah, so *Ariaaaa* goes to a cabin by the lake with her family."

"That sounds nice," I say, still unsure where this is going. "I have a cabin down by the lake too."

"You do?" he asks, his green eyes—the same color as Zoe's—growing as round and wide as his glasses frames.

"Yup. And one up here in the mountains near the ski slopes."

"That's a lot of cabins."

"It's easy to have a lot when you do all the labor yourself and own a lumber mill," I smile.

"Labor?"

“Work. I make wood and build cabins,” I say more plainly.

Zander’s look of pure awe is the ego boost I didn’t know I needed.

“That means you can build anything!”

“Well, not anything—”

“Can you build trucks?” He holds his little, wooden green truck up for me to inspect.

“Actually, with some of the tools I have across the street at the shop, I think I can.”

“I’m going to drive a truck just like this one day,” he says with so much confidence that I wholeheartedly believe him.

“I bet you are.”

“Zoe doesn’t have a truck,” he says, deflating so quickly I get whiplash.

I peer outside of the window at the parking lot and see that he’s right. Zoe’s patchy pickup is missing. Had she sold it? Even though it was breaking down constantly, it still seemed safer to drive home in the beat-up truck late at night than walking home in the dark.

“Zoe doesn’t have a cabin either.”

*Zoe.* Why does he keep calling his mom by her first name?

I’m ten years older than Zoe and not a parent, so is this some new thing sparking in the younger generations? Getting rid of the terms Mommy and Daddy? I hope not. Sure, I knew I’d shift from Daddy to Dad one day, but I still wanted to hear them both. It’s a parental right, isn’t it?

“On Sundays we just stay here at the diner.” Zander frowns. “Like Saturdays and every other day. But all my friends get to do something fun on the weekends. They get to spend time with their families. Sunday is *special*.”

My heart twists at Zander’s defeated expression. When I was a kid, my parents let me run wild around Forester Ranch with my cousins, and I want the same for my future kids... assuming I even have access to Forester Ranch in the future.

Thanks to my Uncle Buckee withholding my share of the land unless I marry, it's a toss-up.

I can imagine Zander in a few years running around with my cousin Cali's twins and the Woods brothers' children whenever they come out for a visit—not sitting here in a rowdy diner until midnight week after week.

Not that I blame Zoe either. Obviously, she has no help, and from the looks of it, no family or friends aside from Connie. Being a parent is hard enough, but being a *single* parent is nearly impossible if you don't have any help. Since Zoe doesn't seem to have family, she needs a friend.

I want to be far more than a friend to her—I want to be her everything—but it's a starting point I've managed to wiggle my way slowly into ever since we met a year ago.

“You know,” I say, turning the toy truck over in my fingers as I think of a way to cheer Zander up, “maybe we could build a bigger truck.”

My tactic works because suddenly Zander's shoulders rise again.

“How big?”

I purse my lips and look around as if I'm thinking. “How about... big enough for you to ride in?”

He gapes at me adorably like a little fish. “No way.”

“*Yes way*. If you're going to drive the real thing as an adult, you should practice now, right?”

“When?”

I think again. “What about... *Sunday*?”

He nods giddily in agreement. “Zoe!” he squeals as Zoe pops out from the back with her purse tucked under her arm while putting her coat on. “Zoe! Cole's going to build a truck with me tomorrow!”

She looks from him to me wide-eyed as she helps him into his coat.

“If you'll allow it,” I say quickly.



“Build a truck?” She asks in confusion.

Zander thrusts the toy so far under her nose she goes cross-eyed. “Just like this one, right Cole?”

“Didn’t I tell you to call him Mr. Cole?” she frowns.

“Mr. Cole is my father,” I say with a smile. “Just Cole is fine.”

“Just like this one. But bigger!” Zander says, ignoring us both while playing with his toy truck. “One I can drive in.”

“Drive in?” She gazes at me incredulously, but there’s something else in her eyes. *Fear*. “That would take a lot of lumber and parts.”

*Money.*

“All of which I have lying around my shop, and it’s only going to waste,” I assure her. “It’ll be a more fun way to recycle the parts. I wasn’t sure what to do with them before.”

Zoe relaxes her shoulders at this.

“Can I, Zoe? Can I go with Cole to his workshop tomorrow?”

“I don’t know...” Zoe’s worried eyes glance from the jumping six-year-old to me again.

I can see the concern clouding her, and I don’t blame her one bit. I couldn’t say I’d trust anyone with my kid either. But I want to help, and Zander’s driving them both—and the customers—insane by being cooped up in here all day. Plus, this way Zoe won’t have to stress over trying to keep an eye on Zander while running around the diner all day.

“You know our office is right across the street.” I tap the window and she follows my gaze. There’s a massive window at the front. A window she could clearly see out of while she’s working the floor and serving customers. “I can set up a workbench directly behind that window. Cole and I will stay glued there where you can trace our every move until your shift ends. I promise you won’t lose sight of him.”

“*Pleaseeeee.*” Zander whines, his little hands clasped together as if he were praying.

“Fine,” she relents and wraps her arms around him as he jumps up to give her a bear hug.

“Now, say goodbye to Cole. We have to get going.”

“Will you give me a piggyback ride?” Zander asks. “I don’t want to walk.”

That reminds me. “What happened to your truck?” I ask. “Zander said you don’t have it anymore.”

“I sold it,” she says nonchalantly as if it isn’t a big deal.

“Why?”

She shrugs. “Zander’s school is just up the road, and our apartment is just down the road with the diner right in between. It’s a small town so we can walk anywhere we need to go. I don’t really need it.”

That fact that she won’t look at me tells me that there’s more to the story, but I let it go for now.

“It’s dangerous to walk alone at night, though.”

“Maybe from a bear,” she jokes, but I’m not laughing. And I’m not asking when I say, “Let’s go. I’ll take you home.”

“That’s ok. We can walk—”

“I know you *can*,” I say, taking Zander’s free hand as he pretends to drive his truck through the air. “But it doesn’t mean that you *should*. Besides, Zander would love to ride in a green truck, wouldn’t he?”

Zander pauses his toy’s ascension to stare up at me. “You have a green truck?”

“The greenest.”

“Oh yes! I want to ride in it.” He squirms excitedly, bouncing on his heels before running out the door as we follow.

Zoe narrows her eyes as if to say using Zander to get my way was low.

“You don’t want to ride in my truck?” I whisper teasingly as Zander leads the way into the parking lot. “What was that you said earlier? *Three hours and the only thing I rode was that damn—*”

She knocks my shoulder to stop me singing, but the smile she tries to hide as she climbs into my *damn truck* after Zander is priceless.



## Chapter Two

Zoe

I didn't think I could possibly find Cole any more attractive than I already did.

That was before I saw him up close and personal with my little brother.

Sure, Cole always acknowledged Zander and even ate his meals at the diner with him, but I'd never been able to linger around their table long enough to catch the full scope of their dynamic. But our short truck ride showed me just how comfortable Zander is with Cole and that it went far beyond polite pleasantries. It's like they've been best friends this whole time, and I'm just now finding out.

Apparently, Cole knows Zander's teacher's name, Ms. Hucklebee. He knows that Zander's in first grade and that his favorite animal is a dinosaur. A Stegosaurus, to be exact. He knows that Zander had a field trip to Falcon Farm last week and that a rogue llama from the neighboring farm trespassed just to spit on the owner—a fact they were reminiscing and giggling about now.

As the two chatter continuously, I can't help but wonder why Cole is doing all of this.

Why is he so invested in Zander and me?

Do I want him to be invested in us?

I know why all Mom's boyfriends were invested in her, and it had nothing to do with Zander and me and everything to do with her body.

But that's not Cole, right? He isn't shallow.

Since I came to town a year ago, he's the only one besides Connie who's ever paid us any attention. Well, after the initial gossip that surrounded our arrival, that is. In a town as small as Moonshine Creek, gossip swirled faster than flies on dung.

The most popular rumor though is that I'm Zander's mom — that I had him at sixteen and that my family abandoned me because of the pregnancy.

I never corrected anyone because, in a way, they were right. Our mother passed, leaving us with just each other. I never knew my father, and the same went for Zander's. The only thing I know for sure is that they were different men. Zander's the vanilla to my caramel, but we share the same green eyes and sunkissed, golden brown hair color, though Zander's is more of a dirty blonde—these traits we both inherited from Mom.

Mom was mixed. Her skin color was more like my own. She was so beautiful. I wish she could have found someone who saw past that and loved her for her heart and mind too. She died before she got the chance.

My heart squeezes as her beautiful face flashes before me. She wasn't perfect, but she never made excuses. Well, aside from our father's identities.

That doesn't matter now though. I'm Zander's guardian and parental figure, and I have been since Mom passed away two years ago. I'm the only mother that he'll remember.

As I watch Zander now and see how he physically clings to Cole's side instead of mine, I wonder if I'm doing a good enough job of caring for Zander on my own as both his sister and his mom.

No matter how much I want to be everything for Zander, the fact remains that I can't wear every hat, though that doesn't stop me from trying. I know my limitations though. I can't be Zander's dad too, and he needs a father figure in his life. Something that seeing him with Cole has made abundantly clear.

But Cole embodies something I can't possess. He's a man. *All man*, with broad shoulders, a full beard, and dark blue eyes the same color as the lake that sparkles down in the valley. His thick, dark brown hair. His tattoos on his biceps, and I can only imagine where else. Everything about him is masculine, and Zander's like a sponge, soaking up all of his energy.

For a brief second, I see us in the truck's rearview mirror, taking my breath away. Zander's between us, leaning on Cole's shoulder and excitedly chatting while Cole smiles and listens, and I watch them both. We look so comfortable together.

*We look like a family.*

But we aren't.

I can understand that, but Zander can't. He can't understand boundaries yet or that Cole owes us nothing. It makes me weary and terrified to get close to him because nothing is binding Cole to us, unlike the blood that ties Zander and me together.

Just like Mom's many boyfriends who were there one month and gone the next with all those promises of 'family' and forever. If there's one thing I learned from my mom, it's that men come and go, and you can't trust their promises of forever.

Maybe that's why I've hesitated to let Cole into our lives fully. That's why I've been trying to keep some distance between us. To soften the blow to Zander when Cole eventually grows tired of us and moves on.

*The blow to Zander? Just Zander?* My subconscious prods, but I snuff it out.

"Cole," Zander says, sliding out of the truck behind me. Before I can blink, he's running around to the driver's door and throwing it open. "Come see my trucks! I have a whole shelf of them right above our bed."

My cheeks burn at the words *'our bed.'*

I work in a diner, and I'm essentially a single mom, or so Cole thinks, so it's no surprise that we aren't rich. Still, what kind of mother can't afford a separate bed for her kid? Even if we do share a room in the one-bedroom apartment.

"Zander," I say with an embarrassed laugh. "I'm sure Cole's super busy—"

“I’d love to,” Cole interrupts, his eyes flickering to mine. “If it’s okay, that is.”

There it is, that firm, commanding, yet gentle tone that weakens my knees. It’s the same tone when Cole said, “Sing to me” earlier at the diner. It’s the same tone I imagine that he’d use in bed.

I shake away the thought, and when I return to earth, Zander’s puppy eyes and pouting lips tell me I have no choice.

My fingers fiddle with the keys for a moment as I try to steady my breath. Opening our door to Cole is like opening another entry point for Cole to get closer to us. That aside, our crappy little apartment is our safe haven—the one place no one is allowed to judge us because it’s our own little bubble.

Will Cole judge us when he sees the secondhand furniture and the constant mess I barely have time to clean?

As we head inside, my eyes are immediately drawn to the mess on the coffee table. Gray feathers from Zander’s Ugly Duckling mask project cover the presswood, as do empty residue-stained coffee mugs I haven’t had the chance to wash yet. But what stands out to me the most is the stack of red notices, half hidden beneath the feathers. Then there’s the letter from Child Protective Services I opened last night—requesting a home visit.

If Cole notices the calm chaos, he ignores it as Zander leads the way to our bedroom. He gives me a look before following Zander across the threshold, and I give a slight nod in approval.

“This one is my favorite,” Zander says, kicking off his shoes before standing on our bed to return the same green truck he’d brought to the diner. “It’s my favorite color.”

“Green,” they say in unison.

“But not just any green,” Zander says, beginning his usual speech.

“*Forest green*,” they say together again as I rush to grab the letters before shoving them in a kitchen drawer.



That's when I notice our tiny dining room table.

It's littered with the diner's take-out containers. Guilt claws at me as I toss them all into the trash.

Even though I cook all the food at the diner, I know it isn't suitable for anyone long-term, much less a growing boy like Zander. I've been trying to convince Connie to implement a few healthier choices, but she isn't listening, claiming the residents like grease, cake, and a cold one from the bar next door to wash it down with. Maybe she's right, but what about hearty meals? Many people depend on the diner's food when they're in between shifts at work or on a lunch break. Maybe it would be a welcome change to have some healthier options. I heard the rosemary pot roast Grant Woods makes at his lodge is a massive hit a few mountains over.

I'd feel much better about feeding Zander something like that, along with some greens, more often. But then again, I'm just happy to feed him at all, and the diner's free leftovers allow me to do just that.

As Zander and Cole appear back in the living room, I quickly tug on Zander's knitted baby blanket to cover a moth-eaten hole in our lumpy sofa before offering Cole a seat.

"Would you like something to drink?" I ask. "Water?"

That's all we have. If Zander wanted juice or I wanted decent coffee, we went to the diner in the morning before I whisked Zander off to school.

"Sure," Cole smiles his thanks as Zander begins to address his concerns about their new truck-building project.

I barely get the glass filled under the tap before there are a few knocks on the door.

We all freeze, and Zander falls quiet. He knows that aside from maybe Cole and Connie, I have no friends, and we never get visitors. Not good ones, anyway.

His wide eyes find mine, but they're filled with excitement, not the dread brewing in my stomach.

“Quiet game?” he mouths, and I nod with a smile, feeling like I’m about to throw up.

The knocks grow more intense as I put the water glass down as quietly as possible before placing a finger to my lips.

Cole looks from me to the door quizzically as Zander copies me, placing a finger over his grin to tell Cole to keep quiet. Then he takes Cole’s hand and then mine, just as another bang rattles the door.

As we tip-toe into the hallway, I can feel Cole’s eyes burning into me as Zander eases open the bathroom door, and we trickle inside.

*BANG! BANG! BANG!*

“I know you’re in there, Zoe!” A male voice booms.

As Zander turns on the faucet to drown out the sound, I shut the door behind us and ignore Cole’s intense stare that’s damn near burning my skin off. I know he’s added everything together—the stacks of letters. Me selling my truck. The banging. No, he isn’t confused anymore, but I have no time to feel embarrassed. Not when I can make Zander feel like it’s all a game.

Protecting Zander from our harsh reality is my first priority.

Pulling back the shower curtain, Zander motions for Cole to sit in the tiny tub. When he does, Zander forces me in next, so I sit between Cole’s poor knees that are scrunched up to his ears. Zander does the same to me, grabbing my knees as I place my hands over his ears right before my landlord screams, “You can’t keep hiding!”

The pounding is so loud now that I pray Zander can’t hear it.

Cole’s warm hands come down over mine, shielding Zander’s ears too and the gesture damn near shatters me. His head rests on my shoulder, and our eyes meet until I can’t see him anymore because mine are filled with tears.

When the banging dies down, and the sound of an engine rolling over alerts us to my landlord's departure, I finally take my hands from Zander's ears.

Cole's hands fall to my sides before he wraps them slowly, tentatively around me in a hug I haven't felt from anyone outside of Zander's tiny arms. A hug I never would've known I needed so badly until I got it. His arms feel so solid and supportive around my frame, which feels so pitifully weak as we all get to our feet. What I wouldn't give to be able to feel his comforting arms around me every day, helping me stay strong even when I'm so so tired.

But I can't be like Mom and put my weight on someone else. Because when they leave, I'll crumble.

"We won!" Zander declares, punching the air and cutting the faucet off before happily running back into the living room and peeking out the curtains. "The beast left!"

*For now.*

I finally relax.

That is—until I see a letter beneath the door.

Cole sees it too.

"Since we won, I think that means we get a prize, right?" Cole says to distract Zander. "What about thirty minutes of TV before bed?"

I pick up the letter just as the theme song from Zander's cartoon filters from the tiny TV in our bedroom. I'm filled with dread, already knowing what the letter will say.

My heart sinks. And sinks. Until it drops out of my body entirely as I read the words 'EVICTION NOTICE' in big red letters.

I'd tried so hard to avoid this. To keep a safe, warm place for Zander. *A home.*

It didn't matter that I'd sold my truck to pay last month's owed rent. Or that I worked pretty much every waking hour at the diner to try and get ahead. I was short again. And I had been since moving in.

As I scan the document, I see we only have three days to get out. That can't be legal, but did I really want to deal with the harassment that would follow if I didn't oblige? And I don't have the time or money to fight it.

Maybe I could find the energy alone, but Zander's peace of mind and comfort came first. How could I expect him to have that if we needed to play the quiet game daily?

Soon, he'd catch on that it wasn't a game at all.

Still, without my truck, where are we going to go?

What am I going to do?

We have a home visit from the family department in less than a week. How can they see I'm taking good care of Zander if we're homeless?

Overwhelmed and panicked with thoughts of them taking Zander away from me, I'm suddenly lightheaded.

I feel like I'm going to pass out.

And I do...

Right into Cole's strong, tattooed arms.



# Chapter Three

## Cole

Something primal overtook me when I heard Zoe's landlord banging on that door. The barrier that's meant to keep them tucked safely inside while sealing out any danger.

The guy is owed money. *I get it.*

As a business owner, I've had my fair share of non-paying customers, but I've never used such force to get my point across, especially not toward a woman and her kid. He already has the upper hand. He has his letter. The police would be on his side if Zoe didn't comply, and yet he still found the need to pound on her door like he was about to kick it in and put his hands on her.

*On them.*

I wanted to leap up and rip the door open—to tell the landlord we could damn read and that Zoe and Zander would be out by the deadline. I bet his attitude would've changed when he laid eyes on a six foot six, two hundred and forty-pound man instead of the five-foot-nothing woman and her fifty-pound kid he was expecting.

But then, something else had stopped me from leaving that tub.

*Zander and Zoe.*

When we sat, stacked together almost like Russian nesting dolls, my need to stay with them as the biggest doll, the exterior shell, and the protector, made me stay put. It made me keep my arms around them both until the danger left. Then I stayed overnight to make sure the landlord didn't come back.

But the landlord isn't the only threat.

There are a half-dozen others, waiting patiently inside the utensil drawer...

I seriously had no intentions of snooping—or leaving until Zoe woke up—but when Zander asked for cereal the following morning, I stumbled across the red notices and letters.

While he munched away, enjoying a cartoon on my phone, and Zoe continued to slumber soundly on the couch, I read them on accident... and then on purpose.

I'd bent down to pick up the two that fell out of the drawer. That's when I noticed one of the letters was from Child Protective Services concerning Zoe's guardianship over Zander.

### *Guardianship.*

Suddenly, Zander's constant use of "Zoe" instead of 'Mommy' or 'Mom' makes sense because Zander isn't Zoe's son. He's her brother, yet Zoe always referred to him as her kid or baby. I can't help but wonder why she never corrected me or anyone else in town. Then again, what did it matter? Zoe is Zander's legal guardian, so wherever his biological parents are, they aren't in the picture, making Zoe his parent.

His *single* parent.

That's a lot for a twenty-two-year-old to take on, especially one who can barely make ends meet, and yet Zoe's trying her damndest.

How long has she been struggling just to keep the utilities on and a roof over their heads?

How long has Zander been in her care full-time?

And how long has she been awake that she's still sleeping when Zander and I return from my workshop and dinner at the diner that afternoon?

I had reservations about taking him without Zoe's permission and even more hesitations about leaving Zoe alone. Not just because of her aggressive landlord but because I knew she'd be sick with worry over Zander.

On the other hand, Zander was bouncing off the walls with energy. Energy I didn't want to disturb Zoe with, so I'd sent

her text updates every thirty minutes. I never got a response back.

As I tuck Zander into bed by seven thirty p.m. and Zoe still doesn't rouse, it's clear she's barely been functioning. Merely running off of adrenaline and caffeine fumes to keep going. Now her body has finally given up. I itch with the need to care for them, make things better, and keep them safe.

Watching over Zander through the open bedroom door—and Zoe now as I settle beside her on the couch—scratches that itch. That protective desire is only growing stronger by the minute.

If she were mine, I'd take care of them. She would never need to overwork herself like this again, spreading herself so thin that I'm surprised she hasn't fallen apart. She wouldn't have to be in this alone anymore. I'd be her rock. I'd be who she leans on when she's overwhelmed.

I wish I could keep her in my arms all the time. It felt so right to hold her back in the tub—to comfort her and keep her safe. I can imagine holding her every night in our bed; if I could do just that, it would be enough. But I know it will take more time to earn her trust, trust I don't want to take advantage of while she's so vulnerable.

I gaze down at her, sleeping peacefully now. For once, her forehead isn't wrinkled with worry or stress. This might be the only time I've ever seen her fully relaxed.

Leaning down to brush a lock from her face, I can't help but press a kiss to her forehead, wishing I had the right to kiss her lips instead. From now on, I'll do whatever I can to help her be as relaxed as she is now.

But whatever peace she found in her dreams slowly comes to an end as she begins to toss and turn. Her brows knit, and her eyes dart back and forth in agitation beneath their lids. A second later, they blink open, changing from sleepy unawareness to pure panic as she bolts upright.

“Zander!” she screams. “Zander, we have to go.”



Before I can stop her, she's rolled off the couch onto all fours. As her hands frantically pat around the darkness, I reach for her phone that I'd placed on the coffee table.

She's so out of it that she doesn't register when I hand it to her. Instinctively, she hits the power button, lighting the living room in a blue glow as she gazes at the time and jumps to her feet.

"Zander, it's eight! I'm late for work, let's go!"

"Zoe," I say calmly as I watch her stumble to the wall and flick on a light switch that won't work.

When Zander and I got home, the power was out. The electric company had made good on their promise. Thankfully, there's a cool breeze tonight with a bright silvery moon shining through the window. If it weren't for the natural nightlight, I'm not sure Zander would've fallen asleep so quickly.

Zoe curses as she bucks her toe into the table leg. "Zan!"

Reaching for my phone, I turn on my flashlight, and Zoe damn near jumps out of her skin as the tiny room lights up.

"Cole?" Her hand flies to her throat. "What the hell did I tell you about sneaking up on me?"

"I thought that only applied to the diner," I smile softly as she gazes around us, taking in our surroundings.

"What are you still doing here?" she asks, reaching for Zander's coat while trying to put her shoes on and nearly falling over in the process. "I can't believe I slept this long. I can't afford to be late, especially not now... not when—"

Not when she needs some cash to pay for some cheap room in a seedy motel. A room I'd be damned to let her and Zander stay in.

"Hey, hey," I say, grasping her arm to steady her. "It's alright."

"No, it's not." She sounds on the brink of tears. "I need that shift."

“You *needed* the rest. It’s going to be okay. Come here,” I say as I pull her onto my lap, soothingly running circles over her back.

She’s so defeated that she doesn’t resist or tense up the way she always does when I get too close for too long. And I’m damn near shocked when she presses her face into my neck. A second later, I feel the flutter of her wet eyelashes.

“I can’t afford to rest,” she cries into my shoulder. “The eviction. The letters—”

“Can wait. Zoe, everyone deserves to rest. You more than anyone. Let me help you. Zander is already in bed, and I can stay here with him while you go to work, so you don’t have to wake him up.” I want to bite my tongue even as I say it.

The last thing she should do is go to work, but I know her anxiety won’t lessen until she does.

“You would do that for me?” Zoe looks up at me, eyes wide with a mixture of disbelief and hopefulness.

“I would do anything for you.”

The moment I say the words, I swear I can see that switch flip inside of her. But instead of shutting off, she’s turned *on*.

“But somehow, I don’t think you’ll let me convince you to take the night off,” I say, licking my suddenly dry lips.

Her eyes follow the motion of my tongue, and suddenly the air between us becomes charged. Our breathing quickens as we realize how close we are to each other. So close I could lean in and finally taste her. I rub my thumb along her jaw and lower lip as we gaze into each other’s eyes. Like magnets on an invisible force field, we begin to draw together...

Then her phone rings, effectively pulling us out of our trance.

Zoe rushes to answer it, stumbling from my lap as the name Connie runs across the screen. “Hey, I was just leaving!” Her hands that attempt to smooth the frizzy halo around her curls are shaking.

Did I make her that nervous?

*Good.*

“Whoa, what do you mean don’t come in?” She stops her smoothing, her eyes growing wide. “*What???*... But...But... no, no, I understand. Thank you for warning me.”

*Warning her?* I look at her in confusion.

“It looks like I don’t have work tonight. I guess my landlord went into the diner looking for me.” The embarrassment that crosses her features twists my heart. “Now my boss knows I’ve been evicted, and she’s giving me a few days off to figure things out. We don’t have much, so I don’t think it will take too long to pack, but I have no idea where we’re going to go and...”

She’s panicking again, and instinctively I reach for her again.

“Zoe—”

She shakes her head. “You don’t get it. I have a...” she falters and swallows. She still doesn’t trust me completely. “A meeting. It has to be done at home. I can’t do it at some hotel.”

“You can stay with me,” I offer without admitting I know all about the meeting. Not yet, anyway. “I have plenty of space.” And I can’t picture her going anywhere else, much less some roach-infested motel. They should be with me.

“No, I can’t. That’s putting way too much on you,” she hides her face in my chest. I didn’t even realize I was holding her again. That just reconfirms how right of a fit we are for one another. I just need Zoe to see it too.

“I can handle a lot of weight. Look at the size of me.”

It’s enough to earn a watery smile, but she’s still on the defense.

“You can put some on my shoulders.”

“You’re only saying that because you don’t know all of what’s going on, how heavy it can be. It’s not just the eviction.”

I take a slow breath, not knowing how she'll react if I confess to reading her mail.

“So why don't you tell me?”

She looks so vulnerable, and I can see in her eyes that she's contemplating if she should finally let go and share her burdens.

“It's okay to ask for help, Zoe.”

She sniffles. “Not me. Zander relies on me for everything. I have to provide for him. What would happen to him if I can't do that on my own?”

“What would happen to *you*?”

She doesn't answer because I know she isn't thinking about herself at all.

“Zoe, if you're Zander's support, and you crumble, so will he. Taking care of yourself *is* taking care of Zander, and you can't keep going like this. It's not good for either of you.”

I gently slide my fingers into her curly hair and tip her head back to look up at me. Her eyes shine with unshed tears just like they did inside the bathtub, and my stomach twists at the sight.

“I can share the load. But you have to tell me first. You don't have to carry it all on your own anymore. Let me carry some for you. I promise I'm strong enough.”

Minutes pass and I think she's going to remain stubborn. But then, as her lip trembles, the cracks she's been trying so hard to hide begin to slip through, and then she shatters right in my arms.

Through deep breaths, she lets it all out.

Losing their mother and taking custody of Zander at just twenty.

Having to move to Moonshine Creek a year ago because the town was cheaper than the touristy village near the lakeshore where she grew up. Then, she finally admits that their move wasn't solely based on the rental prices.

Through hiccups, she tells me that Zander's guardianship case was taking a turn for the worst. At his last school, she'd consistently picked him up thirty minutes late, as that's when her shift ended. Her boss wouldn't budge on reworking the schedule, and she needed the job.

That triggered a series of home visits that pointed out all of Zoe's shortcomings, like there not being enough fruit and vegetables in the fridge because they mainly lived off of the fast food at her old job. Then, at least once a week, Zander would fall asleep in class because he was up late the previous night at her job with her since she couldn't afford to hire a babysitter.

"I'm trying so hard," she sobs. "But it's not enough. It's not enough to try. It's not enough to love Zander. He has needs."

"Needs I can help with," I say gently. "Like a home for that visit."

She looks at me incredulously. "I'd have to register the new address with their department. Unless you're my landlord it's not easy to just say that I live there. Especially if I'm inside of the unit *with* you as an unvetted person. They don't even know you."

"So I'll get vetted. And you need to register a new address anyway."

She shakes her head frantically, already shutting down my solution.

"Look at me," I demand gently. I lift her chin until she meets my gaze. "I want to do this."

"But why?" She genuinely looks confused.

"I told you. I'd do anything for you and if that means becoming a vetted person in the household, I'll do it. They can run a background check and they'll see that I have no criminal record or history of violence or abuse. I'll get character witness statements—"

"Cole, it's not that simple. They are always suspicious of having men around who aren't family. They've already

marked me as an unstable single guardian. Adding some strange man into the equation doesn't help things."

"But I'm not just some strange man."

She shakes her head again. "They won't see it that way. You're still not family. They'll be worried that it's not a stable home for Zander. I doubt the government takes 'friendship' seriously."

"So let's make it serious. Let's show them that we *are* family."

Her brows knit in confusion again as she struggles to find the words. "How? What we're talking about is really complicated. It's a long-term commitment. I don't understand why you'd go through all of that trouble. I'm not anything to you."

That's where she's wrong. She's *everything*.

"So become my wife. Marry me," I say matter-of-factly.

"*WHAT??* Are you crazy? I can't just marry you." Zoe throws her hands up in exasperation. I can't tell if she realizes I'm serious or not.

"Why not?"

"Because... it wouldn't make sense! You'd be taking on a huge responsibility. I know you want to help, but why would you ask me that? What would you even get out of marrying me?"

*I'd get all of you.* But something tells me she isn't ready to hear that answer just yet.

That's when I think of it, a way to get her to let me help that seems '*even*'. I never thought I'd be grateful that Uncle Buckee put that ridiculous clause in his will, and now, I couldn't be more thankful.

"I need a wife," I say bluntly.

She blinks. "What? Why? And why would you choose me of all people? I have nothing to offer you in return."

Convincing her may be more difficult than I thought, but I know that I will. I have to. Not only do I want to help her and Zander, but I can't imagine marrying anyone else. I want to wake up every morning with her in my arms. I want to hang out with Zander and build toy trucks. I want to smell her chocolatey scent after she's spent a day baking in my kitchen, and I want to taste more batter from her fingertips when she's excited for me to try a new recipe of hers. Suddenly my life seems so empty, and now I know that Zoe and Zander are what's missing. I want us to be a family. But more than anything, I want it to be *real*. I can convince her in time. I know I can. She must feel this too, but her walls are up so high that I won't be able to get in unless I make this logical instead of emotional.

I take a deep breath as I prepare to explain.

"My Uncle Buckee put a clause in his will that we have to get married to inherit our portion of the ranch. He's convinced that it's the push we all need to go after what we really want—a family." I purposely leave out the part about needing to have children. One thing at a time. And maybe Zander would count; I'll have to ask.

Zoe crinkles her nose as she tries to process this.

"I don't get it. You could have anyone, *anyone* you want. And I've seen your cousins. You all could. So why would your uncle issue such an ultimatum? Wouldn't you all have families by now if you wanted to?" she asks.

"I wouldn't say I could have *anyone* I want," I say. I try to sound teasing, but the longing I feel for her has made its way into my voice. But I can tell she's not ready to hear that she's who I want, and I can tell she wants to ask, so I hurry to argue my case before she has the chance. "Besides, we don't know how long Buckee has left. This is perfect for both of us. I'll get the ranch, and you'll have somewhere safe to stay with Zander."

The moment I utter Zander's name, I can see the crack immediately forming in her resolve.

"I don't know..." Zoe hedges.

I know I'm about to play dirty when I say this, but she needs to hear it. "If we were married, Child Protective Services would see that you're settled and that you can provide a stable life for Zander."

That gets her attention even more. She looks up at me with hope in her eyes, but she still has too much pride to say yes right away. She'll never make anything easy for me, so it's a good thing I love her stubbornness and have enough of my own to keep up with her because I'm never backing down.

"But what about when you meet someone you really want to marry?" she asks nervously, looking down at her feet.

When will she realize that *she's* who I really want? Maybe I can convince her of that once we're married.

"Let's not worry about what-ifs right now. If either of us wants out of this marriage in a few years, we'll split amicably. This will give you time to figure everything out."

I can tell that I have her now. She hesitates for one more moment.

"Okay," she finally whispers. "For Zander. And your property."

No. For *all* of us.

If I have to, I'll spend the rest of my life trying to ensure she doesn't regret those words.





# Chapter Four

Zoe

I'm free-falling, plunging through the forest canopy like a fairy with torn wings.

*No.*

With wings that can't support all of my weight. All of my burdens.

A creamy white, bohemian wedding dress billows around me, the small, off-the-shoulder cap sleeves fluttering madly in the wind. Pearl buttons stretch from my hips to my waist, leading to an open back with a sheer lace overlay and a button at the top, which makes it look sweetly sexy.

I can't focus on my beautiful gown, though, just the hard ground covered in gnarled roots and boulders bound to split me into a million pieces.

I flap my wings faster and harder, but it isn't enough.

If only I could get rid of some of my weight.

If only I could let go and accept help...

As the thought crosses my mind, a lumberjack appears below through the pines, his tattooed arms outstretched and ready to catch me, like he knew I was coming.

Like he knew I was falling.

My first instinct is to squeeze my eyes shut and get ready for the skeleton-shattering collision into the mountainside, but then I hear his voice, though his lips don't move.

"I promise I'm strong enough for us both."

*I promise...*

The words ring in my ears with such conviction that I believe him despite my heart's warning that men's promises are as good as no promise at all.

I believe my burly lumberjack because I... because I trust him, and I think I... *love him?*

Suddenly, I'm not freefalling. I'm floating, drifting down towards my savior. No. Co-savior, because now my wings are working, stabilizing me as if they know they finally have help.

As I drift closer, he catches me possessively, his big body leaning into me so slowly that I can feel his soft breaths tickling my lips. Supporting me with one arm, he uses his free hand to gently pull a curl from my face, his gaze electric.

That's what's buzzing through me now. Pure electricity, like dozens of buzzing butterflies that are igniting every nerve ending within me. My whole body tingles as warmth snowballs in my chest in anticipation of our first kiss.

And just as our lips touch, I wake up.

I blink, squinting in the sunlight and drifting through my hotel suite's sheer curtains. It's a hotel, not a motel like I'm accustomed to. It's massive, with an ensuite and more than enough room for Connie to stay overnight with me.

I'm grateful for the company because it's the first night I've slept without Zander. Well, that's not entirely true. I made him stay on a video call with me most of last night, though he barely spared me a glance. Cole's his best buddy now.

Not that I can even blame him. Since Zander paid me zero attention, I spent my time searching the screen for a shirtless, sweatpants-wearing Cole who drifted in and out of the background.

At one point, Zander asked me if I was sleepy because I kept drooling.

If I'm being honest, my call wasn't entirely sincere. Yes, I wanted to make sure Zander was okay, but I also had this nagging feeling about Cole. Sure, our wedding is a sham, but how could I blame him if he stuck Zander with a babysitter—one I approved of—before heading out with his cousins to a strip club for a bachelor party?

The thought twists my stomach into knots it has no business twisting into.

But I was so relieved when I realized that Cole wasn't like that. He wasn't interested in a night of debauchery. He just wanted to hang out with Zander. Does that mean he'll be that faithful and devoted during our marriage?

*It's a sham marriage, Zoe. It's predestined to fail. You know that already. It's what you signed up for.*

But... Cole had reserved the hotel room for me, saying that it was bad luck to see the bride before the wedding. Did that mean he wanted it to succeed?

I sigh. Fake or not, I'm getting married. Legally. To Cole. *Today.*

I gaze over at my perfect wedding dress, the same one from my dream that I found at a local thrift store. It's delicate, demure, and understated.

The thin material is light and airy with a floral lace overlay. The A-line shape stops just above my feet, so I won't have to worry about tripping over it, and the leg slits on each side make it easy to walk in. I wonder if Cole will find the subtle flash of my bronze legs sexy.

When I tried on the dress, all I could imagine was Cole's face lighting up with love and desire. I want him to want me. I want him to see me in my wedding dress and think this is forever, not just for now.

I'm being delusional, I know, but I can pretend, can't I?

This is my moment, one I doubt I'll ever have again with another groom. Not when I have Zander to raise and his future college tuition to help pay for. Then there are my dreams, like running my own restaurant and getting to design the menu to feature foods that I want to make.

Designing and baking my dream wedding cake—a tier of decadent dark chocolate and another of a light amaretto flavor with shaved almonds topped with cream cheese frosting—the past two days made me wonder if I want to focus more on pastries.

“Are you ready to become the most gorgeous bride on earth?” Connie asks, peeking into my room with a makeup

bag. No matter what year it is, Connie's dressed like a fourth Golden Girl, and today's no exception, with her thick shoulder pads and slingback kitten heels. Inside the dated diner, she blends in as if the eighties were still in full swing. And yet, I find her demeanor so comforting. So familiar, as if I've known this woman my entire life.

Despite our little tiffs over the menu, I seriously can't think of anyone else I'd love more to help me get ready.

I smile and nod, not trusting myself to speak, to tell Connie more lies than I already have. Like Cole was so in love with me that he proposed after a few weeks of secretly dating.

Connie hadn't been surprised. She swooned, saying how much she knew love was in the air at the diner—more like lies.

“Cole won't be able to keep his eyes or lips off of you,” she promises.

*His lips.*

As I slip into my wedding dress, I can't stop thinking about how real the kiss felt in my dream and how he'll kiss me during the wedding. Will it be soft and comforting? Or will it be raw and possessive, like in my dirtiest fantasies?

Examining myself in the mirror, I imagine Cole sliding my sleeves down my shoulders on our wedding night, trailing the material with soft kisses down my skin. But I have to snap out of it. There won't be a honeymoon tonight, regardless of the wedding lingerie I couldn't stop buying. The white silk slip dress feels so luxurious against my skin underneath my wedding dress.

Despite Connie's offering—she's incredibly heavy-handed on the blush—I decide to do my makeup myself, keeping it subtle—just mascara, a sheer red lip gloss, and a light dusting of mineral powder foundation and blush.

Connie leaves my tight curls down before securing in place the flower crown I made using the wildflowers in Cole's yard. The golden petals compliment my warm skin and enhance the highlights in my naturally sunkissed hair.

When she's finished with my hair, I can't help but fall in love with the dreamy, forest fairy version of myself.

When we meet Cole and Zander outside of the courthouse, Zander is practically vibrating with excitement, but it's Cole's reaction that sets off butterflies in my stomach. When our eyes meet, I swear an electric current flows through me, connecting me to him.

His gaze is ravenous, slowly raking down my body in a way that makes me shiver before we lock eyes again. I could stare into those deep blue oceans forever... or until Zander comes barreling into me for the world's biggest hug that sends me teetering on my heels, and we all laugh.

"Zoeeeeee! I get to be the best man!" I didn't think it was possible, but my heart melts even more.

Cole's wearing a modest navy suit with a forest green tie, no doubt Zander's influence. His beard is freshly groomed and it looks like he got a haircut. I've never seen him look so polished, even though he's still wearing a blue-green flannel button-down with his suit. He's the perfect lumberjack groom.

The lumberjack and the forest fairy—

*Stop it!*

This isn't about me and Cole. It's about Zander and securing Cole's inheritance at Forester Ranch.

"Zoe, you look absolutely beautiful," Cole whispers in my ear as he takes my hand, sending that electric current straight up my arm and to my wildly beating heart.

Almost breathlessly, I say, "Thanks. You do too."

He chuckles.

"I mean, you look handsome!" I whisper-shout, embarrassed.

He squeezes my hand and leans down to kiss my cheek.

The warmth from his kiss lingers even as we say our vows. I thought we'd just stick with the traditional ones instead of writing our own, but Cole surprises me. As he promises to

always cherish *us*, protect *us*, and help ease *our* burdens, I feel a tingling pressure in my eyes and nose, but I'm trying not to cry. The fact that he included Zander—who took notice with a toothy grin—in his vows is overwhelming.

What will it do to Zander if he finds out none of this is real?

Not if. *When*.

But it *feels* real as Cole gazes into my eyes as he reverently slides the thin rose gold ring on my finger. It feels real when we're pronounced husband and wife. It feels real as he leans down for our very first kiss. It starts off gentle, bordering on polite, like a peck, but then Cole cradles my head, his calloused thumbs stroking my cheeks as he kisses me deeply, brushing his tongue against mine before pulling back like he's fighting to constrain himself.

Something snaps in me—my reservations. My hesitations surrounding all the what-ifs. Maybe I'll care about them again tomorrow, but at this moment I don't want to hold back.

I lean up on my tiptoes, catching his bottom lip between mine in a gentle suck before we finally pull apart. When we do, Cole's eyes are shining the brightest blue.

*We can just pretend*, I tell myself, and I do because it feels real as Cole holds hands with Zander and me as we walk out of the courthouse like we're a real family now. And I want that. More than anything.

"So beautiful," Connie—who I've never seen get emotional unless it's about her beloved diner—cries through tears as she snaps pictures from every angle. I'm grateful for it because I want to remember this. I want to have something to look back on when it's all over. I want to remember what it was like to feel loved and cherished for just a moment in time.

"I'm *so* hungry," Zander whines an hour later as we wander into Cole's backyard.

I squeeze his hand guiltily. He'd been on his best behavior for the entire ceremony. It's definitely time to relax and enjoy some chocolatey goodness.

“I made cake...” I trail off as I notice our surroundings.

The backyard looks downright magical today, with string lights woven between the trees. A subtle mist and light breeze blow a fresh nature smell of petrichor that no candle can quite seem to replicate. It’s like it’s our own woodland paradise, and I couldn’t have imagined a more perfect setting if I tried. One reminiscent of my forest fairy dream.

When I turn to face Cole, he’s already staring at me, a small smile playing on his lips.

“I take it I did good?”

“Better than good. *I love it.*”

“Where are all the guests?” Zander asks, wrinkling his brow.

Aside from Connie, we’re the only ones at the reception.

Cole squats to Zander’s level. “Remember how I was telling you about my Uncle Buckee?”

Zander nods, pushing his glasses up his nose.

“He got pretty sick last week.” Cole’s eyes flicker to mine. “Right when we got the marriage license.”

I can tell he’s explaining to me why none of his family came. It makes me feel better to know that they’re no-shows, not because they question our union and not because today was meaningless to him, but because they needed to be there for Buckee.

A reason that makes me feel even worse. I’ve never met Buckee, but by all accounts, he’s the glue that holds the family together.

“Marriage license?” Zander asks, but Cole shakes his head.

“It doesn’t matter buddy. The point is that with the family so concerned, I thought it’d be best if we told them about the wedding once Buckee’s stable again.”

“And?” Connie asks, her eyebrows shooting up.



I know she's met Buckee a few times during her own hospital stints. Had they grown closer recently?

Cole's smile settles my stomach, and apparently Connie's as she lets out a sigh of relief.

"He's totally stable and cracking tons of jokes again. He'll be discharged tomorrow. We'll have an informal reception at the ranch later. More of our family will be able to come since it'll be Saturday, so it probably works out better that way. I doubt we could fit my entire extended family in my backyard anyway."

Connie pats her hair, which is reminiscent of white candyfloss, and says, "Well, I guess I ought to pay him a visit. After you two lovebirds, of course."

"Can I eat the cake now?" Zander says, hiding his finger that's already smeared in chocolate.

"Hang on," Connie says, grabbing her digital camera. The only modern invention she swears by. "I need some snapshots before you ruin that flannel with icing."

Connie's actually quite a good photographer.

*"I love photos," she told me once when she captured a candid picture of some bikers shoveling cake at the diner. "It's like a time capsule. Forever frozen."*

Was that why she loved the diner's decor so much? Because it's a frozen period in her life? The decade that she first started her business?

Maybe I could explain to her that she could capture every portion of the diner including its recipes with her camera, so she'd always have it frozen in time even as her diner moved on to the future.

That aside, I think she's itching to retire so she can spend more time on her photography. Maybe she'll have an exhibit at the small art gallery in town.

As Connie maneuvers us around for the best background and lighting, I'm sure the setting will only make the photos more convincing, not just for Cole's family, but for CPS who

may be expecting a happy photo or two on the walls. I smile and laugh as Zander makes all kinds of weird poses. When I look up, I expect to see Cole smiling at Zander too, but he's looking at me. His intensity takes my breath away as I look into his eyes. Then I hear a click that lets me know Connie captured that moment too.

"Can. we. cut. the. cake. *Nowww*?" Zander asks through his teeth.

"Yes," Cole and I say in unison as we lead the photoshoot toward the small high table.

Just as I pick up the knife, Connie says, "Get closer to your wife, Cole. Wrap your hand around hers. *That's it*. Go on, touch her. She won't break."

Cole steps so close behind me that his front is pressed into the top of my ass. One of his hands curls around my waist and the other grasps my hand holding the knife.

"Ready, baby?" he asks in my ear, sending a shiver down my spine.

It's just cutting the cake, so why do I suddenly feel like I can't do the simple task of pulling the knife through the top tier? Not that I need to as Cole guides my hand and does it for me.

When Zander disappears with the first slice, Cole drops the knife and swipes a bit of frosting with his finger before holding it up to my mouth.

Did he just want the photos to look real, or is this as real in his head as it is in mine?

I slowly part my lips, opening for him as he presses two thick fingers against my tongue. The nutty flavor of the frosting is so much more delicious against the saltiness of Cole's skin as I suck his fingers clean, never breaking eye contact with him.

Suddenly I'm reminded of that moment we had in the diner when he licked chocolate shavings off my finger. Was it as erotic for him as it is for me now?

When I hear the soft click of Connie's camera, it snaps me out of my trance reminding me that she and my little brother are still around here somewhere.

But with the setting sun comes Connie's departure, and Zander's bedtime, and finally, Cole and I are alone.

In his room.

For the first time.

"We still have to bring in the rest of your and Zander's belongings," he says, crossing the room to stand in front of me. It takes everything in my power not to shiver as his heat radiates against my exposed back.

"I don't have much here," I agree, finding his burning gaze in the mirror's reflection.

"And we still haven't discussed the sleeping arrangements."

"We haven't," I say finally. The air's so thick between us that I can barely breathe.

Neither of us speaks as Cole slides his finger under the sleeve of my dress, slowly stroking my goosebumps skin with a gentleness that's driving me crazy. I'm so tempted to grab his face with both hands and bring his mouth crashing down on mine. I need *more*. Whatever this is, I need more.

He buries his face against my neck, his breath becoming ragged as he inhales my scent as if committing it to memory. With each passing second, his grip on me tightens possessively and I lavish it because I don't want him to ever let me go.

I'm burning inside as the tip of his warm tongue swipes over my pulse point. If he doesn't do something soon, I'm going to combust. My hands pressed against his chest grab his shirt so hard in anticipation that I'm surprised it doesn't rip.

I have to take off this dress. *Now*. Because I've made up my mind regardless of the outcome.

I want Cole and I *want* that honeymoon.

“I need help getting out of my dress,” I say, licking my dry lips. “Can you help me with the buttons?”

Cole’s breathing becomes even heavier as he turns me around and undoes the buttons. One. By. One. He nibbles at my neck and the warmth of his mouth feels *so* good against my skin.

As a chill from the night air brushes against my exposed back, I tense up and Cole freezes. He slowly puts a little distance between us and moves his fevered kisses from my neck to the top of my head before whispering in my ear, “Get some sleep.”

*Sleep?*

*What. The. Hell.*

Surely I didn’t imagine that.

I turn around to pull him closer, to let him know that I more than want this... but he’s already gone.



# Chapter Five

## Cole

I've always been someone with an immense amount of control, but Zoe's white satin slip dress she wore as pajamas last night stretched me to my limit.

I was so close to taking her the moment her wedding dress slipped down her hips last night, but the way she tensed up brought flashbacks of every time I tried to get close to her at the diner. I don't want to rush her if she's not ready. She deserves patience and gentleness, and if I claimed her last night I don't think I could have controlled myself. I would have taken her over and over again.

But if I didn't know any better, I'd think Zoe was punishing me for not taking things further. An hour after I left her alone, she emerged from the bedroom with wet hair that was dripping down the front of her white satin slip, making it transparent enough for me to see the outline of her tits. I'd never been so hard in my life.

The worst part is that Zoe isn't even trying to be sexy. She just *is*.

It's not her fault her ass hikes up every dress or skirt that she puts on, regardless of length.

It's not her fault that her breasts stretch every neckline, and it's certainly not her fault that I can't stop staring at them or at her nipples that poke through the satiny fabric as she whisks eggs and flips pancakes in that same damn slip dress. The contrast of the creamy white satin against her smooth caramel skin makes my balls ache. I grip the edge of the table harder. Her curves are driving me mad.

"Are you sure you don't want my help with breakfast?" I ask for a second time from the kitchen table. My voice sounds strained even to my own ears. Maybe helping would take my mind out of the gutter and peel my eyes off her body.

She shakes her head and looks pointedly at the pile of boxes lining the living room. I brought them over from her old apartment early this morning. I couldn't sleep after all.

"You've done so much for Zander and me lately; the least I owe you is breakfast."

"You don't owe me anything," I say just as the kettle whistles. I jump to my feet before Zoe can cross to the stove and turn it off. "Everything is mutual, remember? Symbiotic."

"Still," Zoe says, tiptoeing to grab three mugs from the cupboard. As she does so, that little nightdress that's been haunting me rises up her thigh, showing me the quickest sliver of her hip.

Is she wearing panties? Or is she totally bare?

I lick my lips as she fills the mugs with steaming water, then watch, mesmerized as she stirs each cup. The slight motion causes her breasts to shake and her nipples to scrape across the taut fabric of her night dress.

Bras are uncomfortable to sleep in. Maybe panties are too...

If she isn't wearing them, just the slight shift could expose that sweet little pussy I've been dreaming about—

"Cole?" Zoe asks, and I immediately glance away, busying myself with the sugar.

*Fuck.*

Had she seen me staring down her dress?

I'd already messed up by gawking at her like a damn zoo animal when she emerged from the bath last night, and here I am doing it again. If I want her to trust me, to know that I'm interested in far more than that beautiful curvy body of hers, I need to think with more than my dick.

Speaking of my dick, it's about to tent my sweatpants if I don't cool off.

"Yeah?" I let out a breath and run my fingers through my hair. I can't look at her. Not now. I won't be able to hide the

effect she has on me.

“How should I act around your family when I meet them today?” Immediately, my eyes fly to her worried ones despite what I just told myself. I can hear the nervousness in her voice even as she tries to remain calm. “I mean. We know this is all fake, but they don’t. I’m not sure what I should or shouldn’t say.”

“It’s my circus. I’ll take the lead and come up with something.”

She nods. “It’s just, I’ve never met anyone’s family before. Not even as a girlfriend, and now I’m supposed to be someone’s wife.”

I freeze. “You haven’t?” I spent so long thinking she was a single mom that it hadn’t occurred to me that no one has tried to claim her yet.

She shakes her head, flipping a pancake and shoveling eggs onto a plate. “I’ve never been in a relationship because I’ve been so busy with Zander.”

That could be the only reason. Any man with eyes would ask Zoe to be his. I’m just the lucky bastard who got there first, and if I can prove myself to Zoe, I’ll be last too.

“I just don’t want to say the wrong thing and ruin things for you. What if your uncle doesn’t like me? What if he knows it’s all a sham?”

I want so badly to reach for her, to pull her into my arms and reassure her that everything will be fine. But I can’t. I can’t touch her. Not now when my cock has a mind of its own. It’s impossible to hide a hard-on when you’re wearing sweatpants. Remembering how she tensed up last night, I don’t want to make her any more uncomfortable.

“My uncle and cousins will love you,” I say, taking two plates from her and setting them on the table. One is decorated like a smiley face with chocolate chips for eyes and scrambled eggs for hair. The next is a fruit platter of dew melons and pineapple in the shape of a stegosaurus.



After Zoe mentioned her case workers' constant complaints about a lack of fruit, I made sure to cram the fridge full of it. Zander isn't the only one who doesn't get enough of it. If Zoe arranged my fruit into my favorite shapes, I'd eat it too. I can think of a few, like two grapes, each on a round slice of cantaloupe.

*Don't look at her tits.*

*Don't...*

But I do as she hands me a steaming mug of cocoa filled with a melting marshmallow smiley face to place with the rest of Zander's food.

The fact that someone like Zoe could be concerned about anyone not liking her is downright insane. Seriously, what's not to love about this woman?

"You're hardworking," I say. "And super dedicated to your brother. My family will see that first."

Zoe fiddles with the little bow on her neckline, drawing my attention once again to that deep crease between her breasts. "Will that bother them? That I'm basically a single parent?"

I frown. "Why would it?"

"Most families don't want outside additions. That aside, I work at the diner."

"And you're one of the best damn chefs I know," I say, not liking how this conversation is going. There's nothing shameful or *wrong* about either.

She blushes. "I'm not anything special, Cole. I'm just a line cook."

"You're not *just* anything," I assure her, but she doesn't look convinced. "You're still young. You have plenty of time to make your dreams come true. What do you want to be?"

"It's a small town I fully intend to stay in, so I don't think I need a specialty. I'm more or less interested in tweaking the diner's menu and whipping up specials," Zoe smiles softly.

“Sometimes when I’m flipping burgers in the diner, I imagine it’s totally mine, and I have full creative control.”

“What else do you imagine?” I ask, wanting to know all the dreams floating around in her gorgeous head.

But then she freezes, growing stiff and shuttering her emotions again.

“It doesn’t matter. I better get Zander before the food gets cold.”

“Wait,” I grab her wrist, breaking my no-touching rule. Everything in me tells me to drop it, but my fingers have a mind of their own. “It matters to me.”

“It’s just a fantasy. Shouldn’t we concentrate on reality? Like the fact that your family may be less than impressed with me?”

I stroke my thumb over her fingers. So this is what this is about.

“You think they’ll think I can do better than you.” It isn’t a question, and she doesn’t deny it.

“You’re thirty-two and gorgeous with no baggage. You own your own company. Two of them! The lumber mill and the cabin building business with your cousins. You have two beautiful homes and enough spare time to actually enjoy them. I’m a twenty-two-year-old single parent with no college degree who can’t even afford her own apartment or a babysitter for her kid. I work a dead-end, minimum-wage job at a small-town diner. If I can see how mismatched we are, won’t your family? Maybe this was a mistake. I don’t know why you chose me. You can do so much better than me.”

She’s spiraling. She is getting so far into her head that I worry I won’t be able to pull her out.

“Zoe, there is no *better* because you’re downright incredible,” I say seriously. “They won’t see Zander as an unwanted addition or a burden. They’ll see him for the smart, funny, hyperactive little boy that he is. Foresters are all about family; it doesn’t matter how the relationship came about or if there’s no blood involved. It wouldn’t even matter if he had

four legs and a tail. If I claimed him as my own, so would my family. Mark my words that Buckee will be waiting with a scepter to crown Zander the next Earl of Forester Ranch by his second visit.”

Her smile is sad as she says, “But he isn’t a Forester, and he won’t ever be. Not for real.”

The word *ever* stabs at my heart. Can’t she envision it as easily as I can? What will it take to convince her that we can be a family for real?

“What if he gets too attached to your family? How can I explain that he isn’t going to see them again?”

“Things aren’t that cut and dry between us, are they?” I ask. “I mean, *if* the time comes for us to split,” I pause, hating even to say the words, “We’ll still be friends, won’t we? We don’t have to be in a fake relationship for me to maintain my friendship with Zander and you, do we?”

She softens. “You’re right. I just meant Zander can’t expect the same kind of treatment once this ends. I just want to keep him at arm’s length to soften the blow. You know? Maybe I should keep Zander scarce after the initial visit. We can go again as a couple while he’s at school to make our relationship look real.”

I know she’s just trying to protect him, but I don’t want to keep Zander at bay. I want him fully involved. I want him to have cousins and romp around the ranch just like I did as a kid. But it isn’t about me. Hopefully, I’ll have plenty of time to convince her that this is already real to me.

“Speaking of making it look real,” I say, deciding to drop the conversation about Zander for now. “What’s okay and what’s not? Physically, I mean?”

Another blush darkens her cheeks as her lips part. “What do you mean?”

“Every couple’s different, but my family’s pretty affectionate.” I slide my fingers from her wrist to her hand and lace our fingers together. “Is hand-holding okay?”

She nods, her eyes trailing up my arm like she's following my tattoos all the way to my throat, where they stop. I swallow, and she watches my throat bob as I pull her closer until she's standing right between my legs. With a tug, she drops onto my lap.

“What about if I pull you onto my lap? Is that okay?”

It's her turn to swallow. She nods again, and I wrap her hands around my neck. We're so close now, and I can feel her quick breaths and the softness of her breasts as I trail a hand up her neck and into her curls.

“And what if I kissed you?” I rasp before grazing my lips against her cheek. “Is a cheek kiss okay?”

She lets out a breath and nods again as if not trusting herself to speak.

“What about,” I ask between kisses along her jaw. “If I kissed your lips?”

She's so damn tense in my arms. Am I making her uncomfortable in a good or bad way? Is it displeasure or anticipation? I don't want to push her too hard, but at the same time, I want nothing more than to plow into her full force. My cock jumps at the thought, and I have no idea if she can feel it pressed between my abs and her thigh.

I don't care either. I can't hide my need anymore. Not when she's right in my arms, her comforting weight pressed against me.

She isn't pulling away either. She's tracing my lips with her eyes, now a darker green shade, shining at me like emeralds.

Last night, she did ask me to help her out of that dress... maybe I'd mistaken her reaction because I swear I see the same amount of desire that's running through my veins reflected in her emerald eyes.

“I...” she trails as the tip of my tongue darts to graze the edge of her bottom lip.

“Is breakfast ready?”

Zoe damn near touches the ceiling with how high she jumps up from my lap.

We both turn to see a sleepy Zander rubbing his eyes. Zoe lets out a breath of relief, and I know it's because he isn't wearing his glasses. Zander told me that anything more than two feet in front of him is blurry.

"I just finished it," Zoe says, still breathless as she darts to the coffee table where Zander left his glasses last night. "Go wash your hands at the sink. Then we'll eat."

"Morning, Cole," Zander says with a smile as he trots past me to the step ladder in front of the sink.

Despite Zoe clearly not wanting Zander to see us be affectionate, she can't take her eyes off me.

Not when she offers to refill my coffee mug, exposing a slip of her nipple as she bends forward.

Nor when her thighs double in size when she sits and brushes against mine beneath the table.

Nor when she adjusts that little strap that constantly falls down her shoulder... and suddenly I realize just how badly I've been misreading her. Just how badly I fucked up last night. God, I hope I get another chance to show her how much I want her.



## Chapter Six

Zoe

To say that I'm nervous to meet the Foresters is an understatement. Despite Cole's reassurances, I'm still buzzing with a bunch of 'what ifs.'

What if they blame me for excluding them from the wedding ceremony, despite Cole having a good reason to?

What if they think I'm just using Cole for his money, seeing as I have none?

What if they think I'm a lazy loser with no aspirations, content to stay a fry cook my whole life?

What if Cole chose wrong in picking me for this sham? What if Uncle Buckee doesn't buy it? What if he does, and Zander gets overly attached?

I glance into the truck's rearview mirror at Zander, who's strapped in and happily playing a fourth round of 'I Spy' with Cole.

How am I going to explain all of this to him? People suddenly calling him their nephew or cousin when he hasn't had any other family besides me before now.

My stomach roils. I keep telling myself that I'm doing this for Zander. For us. I keep repeating how necessary it is to keep us together. To keep us sheltered and fed, at least for now. But my rationalizations can't trump my guilt. I don't want to confuse Zander.

*I'm already confused enough. Or at least my heart is.*

*My pussy's crystal clear on what it wants.*

*Cole.*

*Cole's body.*

*Just Cole's body. Right?*

And what's wrong with that? It's not the same as Mom's failed relationships. With Cole it would be different. We both agreed to mutual terms. We both know our relationship is fake. It' I were to delude myself into thinking otherwise. I couldn't even cry and blame it on deception like Mom always did with her ex-partners, who'd filled her head with promises and lies. Those same devils played a major part in why I never had a boyfriend, my busy schedule aside. How could I trust someone with my body and heart after witnessing so much deception?

But to Cole's credit, he'd never lie to me. He doesn't fill my head and heart with sweet nothings. He's honest and upfront with everything, and isn't that what I've always wanted from a man? Honesty... even if it isn't what I want to hear.

I gaze at Cole's handsome face from the corner of my eye now, and instinctively my nipples harden beneath the modest sweater I'd put on to meet his family. I've always denied myself male attention, and maybe given the frank circumstances, now is the best time to give in.

It's just physical.

I can set aside my heart. I can compartmentalize it while giving my body what it wants—my very own lumberjack.

When we exit Cole's truck on the massive stone-paved driveway, Cole slides his palm into mine. I lace my fingers between his, letting him know I'm becoming more comfortable with his touch. Zander has a similar idea because he runs to Cole's other side and takes his hand too. I swallow the pang of hurt, knowing that Cole he reaches for now instead of me.

Cole's here for us now. But for how long? My heart aches at the thought of this ending.

I can't talk with the lump in my throat. I just squeeze his palm tighter as mine begins to sweat.

"They'll love you both," Cole whispers as we near Buckee's front door.



I pause at the rustic wood-paneled door to take in my surroundings, letting Cole and Zander walk ahead of me. Before we go inside, I take a moment to breathe in the crisp autumn air. The golden leaves of the fields around us sway in the breeze. The sunshine kisses my cheeks. Okay, I feel calmer now. I can do this...

As Cole opens the door, he shouts, "Morning everyone," to alert his family to our presence. A second later Zander's voice utters a sweet "Morning," which he definitely picked up from Cole.

Maybe surprising everyone with our instant family was a bad idea because the minute we walk through the door and into the massive living room, the room goes eerily silent, save for a telenovela playing on the TV. The main character looks almost exactly like Connie, causing me to do a double-take.

Stationed a few feet in front of the screen is an older man in a wheelchair with thick silver hair tucked beneath a cowboy hat. That must be Buckee.

In the armchair beside him is a woman, perhaps a little older than I am, with long black hair and piercing blue eyes that are trained on me. "Hi, I'm Cali, Cole's cousin," the woman says. Her gaze is so intense for a moment that I'm glad for the giggles in the corner of the room that force my attention away from her.

Tucked behind a doll house are two little girls around Zander's age. The one holding the Ken doll looks like she could be my daughter, with the same caramel skin and sun-bleached highlights. The girl beside her with a Barbie doll whispers into her ear, and then they both erupt into another fit of giggles as they stare at Zander.

Speaking of Zander, I don't recall a time I've ever seen him so shy. His eyes flit from the floor to the girls repeatedly as he tries to hide a nervous smile behind Cole's leg.

"Sorry to burst your bubble girls, but he can't be your new Ken," the old man says, pointing at Zander. "He's your new cousin."

Cali laughs, setting off a chain reaction that cracks my lips and deflates the tension in the room.

Even the kids join in, though their confusion is evident when the little girl holding the Ken doll whispers, “I don’t get it.”

Cali jumps to her feet and comes over to give me a hug before wrapping her arm in mine and leading me towards the couch. Her warmth takes me by surprise for a moment, but Cole’s serene smile tells me it’s zero surprise to him.

“Those are my nieces, Sunny and Everly Woods. They’re my brother-in-law’s kids.” Cali says.

“Nice to meet you,” I smile and wave, but the girls are busy taking Zander’s hand and leading him toward the dollhouse, where I’m sure he’ll be subjected to at least an hour of house play. Not that he seems to mind as he inspects the wheels of a hot pink convertible.

“And you must be Uncle Buckee, right?” I ask, extending my hand to the older man. He shakes it but doesn’t let it go for a long beat as he gives me a long, hard look.

Suddenly, the tension begins to rise again, but it pops the moment he smiles and says, “I’ve been waiting for Cole to make a move on you for a long time.”

Cali swats his arm playfully, and I let out a breath, turning to Cole, who’s blushing and staring wide-eyed at his uncle.

“What?” Buckee asks. “You’ve only been in love with her since she came to town.”

Butterflies erupt in my stomach, and my heart soars into my throat at his words. Is that what Cole told him? It’d make sense as to why we got married so soon if his family believes that he’s always been in love with me.

I blush and look around the room. I’m fascinated by the exposed beams and vaulted ceiling. There’s also a beautiful view and a lot of natural light coming in through the wall of windows at the back of the house. Maybe if I seem really interested in the view—which I am—we can talk about something else. No such luck though.

Cole wraps his arm around me, inches so close that our thighs touch. “That’s why we rushed the elopement,” he says with an apologetic grin. “I just couldn’t wait to become her husband.”

The butterflies in my stomach dance faster to the erratic beat of my heart. I love how he phrased that. To become her husband rather than just making me his wife.

“Same as Heath and Dixie,” Cali gushes. “We totally understand.”

They did? That eases my hesitation even more.

“But I assume there will be a wedding reception later, right?” Buckee asks. “We would love to meet your family too, Zoe.”

“Um...” I squirm, and Cole tightens his arm around my waist. His hand slips onto my upper thigh and his thumb settles into that little crease where it meets my hip. It feels far more intimate and comforting than it should. Instinctively, I lean into him. “I actually don’t have any family in Moonshine Creek. Or anywhere for that matter... It’s just Zander and me.”

The room goes silent for half a second before I add, “But I do have somewhat of an aunt, someone who’s become part of my chosen family. She looks nearly identical to that actress.”

“Connie?” Buckee and Cali ask in unison, and I nod.

“Of course you’d know her; it’s a tiny town.”

“Actually,” Cali grins, shooting Buckee a look. “I live a few mountains over. I only know *about* Connie.”

I smile back. “Connie’s the best. I don’t know what we’d do without her. After our mom died, Zander and I got used to being each other’s only family until Connie showed us so much kindness.”

Buckee fiddles with the remote, shutting Connie’s doppelganger off. “Well,” he says, lightening the mood of the conversation. “It’s a good thing there’s a crap ton of us Foresters then. Now your family can get even bigger.”

“Speaking of more Foresters,” Cali says, turning around to look out the window. Outside a truck is pulling into the driveway. “Looks like more have just arrived.”

Two men emerge from the truck a second later, and even if I hadn’t been told they were all related, I would’ve guessed. They’re both as tall and broad as Cole, with dark hair, beards, and tattoos peeking out of their collars and sleeves. How many of these hot giants are there?

The two men are having a heated debate as they head for the porch.

“What’s their problem?” Buckee asks Cole, who shrugs.

“I haven’t spoken to either of them in a few days. I’ve been busy.” His eyes fall on me, and I swallow.

He’s doing such a convincing job of playing a blissful newlywed that even I’m starting to believe it. Could this actually be real? What other reason would there be for Cole to let his family believe he’s in love with me even months before we made our deal?

“Ash, Kai, this is my wife Zoe and her little brother Zander,” Cole says, gesturing to Zander and me as both men enter the living room.

They pause their bickering to give each other shit-eating grins before extending their hands to me and shaking mine in turn. Did Cole let them in on our ruse? They sure seem to know something I don’t, as they nudge each other before settling on the loveseat opposite us.

“What were you two arguing about,” Buckee asks.

Kai, the one with blue eyes as piercing as Cali’s, sighs. “The venue for the Twynam Twins concert.”

Immediately I sit up straighter. That’s right—Cole told me his cousins acted as bodyguards for the twins whenever they were in town.

“What’s wrong with the venue?” Cole asks, sitting forward so my back connects with his chest again. It’s like he doesn’t

want to lose contact with me for even a second. At least physically, we're entirely on the same page.

"Permit issues. *Again.*" Ash says. "As a part of the security team, Kai and I have been trying to get it sorted out at the permit office, but it looks like a no-go. Something about red tape and a bunch of legal jargon.

"The bottom line is that the crowd's larger than we expected," Kai says. The local park doesn't have enough exits to the main road. It's a safety issue amongst other technicalities."

"So, if the venue doesn't get sorted out soon, there'll be no concert?" I ask, my stomach sinking like a stone. I don't think I'd ever looked forward to an event so much in my entire life, barring Zander's birth. As Cole squeezes my thigh, I gaze down at the black stainless steel band around his ring finger.

Ok, there was one other event, I'd looked forward to more than I care to admit. My wedding.

My wedding—my *fake* wedding.

Cole's gaze lands on me and I'm surprised at the amount of concern in his eyes. I don't think anyone's ever looked at me that way before.

"The tickets," he says. "You worked so hard to get them last week."

Kai's looks between us. "You got tickets recently? The concert's been sold out for months."

"Zoe stayed up all night just to call in to the radio station. She won them," Cole says proudly as if I'd done something spectacular.

"You stayed up too," I point out.

"But you needed the rest." He brushes a curl away from my cheek and I shudder at his touch. His eyes are burning into me with such intensity that for a second, the entire room fades away and it's just us.

"*I bet,*" Ash sniggers before clasping his hands together and resting his cheek on them. "Aaah, to be young and in

love.”

“Shut up, Ash. I’m older than you are,” Cole grunts.

“Newly wedded bliss,” Buckee nods as my cheeks flame. “That’ll do it to you.”

“Anyway, I’m not the only fan that’ll be disappointed if this concert is canceled,” I say, desperate to get the attention off Cole and me. “There’ll be at least a thousand others equally as heartbroken. That aside, what about the vendors? They’ll lose a couple hundred if not thousands—they invested so much to prepare for this and they were counting on the revenue from all the tourists the twins would draw in. The whole community is counting on this.”

Connie hadn’t been able to afford the booth prices to secure a spot for the diner. She’d been devastated, but now it’s probably for the best. Otherwise her meager earnings would be tied up in a refund process that could last weeks, if not months.

“Tell me about it. Bear Lair, that’s my husband Beau’s and his family’s lodge business,” Cali says, addressing me, “is going to lose a ton of money with all the cancellations. With so much money spent on the new extension we were really looking forward to the tourists to help rebalance the books. We thought about hosting the concert at the lodge but there’s no way that we would have enough space for all that.”

As Cole gazes out the window, his eyes light up so much I spin around to see who’s piqued his interest, but no one’s there. Just miles and miles of green and golden pastures.

“What if we had the concert right here at Forester Ranch?” he asks, looking at Buckee. “There’s tons of space, and tons of exit points on the outskirts.”

“Did you know I had my first rodeo right here on this land?” Buckee says. “My grandfather offered a part of the ranch to host the event that year. It was fantastic. I swear the entire town came out. And besides some dead patches of grass and a crap ton of dung, which we used to fertilize those areas, there weren’t any problems hosting a crowd that big. It’d be

great to see this dead ranch come alive again with people.” Buckee’s pointed look at Kai and Ash isn’t lost on me but then he looks at me. “And loads more kids. The more the merrier.”

I blush. Does Cole want kids? I love mothering Zander, but there’s no way I can take on another kid as a single parent. Not when I’ve already been struggling so much to pay rent and provide a good life for Zander.

With Cole though, that wouldn’t be a worry.

Well, if he were actually my husband.

Cole would be such a good father too. I would love for us to have children together and give Zander more siblings, but I have to remind myself that I don’t get to keep Cole.

I’m pulled out of my thoughts when Kai says, “That’s not a bad idea,” eyeing the property line. “Time’s running out and I know the twins won’t want to disappoint their fans or the vendors. I’m positive Luna will go for it.”

Ash coos. “Luna, huh?” Ash elbows Kai while raising his eyebrows suggestively. Since when have you two been on a first name basis? What happened to remaining *professional*?” Ash shoots me a look. “That’s Kai’s favorite word.”

Kai clears his throat, “I mean, Ms. Tynam.”

But the damage is done as everyone shares knowing smiles.

“But we need a stipulation in the contract,” Cole says, his eyes sliding to mine again. “Zoe has to get a spot on the vendor list. A prime spot, close to the stage and free of charge. Her services come with the land—”

“Cole,” I say incredulously. “I can’t do—”

“Why not?” he interrupts. “You said catering is part of your dream. This is the perfect opportunity to start it.”

“But—”

“Your husband’s right,” Buckee says. “No time like the present. Take it from someone who’s present is as fragile as that convertible’s wheels.”

Despite the morbid undertones, we all look to the corner where Everly scoots around on the pink convertible, its plastic wheels flexing with strain.

“Cole and I are making a truck,” Zander says. “A big one I can actually fit in.”

“Can I fit in it too?” Sunny asks.

Zander nods.

“Ohhh will you bring it over so we can ride in it with you?” Everly coos as the convertible makes a cracking sound.

“Of course he can,” Buckee says. “Cole, you can bring it over when you come to work on Zoe’s stand. It’ll be a good way for the kids to keep busy for a few hours.”

*Wait... my stand? At the Tynam concert?* It feels too good to be true, but then reality sets in.

“I... I don’t have a menu, or supplies or...”

“But you have us,” Buckee says, patting my knee and I swear my heart grows two sizes bigger.

“It’s easy for us to put together a stall or booth or whatever you want,” Kai says in agreement. “Our mill always has a pile of damaged lumber we can salvage and Cole’s workshop is loaded with paint supplies.”

“I own a wholesale grocery supply warehouse,” Cali says with a smile. “Just tell me what you need and I can bring it right over.”

“And Connie’s great with a camera,” Buckee says, cutting his program back to where Connie’s look-alike is looking thoughtful on a ranch, her cotton candy hair beneath her cowboy hat blowing stiffly in the breeze. “She can take some great photos of your recipes.”

“I think Connie would enjoy that,” Cole agrees. “She was great at our wedding.”

As I gaze at everyone in astonishment, the same questions that I had for Cole when he first offered me his help come rushing back.



Why? Why did these people want to help some strange girl that just popped into their lives? At least with Cole, he's getting something out of the deal. His land.

But what about everyone else?

I've never gotten anything in life for free or just because. So why now?

As I gaze into Cole's eyes I can almost see the answer.

*Love?*

Or wishful thinking?

"Speaking of recipes... Do you know how to barbecue? I have a crap ton of whiskey I can't drink anymore and a load of ribs to soak them in."

"She's not here to work Bucks," Cole says with a sigh, but I actually never feel more relaxed than when I'm cooking.

"What?" Buckee shrugs. "It's good practice for the concert."

"Who eats ribs at a concert?" Kai says, wrinkling his brow.

Ash elbows Kai and mutters under his breath, "That's not the point. Why would you try to take away an opportunity to eat some good barbecue?"

Ignoring them, I tell Buckee, "I actually infused rum into a dessert I made last week. I'd love to experiment with other liquors."

"You don't have to do that," Cole whispers in my ear.

Then I turn to tell him, "*I know*. But I want to. I love cooking." As I get to my feet I ask, "Where's the kitchen?"

"After me," Buckee says, rolling his wheelchair down the hall.



# Chapter Seven

## Cole

I don't know if I've ever seen Zoe look so confused. All night, her expression fluttered between pure joy and worry. She was smiling so big as she cooked with Buckee and laughed at Ash's insistence on being her personal taste tester. Then she looked so conflicted whenever she heard Zander's laughs with Sunny and Everly or his squeals from getting piggyback rides from Ash and Kai.

I can tell that Zoe honestly believes something will go horribly wrong if she and Zander grow too attached to us. It makes me wonder about their past stability. How many people have come and gone from their lives that Zoe has such little faith in me? Or in anyone, for that matter. Even when Cali invites her to the next girls' night with the Woods's brothers' wives, she flickers from excited to reserved, shyly promising to check her schedule.

More than ever I want to show her how safe she and Zander are with me, with us Foresters. That night in the tub, I swore I'd be her armor, the biggest Russian doll whose embrace she and Zander can rest comfortably inside of.

All night she leaned into me, whenever she laughed, grew shy or got nervous so maybe my plan to keep her in my arms forever is working.

When we get home with an extra slab of whiskey, brown sugar ribs, and a sleeping Zander, I realize that Zoe and I need to discuss our own sleeping arrangements as I tuck him into bed. I don't want to sleep apart from her on the couch anymore and given our chemistry at breakfast that lingered straight into nightfall, I don't think she wants me too either. At the ranch she'd touched me just as much as I did her, seemingly desperate to keep a physical connection between us.

That aside, how's it going to look when CPS comes for the home visit and it's obvious that we aren't sleeping together? What if Zander spills the beans in typical kid word-vomit

fashion? They'll think he's in an unstable environment or that there are already problems brewing in our marriage.

Zoe seems to have the same idea because she walks to the threshold of the bedroom, gazing at me over her shoulder. Before she can cross it though, I scoop her into my arms and she lets out a surprised yelp.

“I was supposed to do that last night,” I whisper against her ear. “I wasn't sure if you wanted me to.”

She swallows, wrapping her arms around my neck and boldly presses a kiss to my lips. “And now?”

I grip her tighter, my cock already brushing the underside of her ass. “I'm sure that you feel this too—this deep connection, the rightness of us together.

I make it two steps toward the bed when Zoe's phone buzzes with notifications. Data on the road is spotty given the thickets of trees, so I'm used to the bombardment of messages from clients and my employees at the lumber mill once I reach wifi. Zoe's phone barely pings though given her time off from work.

The rarity of it is the only reason she breaks eye contact with me to check her missed notifications.

As I sit on the bed, with Zoe on my lap, I know immediately that something's wrong. She presses the phone to her ear and her eyes go wide. “No no no no no...”

“What's wrong?” She's stiff as a board.

“I... I got a voicemail from the case worker assigned to us. CPS is sending someone out tomorrow. I'm not ready.” She gazes at two duffel bags of her clothes still stacked in the corner. “It's too soon and what if they know this isn't real? What if we get in trouble for lying?? What if—”

She's working herself into such a frenzy that her face is damn near turning purple from a lack of oxygen.

“Hey. Breathe with me,” I say calmly, placing my hand over her heart. “That's it. In through your mouth 1 2 3 4. Now

hold for 4. Exhale 1 2 3 4. Hold. Good. In 1 2 3 4. Out 1 2 3 4.”

As her jumping breasts beneath my palm eases with the slowing of her heart rate, she visibly releases some tension in her shoulders. As she deflates, I hold her tighter, marveling in the way she puts her full body weight against me like she’s laying all her problems on me too.

I told her I could take it, and I meant it.

“Okay baby. Let’s try this again. If it gets to be too much then just squeeze my hand. I got you. Now what did the voicemail say exactly?”

“They said that they’re stopping by tomorrow. I know it’s because they’re making updated notes on Zander’s file.” She gulps.

“Notes that will only shine a positive light on you as his guardian. They’ll see that his glasses prescription is up to date, as is his last dental appointment and physical. Things you made sure you got accomplished by selling your truck.”

“But I still lost our home in the process.”

“And gained a better one. They’ll see that this is a good home for Zander. One where he has a secure yard to play in and his own room with a closet stuffed full of clean, weather appropriate attire and toys *you* provided.”

She perks up a fraction at this, pride swirling in her eyes before she nudges her shoulder into my chest. “Then they’ll open the fridge and see all the fruits and vegetables you’ve stocked it with.”

“I think you mean, they’ll see all the ferocious fruit dinosaurs that have invaded the shelves.”

Her smile is short lived as worry creases her brow again.

I grasp her chin and tip her face to look up at me. “They’ll see how hard you work to provide for him, Zoe. Everything will be okay and no one is taking him away from you. *From us*. I’ll make damn sure of it.”

The words she utters next down right shocks me.

“I believe you.”

*You do?*

“I have a hard time trusting anyone but myself, Cole. Especially men, but you’ve never lied to me. You’ve never sugarcoated anything and I... I trust you to protect us so long as we’re in your care. Just like you said in your vows.”

“You know I meant every word right?” I ask, peering into her eyes but I don’t think she quite understands my full meaning even as she nods, gazing at the duffel bags again.

“Okay, so CPS is coming tomorrow morning and we need to look like a real couple.”

As far I’m concerned, we are a real couple.

“If they see you on the couch, they’ll assume we’re fighting and make notes about this possibly being an unstable living environment. I can unpack my things in here but sleep with Zander so you can still have your space.”

I frown. “Not gonna happen.” The assertiveness in my tone momentarily stuns her but I’m standing firm. Unless Zander has a nightmare, at which point we’d all cram into his single bed, she isn’t sleeping anywhere else but with me.

“What makes you think I want space?”

“Don’t you? I thought that’s why you’ve been sleeping out there alone instead of in your own bed. I thought maybe our new arrangement was making you uncomfortable in your own home.”

“Our home.” I growl. “I was trying to give you time to adjust. I didn’t want you to feel violated if I just assumed it was okay to sleep in the room with you.”

“But it’s *your* room. Your house. You take first priority.”

Not anymore.

“Maybe you’re right about me crowding Zander though. I may miss our sleepovers but I think he likes having the whole bed to himself.” Her eyes drift around the room. “Maybe I can sleep on the recliner then?”

After all our flirting, and touching earlier, did she really not understand that all I want is her?

I clench my teeth and look up to the ceiling for patience. “It’s our room, Zoe. And no. You’ll sleep in the bed with me. I promise that I won’t do anything you don’t want me to... and I’ll do anything that you want me to do.”

I wish I could read her thoughts as she stares at me, her lips slightly parted into a sexy O.

“Anything?” she asks and it’s barely a whisper.

*“Anything.”*

But anything turns out to be an hour of unpacking and making our room look believable. Like Zoe’s belonged right beside me all along.

When we finally collapse in bed thoroughly exhausted, I don’t hesitate to curl my body around Zoe, and she isn’t shy about scooting into me.

My little nesting doll.

\* \* \*

I’m having the best dream and it’s wet.

*So fucking wet.*

Zoe’s soft, curvy body is spooned against me, her ass perfectly aligned against my cock, it damn near swallows it. A pebbled nipple presses against my left palm while my right hand is trapped between her honey thighs and soaked in liquid heat. She’s not wearing any underwear under her little satin slip dress. Suddenly I want the thin fabric off of her completely. It wouldn’t take much to get her naked... just a little tug.

Burying my face in her hair, I inhale her intoxicating cocoa scent before trailing kisses up her neck to her earlobe. She moans and arches back, rubbing her ass against my cock and driving the tip straight toward her center.

“Mmmm. Zoe,” I rasp against her ear.

As she earnestly starts rubbing against me, getting her wetness all over me, her eyes flutter open. “Cole?” she whines breathlessly.

“I’m here baby.”

“I... What are you doing?”

I glide my fingers through her slick folds and find her clit with the pad of my calloused middle finger. The moment I make contact she jumps, squirming like the sensation is too foreign. Too overwhelming to handle.

“Making you feel good.” I nibble against her earlobe, but I still my fingers. “Do you want me to make you feel good?”

She nods, her curls brushing against my cheek.

“Tell me,” I rasp. I want to hear the words straight from her lips.

“Please, make me feel good.” Her hand curls around my wrist, encouraging me to start again.

The moment I do, the sweetest little moans escape her throat, her breast beneath my palm rising and falling rapidly.

“*Fuck.* You’re so wet.”

I stroke her faster, swirling her slippery, swollen clit until she bucks against me as if to get away.

“Cole, it’s...” She throws her head back, her hand around my wrist pulling. “It’s too much. I can’t.”

I only hold her tighter, keeping her still.

“You can, baby. You were made for this.”

Letting go of her breast I slip my finger between her lips and she bites it, sucks it as she falls apart. I can’t wait to make her come again, but this time, I want to be inside of her.

She has a similar idea because her fingers reach back to the waistband of my sweatpants. The moment her fingertips swipe at the top of my pubic hair, a loud banging on the front door stops her descent.

*Knock. Knock. Knock.*



Huh, that's weird. Why would I dream that anything would interrupt what I've wanted for an entire year? But as I rub my eyes and see Zoe sliding off the bed to peek through the curtains, I realize it's not a dream.

*Shit.* The case worker from CPS must already be here.

*Knock. Knock. Knock.*

In strained silence, we rush to get dressed. I pull on the jeans I wore yesterday since they're the closest to me and I rush to the dresser to grab a t-shirt. By the time I have it over my head, Zoe's already dressed and running to open the door.

"Hi." She smiles too wide while still trying to catch her breath. I look down at my phone and see it's only eight in the morning. It's a little early for them to be making a home visit, isn't it?

I wrap my arms around Zoe from behind and look at the middle-aged social worker. "Cole." I reach out to shake her hand before remembering I just had it in Zoe's wetness as I strummed her to orgasm. Thankfully she doesn't take it.

"Tabatha. May I come in?"

"Yes. Yes. Sorry, we just had a big family day yesterday and slept in this morning." Zoe rushes out nervously. "Would you like anything to drink, Tabatha? Here, why don't you sit down in the kitchen and I'll make you some tea."

Thankfully Zoe had the forethought last night to let Zander know that we were having a nice woman come over today to have a tea party. She read online that it's good to make sure your kid is comfortable around the case worker.

Zander always loves a good game and surprisingly he's already up. At the commotion he runs out of his room in his pajamas with a big smile on his face.

*"Morning!!!"*

Zander's excitement must thaw Tabatha because she finally smiles and seems to soften. "Well good morning to you too. You must be Zander."

“Yesss. And you’re the nice lady we’re having over for Sunday tea.” He’s grinning so wide. I don’t think anyone could be in a bad mood around this kid.

Tabatha chuckles and smiles at Zander. “That’s right. And you can tell me all about your new home and family.”

“Cole builds trucks!” he says. “He’s a lumberjack. He can build anything.”

“Well,” I say sheepishly. “Not anything.”

“We made a truck at his workshop,” Zander says, ignoring me entirely. “One big enough for me to fit in.”

“I’ll make breakfast. Would you like to eat with us, Tabatha?” Zoe smiles and crosses to the kitchen. “Zander will probably be talking for a while.”

The moment she touches the fridge handle I know what she’s doing.

*Smart girl.*

Colorful platters of cut fruit, veggies, and rows of juices line most of the shelves. Zoe had even labeled and organized the dairy and deli meats with cute pictures so Zander would know which drawer held which when he wanted a snack.

Tabatha looks impressed at the display, before peering down at Zander. “Well it wouldn’t be a proper tea party without food, would it?”

“That’s right!” Zander shouts. We’re still working on his inside voice.

Grabbing her hand he leads her to the kitchen table. All the while, he’s telling her how excited he is to have his own room and how we painted it forest green which is his favorite color. He talks about his new cousins he played with yesterday, how he got to be my best man at the wedding, and so on.

As Tabatha listens intently and accepts a mug of tea from Zoe, I know we’re going to be just fine.

\* \* \*

After the case worker leaves, Zoe looks more relaxed than I've ever seen her. So relaxed that she jumps straight into my arms and wraps her arms around my neck. *In front of Zander.*

I could get used to this and maybe Zander should too. A healthy amount of affection between parents is normal.

“That went well. I think that went well. Do you think that went well?” Zoe babbles as she slides her jittery fingers into my hair, giddily tugging at the strands too hard. Not that I mind. I'm just glad her nervous energy is out of pure happiness this time. “There's no way she saw anything wrong. We're good now, right? I think we're good. Do you think we're good?”

“Yeah Zoe. I think we're good. I think everything's perfect.” I smile back at her and Zander and realize that I've never felt more perfect in my life. We're meant to be together. A family. And it's only a matter of time before Zoe realizes it too.

I hold Zoe tighter and when Zander sees us hugging he happily joins in too. My heart is bursting with how full of affection it is as he squeezes my legs with all his might.

“Hey,” I tuck a loose curl behind Zoe's ear. “Buckee and everyone really liked you guys yesterday. How would you feel about spending the day at Forester Ranch to celebrate? Zoe, you and I can scan the property for the perfect place to set up your stand. And Cali's still visiting Bucks with the girls so Zander will have company while we discuss the menu. We can pick up the toy truck along the way too. The paint should be fully dried by now.”

Zander bounces up and down. “Can we, Z? Pleeaasseeeee.”

Zoe smiles at his excitement. “Yeah, I think that'd be perfect.”



# Chapter Eight

Zoe

This feeling of freedom is one I've never felt in my entire life. For the first time I can truly breathe and relax. I don't have to worry about anyone taking Zander from me. I don't have to worry about working myself to the bone to afford rent. Cole is our lifesaver and I'm so damn happy and proud that I stopped letting Mom's past relationships dictate how I should navigate my own. I'll never totally depend on anyone, but having such strong support is invaluable and I can finally admit that I don't know if I could've done all of this without Cole, and that only makes me fall for him harder.

Not just my body, but my heart.

I've tried to separate the two. Tried to look at our dynamic from a logical standpoint. We work well together and have a lot of sexual chemistry, but that didn't mean Cole was genuinely in love with me. I keep telling myself that I can be okay if we cross that physical line but keep our emotional connection in the friendship category in case Cole ever does find someone special. But telling myself that becomes increasingly harder with each passing day because my heart simply won't accept it even if my mind has.

When we reach Forester Ranch, Zander barely says goodbye as he rushes off to play with Sunny and Everly again.

We talk with everyone for a while, but soon Cole's pulling me away to give me a private tour of the ranch.

First Cole points out the spots he and his cousins used to play as kids, including the treehouse where Heath and Dixie met. He tells me I'll get to meet them when they're back from their honeymoon. Heath and all the cousins rebuilt Dixie's grandmother's house as a surprise wedding present so they're spending their honeymoon there. Foresters sure know how to treat women.

Then he shows me where everything will be set up for the concert and I can't help but feel excited. Cole is literally making my dream come true. Arrangement or not, how did I get so lucky?

Cole points out how close the booths will be to the stage so I'll get a prime view of the concert while I work, as if I needed more incentive to do this. I practically start squealing like a damn pig when he tells me that Ash and Kai were able to get me backstage passes to meet the twins after the concert.

As we figure out more of the logistics, Cole asks for my input about how to build and decorate the vendor booth, and we make plans for what equipment we'll need for me to be able to cook. We'll need at least a grill and some portable burners.

My mind's already going a mile a minute coming up with different menu ideas. I'll have to serve food that people can easily walk around with. If I prepare shish kabobs before the concert and let them marinate in the fridge with whiskey-infused barbecue sauce overnight, I would only need to grill them for a few minutes before they're ready. I could have different options—angus beef with grilled potatoes; honeyed Hawaiian-style chicken with pineapple and bell peppers; Thai chicken satay; bacon-wrapped brussel sprouts; a meatless grilled veggie option; and some refreshing fruit skewers.

Oooh—and I could have grilled cheese sandwiches, mac-and-cheese bowls, cheesy fries.

For dessert options I could make cake pops, and churros. With halloween coming up, I could make pumpkin bread, cookies, maybe muffins... We could have seasonal drinks, or would that be too much? Maybe I could give some ideas to the local coffee shop and they could set their booth up next to mine.

Should I be writing all this down? I feel like I should be writing this down. Maybe I can get Cole to make some notes on his phone for me. I'm so lost in thought about the menu that I don't realize how long we've been walking around the

ranch. I can tell I've been going on about food for a while by the amused look on Cole's face.

By now the sun is starting to set and the sky's hazy pink twilight glow only adds to the romantic mood, as does the melody of a nearby creek. I wonder if Cole will touch me again like he did this morning. We haven't spoken about it, but I feel like the sexual tension is still hanging heavily between us.

Cole must have the same idea because when we get to a secluded area, he lays down the thick picnic blanket he'd been carrying on a soft patch of grass.

The surrounding trees act as our shield from the rest of the world, not that it exists right now. It's just me and Cole.

He pulls me down onto his lap, one hand cupping my cheek and the other circling my waist. He's gazing into my eyes so lovingly that I let myself get caught in the moment and believe this is real.

*We can just pretend.*

Because if this is the only chance I ever get, I want to enjoy every minute of it.

As Cole breathes in against my neck—I think he's inhaling my scent—I'm reminded of this morning and how good it felt to be snuggled in his arms. To have him hold my body like he owned it because in that moment when he made me come, he did.

My breathing gets heavier too, syncing with his. God, he smells so good. His musky, earthy scent with a hint of citrus wraps around my brain and drives me wild. He's so big, radiating enough heat to warm us both. I swear I could crawl inside his flannel and live there forever.

I slide my hands under the fabric, desperate to feel his skin on mine. Desperate to trace those tattoos that span the width of his shoulders.

Cole growls in my ear and the gravelly sound triggers something docile inside me as I start kissing his neck and damn near purring. His fingers dig into my waist, pulling me

closer and grinding me against his erection. The delicious friction it creates, makes my hips move on their own. Slowly at first.

Encouraged, his cock grows even harder and I squirm, desperate to get it between my folds and pressed against my clit despite all the layers between us.

His voice is raspy, strained when he says, “Tell me you want this Zoe. Tell me you want me as badly as I want you.”

He sounds almost desperate, but he holds me still against him as he waits for me to respond. I whimper and try to grind against him anyway, too shy to say anything. Earlier in bed, we both were clouded with sleep, but out here in nature with the birds chirping above us and the wind gently blowing through my hair, there’s no pretense that this isn’t totally real.

But my attempts at continuing my ride are halted by Cole’s iron-clad grip. I can’t move unless he lets me. *Lets me...* Why is that so hot?

“I need to hear you say it. I don’t want to do anything you don’t want me to do. So if you don’t tell me you want this, I’ll stop. Do you want me to stop?”

I don’t think when I shake my head. I’m tired of thinking. For once I just want to feel.

“No. Don’t stop. I want this. I want *you*.”

That’s all Cole needs to hear before he flips us over so that he’s on top of me, devouring my mouth with his. The soft slide of his tongue against mine causes me to moan as they sensuously dance together, their movements mimicking our bodies.

Cole’s calloused hands slide up my sundress before curling into the waistband of my pantines and yanking them down to my ankles where I kick them off. Then, he’s tugging my dress down to my waist so my breasts pop out the top. The moment they do he’s licking, sucking, nipping each one before sliding lower.

“God, Zoe. You have no idea how much I’ve dreamed about this. How much I’ve craved you. How many times I



stroked my cock to the thought of us doing exactly this. I want to *savor* you like you're my favorite dessert. Let me taste you."

I love how it's not a question but he pauses beneath my belly button waiting for an answer.

My fingers fist his hair as I help guide him, not that he needs my help.

"Pleaseeee. *Mmmmm*," The feel of his wet tongue sliding through my folds causes my back to arch and my toes to curl .

Cole pulls back to look at me. He's staring so intently at my pussy that I start to get nervous that something's wrong with it and try to close my legs, but Cole's not having any of that. His hard grip on the insides of my thighs won't allow me to cover myself, in fact, he spreads them even wider. He's in complete control of my body right now. Why do I like that so much? The longer he stares at me, the wetter I get. He seems mesmerized as he watches my reaction to him.

"Fuck. You're so pretty Zoe. Look how wet you get for me." He slides his index finger inside me and I clench down against the invasion. "God, you're so tight. You taste so fucking good too." He goes right back to eating my pussy, his finger fucking me and pressing against my Gspot at the perfect angle.

When I'm close to coming, he adds another finger and fucks me harder. When his thumb rubs my clit again I lose it, falling over the edge but he doesn't stop until my legs quit trembling.

Instead of pure relief though, an empty ache starts inside me.

Cole knows it too as I desperately reach him, but he takes his time, a smirk playing on his lips as he kisses his way up the sensitive skin between my breasts. He flicks his tongue against my nipple and his fingers still curled inside me begin to move again.

I cradle his head against my breast as he sucks on my nipple harder. "Mmmm. Please please please. I need more."

“You know how this works Zoe. Tell me what you need and I’ll give it to you.”

“You. Inside me. *Now.*”

Cole chuckles. “Aren’t I already inside you?” He pumps his fingers harder.

“Your cock. I need your cock. I want you to be my first.”

With a pop, he lets go of my nipple and gazes at me seriously, like he’s checking for... I don’t know. Maybe he thinks it’s strange that I’m still a virgin at 22.

“Zoe,” he says almost reverently. “I need you to be sure but there’s no going back. Once I take you, you’re mine.”

I don’t want to go back.

“Make me yours.”

*If only for tonight.*

And he does, leaning in to give me a possessive kiss.

The dusky sky makes this moment all the more intimate and tender. In the low light, everything feels *more* somehow. More special. More serious. More loving.

I want to remember everything about this experience. I feel so cherished with Cole looking at me like I’m the most beautiful woman in the world.

As Cole starts stripping, I almost have a mini-orgasm from the sight of his tattooed, chiseled torso. God, being a lumberjack sure keeps him fit. I take a moment to admire how detailed his tattoo is. It’s a tree that starts on his right side. The roots reach down to his waist. The trunk goes up most of his side before the branches stretch across his ribs and trail up the side of his neck and over the top of his bicep.

My fixation on Cole’s gorgeous tattoo is only interrupted when he leans down to kiss me again. This time it’s sweeter, gentler as are his hands as he peels the sundress off of me, leaving me completely exposed.

“Zoe, you’re everything.”

I'm not sure what he means by that but I don't care as he positions himself against my entrance and slowly eases inside me. I'm so turned on that it slides in more easily than I thought it would. There's a burning stretch, but it's a good burn.

Cole starts moving slowly, lightly holding my face, and it's sweet. But after a minute, I need more.

"Harder. I want more of you, Cole."

"Are you sure?" he asks, but I can tell that he likes the idea by the way his cock pulses inside of me. Cole clenches his teeth. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't hurt me. I need it. Show me what it means to be yours."

That seems to undo him because his fingers dig into my skin harder as he moves my hips, plowing into me as I wrap my legs around his waist. "Mine," he growls. "All mine."

"Yes." I cry out. This is exactly what I need. This primal possessiveness. Oh my god...

Cole snakes his hand around my back and pulls us up so that we're sitting and I'm in his lap again, but this time when we grind against each other, there's nothing in between us.

"*Ohhh*," I cry at the new sensation, the feeling of his cock going so deep inside of me that his head presses against my womb. I'm so overwhelmed by the feeling that he's doing all the work, his strong arms moving me up and down his cock like I'm his toy. My walls clench even harder at the thought that he's using my body for his pleasure.

"More." I say, gripping his shoulders and using my knees for leverage to bounce against him. "I need more of this."

He doesn't question me this time, slamming me up and down his shaft even harder until I shatter, the moan from my orgasm ringing in his ear.

The sound sets Cole off too. He plows into me one more time before spilling his warm release against my inner walls.

If I wasn't sure before, this moment cements how much I love Cole. The fact that I wanted him so raw like this.

Is this how Mom felt every time she lost herself to a man? Suddenly, I can understand her a lot better. I can understand how she'd fall apart when men left her if they made her feel like this—so adored, wanted, worshiped.

The only difference is when this finally ends and my heart breaks, it'll be my own doing not Cole's.



# Chapter Nine

## Cole

Zoe's so quiet and pensive as we walk back to the main house, that I'm starting to worry that our incredible connection was solely one sided. My hand squeezes hers and she offers me a small smile. Maybe she's just nervous to see my family right after I fucked her in the middle of a field. I would be nervous about Ash's potential teasing comments.

One look at Zoe's crushed curls and my wrinkled shirt says it all, but I feel zero shame. Just an indescribable feeling of bliss.

The moment I open the porch door, everyone inside the sunroom turns to us in unison, a chorus of knowing smiles playing on their lips. Behind Buckee, Ash's shit eating grin over his mug causes me to throw him a warning look. Zoe's just beginning to get comfortable, the last thing I need is her shutting down again which it seems like she's already doing.

"How did you like the property?" Ash asks innocently, taking a sip of his tea to hide a chuckle.

"It's beautiful," Zoe says with a shy smile. "Cole showed me so much."

"I bet."

Kai knocks Ash's elbow but thankfully Zoe's too distracted by the kids squealing next door to notice.

"Speaking of the property," Buckee says, reaching for a large manilla envelope on the coffee table. "This is for the both of you."

He wheels over and hands it to me. It's heavy. Whatever document's inside must be over a hundred pages.

"What's this?"

"Your wedding present," Buckee grins proudly. "The official land deed for your portion of Forester ranch. The part

that overlooks the creek.

The same area Zoe and I had just christened. My heart swells at the perfection of it all as I stoop to give Buckee a hug. But the moment I do, Zoe slips her palm from mine. She bends to thank Buckee too but when she finishes her hug, she doesn't return to my side. She's only a few steps away from me, but it suddenly feels like a mile.

Before I can reach for her, Zander runs up to us with a big grin. "Buckee said all us kids could sleep over tonight and watch movies. Can I?"

Buckee winks at us and I'm guessing he wants to give us more time alone.

"Of course," Zoe says, but it comes out a little raspy. She suddenly looks exhausted and I wonder if I wore her out or if something else is going on.

"I'll be here," Cali says reassuringly. "The girls and I head home tomorrow afternoon, but we'll be back again for the concert."

"How's Beau doing alone with the twins?" I ask.

Cali and her husband had one year old twin boys.

"Surprisingly pretty well. I would've brought them to see Buckee but they would've been miserable on the long car ride here and back.

"Do you need help getting the kids down?" Zoe asks. "I can help with bath time or bedtime stories."

"The Little Engine that Could!" Everyly squeals. "Yes I can. Yes I can!"

"Si, yo puedo," Sunny sings. "¡Sí, yo puedo!"

"Sunny's learning Spanish with her mom Maya," Cali explains as both girls pretend to drive an invisible train around her knees. Zander readily hopes on as the third passenger.

"Come on Zoe," Zander says before hugging me goodbye. "You can be the caboose!"

I watch her ass sway as she accepts her position with a defeated giggle and they all disappear down the hall pulling imaginary train horns.

The moment they're out of airshot, Buckee looks up at me, pausing his Connie look-alike telenovela. "What's wrong? Looks like you were about to run after her."

"I actually don't know." I sigh. I'm in no mood to play defense around my family today. "Things seemed great. Perfect...and then it's like a flip switched."

"Something must've put her on edge," Kai chimes in.

I wrack my brain trying to think what that could be, but I come up with nothing.

"Don't waste time wondering what went wrong," Ash says. "Just ask her."

"But first, make her feel secure," Kai says.

"I do. Or at least I try to."

"By telling her?" Kai asks. "Sometimes we think actions are enough, and I've learned the hard way that sometimes you just need to say stuff plainly. Maybe you two are speaking two totally different languages right now."

Ash and Buckee nod in agreement.

"Talk to her. Make sure she knows how you feel about her while you still have the chance. Have you told her how much she means to you? That you've been in love with her since you first saw her?"

It didn't occur to me before now that my love language was more action based. I squeeze my eyes shut and run a hand through my hair. I'd taken her in the field, and I didn't even tell her that I loved her. I thought about it the entire time, with pump and every orgasm but I hadn't vocalized it.

Before we got intimate I'd held off because I didn't want to scare her off. But once I got her in my arms, and she cradled me between her legs, why hadn't I?

I'm a fucking idiot.



Sinking on the sofa, I shake my head. “Ah, no. I didn’t want to scare her off by coming on too strong.”

“It kinda looks like she’s already scared,” Kai says. “And the relationship is pretty new, marriage or not. If you don’t tell her everything, I think you’ll lose her anyway.”

Buckee rolls closer to where I’m sitting on the couch, “He’s right, son. I once let the perfect girl slip through my fingertips because I was too afraid to let her see how much I felt for her. At the time, I didn’t know that though. I swore I was just too busy with the rodeo.”

My gaze flickers to the TV screen where the actress spots a rogue bull. As the camera zooms in to capture her blood curdling scream, my stomach drops.

The actress looks like Connie, because it is Connie, four decades younger.

I look at Buckee who’s smiling at me sadly, an unspoken message floating between us.

“Us Forester men feel things so deeply that we fall in love quickly. But keeping that love? Well that’s another story entirely.”

“Just talk to her,” Ash encourages before pointing to the manilla envelope in my lap. “Don’t let that huge plot of land go to waste on just you alone.”

\* \* \*

## Zoe

I can barely breathe as Cole and I drive in silence towards the cabin.

On the dashboard between us, the manilla envelope sits like a declaration. One that lets me know our time is up. Somehow, I thought Buckee would wait at least a year to make sure our marriage was legitimate before handing Cole his inheritance. Now that he has, I can’t avoid the writing on the wall anymore.

CPS gave me the all clear with Zander.

Cole's got his plot of land.

Panic starts to rise within me when I think about Zander and I's living arrangement.

I don't start back at the diner until next week and I won't get my first check until a week later.

I know Cole said we'd always remain friends but even staying with a friend past two weeks is outstaying your welcome.

The concert isn't until next month. I'd hope to make a decent amount after repaying everyone for their help. That would probably be enough for first last and security but I couldn't expect Cole to host Zander and I for that long. That aside, now that he had his land deed, would Cole even be willing to keep up our sham to his family for a little while longer?

Shame blooms in my chest as I think it.

Using Cole is one thing. He used me too and that was mutual. But using his family who's been nothing but kind to me? No. I can't, not even if it means never seeing the Tynam Twins in person.

Forget about the concert and the menu, and all hopes of branching out on my own.

I'll beg Connie to let me come to work tomorrow. Then I'll start searching Moonshine Creek's local pages for apartments. If I work doubles all week, maybe I can scrounge up enough for a tiny efficiency. One that you pay weekly instead of monthly.

Zander will have to share a bed with me again, but the most important thing is that we're together.

*Zander.* What the hell was I going to tell Zander? I know this moment is inevitable, but I hadn't seen it coming so soon. Maybe it's for the best. Zander has only been a Forester for a short while. He'll cry, but he'll heal a lot faster than a year from now, right?

He'll understand why I did it all once he's a bit older.

No matter what I tell myself, I feel shittier and shitter with each passing minute.

I gaze at the envelope again and swallow. I guess that's it then. He doesn't need me anymore and I'm back on my own.

*"You only have yourself in this world, Zoe,"* Mom had always said. *"You were born alone and you'll die alone. Remember that."*

Oh I remember it alright. It's kicking me in the ass now as I try to figure out how the hell I'll haul all my shit out of Cole's house now that I don't have my truck.

"Zoe, are you okay?" Cole asks and I blink.

We're back at his cabin and he's holding the passenger door open for me to get out.

"Yes," I say, sliding out. My legs feel like jelly and Cole grabs my waist to steady me.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I'm okay."

I'm always okay. I always figure things out. Even when the walls feel like they're closing in on me somehow I manage to keep them apart, if only by an inch.

*"Whoa,"* Cole captures me, scooping me up into his arms and closing the door with his shoulder. "No you're not. Are you sick? Is that why you've been so quiet?"

He sounds so concerned, but I refuse to look in his eyes where I know I'll melt. If I'm already this devastated, I can't imagine what it would be like if I fell deeper in love with him for a year or two.

How had I got my heart so entangled in all of this? Cole stated the contract's term plainly. There were no declarations of love even when we had sex or false hope, just a promise of friendship. Maybe that's for the best anyway. Even if Cole did love me, I've never known a man to stay. I've never known a man to not get tired of a woman he claimed to want a 'happily ever after' with.

“My stomach just hurts,” I say as he carries me up the porch steps and into the house. It isn’t a lie. It’s in knots and twisting so hard I think I may vomit.

“Let me get you some ginger ale,” Cole says carrying me into the bedroom. “Here, just lie down.”

The moment I leave his arms and he disappears into the kitchen, tears spring to my eyes.

On the opposite wall I spot our wedding photo. The one where we’re cutting the cake while Zander sneaks a taste of chocolate icing. Cole’s guiding the knife but peering into my eyes like I’m his soulmate. It looks so damn real.

It feels so fucking real.

*But it isn’t Zoe.*

Something in me snaps. Blurry eyed, I slip from the bed and grab an empty bag from the closet. I can’t stay here. Not even for one night.

The moment I pull open my drawer and grab a handful of underwear, Cole comes into the room with a chilled glass of ginger ale. He freezes, but I don’t. I dump the underwear into the bag before moving on to my sock drawer.

The silence is only broken by the sound of the glass being placed on the wooden nightstand. Then, I feel Cole behind me, watching me dumbfounded as I move on to my jeans.

“Zoe. Please tell me what’s wrong,” he says, his voice low and hoarse like it’s about to crack. “Whatever I did wrong, tell me and I’ll fix it. We’ll fix it together.”

*What he did wrong?* He’s been damn near perfect this entire time. Suddenly I realize how this all must look, but I still can’t meet his gaze to reassure him.

I shake my head. “You didn’t do anything wrong, Cole. I promise. It’s me. It’s all me.”

I reach to open another drawer but he stops me, blocking it with his thigh.

“Please move,”

“No.” It’s so firm it takes me by surprise.

“*No?*”

“Don’t you think I deserve an explanation?”

He does, but if I give it now, I think I’ll shatter.

“I’m sorry. I just can’t stay here anymore.”

His hands fly around my waist, stilling me as I try to skirt around him.

“Cole, let me go,” I choke out. My throat feels so raw it’s painful to even speak.

“I can’t do that. I *won’t* do that.”

*What?*

“If I let you go, you’ll disappear.”

I struggle against him again, but he only holds me tighter. “That’s what I need to do! I need to take Zander and disappear. It’s better to end this now before it hurts even more later. We both got what we wanted out of this.”

The minute I say the words I almost regret them because Cole looks like he’s about to shatter. There’s a swirling storm of misery in his deep blue ocean eyes. There’s shock and heartbreak written all over his face like I’ve hurt him so deeply he’s momentarily stunned.

*But that can’t be...*

He shakes his head slowly. “You don’t get to do this Zoe. Rip apart our family.”

I gaze at him incredulously. “There is no *our family* Cole. There’s just Zander and me. We both agreed to the terms. You’d help me with CPS and I’d help you with the land. You heard Buckee tonight, he’s given you the land, and CPS has closed my investigation. So it’s all over now.”

“Nothing’s over and you know it. If it was, you wouldn’t have been purring against me in those fields just an hour ago.”

I look away. “That was purely physical. Just sex. That’s it.” But I can’t even meet his eyes as I say it because it wasn’t

just sex. Not to me. That moment is engraved on my soul. But does he feel the same way?

“*Just sex?*” he repeats and his grasp loosens enough for me to get away from him.

I cross the room to the dresser and grab more of my clothes but before I can toss them into the bag, he grabs the duffel bag from the floor and tosses it across the bed where it lands with a thud. Panties and bra spring out, tumbling to the floor.

I swallow, not daring to reach for them and get within his arms reach. Not because I think he’ll hurt me, but because I know there’s no way I’ll get out of them again.

“*Just sex?*” he asks again.

“We both know that,” I say, lifting my chin, daring to lie. “I thought I could do it okay? I thought I could do *this*.”

“What’s *this*?”

“*This*,” I gesture all around the room and then between us. “This fake stuff. I thought I could keep everything separate. I thought I could fake it but I can’t.” My voice cracks as I try to hold in the tears. I keep sniffing to try to hold them back. I wring the pair of jeans I’m still holding between my fists. “I can’t do it the way you can. I can’t keep my heart out of it... I can’t separate it from my body. I can’t just have *fun* like that and relax knowing the inevitable. And now that Buckee’s given you the papers, it’s time I step away.”

“Is that what you think I was doing after all this time?”

I try to walk around the bed to the duffel but Cole gets in my way like an impenetrable wall of pure muscle. He holds me by the waist again and I damn near crumble right there and then.

“Having *fun* with you? Like some little toy?”

My head’s swimming. I can’t think straight when he’s so close.

“Let go of me Cole,” I whisper pleadingly. “I told you we’re leaving.”

The last word snaps something within him and his expression hardens. “Like hell you are.”

I freeze, his sharp words sending a tingle through me I’d never expect. He’s always been so gentle with me. This... this new tone was a side to him I hadn’t experienced, except for when he made love to me, no, fucked me, at the ranch.

I look at his strong hands wrapped around me, at the strength in those veiny, tattooed arms, and for one delirious second I want him to use them to take control of my body like he did earlier. I want him to shove me back onto the bed.

*Hard.*

“Excuse me?” I manage to stutter.

He steps closer, his massive body caging me as the back of my knees make contact with the mattress.

“You heard me.” His front brushes against me, igniting a blaze of heat within me that rushes to my core. In a desperate bid to get some space between us, I sink down onto the mattress.

Bad move.

He’s towering above me now, looking down on me and I suddenly feel fucking helpless as he sinks a hand into my hair. It’s so gentle. Too gentle in comparison to his imposing demeanor as his free hand slides up my breast and to my throat. His index lingers over my pulse point while his thumb falls into the hollow of my throat with that same soft pressure as his hand in my hair.

It’s jarring because I know how easily he can adjust his hold. How quickly it can go from gentle to crushing.

And... *I like it.*

“I said you’re not leaving.”

I swallow and his thumb traces the motion.

“You said we’d split amicably if one of us wanted to end things.”

“Fuck what I said. I told you before I made love to you that if we did that, you’re mine and there’s no going back.”

“Cole... People say all kinds of things in the heat of the moment.” He scoffs at my excuse.

“Why are you so scared, baby? Are you scared of me, or are you scared about what I have to say? Are you scared of being in love or are you scared of getting hurt?”

“I—I’m not scared,” I croak.

As he starts massaging my scalp I fight to keep my eyes open. Everytime they flutter closed though he presses his thumb into my throat and pulls on my hair, forcing me to open my eyes again and look at him.

“No?” he asks, continuing his ministrations. “Then why are you trembling?”

Because I feel like my pussy’s going to explode if he pulls on my hair one more time.

“I think you are scared. I think you’re trying to run because you’re afraid of what I have to say. You’re afraid that I’ll reject you so you’re trying to leave before I get the chance. You’re so convinced that no one else could love Zander as much as you do so you try to put space between us. You try to shield him from a rejection that’s never going to come from me. You try to shield your heart from me.”

“Like you said, you can’t separate your heart from your body and I can’t either. I wasn’t just trying to fuck you in the field, Zoe. If that was the case, I’d never do so raw. Nor would I waste my first time with someone I didn’t give a damn about for *just sex*. If I felt that way, I had plenty of opportunities before thirty-two to do so.”

*What???* This sex god of a man was a virgin too?

“What we have could never be *just* anything. I love you Zoe and I love Zander and if you want a divorce get ready for a long battle because I’m not signing a damn thing.”





# Chapter Ten

## Cole

She looks panicked, like prey caught in a trap. She is trapped, because I'm not letting her go. *Ever.*

I push her shoulders and she gasps as she bounces against the mattress, but the way her wide eyes dart to my straining cock as her tongue wets her lips, lets me know she's aroused.

I crawl up the bed as she scoots back, like a little gazelle trying to outrun a lion. But my baby's too slow and I'm over her in no time, gripping her throat, but not squeezing, just keeping her in place and forcing her to look at me.

I can feel her swallow against my palm. Her eyes, green as moss, are still so wide. She's holding her breath. Waiting to see what I'll do next. Her legs fall open and I fill the space between her, but I don't let my cock touch her yet.

I need her to look into my eyes and see that I'd never hurt her, just hold her when she needs it the most. Pressing a gentle kiss over her rapidly beating pulse, I bury my face in her neck and breathe in her cocoa vanilla scent. I'm salivating at the thought of tasting her all over again, as I lick her silky skin like it's the finest dessert.

"I told you you're mine," I growl in her ear. "Not mine until I got *our* land deed. Not mine until CPS closed the investigation, and damn sure not just mine for a quick fuck because we haven't fucked. We made love because we love each other."

Her eyes water because she knows it's true. I press a kiss to her soft lips and she kisses me back slowly, a tear slipping down her temple.

"I know you love me baby, and I love you. I'm sorry I didn't say it to you sooner, but I've felt it long before we got married."

She swallows as another tear slips out.

“I belong to you Zoe and you belong to me. Forever. That’s our real contract and there’s nothing fake about it.” I press a kiss over her breast that’s rising and falling rapidly. “Nothing fake about what our hearts feel.” I drift a hand between and cup her soaked slit over her panties. “And nothing is fake about the way our bodies react to one another.”

She clenches her thighs and whimpers but I don’t slip a finger between her slit to stroke her. I have to be sure she wants this even though I’m hanging onto my control by a thread.

“Tell me everything I’ve just said is true. Tell me it’s what you want too and I’ll give it to you.”

“What if I want to leave?” Zoe challenges me weakly. She says that even as she tries to rock her hips and spread her sweet little pussy so I’ll rub her clit.

I won’t. Not yet.

“You don’t.”

“But what if I did?”

She’s teasing me.

I snarl. “Then I’ll tie you up and eat your pussy until you forget your own name. I’ll make you come so many times that your voice will be too hoarse to argue with me. Then I’ll make you beg for my cock before fucking you so hard that you won’t be able to walk away from me even if you wanted to. I’ll fuck you over and over again, breeding you, and it still won’t be enough.”

Her breaths grow more shallow, her hard nipples rubbing against my chest, teasing me.

She likes that idea.

“I don’t believe you,” she taunts, struggling to swipe her pussy against my fingers again.

“I never bluff.”

“Then show me.”

Taking off my belt, I loop it over her wrists above her head, leaving them loose enough until I can confirm she knows what she's getting herself into.

"If I show you, I'm going to tighten this belt against your wrists and I'll never let you leave my sight again." I swat her sex and she gasps before moaning as I rub her slowly to ease the sting. "And I can worship this pussy for as long as I please. Is that what you want?"

She nods vigorously.

"Say it, Zoe. Let me hear those sweet little words on your lips."

She hesitates for a moment, biting her lip and looking up at me shyly, "I want it. Everything you just said."

"Not good enough Zoe." I tut, replacing my hand with my rockhard cock. I grind into her, making sure she can feel the friction against her clit. "And not a single *please*. Where are your manners? I should spank you for being so rude. Would you like that?"

"*Please*," she whimpers squirming beneath me. "I want you to spank me."

I grab her and flip us over so that she's on top. Then I maneuver her on to all fours over my knees, so her head's pressing into the mattress, while her tits rest in my lap. I start caressing her ass in slow circles, gradually applying more pressure and looking for any sign that she doesn't like this.

"Please Cole. Touch me," She breathless. "*I need it.*"

I deliver a smack against her ass before smoothing my hand over it, more a test than an actual smack. When she leans back into my hand, I smack her harder eliciting a moan as she rubs her breasts against my cock. The harder I smack her, the louder she moans.

I slide my hands up her dress, giving her ass a firm squeeze under her panties before cupping her sex again. I almost come in my jeans when I feel how much wetter she is now.

My girl likes it when I'm in control of her body.

She spreads her legs wider, trying again to get my fingers on her clit.

"Tell me what you want Zoe. This time with manners."

"Please touch my pussy."

"Please who?"

She licks her lips. "Cole. Please make me come, Cole."

We'd have to work on another name just for the bedroom.

"How do you want to come?"

"Any way you want me too. Make me yours."

I lose my last bit of restraint and shove two fingers inside her tight channel. I'm painfully hard now and I'm sure I'll pass out at any minute from how much blood is going to my cock. I piston my fingers deeper inside her, showing her clit no mercy with my thumb until her knees give out and she collapses against me.

I slip my sticky fingers out and swat her ass.

"Be a good girl and get up," I tease, knowing she's too far gone to even try. She just moans, clenching her thighs together in the aftershock of her orgasm.

"Shame I say," Swatting her again, this time making sure my fingertips connect with her swollen clit. "Only good girls get cock."

That does it. She scrambles to shaking knees and I get behind her, tightening the belt loops around her wrists before buckling it around one of the slats in the headboard. I cup the back of her neck, pressing her head down onto the mattress where she turns sideways to look up at me in anticipation.

*Such a good girl.*

"That's it baby, look at who's mounting you. Fucking you. Breeding you."

She moans, arches her back even more and spreads that beautiful right on the head of my cock.

“You want to be bred don’t you? You want to milk my cock with that tight little cunt.”

She nods, practically frantic as she tries to mount me herself. “I want every last drop of your cum inside of me.”

I almost cum just from hearing her say it.

“Where are your manners?”

“*Please.*”

Gripping her hips I plunge into her, fucking her—no, loving her—into oblivion.



# Epilogue

Zoe

I can't believe this is my life now. I can't believe *we* get a happily-ever-after. Sometimes it's still a little hard for me to believe—that I can be this happy, that Zander and I get to keep Cole and start a new family. *Family*, that's something Zander and I have never had before aside from each other and Connie.

Zander accepts all the new changes so easily. He's always been that way, a happy-go-lucky kid who sees life as one big adventure. I'm glad that I've been able to shelter him from life's harder realities so that he gets to be just a kid. I never had that growing up.

I smile as I watch Zander race Sunny and Everly in their life-size toy cars in the kids area we set up at the Tynam concert. They had so much fun riding in the one Zander made with Cole that they begged Cole to help them build their own. Of course each of them painted their cars in their favorite colors. Sunny painted hers sunshine yellow with pink roses and Everly painted hers sky blue with orange magnolias.

Words can't describe how happy I am now that Zander has cousins to play with nor how elated I am that he's an official Forester ever since Cole adopted him. Now we're his legal guardians together with matching surnames, something not even Zander and I shared before. It's so much more than a name. It's a tie, weaving our new family together as we start a new chapter.

Sometimes I think this new life is too good to be true. That I'm going to wake up and discover it's all a dream and that I'm still working a dead-end job while shying away from a sexy lumberjack because I'm scared he'll get tired of me someday. Because I'm petrified of ending up alone, used and heartbroken like Mom. Because I can't open my heart wide enough to trust him and let him in.

But it's not a dream and now I have something else to tether me to this new reality. A new life. Literally. I'm about



sixteen weeks pregnant and just starting to need maternity clothes.

Zander is beyond excited to be a big brother. He keeps putting his hand on my belly to ask when he can feel the baby move. It's so stinking cute. He's even talking about which of his toys he can share. He's getting a bit impatient to find out whether he's having a brother or a sister though. We won't find out until our next checkup in a couple weeks when we have our first ultrasound.

Cole's rushing to get the addition on our cabin done before the baby comes. It's a good thing his family is able to help. We're adding a couple more bedrooms and bathrooms and we're creating a new master suite with, as Cole puts it, "a bath fit for a queen." It's ridiculous how much Cole spoils me sometimes.

I'm so lost in my thoughts that I startle when Cole joins me in my vendor's booth and puts his arms around me. The booth is perfect and so is it's spot because I can see everything! That aside, the booth is a huge success. I've already gotten orders to cater at other events and Connie let me add all my concert recipes to the diner menu. *Finally.*

Connie and Buckee are becoming fast friends and, thanks to his influence, Connie has mostly retired and left me to run the diner. I'm saving up to buy her out or to at least become a co-owner. It seems like every time we go over to the ranch, Connie is sitting out on the porch with Buckee. I wonder if there's anything going on between them? I hope so. They both deserve happiness.

I remember how much I cried when Connie surprised me with a baby shower at the diner. That's when she told me that she wants to transition into retirement. She's too headstrong to retire all at once, but so far she's been letting me make most of the changes I want, including those related to the decor. The Foresters helped me renovate so that even though it still has some of its vintage vibes, it's now sturdy and belongs in this century. In the next few months we should actually be in the green.

I'm pulled from the memory as I hear Ash and Kai talking to the Twynam Twins, Aurora and Luna, by the side of the stage close the vendor booths. I've never heard them sound so awkward before. Is this them trying to be professional?

Ash keeps tripping over his words around Aurora to the point that I wonder if he has a stutter? No, I would have remembered that. Why is he... ohhh, he likes her! Damn, he's going to need a lot of help to make anything happen between them.

Then there's Kai... he seems so stoic and professional until he opens his mouth. Then he's worse than Ash. Have these two never spoken to a girl before?

I hear Kai tell Luna, "I need to be inside you—your home. You need around the clock security until we can be sure you're not in danger... I can take you home after every show. Let me give you a ride tonight—in my *truck*."

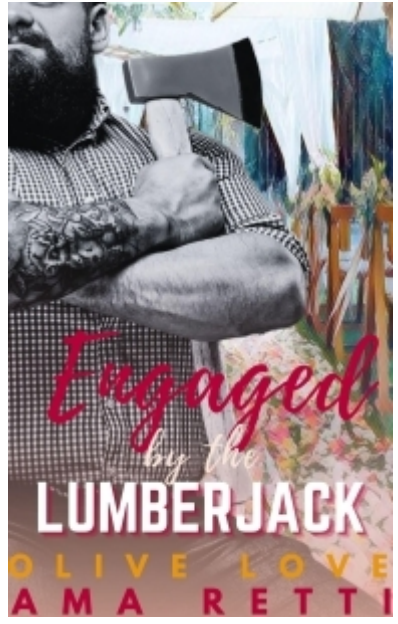
Well, this should be interesting.

The End.

\* \* \*

Thank you for reading Cole and Zoe's story. Please consider leaving a star rating as it's so encouraging ☐

Want more of the Twynam Twins? Check out Kai's story next: [\*Engaged to the Lumberjack.\*](#)



*Engaged*

*by the*

**LUMBERJACK**

**OLIVE LOVE  
AMARETTI**