

Weed

by the

LUMBERJACK

A M A R E T T I

Wed by the Lumberjack

Mounted in the Mountains

Ama Retti

Published by Ama Retti, 2023.

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

WED BY THE LUMBERJACK

First edition. August 27, 2023.

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Written by Ama Retti.

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*For everyone who loves childhood sweethearts,
protective country boys, and a sweet happily ever after
:)*

Tropes:

Amenisa

Fake Marriage

Curvy Girl

Childhood Sweethearts

Woman in Jeopardy

Content Warning: This book contains depictions of domestic violence and an alcoholic father. If this content is triggering for you, skip most of Chapter 9.

Acknowledgments

A special thank you goes out to my editor Sarah Schopick, who helped with development and proofreading.

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Chapter One

Heath

I never thought I'd see Dixie Rose Fox in Covet County again. She was my crush and best friend in middle school until she left town one summer night without so much as a peep.

Now here she is in my arms, with a bloody forehead and apparent memory loss.

She hit her head so hard on the steering wheel, that I think she may have a concussion.

“Dixie? Who’s that?” She asks groggily again as chaos ensues just behind her head.

She'd come barreling onto Jaxon's property, and it was my truck at the edge of the driveway that stopped her from running directly into the cabin.

The Woods brothers and my cousins, the Foresters, are trying to put out the flames from her exploded engine now with fire extinguishers. The blaze seems invincible though, roaring back to life each time they think they've finally conquered it.

A safe distance away on the porch, the women, children, and Jaxon's dog, Mochi, look worriedly from the blazing truck to the surrounding forest.

Finally, it's Kai's extinguisher that has the last word as the flames die down for good.

I look now at my sweet baby, Pearl, only two years old with her back end crushed in like a soda can. The wheels look okay though, so hopefully, that means I can still drive her to my buddy's auto shop later.

But Pearl can wait, It's Dixie I'm concerned about.

“You don't know your own name, peanut?” I try to say lightly but my heart's racing as I carry her towards Goldie, my cousin Cole's unharmed pickup. He offered to drive Dixie to the emergency room himself while I sort out Pearl and Dixie's still-smoking truck, but there's no way I'm letting her out of

my sight. Not when I've been waiting over a decade to see her beautiful face again.

"Peanut?"

I gaze down into her big brown eyes which are cloudy with confusion and fatigue. The way she asks, makes me think her brain is trying to make the connection to her old nickname but it just can't.

Don't they say people with potential concussions need to stay awake?

I've seen it a dozen times in movies, but that doesn't mean it's true. It probably isn't, but keeping her awake until we make it to the nearest emergency room couldn't hurt, right?

"That's you," I say, easing her onto the semi-reclined passenger seat. "Remember? You were so tiny in middle school that everyone thought you were in the wrong building."

I look down at her curvy frame now and quickly realize that apart from her height, there isn't anything tiny about Dixie anymore. She's curvy. Painfully curvy with wide hips, heavy breasts, and the cutest little belly that peeks out from her disheveled graphic tee.

I tug the fabric down and strap her in. Now isn't the time to observe how sexy she is. I move a lock of her dark hair that's sticking to the bloody trail on her forehead and examine the purpling gash. It isn't too deep, but she'll probably need stitches.

"Tiny?" she snorts, her eyes fluttering closed and then open again as she stares up at me unfocused. "You're a giant."

A Forester family trait for the males. If she thinks I'm huge, she should see Ash.

"That I am," I chuckle, not bothering to point out that it wasn't me I was talking about.

I'm just about to close the passenger door when she whispers, "Are you a gentle giant?"

The worry in her voice sends ice running through my veins. Is she worried about her safety? "Of course I am. But I

know you don't remember..."

"*Good*. I'm so tired of running."

"From who?"

"I can't outrun a giant," she slurs, turning her head away from me. "Not when I've already outrun a beast."

"What beast Dixie?"

But her long dark eyelashes flutter close and her head lulls.

"Dixie?"

It's no use.

A feeling of unease settles over me as I turn the engine over and Goldie roars to life. She's louder than Pearl and doesn't drive as smoothly, but what matters is that we have a safe drive down to the emergency room.

I silently curse as I ease onto the winding main road. Over the cliffside, I can see the dark inky blot of the lake below. It'll take me nearly two hours to get there. Two hours I hope don't impede Dixie's recovery because I need her to remember me. To know that she's always safe with me. And I need her to remember who the hell this beast is because I'm the best hunter around.

* * *

Six hours later the scent of antiseptic cleaners and the bright fluorescent lights of the emergency room are beginning to drive me insane. That, and not knowing what's going on with Dixie.

Cole had called asking for an update I didn't have. He said they'd taken Dixie's things out of her truck to avoid the smoke ruining them. I asked him to carry them to my cabin because as far as I'm concerned, Dixie's leaving the hospital with me until we can figure things out.

I'm about to go to the vending machine for my third cup of weak coffee when the doctor approaches me. Her white lab coat reads Dr. Brooks.

“Mr. Forester?” She says. “We have some good news. Ms. Fox is stable and resting.”

I let out a sigh of relief, the knots in my stomach loosening, but not untying.

“All of her tests came back fine?”

She hesitates. “What’s your relation to Ms. Fox?”

I’m about to say that I’m an old friend, but then another movie tidbit pops into my brain.

“Family only!” Isn’t that what the receptionists and nurses always said when a friend tried to visit someone who was freshly admitted?

“Why?”

“Because we can only share medical details with her close family members. The same goes for visits. Sorry.”

I don’t think, blink, or breathe before I blurt, “I’m her husband.”

Dr. Brooks looks doubtfully up at me. It’s a small town, and the noisy inhabitants would’ve heard about a wedding even up in the mountains.

Before she can look at my fingers for a ring, I shove my hands into my jeans pockets.

“Her husband?” She asks tentatively.

I nod. What? Is she going to ask to see my marriage certificate right now?

The doctor blinks and then chews her lip. I can tell she doesn’t really believe me, but she doesn’t distrust me either. Given the tight-knit community of the town, Dr. Brooks has seen me around at least a half dozen times in passing.

“Well, if you’re her husband that means you’re responsible for her and she’ll need a lot of care. She’s very confused right now with some memory loss from hitting her head on the steering wheel. Her injuries could’ve been a lot worse, but her body was relaxed at the time of impact. We think she fell asleep behind the wheel.”

That meant she'd been driving for ages. Once again the questions of *where did Dixie come from*, and *where was she going*, remerge in my mind for the hundredth time.

I think of all her worldly possessions piled high in the back of her truck and it becomes obvious that she must've been moving, no— *running*.

That triggers another thought to zoom to the forefront of my brain. *The beast*. Who the hell was this beast? And what had they done to scare her into running away without a break to rest?

Was she in an abusive relationship? My stomach knots at the idea of Dixie with anyone, especially an asshole that didn't deserve her.

What pains me the most though is the thought that Dixie was potentially being hurt. *Again*.

I still haven't forgiven myself for allowing that to happen to her.

“How long will her memory loss last?”

“We can't say for sure, but we believe she has post-traumatic retrograde amnesia due to her car accident. Physically, she will make a full recovery, but her memories may take longer. Since there doesn't seem to be any extensive damage, it is likely that her memories will come back in the next few days.”

Well, that's a bit of good news. Hopefully, by tomorrow Dixie can clear up all the confusion.

And, she'll finally be able to remember me.

“For the most part, victims can't remember the recent past and they're typically confused about what's going on around them. It's important to remain calm and patient with them. We don't want to confuse and frustrate them further.”

I nod at the doctor's stern look. “Don't add to the confusion. Got it.”

“She also inhaled some smoke,” she goes on. “Thankfully it's mild and she's being treated with an oxygen mask.”

“It must be the smoke from the engine exploding.”

The doctor frowns. “Until Dixie can tell us herself, we can’t be certain, but it seems unlikely that the car smoke caused it. You did say she was pulled from the vehicle almost immediately, right?”

I nod.

“We think she inhaled the smoke much earlier, and far more of it than what you described coming from the hood. Do you know where she was earlier?”

I swallow and shake my head and Dr. Brooks can barely conceal her disapproval.

What sort of husband doesn’t know where his wife was for hours on end?

With a sigh, she gestures with Dixie’s folder for me to follow her down the long corridor.

When we reach room 213, Dixie stirs at the sound of the door opening. There’s a small bandage on her forehead, but otherwise, she looks relatively unharmed.

“Ms. Fox, your husband is here to see you.”

My stomach clenches at her words. She’s probably trying to be clear and direct with Dixie to avoid any confusion, but how am I supposed to backpedal on that now?

Dixie looks at me, pulls down her oxygen mask, and smiles sleepily. “The gentle giant. You came back for me.”

“I never left, peanut.”

Something in my chest tells me that I never will.

Chapter Two

Heath, 13 Years Ago

I tighten my grip on the baseball bat Dad insists I carry when I go exploring through the woods. I doubt it has anything to do with the animals, but rather the odd chance I'll stumble into some lunatic.

With a population of five thousand people, Moonshine Creek probably has more wolves and bears than loons. But as I near my treehouse, I've never been so grateful for Dad's paranoia, because someone's inside, and it's definitely a human. I can tell from the way he's blowing his nose like a damn trumpet.

Should I ambush him?

Should I make my presence known in hopes that he just runs away?

As I adjust my grip on the bat, I realize that my palms are suddenly sweaty.

Do I actually want an altercation at all?

I've never had to swing this thing at someone's head, though I know I can. I'm the best player on the baseball team but a head's much different than a ball. That aside, I've never had to use my fists. Usually, the sight of me or my cousins sent people running, even the grown men whose height I rivaled at thirteen.

But how big was this squatter?

Deciding it's best to size up my opponent secretly before acting, I quietly sneak up the staircase and thank the heavens for all the support beams we put beneath it.

My cousins and I have been doing woodwork since we were seven and we built the place together six months ago. It's more of a little cabin than a treehouse, complete with glass windows, and bean bag chairs. We share it on weekends but

the five of us have a solo designated day during the week that's sacred.

Today's Monday.

My day.

I know none of my cousins would dare intrude, but if it really is a stranger, how the hell did they find the treehouse at all? It sits in the middle of our family's massive acreage and not even our parents know it exists.

When I get close to the window, I press myself flat against the wall before peaking inside. At first, I don't see anything unusual. The bean bags are still in a circle from our meeting last night. There are no traces of food, as we make sure to keep the place free of bear bait, and most importantly, there's no sign of a human. That is until a bean bag covered with a blanket trembles.

My bean bag.

Someone's under the cover of my Christmas crocheted blanket from Gran. A gingerbread man with a ginger beard and two candy cane crutches looks up at me merrily as the person beneath it stirs again.

The tiny size of the lump emboldens me a fraction.

This person is little more than a peanut.

Grabbing the door handle I wrench it open and step inside.

"Hey," I say, and the lump freezes. "This is private property. Get out now or I'll toss you out."

And I meant that literally.

The person doesn't speak but a filthy bedroom slipper pops out from the corner of the blanket. It's pink and covered in mud and bits of dry leaves.

It's my turn to freeze.

A girl?

Sure I know they exist, but I've never seen one alone in the woods before.

Seconds tick by before I bend down and grab the edge of the blanket. When I pull it, the sight it covered just seconds before makes my heart pound to stop.

It isn't just any girl. It's Dixie Rose Fox from the grade below me.

There's a massive knot on her forehead that makes her left eyelid droop and beneath the ratty sleeves of her too-small pajamas, are nasty bruises that circle her upper arms as if someone had grabbed and shaken her.

Time comes to a standstill as she stares up at me petrified.

"I'm sorry!" she cries, putting her arms out in front of her as if to ward me off. Her wrists are bruised too. "I fell asleep. I was going to leave before nine. I swear."

I always came to the treehouse at nine during the summer break. If Dixie knows that, that means she's been watching me for a long time.

I drop the bat and remain rooted to the spot so she knows I'm not a threat.

"Why are you sleeping in here Dixie?" I ask gently, but I have a pretty good idea.

Dixie's father, Douglas, is the town's drunk, and rumors of his erratic temper have circled Moonshine Creek for as long as I can remember.

"H-how do you know my name?"

How could I not? Dixie is the most beautiful girl in the school. A tiny thing with big chocolate brown eyes and long hair to match. Those beautiful eyes are swollen now and her cheeks are tear-streaked.

"We go to the same school." I shrug. "It's hard not to know names when there are only fifty students."

"I don't know yours."

I swallow my embarrassment and run a hand through my hair. "I'm Heath... but what are you doing here?"

"I don't know. It was raining and empty and I just..."

But it hadn't rained today. Did she mean Sunday night? It poured when I jogged all the way back home.

"Have you been sleeping here since Sunday night?"

She nods.

"Why?"

"I just...I ran." As she tucks a lock behind her hair, I see another knot on her temple and every muscle in my body tenses. What sort of a father, no coward, would beat up his own kid? A tiny little thing the size of a peanut?

"Why were you running? Who did this to you?" I ask quietly, sinking down so that I'm at eye level with her. I already know of course, or rather, I've already assumed, but I want her to confirm it.

"What does it matter? It's over with."

"It's not over with; your face is swollen and it will be for days."

I lean forward, trying to get a better look but she sinks into the bean bags, desperate to get away from me.

I put my hands up and back off but my blood's boiling as images of a gap-toothed and balding Douglas stumbling around the market flash before my eyes.

"You said you ran away at night? That must mean you live around here, right?"

And if she lives around here, it's even more obvious to me that she's running away from someone in her household. Like a parent. Like Douglas.

"Yeah."

"Do you have any siblings?" I doubted it. I would've known given the tiny class sizes, but the thought of someone else being trapped with Douglas inside that hell hole of a house nagged at me.

"No, it's just me and my dad—"

My fists tighten but Dixie looks nervous, realizing her mistake.

So she *is* running away from her father.

“But he’s not home. He never is.”

“So you were running away from an empty house?”

The silence that drifts between us is deafening as Dixie finds a corner of the room to stare at.

“Look,” I sigh. “If you don’t want to go home you don’t have to. But won’t your dad be worried? I mean you’ve been here since Sunday night.”

It pisses me off to even say that but I’m fishing for confirmation that Douglas really is the piece of shit my mind’s painting him out to be. Something tells me Dixie won’t reveal much though. Not tonight anyway.

She shakes her head. “It’s Tuesday,” she says as if that’s self-explanatory before adding, “The Watering Hole has two for one drinks on Tuesday.”

So her house would actually be empty tonight.

I nod slowly. The Watering Hole attracted a lot of animals, to say the least.

Outside, a bear howls, and Dixie instinctively leans closer to me.

“Weren’t you scared here all alone last night?”

“No. I guess my adrenaline was high.”

“And now?”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little bit scared.” To prove her point a wolf howls and she inches even closer to me.

“Do you want me to stay?” I ask tentatively before quickly adding. “On the opposite side of the room.”

She nods slowly. “Won’t your parents worry though?”

“It’s just me and Dad and he’s already asleep. He had a bad accident at the lumber mill a few years back so he takes heavy

meds that make him drowsy. As long as I'm there when he wakes up, he'll never know."

She nods again and snuggles down into the bean bag chair with a flinch when another howl— from the wind this time— rattles the windows of the treehouse.

Dang, she looks so small. So fragile.

"Dixie?"

"Yeah?"

"You can sleep here whenever you want."

She looks apprehensively through the dark window that rattles again.

"It'll always be safe here for you."

Her eyes flicker to mine. "Promise?"

"I promise."

Nothing bad will happen to you when I'm here, because I won't allow it.

"Thank you, Heath."

I don't need a thank you. It's the bare minimum of what she deserves.

We stare at each other for a long time and it isn't until Dixie finally closes those tired, dark eyes, that I do the same.

Chapter Three

Heath

Dixie did take me up on that offer of sleeping in the treehouse and making it her safe space for an entire year, until one day, she never showed up again.

Rumors flew around Moonshine Creek, but I never could decipher the truth from the tall tales.

Some people said Dixie and her father went on the run after Douglas had a brawl at the Watering Hole that cost the owner over ten thousand dollars in damages. Another rumor said they'd inherited a chateau in the south of France where Douglas's grandfather was from.

I never believed either story, but I kept on believing that wherever they were, they were apart, and Dixie was okay, because thinking of the alternative would shatter me.

But now that she was right in front of me, I wouldn't have to guess about what had happened. At least, not after she got her memory back.

I stay by Dixie's side until she drifts off into some much-needed rest. It's only when I'm sure she's sleeping deeply enough to not rouse, that I begrudgingly leave her.

She isn't the only patient I need to keep tabs on. Uncle Oliver, or rather Buckee, from his bull-riding days was admitted to the hospital yesterday for another suspected lung infection. With the changing temperatures as winter approaches, his health seems to be taking a turn for the worse.

Last winter, we nearly lost him.

Buckee always thought it'd be a bull that took him out, not the pneumonia that's plagued him for the past few years.

"At least I'd die doing what I love instead of being hooked up to all these contraptions," he grumped this morning when I'd checked up on him.

Despite all the injuries his first love caused him, Buckee's still heartbroken that none of the younger generations of Foresters took up the sport. Instead, we all chose woodworking, with the treehouse being our first major project. I can't help but wonder if Buckee's drama surrounding the family homestead has a little to do with his resentment.

He'd recently put a new clause into his will stating that only married Foresters or those with children would inherit portions of the Forester ranch. That would cut out me, and my cousins Cole, Ash, and Kai all together. As a man who never married himself or sired children, Buckee has to see how ridiculous this all is.

I just need to make him see reason.

When I get to room 114 just up the hall, I pause to knock before letting myself into the room.

Buckee's wide awake like the true night owl he's always been, watching some family sitcom from the 1970s.

From the looks of it, someone, maybe the adult daughter, has just had a baby. The father's holding him or her and giving a little monologue in front of the hospital's glass window where the city looms outside. I can tell it's symbolic of the big wide world that's ready to retrieve the newborn in due time.

Buckee, a man I've never seen cry a day in my life is staring up at the TV utterly transfixed with watery eyes.

I know he knows I'm there, so I pull a chair up to his bedside and wait for a commercial break when he finally mutes it.

"That was beautiful wasn't it?" Buckee says, turning to me. "That's what life's really about. Family."

Before I can answer him he chuckles.

"I know what you're thinking. How would I know? A bachelor like me."

"You never wanted to get married or have children."

Buckee snorts. "You believed that lie too huh?"

I lift a brow. “It’s what you’ve always said.”

“It’s what I’ve always convinced myself of.” He looks me straight in the eye. “I could always put myself out there in the way of bull riding, but never in love. I was too cowardly to ever go looking for it. I convinced myself that being as wild as those bulls was what I wanted.”

I frown. “Why would you do that if it’s not what you truly wanted?”

“Probably for the same reasons you and your cousins do. Fear. Complacency. Distraction.”

“Now wait just a minute. *Fear*? I haven’t been fearful of a relationship in my entire life.”

“Sorry, that’s Kai. It *was* Jaxon before he finally confessed his feelings for Ayla. For you, it’s just complacency and distraction.”

I gape at him and he nods.

“You’re just like I was. Burying yourself in your work. Making those damn cabins and dedicating yourself to them like they’re your babies.”

“You’re making that up,” I say incredulously. “Or projecting.”

“Am I?” he leans forward from his pillows, but a second later he collapses back into them with a shaky breath. “So I was just imagining the longing in your eyes at Beau and Cali’s wedding?”

I go to retort, but the answer dies in my throat because he’s right. My cousin Cali’s wedding felt like a kick in the gut. A reminder that I’m not happy with my nonexistent personal life.

“And I’m just projecting that Cole wants kids when he won’t damn let go of Beau and Cali’s new twin boys? Or the fact that he’s practically adopted the diner waitress’s kid?”

“You can admire and appreciate kids without wanting them.”

“And I just made up that conversation all of you boys had after Cali’s wedding about wanting the same thing one day, but it just wasn’t in the cards for you all for some bullshit reason or another?”

I swallow. So he did have actual proof straight from the horses’ mouths. Damn, had he been hiding in the bathroom when we had that heart-to-heart?

“So *that’s* what sparked that clause in your will?” I ask.

“There was a girl you loved once who you often thought about.” Buckee counts off on his fingers, ignoring me.

“Puppy love. We were just kids,” I defend, as I think about Dixie just a few rooms over. But we weren’t kids anymore and my feelings for her haven’t ever gone away. In fact, seeing her now only intensifies them from pure innocence into something much deeper that I couldn’t identify yet.

“But she got away. Then there’s Cole, who’s falling in love with that waitress but for some reason or another, he hasn’t pursued her yet. Probably out of fear.”

“And Ash and Kai? Since you know everything?” I snark.

“You mean those two knuckleheads who are in love with the twin country singers they bodyguard for on the weekends?” Buckee waves his hand dismissively. “Just more bullshit excuses of wanting to remain *professional*.”

So he did know everything.

“That still doesn’t give you the right to hang the Forester Ranch over our heads like a damn carrot,” I say begrudgingly. “Even if you’re legally allowed to.”

“I’m just doing what’s necessary to make you go after what you want. What I wished someone did for me before I was old and wrinkled and living vicariously through sitcoms and telenovelas. Just like you all will be doing in thirty years, all alone, unless you change your ways.”

“We’ll have each other.”

“That’s what I said,” Buckee says sadly. “Until it was just me.”

The last Forester sibling to die was Buckee's brother and Cali and Beau's father. That left just Buckee who lived on the ranch alone. Through financial hardships, moving, and a lack of heirs, many Forester siblings sold their portions of land to Buckee, who was well off from his bull riding days. By the end, he owned the whole fifty acreage, and without heirs of his own, he promised his siblings he'd redistribute the land upon his death between the remaining Foresters. I doubt he told them of his little clause though.

"But why does it matter? Everyone dies Buck. Whether they have families or not."

"That's not my only point," Buckee says. "There's another reason I want the ranch to go to Foresters with families. I want the land to *stay* in the Forester family. Do you know how much of a headache it was when some family members were on their deathbeds without heirs? They wanted to divide up the land to sell to strangers or donate to charities. Look, I'm just as charitable as the next person, but our great-great grandparents bought this land when they first settled here. It's been in the Forester bloodline for over one hundred years and that's where it should stay. That's why I bought them out. I know heirs don't guarantee a smooth inheritance, but I hope that each Forester will raise their kids with the same mentality I have. That ranch is *sacred*. It stays in the family at all costs, and that can't happen if there are no Forester families to manage and maintain it."

Despite my father not having a legal claim to the ranch since his father sold out to Buckee before I was even conceived, he raised me to believe the ranch was holy ground and not just a hilly plain full of cow dung surrounded by a wild forest.

"Thank the heavens for Beau and Cali's twins. The next heirs apparent."

I struggle to not roll my eyes. "You're acting like we desperately need a crown prince to ensure the Forester dynasty."

“That we do,” Buckee says. “Or crown princess. I’m not biased.”

“I hate to break it to you Bucks, but we’re lumberjacks, with pickup trucks, ten-year-old flannel shirts, and some axes. The land is beautiful but it isn’t Buckingham Palace where the next country’s ruler will reside and births are urgent and dire.”

“Then why are you so upset that you’re not in the running for it,” he snaps. “And those boys are little Dukes in my eyes. The Dukes of Forester Ranch. Or they will be anyway.”

I pinch my nose bridge. “So nothing I say will make you change your mind about this clause?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

Buckee places a gnarled hand on my shoulder and I notice how alarmingly thin and fragile his wrist is.

“No. And if I *truly* thought you enjoyed having lumber as your mistress, I wouldn’t offer my advice. It’s true that some people don’t want families, and that’s perfectly fine, but that’s not you. And that’s not your cousins either. You may all hate me now but you’ll be thanking me later for the kick in the ass when I’m long gone. Besides, none of you are getting any younger. What are you, forty?”

“I’m not even thirty,” I deadpan.

“All the more reason,” Buckee says with a purse of his lips before unmuting the TV just as the happy couple arrives home from the hospital.

When I get back to Dixie’s room she’s awake and terrified.

I swear she jumps an inch off the hospital bed the moment the door cracks open and I slip inside.

She looks so fragile and small like that night she did in the treehouse. Even her expression is the same as she stares at me with round, wide eyes.

“It’s you. It’s just you.”

“It’s me,” I say gently, approaching the bed slowly. “Who else would it be?”

She looks to the window as if searching for someone, but when she looks back at me, her expression grows frustrated like she can't think of who it is.

I press my finger between her eyebrows to force them to unknit, the way I did when we were kids.

“They’ll get stuck like that. Don’t think too hard tonight. Just rest.”

Before I can pull my hand away, she clings to my wrist.

“Will you hold me?”

My throat grows dry, my eyes darting to her full lips before I catch myself and look away.

The hospital bed’s pretty wide, but I’d still probably squish her a bit. That aside, the doctor said she’d get her memory back soon. What would happen if she woke up first and found me in bed with her? Someone who’s a grown man now and someone that she hasn’t seen in 15 years.

“Please.”

That one little word erases my resolve. I kick off my boots and climb into bed behind her, relishing in her warmth and softness.

She clutches my hand and presses it to her breast. To her racing heart. A minute passes before it slows, but her worried eyes are still flickering from the window to the door.

“You can sleep, peanut. I’ll be on the lookout.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

It takes another few minutes, but eventually, she snuggles against me and her eyes flutter closed for the final time that night.

Chapter Four

Dixie Rose

The next day, I wake up from the best sleep I've ever had.

The feeling of being so warm and comfortable and, most importantly, safe is one I haven't felt in...well, I couldn't exactly remember.

Chunks of memory are still missing.

I remember driving down an isolated road and crashing into a truck.

But I can't remember where I was driving to, or more importantly, who I was driving away from.

There's this feeling of unease I can't shake. Something bad happened. I may not know anything else, but I know that. It, whatever *it* is, is festering deep in the pit of my stomach. I feel like I'm being watched.

I feel like I should be afraid.

But last night in Heath's arms, I wasn't.

Heath. I don't remember my husband, but how is that possible? I've never been more attracted to a man in my life. He's tall. So tall he has to duck his head to get beneath the door frame. His full beard is as dark as his shoulder-length hair and his eyes are the stormiest shade of gray I've ever seen. Then there are his massive arms covered in shadowy tattoos.

Not for the first time, I think about how those muscular arms once gripped my hips. Has he ever squeezed my throat or hauled me up against a wall? I go to lace those tattooed fingers through mine now and realize that they're completely gone.

Springing my eyes open, I turn around to see that it isn't Heath's bulky frame behind me but a few pillows wrapped in a thick duvet squashed against me like he'd been trying to emulate his own body.

Stay calm.

Stay Calm.

He's probably just checking in with the doctors or helping with some paperwork. Didn't the doctor say I'm being discharged today?

No matter how I try to keep the logical side of my brain working, my anxiety's building all over again.

My eyes dart to the window, and suddenly that pit is back in my stomach. When the pain becomes too unbearable I throw on the hospital-provided bedroom slippers and clutch the back of my robe shut. It was slouchy around my shoulders, but sparse around my hips. The last thing I need is to show my ass to the entire floor, though I'm sure the staff's seen it all.

It doesn't take me long to spot Heath just a few doors up from my room. He's the tallest in the corridor, and he's talking to a doctor who's grinning up at him so wide I can see all of her teeth.

Beautiful teeth.

Mine were a little yellow from too much coffee.

As she lightly swats his arm, I spy her gel manicure. Even with the constant hand washing, she still had time to keep her nails beautiful. I look down at mine that are bitten and broken. Does that have something to do with my anxiety?

But then another thought pings through my mind. There's no ring on her finger. Or any finger that's wrapped around *my* husband's bicep.

Is she flirting with him?

Something I don't think I've ever felt before, or at least not this intensely, stirs within me as I charge forward toward them.

"I was looking for you baby," I say as I slink up to Heath's side, and disguise a wince as a smile. My knee still throbbed from where it was shoved up under the steering wheel. From what the doctor said, I'm lucky nothing in my leg shattered.

Heath looks alarmed as he stares down at me, but he immediately wraps his arm around my waist, taking some of

the weight off my bad leg. “Why are you up?” he asks gently. “You should be resting.”

“I want to rest in our bed,” I say, locking eyes with him. The dark look that crosses over his features and the way he squeezes my waist tighter extinguishes the green-eyed monster in me completely. “Are we going home soon? Did you get the release papers?”

“Yeah. We’ll leave in a second. Doctor West, this is Dixie. Dixie, Doctor West.”

I deflate as I shake the doctor’s hand who’s looking at me curiously, with a smirk.

Why didn’t he introduce me as his wife?

“Doctor West was just checking in on Uncle Buckee,” Heath points into the room behind the doctor and I peek inside to see an old man peering back at me with just as much curiosity.

He looks pale and frail and in a much worse condition than I am. Immediately I feel stupid for worrying about the wrong things. This doctor was here to treat his ailing uncle who I couldn’t even remember, and yet I’m worried about her possibly flirting.

“Your Uncle?” I ask. “Is he okay?”

“He’s coming along nicely,” Doctor West says, tapping a paper in Heath’s hands. It’s loaded with prescriptions a mile long. “But he needs to take his medications religiously. Is there someone at home to take care of him? Aunty Beth said Ash was thinking about raising some livestock at Forester Ranch. If he’s there daily, it’ll be a good idea to have him check in on Buckee during the day. We can figure out another shift at night.”

Aunty Beth?

Suddenly I felt even stupider.

Is this how I always acted around Heath? Jealous and insecure, and always jumping to conclusions?

There’s no need for that. He’s mine. My man.

I'll make sure to work on that.

Heath nods. "We'll work it all out."

"See you later Bucks," Doctor West says with a smile and a wave into the room before squeezing Heath's arm again. "You too Heathcliff."

"Don't call me that *Elly Belly*," Heath grunts, but Elly Belly only grins wickedly before giving me a little wave.

"It was nice to meet you, Dixie."

I smile but it quickly falters. *Nice to meet you?*

"Wait, if Doctor West is your cousin, why haven't I met her yet?"

Heath's own grin fades but a voice distracts us both.

"Why haven't I met her either?"

We both turn to look at the old man in the bed.

"Who are you?"

"I'm his wife," I blurt before whipping back around to Heath. "I haven't met your uncle either?"

"I can explain—" Heath begins but the old man tries to whistle only to incite a coughing fit.

Heath zooms past me into the room to gently pat the man on the back while I scramble to pour him a glass of water from the tray on his bedside table.

When he's finally settled again he glances up at me with sudden recognition.

"That's right," he says. "You're Dixie Rose. *The* Dixie Rose!"

I smile unsurely at Heath. "*The?*"

"Heath spoke so much about you, I wasn't sure if he knew how to converse about any other topic. It was always Dixie Rose this, Dixie Rose that. I was on the road a lot back then, so I never had the pleasure of meeting you."

Warmth spreads through me and I'm sure a blush is creeping across my cheeks. "Really?"

"I swear it. It's no wonder you two ended up together."

Heath's staring at Buckee with a face as red as a tomato but I think it's cute how embarrassed he is over bragging about me to his uncle.

"Shame we're just meeting," Buckee says, "I live over by Moonshine Creek. About an hour and a half away from Heath's cabin business."

Moonshine Creek. Why did that sound so familiar?

"Yeah, sorry we haven't come around to the ranch yet, Bucks."

"Well, we will now," I assure him, reaching out a hand to touch his shoulder. "The doctor mentioned you need to be on a schedule. Heath, we'll have to take our turn with Ash too... It was Ash, right?"

Heath swallows and nods.

"You'd drive all that way just to make sure some old man takes a few pills?" Buckee asks me incredulously.

"Of course. We're family right?"

"I like her." Buckee smiles at Heath before turning back to me. "Say, do you like telenovelas? There's a really popular one about heirs to a dynasty. I'm on episode two hundred and thirty-eight, but don't worry you haven't missed much. We should watch it when you come over."

I nod. "That sounds great."

Or at least to me, it did. Heath's staring at Buckee with an unreadable expression.

What? Did he not like soaps?

Chapter Five

Dixie Rose

“Do you remember anything?” Heath asks gently after we’ve been driving for ten minutes.

He seems utterly concerned for me. So concerned that I’m trying my damndest to hide my own worries. He sees straight through me though. Every time I try to sneak a glance in the rearview or side mirror, he catches me before diverting his eyes back to the road.

That aside, he took an eternity speaking to the doctor in hushed tones, even after we’d met with her together. I guess he wanted her professional opinion of how to delicately handle things. I couldn’t say I blamed him for treating me like glass. Something had happened, and despite the doctor’s assertions that my memory would return at any minute, I’m still no closer to finding out what that *thing* is no matter how hard I rack my brain.

I shake my head. “I’m sorry. The doctor says I should be remembering by now but nothing’s coming to mind. Only...”

“Feelings?” he asks after a pause.

I nod and try to not let those feelings overtake me but my lip trembles and before I know it, I’m biting on my thumbnail.

Heath’s large hand leaves the gearshift to settle on my thigh with a comforting squeeze. Without thinking, I immediately stop biting my nail and take his large hand in both of mine. The minute I do, my raging heart settles to a flutter.

“I have this horrible feeling Heath,” I say softly. “Like someone’s...like someone’s after me. And if someone’s after me...I must’ve wronged them right? I must’ve done something.”

Breathe.

“What if I hurt someone?”

Breathe.

“Or worse?”

Breathe.

But I can't, and soon I'm hyperventilating.

The truck veers to the right, and it takes me a second to realize that Heath's pulled over.

It takes me another second to realize he's unbuckling his seat belt and taking my face into his hands.

“Look at me, peanut.”

Peanut. He said that was my nickname in middle school. That had to be ages ago so why didn't I remember it? The doctor said I should only have trouble remembering recent events. Yet *peanut* doesn't ring a bell. In some strange way though, it does somehow feel familiar. *Comforting.*

“You didn't do anything wrong.”

“You don't know that,” I say, clutching his wrists. “You weren't there.”

“It doesn't matter that I wasn't there. I know the kind of person you are. I've known you since we were kids. Look at me. *Please.*”

I do, tilting my head back to peer up into those stormy abysses. How many hours had I spent getting lost in them before my accident?

“You would never hurt a roach, much less a person.”

Despite myself, I snort. “*A roach?* I would most *definitely* kill a roach.”

He shakes his head. “One time when you left popcorn in the treehouse overnight, we found a baby roach the next day. I told you time and again, where there are babies there's a mama and a crap ton of siblings but you insisted we just carry it outside. My cousins and I fumigated the moment you left.”

“That's disgusting,” I wrinkle my nose.

“But it shows your compassion for even the vilest of creatures. Whatever happened, we’ll figure it out together, but I promise you, you didn’t *kill* anyone. You’d never do that.”

“But—”

He shakes his head and strokes my cheek. “Stop jumping to conclusions in that beautiful head of yours. I promise we’ll find out the truth. Together.”

He leans forward and kisses my forehead and my fears slowly start to melt away.

Together. Somehow if I’m with Heath, I feel like anything’s possible.

“I wish I could remember more about our relationship,” I say quietly. “But I know one thing for sure— it’s obvious why I married you, Heath.”

He swallows and I follow the motion of his Adam’s apple.

“I feel so safe with you. Grounded. *Protected.* If you weren’t here I’d be so lost right now.”

“I’ll always be here for you, Dixie. No matter what.”

I smile, feeling my eyes water but this time with happy tears.

“Umm, speaking of that treehouse. Is it in Moonshine Creek?”

Heath looks at me so hopefully that I cut him off before he can ask.

“I don’t remember it or Moonshine Creek. It’s just Buckee brought it up and the name sounds so familiar.”

Heath deflates a bit, but I can tell he’s trying to hide his disappointment.

“It is. That’s where we grew up, and it just so happens to be on Buckee’s ranch. Or rather, in the forest that surrounds his ranch. He never cleared it down. Anyway, my cousin Cole is collecting him from the hospital tomorrow, so as long as everything goes smoothly, I promised to meet them at the

ranch with all Buckee's medications. If you're up to it, I can take you to the treehouse at the same time."

I nod. "I want to go. Maybe being in our old town will jog my memory?"

Heath's expression is unreadable again as he pulls the truck back onto the road.

"Maybe it will."

* * *

Our home is downright stunning. It's small and super cozy with one exposed bedroom upstairs beneath the A-lined roof. The best part is that it smells of cedar that drifts from the small closet.

Despite its beauty though, I don't remember a single thing about it. I was hoping I'd remember decorating a Christmas tree in the corner of the living room or cooking a meal on the tiny two-burner stove, but I don't.

"Are you tired?" Heath asks, bending down to take off my boots and I smile my thanks. My knee's still throbbing.

"A little. You'd think after laying in bed for twenty-four hours, I'd be sick of laying down but I'm actually craving my own bed...although I can't exactly remember what it feels like," I say, shrugging out of my coat. "But first, I want a hot bath to get rid of that antiseptic hospital smell."

Heath nods. "Your stuff's still mostly in bags so if you need my help just call out for me. I'll make you something to eat to take with your painkillers in the meantime. You're almost due for your next dose— What are you doing?"

Heath's face comes back into view as I pull my shirt over my head and reach for the clasps on my bra.

"Getting undressed?" I'm just as confused as he is. He's staring at me as if I've just grown a third tit.

"I know," he licks his lips and looks away. "I just meant, don't you want to do that in the bathroom?"

I ball the shirt up in my hands and fiddle with it, not liking the way this conversation is going. “Why? Are you afraid the neighbors will see?” I joke, looking out the window at the miles of forest that surround the cabin.

“No,” Heath says dismissively. “I just thought it’d be easier if you got undressed upstairs.”

For who?

Is it that he doesn’t want to see me naked? I peek at him sheepishly. He’s my husband. He’s seen my body over a hundred times, right? So why do I suddenly feel so self-conscious as I press my balled-up shirt to my chest?

“Heath?”

“Hmm?”

“Are we newlyweds?”

He did say my things were still packed. Maybe that’s why I had all that stuff in the truck? Maybe I’d just moved in. I scan the kitchen now. There weren’t many hints of things I liked or used, like lemon dish soap or the hand lotion I always kept next to the sink because dry skin made me itch like crazy.

He looks taken aback. “I guess you could say that. It is relatively new, yes.”

Had we waited for marriage to have sex? Is that why he’s still shy about seeing me naked? Or were we a couple that only did it in the dark or in low lighting?

I stare at his tattooed hands and remember the way he grabbed my waist at the hospital and the way he squeezed my thigh in the car. No. There’s no way Heath’s a man who only has sex in the dark.

Or at least I hope not.

Throwing the shirt from my chest, I proceed with my original plan. I don’t want a shy marriage. And maybe it’s selfish of me, but the only good feeling I can remember for the past twenty-four hours is being inside of Heath’s arms. I want to be in them again. *Without clothes.*

“Dixie—”

“What?” I ask, unclasping my bra and freeing my breasts. I’m not the most confident, but I’m confident about my girls. They’re immaculate regardless of a little bit of sag. That’s just what big tits do.

Heath licks his lips again, his eyes transfixed on my nipples. “I think you should—”

“I think you should join me. In the shower,” I say getting to my feet and reaching for the waistband of the sweatpants Heath bought me from the hospital’s gift store. I was wearing skin-tight jeans when I crashed my truck, and there was no way I was getting them back on over this bum knee.

Heath’s eyes follow my motions, his jaw clenching the minute I roll the dark gray fabric down my hips. I’m not wearing any underwear. The gift shop didn’t have any.

“I...”

I step out of them and kick them to the side before sauntering up to Heath and wrapping my arms around his neck. Immediately his hands fly to my waist, his fingertips just centimeters from grazing my ass but he won’t move his hands any lower.

I trace his lips with my eyes and it’s the first time I’ve noticed he hasn’t kissed me yet. Earlier on the ride home, he kissed my forehead, but not my lips. Even if I tiptoed, I wouldn’t be able to reach him though, and something in me wants him to bend down and kiss me first.

“Dixie, I...”

“You what?” I breathe, pressing my body tighter against his, and the moment I feel his massive erection digging into my stomach, he lets me go and backs up into the kitchen with his hands up like he’s under freaking arrest.

What the heck is going on?

“I have to get you something to eat,” he mumbles, turning to the fridge. “What do you want to eat? I can make sandwiches. Or soup. Or both.”

“You.”

“What?”

“I want to put my mouth on you,” I say in frustration.
“And I want you to devour me with yours.”

“Dixie—” he groans.

“We’ve been separated for an eternity or so it feels in my mind.” I tap my temples. “I want to be close to you. I want to be *with* you. I feel like I’ve been missing you for ages.”

He shakes his head slowly but the longing in his eyes is impossible to ignore. “I feel the exact same way. You have no idea.”

I reach for his hand and put it on my breast over my heart.
“So give me an idea. Make me feel. Make me remember.”

“I’m sorry, peanut,” he says, eyeing the hurt expression I’m trying to hide. “But that right there is the problem. You’ve lost your memory. You don’t remember me.”

“So let me remember you,” I say, pulling him down toward me.

He comes of his own volition, squeezing my waist and lifting me an inch off the floor; my yelp quickly fades into a moan as he presses a kiss to my lips.

I wrap my legs around his waist and his hands slide to my ass, but this time he isn’t hesitant to touch it. He grips me like I’m about to disappear and I grind against him just as he slips his tongue into my mouth.

The more I move, the closer those calloused fingers inch towards my aching center where I want to feel him the most.

“Dixie...”

Another twist of my hips gives me what I want as his middle finger swipes against my slit, sending a shiver straight up my spine. I pull on his hair, grinding against him harder, desperate to feel release, to connect with my husband. “Maybe you should help me shower?”

“Maybe...” his voice rasps in my ear.

“I am injured, after all.”

“Yes, you are,” he says as if trying to convince himself that it’s a good idea. “I’d hate for you to hurt yourself when I can take care of you.”

“You’ve always taken care of me. Haven’t you?” I whisper and those words seem to seal his resolve.

He grips my thighs harder, carrying me to the bathroom, and kissing my neck the whole time. With each step, I bounce against him, the friction driving me crazy.

When we get to the shower, I slide down his body. “I want to see you,” I say, reaching for his top button and exposing more tattoos that span the width of his chest.

I follow them down his arms all the way to his fingers as I tug the shirt off and toss it aside. The moment I reach for his belt though, he tenses, his jaw clenching again. I lean in and pepper kisses on his chest, trailing them right down to that thin strip of hair that disappears inside his jeans as I get to my knees.

Those strong inked fingers sink into my hair, and his grip makes me wonder if he’s going to push me away or pull me closer as I strip off his belt and unbutton his jeans. It’s only when I’ve rolled down his boxer briefs and his rock-hard cock nearly whips me in the face do I get my answer.

“You said you wanted to *see*,” he says, his voice heavy with constraint as he tugs me to my feet.

“But—”

“Dixie,” he growls in warning, but it does nothing to ward me off. It just makes me wetter. “*Get in the shower.*”

And I do. I stand like a good girl under the stream the moment it turns warm.

Heath stands behind me, his front flushed to my back. His cock digging into my spine, yet I’ve never been so happy to be stabbed before.

The familiar smell of peonies and roses fills the air as Heath grabs a bottle of soap. *My soap*. Another memory.

A shiver wracks my spine as he works it into a lather between his hands and begins massaging my neck. The way he squeezes it gently but firmly lets me know that my earlier thoughts were right.

There's no way this man is shy. He's possessive, primal. I want him to *own* me.

His fingers glide to my collarbones, then down to my breasts where he rolls my nipples in slow teasing circles. I might come just from this.

Just when I think I'll get my release, he moves down the curves of my waist before focusing his attention on my back. He slides his hands down to my ass, caressing me gently before grabbing me harder and lifting me up against the shower wall. He holds my neck in one hand and devours my mouth, controlling my movements.

He teases his fingers against the inside of my thighs in soft strokes that make me desperate for him to take me already. I grind against him and slide lover against his public bone, needing more friction. I'm so close that it wouldn't take much.

The second I feel his cock rubbing against my slit, he presses my back against the cold shower tile, his chest crushing my breasts.

“What did I tell you?” he grunts.

I barely hear him as the head of his cock splits my opening. I try to reach it, to guide it where we both want it, but Heath grabs my wrist and pulls it over my head.

There's that little squeeze again. Gentle but firm. I love it when he takes control. He's so strong and so powerful, but I know he'll never hurt me. I feel safe in his arms.

“Just look,” I say breathily, before leaning in to suck on his bottom lip. He moans as I let it go with a pop but the moment I try to sink down, to give us what we both want, he moves away from me and I swear he's going to put me down. But then he thrusts his cock in between my lips, sliding against my clit. I grind against him, harder, faster, teasing us both with the

taste of what's to come. He tries to slow me down but there's no stopping me. I fall apart in his arms.

“Fuck!” he groans. Then he's coming too. I feel his warmth against my stomach and I want more.

“I want to feel you inside me,” I beg. I try to grab his still-hard cock, but then he's gone and I'm sliding back down onto my feet.

“Heath?”

His eyes flutter close like he's struggling to think and just when I'm sure his resolve will break and he'll grab me again, he says, “I want you to remember me before I make love to you. I want you to be one hundred percent sure of who's fucking you. Of whose name you're screaming when you're climaxing.”

“Heath—” I begin to protest.

But he just bends down and kisses me deeply before pulling away. “So remember me quickly.”

Chapter Six

Heath

Dixie's driving me *in-fucking-sane*.

And she knows it.

Grabbing the buffalo plaid blanket, I pull it over her legs for the second time that night. I can't keep looking at the way her ass eats her pajama shorts or the way her top rides up the curves of her waist to expose the bottom of her breasts. And she's not wearing any underwear – the minx.

It's the sweetest torture, holding her in my arms and feeling her body pressed against mine.

How does she sleep soundly like this when I can't sleep a wink?

I'm trying to be a good man. I'm trying to keep my hands to myself. My lips to myself. But all I want to do is press my cock between her parted thighs as I massage her ass and suck on her nipples.

That one touch of her sweet slit in the kitchen damn near made me feral. Then, I almost lost control and took her in the shower.

I want this woman so fucking bad it hurts. But I can't take advantage of her. I messed up by lying about my identity and I doubly messed up when I didn't come clean during our meeting with Buckee or when we got home.

But the doctor had pulled me aside for a long conversation after Dixie's discharge with stern and crystal clear instructions. She said that Dixie was having trouble not just remembering her recent past, but most of it, indicating that there was a lot more trauma than just the car accident.

For now, it seemed Dixie had a slight overlap of amnesias and we just needed to monitor her closely. She also reiterated how important it is not to stress Dixie out by adding to her confusion or by trying to force her to remember her past. I

could try to encourage her with gentle reminders, however, like with scents, sounds, or sights. I took the doctor's words to heart.

I am responsible for Dixie's safety because she can't be responsible for herself right now. I need to keep her calm and by my side. If I tell her the truth about my identity now, she'd storm out, and without a single memory, she could put herself in even more danger. More danger than what she's already running from.

Until we figure out the truth, there's no way I'm letting her out of my sight, and even then... I don't think I can let Dixie go without a fight.

I feel safe with you. Protected.

Her words were like music to my ears. She feels safe with me and I feel this inexplicable, primal desire to protect her. Not as a friend this time, but as my woman, my family. And that means protecting her from myself too.

No matter how badly I want to taste her, I can't take advantage of her. She'd hate me. I'd hate me. And her hating me now is a lot better than her despising me later.

But there's nothing wrong with holding her, and once I give in and do so, she stops squirming, settling against my chest like it's where she belongs.

* * *

"Are you ready to go?" I ask Dixie the next morning as she puts on her coat and tosses her long dark hair from the collar.

"Yup," she says curtly.

Despite her annoyance with me, I reach for the buttons on her coat and fasten them all the way up to her chin. She's been avoiding my gaze since breakfast, and the silence between us is deafening.

I know she's confused. Hurt. How could I assure her that I want her whilst thwarting her advances at the same time? She thinks I'm her husband; it's only natural that she wants to be comforted intimately, and I've rejected her.

I sigh. This is precisely how and why lies snowball.

“By the time we get there, it’ll be around lunchtime,” I say after I help her get her boots on. “My cousins are coming over to grill as a small welcome back party for Buckee. You met Ash, Kai, and Cole when we were still kids. Maybe seeing their faces may spark a memory.”

I sure hope so anyway. The faster the truth comes out, the better.

She nods but doesn’t say anything as we head outside to Goldie. Cole’s still letting me use her while Pearl’s down at my buddy, Niki’s, mechanic shop. Thankfully the damage can be repaired.

Opening the truck’s door, I help Dixie climb up. Her limp as she does so tugs at my heart. I’m sure it still hurts despite the painkiller I gave her this morning.

We make it thirty-six minutes into the drive before I can’t take the silence anymore. It’s more than just a lack of sound; it’s the distance that’s stretching between us.

After all this time apart, and all this time wondering what happened to my best friend, I can’t bear any more distance.

Desperate to reestablish a connection, I put my hand on her thigh and surprisingly she doesn’t shove me away. Five minutes pass before she takes it in hers, and soon she’s lacing our fingers together. From that moment on, the silence is comfortable.

“Isn’t the smoke bad for Buckee’s lungs?” Dixie asks finally when we bank a big bend twenty minutes later. “You said he suffered from chronic pneumonia.”

I smile. “The ranch is huge. We’ll grill far away from his house and bring it over. Barbecue has always been his favorite type of food so I know it’ll make him happy after days of bland hospital dishes.”

“Since Buckee’s cabin is so close to the treehouse, does that mean I’ve visited his home before? He did seem to recognize me from a long time ago.”

My smile deepens. “Oh yeah. You, me, Ash, Cole, and Kai, became something of the five musketeers.”

“I know you said I met them when we were kids, but I didn’t know we were friends or super close.”

I nod. “We were practically inseparable for two summers. In fact, I’m pretty sure there are some old Polaroids hanging around the treehouse from our meetings. I haven’t been there in ages, and it’s pretty much like a time capsule, frozen with a nineties grunge aesthetic. We all decided to leave it as is until we have kids of our own to take it over.”

“Do any of your cousins have kids?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Will we?” she asks tentatively. “I mean, have we talked about it?”

“We haven’t. I want a truckload of kids but that’s easy for me to say seeing as I don’t have to carry them.”

“I used to pretend that I had five children,” she says with a sheepish grin. “I’d line up my stuffed animals and pretend. The elephant was the oldest. The crocodile was the middle child and the youngest was a... crocheted octopus.”

I’m already fully aware of this and so are my cousins who must’ve remembered Dixie’s obsession with the little octopus—despite her embarrassment over it at age twelve—because I found it perched on the kitchen table while Dixie took her shower last night.

Following the doctor’s orders of gentle reminders, I placed it on the—

“INK!” Dixie’s eyes light up as she grabs the stuffed animal dangling from the rearview mirror. “Gran crocheted Ink for me when...” she trails and shakes her head. “I can’t remember when, but I know Gran made him.”

I’d hoped with her staring at Ink for nearly two hours during the drive, a memory would spark.

“Dixie,” I say grinning at her. “You just had your first memory.”

She looks confused for a second before a smile stretches her lips as she runs her fingers through Ink's multicolored tentacles. "Hey... I guess I did, didn't I?"

"Do you remember why you wanted so many?"

She thinks about it. "I think it's because I wanted to prove to myself that I could do a better job."

"A better job than who?" But I already know.

She frowns at the octopus and squeezes a tentacle. "I- I don't know..."

Despite her words, I swear I see something flash in her eyes as she looks into the rearview mirror, and sticks her thumbnail between her teeth.

Should I ask her about her Douglas outright? I didn't want to push her too hard, but the octopus had worked so maybe bringing up Douglas would too. On the other hand, if it did, did I really want to risk upsetting her before the gathering? And the doctor warned me not to stress Dixie out.

As we drive onto Buckee's ranch, we're greeted by a slew of other pickups that immediately make my heart rate soar. It's not just the Foresters that have come to see Buckee, but the Woods family too.

The women are all gathered inside the screened-in porch setting a massive picnic table while the men are crowding the grill a good football field away for Buckee's sake.

Damn. Under any other circumstance I'd be glad to see the Woods. Problem is, while they all knew of Dixie's condition, none of them knew about our bogus marriage.

So far I'd only told Cole, and I'd planned to give Ash and Kai a heads-up now. But how am I going to secretly explain the situation in front of Dixie to over eight extra people?

Before I can get Dixie's car door open, Cole and Kai ambush me.

"Does she remember anything?" Cole whispers, his dark brown brows knitting as he tries to see over my shoulder and into the truck.

All three of them texted me regularly for updates, but I declined any visits until now. I know they're just as much friends with Dixie as I am, but I want to take things slowly, including reintroductions.

So much for that idea, I think as I gaze at the pickups again.

I shake my head. "She doesn't, but she just got a small memory back on the ride over. I'm hoping if she sees you guys and the treehouse, it will spark more."

"Good, that's progress," Cole says with a nod as I walk around the truck to Dixie's door.

"Where's Ash?"

"Picking up Buckee still. He says they won't be here for almost an hour so we can go ahead and eat without them."

I'm about to protest when Kai lifts a finger.

"At Buckee's insistence. He says it's rude to keep guests waiting."

"But it's his party."

Kai shrugs. "That's Bucks for you."

"Oh and by the way," I pause and say casually, "if she mentions that she's my wife, don't correct her."

Kai grabs the back of my shirt to stop me in my tracks. "Wait, what?"

"She thinks she's my wife."

"And you didn't correct her?"

"Not yet. Look it's a long story."

Kai lets out a whistle. "Being dishonest never turns out good. You have to tell her."

"I will, right after we go to the treehouse. I'm hoping it'll spark some memories without ruining the night," I say. "I think Douglas might have something to do with her running away."

"Her dad?" Kai asks.

I nod and silence falls over us.

“At first wondered if it was an abusive romantic relationship she was running from, but I don’t think that’s it. Last night in her sleep, she said ‘Dad’ and she was squirming around like she was fighting off an invisible force. Then on the ride over, I think she may have thought of him again.”

“Damn,” Kai swears under his breath. “After all this time, that loser is still running her life.”

“But last I heard he was locked up,” Cole frowns.

“When did you hear that?” I ask. I hadn’t heard anything about the Foxes in ages. Given the way gossip flourished around town, I assumed that meant they’d left the county.

“We did some digging ever since Dixie’s crash,” Kai says. “They fled from Moonshine Creek to Whiskey City, Douglas’ hometown. Turns out that rumor about that ten thousand dollar debt at the Watering Hole was true.”

Whiskey City was four hours west and on the fringes of the county. No wonder we didn’t hear much.

“Seems like trouble followed Douglas there too, because shortly after arriving, he got into an altercation that ended in the other person’s death,” Cole says. “He got a life sentence. So how could he be related to Dixie running away now?”

My stomach sinks. That surely put a wrench in my theory.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out. I don’t want to force her, but we need to get to the bottom of this.”

“And you need to tell her the truth,” Kai says sternly.

“I will. Just, let *me* handle it. If she mentions the marriage, just nod and smile.”

They all look uncertain.

“Look, I’m not saying I want you to lie for me. Just... let me handle it, okay? She’s already in a fragile state,” I say lowly, throwing a glance at Dixie through the windshield. She’s gazing at us all curiously, her hand curling around the

door handle. I always open the door for her, and even in our short time together she's caught on to this fact.

"It's your funeral," Kai says clapping me on the back. "But our lips are sealed."

"Great. Now do you mind spreading the word to the Woods?"

Kai shakes his head. "No way. That's your circus buddy."

"And if you'd told me the Woods were coming, I would've prepared better—"

The sound of the truck's door opening shuts me up.

"Kai? Cole?" Dixie calls as she comes around the truck.

"You remember us?" Cole smiles and I'm thankful none of them rush over to hug or touch her. Memory loss aside, a decade and a half has passed between them.

"Now that I see your faces I do. Gosh, it feels like it's been ages."

"A while," Kai says glancing at me. "How's the memory coming?"

"Bits and pieces are beginning to fill in. But it feels like I haven't seen you in 15 years? The doctor said it's the recent past I shouldn't be able to remember. Like my wedding maybe. But have we not hung out as adults?" she asks confused. "I remember you guys not even being able to grow beards back then, and now they're in full force."

"It's been a while," Kai says glancing at me with a warning look. "But we're glad you're here."

Dixie smiles. "It's good to be back."

Chapter Seven

Dixie Rose

“Dixie, this is Emmy, Maya, and my cousin Cali. They’re all married to the Woods brothers, Grant, Levi, and Beau, respectively.”

I’d already met the Woods brothers down by the grill a few minutes before and their wives seemed equally as friendly, with big smiles. Despite the warm welcome though, something unsettling churns in my stomach.

Heath said I’d never met the Woods family before because they grew up outside of Moonshine Creek, so why didn’t he introduce me as his wife? Why was I just Dixie?

Why was I so damn insecure?

Why did I have this feral need for Heath to claim me? I mean, I’m right by his side. He has his arm around my waist. It’s obvious we’re together, so why am I so desperate for him to call me his wife? It’s like I want him to claim me. Brand me as his.

Maybe it has something to do with Heath turning me down last night. I was soaked, so damn ready to climb on top of the sexiest man I’ve ever seen and he’d all but thrown my clothes back at me.

I still don’t understand why it’s so important that I remember him before we make love. Muscles have memory and I’m sure the moment he sticks his cock inside of me, my body will remember him like yesterday.

That aside, I know that I love this man. I can’t explain it. Like everything else, it’s a feeling that I have. A strong one.

“Nice to meet you, Dixie,” Cali says, extending a hand to shake mine.

When she does, I feel the cool metal of her wedding rings. Then those of Emmy, Maya, and Ayla as I shake their hands in

turn. Even in the low light, I can't help but note the pretty sparkles of their diamonds, all different sizes and shapes.

We chat casually for a while until the Woods brothers and the Forester cousins come to the porch with massive trays of barbecue and corn to place between the dozens of other sides already loading the table.

"Ash and Bucks are still forty minutes away," Kai says. "I know everyone wants to wait but Bucks insists we start."

There's a general feeling of discomfort, but ten minutes drift by and soon everyone's digging in.

"What's the matter, baby?" Heath whispers as I poke at my buttery, mashed potatoes.

I hesitate but Heath's worried expression tells me he won't drop it anytime soon. He probably thinks it's related to my memory.

I feel fickle for even bringing it up.

"I swear I'm not trying to be materialistic, but where's my ring? Did they take it off when I was admitted into the hospital?"

He blanches and that unsettling feeling in the pit of my stomach intensifies.

"What's going—"

"We didn't pick one out yet," Heath says quickly, reaching for another ear of corn.

"Oh... Why not?"

"I was saving. I want you to have your dream ring. Do you remember what it is?"

I don't even have to think about it. "A moissanite ring. People say it's a fake diamond but it's not. It's its own gemstone straight from the stars and perfect for our budget if we're saving."

"And the cut?"

“Emerald with a simple, thin silver band. Hey, do you think that’s another recent memory?”

“I think it is.”

I smile. Slowly things are coming back to me. “But I don’t need a stone,” I try to assure him. “A simple band just to show I’m yours will do. Heck, it can even be rubber.”

Heath shakes his head. “Mossinete, emerald cut with a thin silver band it is. I promise.”

“Dixie,” Cole says with a grin. “Look what I found. Polaroids from the treehouse.”

My heart beats faster as I lean over the table to take them from him. “I can’t believe they’re still intact.”

“We put them in ziplocs. The colors are a bit wonky, but you can still make out everyone well.”

The first photo is of all four cousins. Ash is the tallest and suddenly I have a vivid memory of him having to duck his head each time he came or left the treehouse. Beside him, Heath’s staring, not into the camera, but slightly over it, like he’s looking at the person who’s struggling to take the photo.... Me.

I know it’s me from the two fingers blocking out Kai’s head. One has chipped blue nail polish, my go-to when I was twelve.

The next photo has me in it. I’m sandwiched between Heath and Cole. Cole’s grinning at the cameraman but Heath is looking down at me.

My smile at his buckteeth disappears as I take in my own appearance. I look... *haggard*. There are black rings around my eyes and my shirt collar is all stretched out like it’s seen better days.

Each photo lets me know it’s a different day by the boys’ changing flannel shirts, and my hair length that gets progressively longer and messier. Otherwise, I’d have no idea because in most of the photos, I’m wearing that same ratty shirt. It’s not even a girl’s top. It’s a male one like my... dad’s.

My dad.

Douglas.

Douglas had worn that shirt before. I remember he handed it down to me when his beer gut got so big, he couldn't fit in it anymore. I'm swimming in it, then again, I swam in all my hand-me-downs. Sure, they were always too big, but the other problem was that I was too small. Practically malnourished despite the litany of snacks that appeared in all the backgrounds of the photos.

I suddenly have a vivid memory of gorging myself on those snacks, till the point that I'd make myself sick.

With a shaky breath, I change the photo again and I barely have time to register it when Heath snatches it from the pile.

Too late. I've already seen it.

"Heath... did I... did I have a black eye in that photo?" Not the raccoon eyes I had in the other photos that hinted at my constant exhaustion. No, there was no mistaking that someone had hit me. Hard.

"Dixie—"

I look at the next photo and it's one of Heath and I sleeping side by side in our respective beanbags. Between us Kai is kneeling with a marker, drawing a mustache on Heath. I already have one, but it's the dark ring around my eye I focus on, because though faded, it's in this photo as well.

"I should've gone through them all," Cole says apologetically, trying to take the stack back from me, but I turn to the side to keep flicking through them.

Everyone else at the table has gone silent. Not even forks or chewing act as background noise. Though I'm not facing them, I know everyone's eyes are boring into my back.

Despite my happy smiles, which were only genuine around the Foresters, or so I can remember now, it's obvious what was going on. I was being abused. Neglected.

Douglas.

Before I can turn to Heath, the sound of wheels rolling over the deck's planks draws our attention to the back door. Ash's rolling out Buckee while Cali holds the door open.

I hadn't heard her get up.

"Ah everyone's here," Buckee smiles happily to a chorus of claps before turning to Heath and me. "And the newlyweds too."

Once again, it's like someone cut off the sound. All heads turn towards us, their smiles and hands falling mid-cheer.

Cole hangs his head, and Kai reaches for a whiskey bottle.

Confused by everyone's expressions, I turn to Heath who curses under his breath.

"*Newlyweds?*" Cali asks with a wrinkled brow. "When was the wedding?"

"No time for invitations, I suspect," Buckee says as Ash pushes him to the head of the table. "They probably wanted to do it quickly before I croaked. Can't say I blame them."

"Don't say that Bucks," Jaxon says with a frown.

"But Buckee wasn't at the wedding," I say slowly. "If we rushed to get married before he died, why wasn't he at the wedding to witness it?"

"You can have the wedding later," Buckee says with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Now that you're married the land's all settled. I still don't know why you made such a big deal of it though if you've got Dixie. Or were you just trying to change my mind for the others?"

"Land?" I ask. "What land?"

Buckee looks from me to Heath, his cheery disposition suddenly dropping to match that of the others. "Didn't you two rush to get married because I told you about the clause?"

"*What clause?*" I ask, my heart pounding in my ears so hard my vision blurs before Heath comes back into focus.

He's staring at me wide-eyed. "Dixie, I can explain."

“Does *anyone* here know that we’re married?” I ask, my stomach sinking. As I scan the table it’s obvious I have my answer.

“No. Because we aren’t married.”

The world stops and my heart stops with it.

“I just said that at the hospital so the doctors would let me into your room.”

“S-so what are you to me?” I ask. My voice sounds so hollow. “*Who* are you to me?”

“Just an old friend.”

I get to my feet faster than anyone can blink. Within seconds my vision is blurring again, but this time with tears as I race out the screened-in porch and down the steps onto the big grassy yard.

I have no idea where the hell I’m going, just that I’m getting far away from Heath and his lies.

“Dixie! Dixie, wait!”

I swipe furiously at my cheeks but keep jogging forward despite my protesting knee.

How the hell could he do this to me? Trick me like this?

He’s supposed to be the one anchor I have. The one person I was so positive I could trust since my past was shut off...

And it was all a lie, and for what? To trick his ailing uncle for some land? The very land I’m on right now? Suddenly I don’t just want to get away from Heath. I want to get away from the property altogether.

Ignoring my injury, I break into a full-on run, but Heath captures my arm in no time and spins me around. In the distance, I spot the still smoking grill. The lids are down, so there must be more meat inside.

“Dixie, wait. Please. I’m so sorry but I can explain.”

“How you lied to me?” I shove at his chest to get him off of me. He doesn’t budge, but he drops his hands. “For days?”

“I know it was fucked up but I swear I didn’t do it maliciously. I wanted to be there for you.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re old friends.”

“Who haven’t seen each other in thirteen years! I haven’t seen you since I left Moonshine Creek, have I? That’s why I can’t remember Kai, Cole, or Ash as adults. Because I’ve never seen them as adults.”

“Dixie—”

“Answer the question!” I snap.

He shakes his head slowly. “No. When you crashed into my truck at Jaxon’s property, that was the first time we’d seen you in over fifteen years. I had no idea where you were going, or who you were running from, and neither did you. I couldn’t just leave you at the hospital alone when you were so vulnerable.”

“At least I would’ve been with professionals and not a liar.”

Heath nods as if he knows he deserves it and I try to keep my resolve firm despite something trying to knock it down.

I had crashed into Heath’s truck. I knew that, but until now I hadn’t thought of the consequences of it. I was too worried about my memories and not the fact that I destroyed someone else’s property, fake husband or not.

He deserved an apology, and I’d have to pay for all the repairs, but damn it, now wasn’t the time for me to apologize to him.

“I thought I was doing the right thing at the time. After you left Moonshine Creek I was devastated. We all were Dixie. No one knew what happened to you. I can’t even vocalize the immense guilt I felt for not helping you. By letting Douglas get away with murder.”

Douglas.

A dark figure that's either Kai or Ash, given the size, opens the grill and despite the distance, a cloud of smoke engulfs Heath and I.

I cough...

And cough...

And then suddenly, I'm somewhere else entirely.

Chapter Eight

Dixie Rose, three days ago

It's raining and it has been for hours, following me from the chapel all the way to the cemetery where the grave was a quarter full of muddy water. Had I found the money to lay Gran to rest sooner, I would've avoided the dreary weather, but things have always been tight, and Gran's funeral wasn't the exception to that life-long rule despite the triple shifts I'd picked up.

I keep telling myself that Gran's in a better place now. She doesn't mind the coffin that's little more than a plywood box. The most important thing is that I was able to buy the plot next to her late husband, my grandfather, who passed away during the war far before I was born.

As I ascend the rickety front steps to Gran's cabin, well, my cabin now, a feeling of peace washes over me. I thought I'd dread coming back home. Dread the acceptance that Gran's really gone for good. But the bright yellow paint of the cabin's exterior feels so safe and comforting that I actually feel relieved to stick my key in the lock and enter the only true home I've ever known.

When I left Moonshine Creek, and Douglas first brought me here, I dreaded what was to come. I mean, I'd been torn away from the only friends I ever had, and the only space place I had to hide from Douglas without so much as a goodbye.

The faces of Ash, Kai, Cole, and especially Heath, haunted me for months. In my teen years when social media became more popular, I tried searching for the boys online, but if they had social media profiles, I was never able to find them.

Then I told myself when I turned eighteen I'd visit Moonshine Creek again. I'd go to the treehouse and then I'd go to Forester Ranch and it'd be like I'd never left. But that was childish thinking.

Gran was constantly sick and she needed me to keep the lights on in our tiny cabin. I felt like it was the least I could do. The woman had saved me from her abusive son one Sunday when she visited me at the motel Douglas had moved us into.

She took one look at me and took me with her without asking a single question until I was ready to talk. She was my savior, the one person Douglas wouldn't fight. He didn't have respect for his mother, but he did fear her, and that fear was enough to keep him on the other side of Whiskey City until another brawl and a murder charge finally had him locked away.

That's when I finally got brave enough to speak to Gran. Then the police. Then the courts and jury who added child abuse onto Douglas' second-degree murder charge, earning him an additional nine years on his thirty-five-year sentence. And at his age of fifty-two that was a life sentence.

But I didn't need to worry about Douglas anymore. Or Gran now that she was resting comfortably.

Now I could...

I could...

I haven't thought about what I'd do once Gran was gone.

I think back to Moonshine Creek. Back to those boys, my saviors who are probably married now with babies and whose lives didn't have space for an acquaintance from 15 years ago.

Heath flashes before my eyes as I slip off my shoes and take off my dripping coat.

Is he married?

I shake my head. What did it matter? Heath probably doesn't even remember me.

I'm about to bypass the old couch and head into the kitchen when something on the armrests stops me dead in my tracks.

Feet.

Long, bony feet covered in hole-ridden socks.

There are mini whiskey bottles littering the floor, and little holes burnt into Gran's beloved crochet blanket that always rested on the top of the couch. One hole is smoking, like he'd just outed a cigarette the moment I stepped through the door.

How? That's all that comes to mind.

How had he gotten inside? How had he managed to destroy Gran's beautiful home in such a short time?

How had he gotten out of jail?

"What are you doing here?" I whisper, taking a stumbling step back.

His bald head emerges from behind the couch as he rises. He looks the same as I remember with a few more homemade tattoos or rather doodles added to his neck.

"What the hell do you mean, girl?" he smiles. His gums have receded. Way more than they had been. "I live here."

"N-no you don't," I shake my head and clear my throat as I try to remain calm. "This was Gran's house. And it's my house now that she's gone."

His laugh is cruel. "Your house? Let me see your name on the will... Oh, that's right, mother dearest didn't have one. Do you know what that means?"

I swallow but don't answer.

"Seeing as I've been a part of the legal system for decades, I caught up on the laws of our county. Turns out the next of kin inherits her home which is," he points to his chest. "Me."

"That can't be right. Gran told me she was leaving the home for me—"

"Because she thought I'd be incarcerated for the rest of my life," he lifts his shot glass. "Thank you Judge Matthews for my pardon."

"How? How on earth could he—"

"Pardon me?"

“I had one more appeal and wouldn’t you know it, my conviction of second-degree murder was changed to manslaughter, with the acknowledgment of time already served. My last shitty court-appointed attorney didn’t submit all the evidence on my part, like witness statements he couldn’t be bothered to get. Statements corroborating that the drunk swung at me first. I was just defending myself and it got out of hand.” He smirks at the last part, like he doesn’t believe it either.

“That’s rich. You calling anyone a drunk.”

“It takes one to know one,” he smiles again, lighting up another cigarette.

“No,” I shake my head. “I won’t let this happen. We got you out of our lives for good, and that’s exactly where you’ll stay.”

I cross over to the front door with far more bravado than I feel. “Get out.”

He laughs but I’m not laughing.

“I mean it. I’ve been living here for over ten years. I have rights and until I speak with a lawyer, I’m not going anywhere. As far as I’m concerned, you’re a squatter. Get out or I’m calling the police. I bet they’ll be interested to know you’ve just gotten out of jail and are already using substances.”

Douglas gets to his feet, slides on his slippers, and grabs the big whiskey bottle off the coffee table.

As he approaches me, I can’t believe my luck that one little threat had worked—

The rush of air as Douglas lifts the glass bottle to smash it against my head warns me to move. To run.

I duck under his arm just as he lifts it. The bottle misses my head and rams into the hollow wooden door that splinters as it’s forced shut.

I barely make it into the living again before his footsteps are directly behind me, and the heavy bottle plows into my back, sending me face forward onto the coffee table.

The next blow that connects with the side of my head is so swift, I see stars before I even feel the pain.

“You think I’m ever going back to that hell hole?” He sneers in my ear, spittle flying onto the side of my throbbing face as he pins my neck against the table. “I’ll end it all before I ever let them take me again. Before I let a little cunt like you even reach the phone.”

His fingers dig into my collar, and for one second my head is lifted off the table before it comes crashing back into the wood again.

My vision blurs but I try to focus, to stay alert as I zoom in on the closest object beside me. The whiskey bottle.

“You think because you’re a fat bitch now that I still can’t shove you in a kennel for a week the way I did when you were a kid?”

He lifts me up again and I brace for the impact as he slams me back down so hard the table’s legs groan in protest.

“I knew you were all bark and no bite. Look. You aren’t even trying—”

One second Douglas is on me and the next, I’m covered in whiskey and glass. I grabbed the bottleneck and swung it at Douglas’s temple with all my might.

As I roll over and drop onto the flamingo area rug near Douglas’ unconscious and bleeding body, I can’t help but feel like an eternity of bottled-up anger has finally been unleashed.

I look at the broken neck bottle in my hand now, all jagged and covered in red like bloody teeth.

So I did have a bite, and it was fucking sharp.

I’m about to grab the kitchen phone and ring the police when the smell of smoke captures my attention, then the glow of embers from Douglas’s pile of cigarettes on the rug.

One second it’s nothing more than a tiny patch of orange, and the next it’s a full-on flame ripping across the carpet to the whiskey-soaked wet spots.

The scream that tears from my throat as the flames quadruple in size once they hit the liquor sounds alien even to my own ears. I watch them transfixed, too stunned to move as they dance to the hardwood and then lick at the lacy living room curtains.

It's only when they climb up to the glass pane and I'm able to see my reflection in it do I jolt back to reality.

Grabbing Douglas' bony wrists, I pull him off the carpet a second before the flames touch his pants.

I don't stop dragging him until I'm at the front door, through it, and onto the dirt driveway.

When the flames burst through the exterior wall, I'm once again frozen until the rain, the dreary rain I hated for ruining Gran's brief ceremony, intensifies as if the heavens know how badly I need them, then douses the flames.

I stand rooted to the spot as I watch the last ember go out as quickly as it popped into existence. When it disappears I find myself gazing down at Douglas. The rain's washing away the blood oozing at his temple, but it barely disappears before it's back again, trickling down his slack face.

I should check to see if he's breathing.

But I don't.

Panic grips me as I stare from him to the ruined cottage I hadn't managed to take care of for a single day since Gran's departure.

What have I done?

What have I—

I slump against Gran's truck. The one she hadn't been able to drive in five years, and the one I drove to work if I could convince it to start in the morning.

As I cling desperately to its patch-covered side, it's like I'm seeing it for the very first time. Like, for once, I'm not seeing it as a headache, but as a solution.

If Douglas is right, and he is the true owner of the cabin, I'd just burnt it down after knocking him out. Or that's what it'd look like anyway. And if he survives, it's not safe for me here anymore.

If I called the police, who would they believe? Me or the bloody, unconscious man with a head wound?

I could call and find out. Or I could leave.

Now.

Running back into the house, I grab everything I can from my bedroom and shove it into three duffel bags before grabbing the truck's keys from a hook near the splintered front door.

As the truck roars to life, I don't know where I'm going. Just that I'm getting far away from here.

Gran's gone and so is my sanctuary.

* * *

"Dixie!" Heath's voice calls over my shoulder, jarring me back to the present.

I'm running, or rather I had been. At the sound of my name, I trip over a tree root and stumble to my knees.

When I look up, I'm under a tree house. Our old treehouse.

Shakily, I ignore Heath and climb the steps to find the door already open. There are bean bags, but it's clear they're brand-new replacements. I sink into one and duck my head into my lap.

I'm not surprised to hear Heath come in behind me. I can't face him when I say, "Heath, I think I might have killed my dad."

Chapter Nine

Heath

“Dixie, that was three days ago,” I say gently once she’s calmed down enough to tell me everything. “Whiskey City is only four hours away. News spreads like wildfire in these mountains. If Douglas passed away, it’d be all over the news, especially because he’s a former resident of Moonshine Creek. I assure you, he must be fine.”

Tears fall down her cheeks and I catch them with my thumbs as she clings to my wrists.

“B-but you don’t know that for sure. I didn’t check if he was breathing. I didn’t stop the blood flow. Douglas, he’s a monster. You don’t know half the things he did to me,” she chokes.

“I don’t,” I whisper in agreement, feeling as helpless as I did whenever Dixie showed up injured.

“But I didn’t want to kill him.”

“I know.”

“But I did wish he was dead. I still do.” The sob that wracks her, makes me scoop her into my arms as I settle us on a bean bag chair.

“I’ve wished that a million times. But wishing it doesn’t make it true,” I assure her. “You didn’t kill Douglas. Neither did you destroy your Gran’s home. Douglas showed up unannounced. He broke into your home and ambushed you. Then he threw a damn tantrum when you stood your ground. Those were his cigarettes. That was his whiskey. None of that is your fault, peanut.”

“But—”

“None of it has ever been your fault. Not what happened three days ago, and not what happened over a decade ago. Douglas is a coward who doesn’t deserve the title of father.”

I can see the words are sinking in but Dixie's lips keep trembling. Keep opening and closing to refute me like they did when we were kids whenever I tried to broach the subject.

"Dixie," I say, tipping her chin up to meet my gaze. "Please don't make excuses for him anymore. I won't let you."

A long moment passes between us before she says, "I won't. I learned not to a long time ago. But Gran's house... she raised me there from thirteen on up. Besides this treehouse, it's the only safe place I've ever known. She loved that house. I loved that house and now it's destroyed." She shakes her head and swipes at a tear rolling down her chin. "I don't even know how bad the damage is. After the fire went out and I saw Douglas just lying there bleeding, I grabbed my stuff and ran... straight into your truck. Damn, Heath, I'm so sorry—"

"Pearl's the least of my issues right now."

"You named your truck?" She groans. "That means you loved it."

"I love you more."

Her head shoots up off my shoulder and her mouth falls open.

"I mean it, Dixie. I've always loved you since the moment you broke into this treehouse. 15 years haven't changed that. Well... it turned from innocent puppy love to downright primal, overly protective, love with a heavy dose of lust. I know I was wrong for lying about who I was. But all I wanted was to keep you safe and by my side. It's all I've ever wanted."

"Heath—"

"I don't need or want an answer, or a response, or anything from you right now Dixie, but I need you to know that."

She nods slowly.

"Let's go to Whiskey City."

"*Right now?*"

I nod. “I know how much your Gran’s house means to you, and despite that asshole not deserving an ounce of your sympathy, I know you won’t stop worrying until I prove to you that he’s safe, like all apocalypse-resistant roaches.

“But, it’s four hours away.”

“I know.”

“And it’s dark.”

“The ride is mostly down in the valley. It’s well-lit. Unless you’d rather wait until morning? We can go as soon as the sun comes up. Your choice.”

“I think we should wait but my anxiety won’t let me sleep.” Her eyes flash to the windows again, like she’s expecting to see someone outside. “To be honest. I’m just scared of what we’ll find.”

“I’ll be with you the entire time. I promise you when you’re with me I won’t let anything bad happen to you and I mean it,” I say getting to my feet and helping her to hers.

“But four hours. You’d seriously do that for me?”

“I’d do anything for you. You don’t know the half of it.”

“Like pretending to be my husband?”

“Like that,” I say sheepishly.

“I’m still pissed at you for lying to me, even with all the good intentions.”

“I know.”

“I don’t forgive you yet.”

“I’ll wait.”

“Who says I will?”

“Then I’ll wait forever. Come On.”

* * *

When we pull onto the fringes of Whiskey City, the sun’s just starting to rise. Dixie instructs me to make a left through a dirt path that’s so overgrown, I would’ve missed it on my own.

When we pull into the small clearing, it takes another second for me to recognize the cottage half hidden behind some pines.

It's tiny, the size of my tool shed, but I can tell Dixie and her Gran must've put a ton of love into it because the right side that's uncharred is a cheery yellow with beautiful sky blue shutters.

The left side though is covered in soot, and one exterior wall is so charred, that I could see straight into the home itself if it weren't for a blue tarp blocking out the elements and shielding the interior from view.

So the roach had survived.

As I walk around Goldie to open Dixie's door, she lets out a soft cry and stumbles into my arms. I wrap them around her, bringing her close to my chest as she begins to tremble uncontrollably like she did in the treehouse.

I want to tell her that it isn't that bad. I want to reassure her that me and the boys could fix the damage within a few days. But I know it's the memories we can't replace, so instead, I run my hands through her long hair and massage her scalp, keeping quiet until she's ready to talk. It's not until the sun's fully over the horizon that she finally says, "I don't know if I can forgive myself."

"Dixie—"

She lets go of me and turns to face the remains. "This place was Gran's dream cabin. I tried so hard to fight for it, and yet I couldn't save it."

"It was an accident, one that your father started. This isn't your fault."

Stifling a cry, she shakes her head sadly. "But I participated."

My heart shatters at the hollowness in her voice.

"Gran would be so ashamed of me."

I cup her face. "Look at me. I've never met your Gran but I know for a fact she'd never blame you for this. You told me that she apologized to you for raising such an incompetent son.

She knew what sort of person your father was. She knew the sort of person you were, that you are. She'd never blame you. Never."

"But—"

"No buts. You defended yourself."

"I—"

"Defended yourself. Say it."

I can see that she wants to resist.

"Dixie, why do you want to blame yourself so badly?"

"What do you mean?"

"You blame yourself a lot."

"No I don't."

"You blamed yourself for crashing into my truck."

"Because I did."

"Because you were running from someone and we both know who that someone is. Then you blamed yourself for a fire that would've never happened if someone wasn't smoking."

Her beautiful eyes flicker to the cabin.

"Just like you constantly blamed yourself for those bruises when we were kids."

She looks at me, her lips parting to protest but she seals them again.

"I bet you blamed yourself for moving away too, right?"

"I didn't tell," she whispers. "I think a teacher saw the cuts on my arm."

I freeze. "What do you mean? I thought you moved away because Douglas was on the run for the damages at the Watering Hole?"

"I think that was part of it, but it was the principal's call requesting a meeting the next day that triggered him. He blamed me," Dixie swallows, her eyes distant. "Because I

didn't wear long sleeves at school that day because it was hot—”

I grab her into my arms and bury my face in her hair to hide my own tears.

How could this precious angel think that any of this was her fault? Memories of Dixie's innocent eyes in the treehouse the day I found her haunt me now. Why didn't I do more? Why did I let it go on for two years? Why was I such a coward that I didn't call the police myself?

“If you blame yourself then blame me too,” I say.

“Blame you?” she asks quizzically. “For what?”

“For not calling the cops on that piece of shit. Dixie, I should've protected you from your abusive father.”

She flinches at the word.

“That's what he did, peanut. He *abused* you. Hurt you. And I stood by sharing snacks with you and watching movies and—”

“You were a kid.”

“So were you! So if you blame yourself, blame me too. Say it was my fault.”

She shakes her head furiously. “No. You and your cousins were my saviors in that treehouse. Those movies were my escape. Those snacks and your dad's cooking you'd bring over every Saturday and Sunday when I couldn't get a school lunch literally saved me from winding up in the hospital. Heath, you were incredible.”

“So were you.” I tip her chin. “Dixie, the first step to moving forward, is to admit that your father is the only person to blame in all of this. Your father was inherently a horrible person, independent of you or anything you could have possibly done. His true self is not a reflection of you. It's who *he* is.”

More understanding slips across her features.

“Say it, peanut. “Say ‘I'm not to blame.’”

“I—” she starts again. “I—” but we’re interrupted by the sound of the tarp moving.

“What the hell are you doing back here at my cabin?”

The man that emerges is so unlike the hulky giant I remember as a kid.

He’s frail, and filthy, with balding spots and a permanent stench of moonshine.

And yet, Dixie stumbles backward. The fear that crosses her features is crippling and heartbreaking.

Stepping in front of her, I say. “Dixie, get back in the truck.”

“Didn’t you do enough? And didn’t I tell you to get!” he snarks. “You don’t fucking understand English now? Should I bark it?”

The asinine barks that emerge from Douglas’s throat should be the last thing he ever gets a chance to say. If it weren’t for Dixie, I’d make sure it was his last sound.

“That’s enough!” I roar, earning Douglas’ attention. “Don’t you ever talk to her like that.”

Douglas laughs and stumbles forward. “And who’s this? Is he supposed to scare me? Look here boy, if I had a kennel big enough to fit both of you big bitches I’d drag you down to the cellar and tie you up just like I used to.”

Used to?

I stare back at Dixie, and my heart shatters all over again.

“Starve you again.” He marches forward, and Dixie cowers back.

I don’t know what else he did to her and I don’t want to know. I squeeze Douglas’s throat so damn hard his eyes bulge from the sockets.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” Douglas sputters, pulling at my fingers but nothing would make me let go.

“Someone who’s going to knock you the fuck out if you get any closer to her.”

He blinks in the strong sunlight and stumbles.

“Dixie...” I say lowly. “Get in the car baby.”

We have to go. I can’t allow her to stick around and hear this shit any longer. I toss Douglas like a rag doll onto his ass and start backing up. Keeping my eyes on him, I reach for the truck’s handle, before hauling Dixie inside.

I barely get the door shut before my head’s rammed straight into the glass so hard it cracks. Behind it, Dixie’s muted screams ring in my ear as I stumble and catch my balance against the truck’s door that she’s trying to open to get to me.

Like hell I’ll allow that.

Another blow from Douglas, this time a closed fist, blurs my visions as I fiddle with the truck’s remote in my pocket. Once I hear the child locks engage, I zoom in on the target I’ve been waiting to take down for years.

The uppercut I deliver to Douglas’s chin, has him spitting blood and a piece of a tooth onto the dirt driveway. The roundhouse to his jaw, has him spinning around and falling like the coward he is onto his hands and knees. And the kick to his back sends him straight onto his belly where I pin him.

To his benefit, he doesn’t scream or beg when I replace my boot with my knee so that I can sink down to his level and look him dead in the eye.

“All you’ve ever done is fuck up. The one good thing you ever did on this earth was making that woman right there and you tried to ruin her too. Key word– tried, because she’s too strong to break, and I won’t fucking let you attempt it again. This is the last time you’ll ever lay eyes on her. Because if you go anywhere near her, I’ll make sure to scoop them out of your skull myself.”

Douglas spits out more blood before blinking up at me. I can tell he has some smartass retort, but it dies on his tongue as he stares into my eyes.

He snorts, then laughs, a horrible wheezy sound that makes me dig my knee harder into his back. “You want someone to blame for her disappearing? Blame your damn father who called the cops on me. If that nosey son of a gun had minded his business—”

“My father called the police on you for abusing Dixie?”

Why hadn’t he ever told me that?

Thoughts of me begging my father not to get Dixie into trouble for my big mouth when I went crying to him one night surface at the forefront of my brain. At that age, I couldn’t understand that Dixie would be safer if they took her away. But I was worried Douglass would get to her before the police did.

Had Dad decided not to tell me because he knew how much guilt I’d have over it if something happened to Dixie?

As I’m distracted by trying to make sense of what I’ve just learned, something stabs at my thigh so fast and hard that I fall forward.

Another scream from the truck lets me know Dixie’s seen what Douglas has done before I even feel it. Keeping my weight on top of him, I gaze at my thigh that he impaled with a broken bottleneck. Blood’s already oozing through my jeans and onto the dirt below.

Before I can react, the sound of police sirens blares through the air as two police cruisers and an ambulance enter the property.

Dixie must’ve called them. Through the truck’s window, she bangs on the glass pleadingly. I’d rather she stay in the truck until Douglas is hauled away, but the police want statements from all of us.

After Dixie shows them the video she captured on her phone, however— conveniently from the point when Douglas rammed my head into the window— the police believe that he’s the real instigator. Considering that he just got out of jail and the cabin was full of substances, I don’t think there was any doubt anyway.

I can't explain the relief I feel when Douglas is handcuffed by force and hauled away into the back of the cruiser. Despite the horrible words that he continues to scream at Dixie, I'm so damn proud that she stands firmly at my side.

She isn't paying attention to Douglas at all. She's focused on my wound that the paramedics are treating.

"You're so brave, Dixie. You know that, right?" I say when the medic applies the last bandage. They'd insisted I get checked out at the clinic, but I told them I'd drive myself, or rather Dixie would. It was just up the road.

"When Douglas stabbed you, all my fear disappeared. Somehow I could take it if I was the one enduring the abuse. But the moment he turned that bottle on you..."

I shake my head. "It doesn't matter Dixie. Don't you see? Douglass is the only one responsible for his actions. It's not your fault."

She nods, and for once I think she truly believes it.

"I heard what he said. That your dad is the one who called that school. He's the reason the child abuse investigation was about to begin."

I nod.

"Thank you," she says, wrapping her arms around my neck and I bury my face in her shoulder. "I hated to leave you. All of you. But if your dad hadn't tipped off the cops and the principal, Douglas wouldn't have whisked me away, and I never would've met Gran, who really was my safe haven. So thank you for speaking up for me when I couldn't. Thank you for being brave when I couldn't be. For always protecting me."

I still feel like I could've done more, but the past is over and I can only change the future.

"If you let me. I'll protect you forever," I whisper in her ear, and to my dismay, she pulls away from me.

But then her soft lips fall on mine and she kisses me so passionately that the medic asks us to settle down after I go to pull her onto my lap.

“I love love as much as the next person but you’re going to hurt your leg. Thankfully it’s not a more serious wound,” the medic says, helping me out of the back of the van. “Are you sure you can get to the clinic on your own?”

“I’ll drive him,” Dixie says, her face flaming.

“You know,” I say as Dixie drapes my arm over her shoulder and clings to my waist. She thinks she’s helping me to the truck but if I put my weight against her she’d fold like an accordion. “I heard the police saying that Douglas is still on parole. Not only did he stab me, which you got the video of, but you said he had liquor bottles all over the house and tons of pills. He’s supposed to stay sober.”

“Do you think that means he’ll be locked up again for a long time?”

“I do.”

Dixie sighs in relief but it’s short-lived as we climb into the truck and she eyes the burnt cabin again.

“We’ll look into the inheritance laws,” I say as she starts the truck. “We’ll figure out how to make sure you’re the legal and sole owner of the cabin. It’s what your Gran would want. The boys and I are going to rebuild it exactly as your Gran left it. Right down to the wood paneling if you want.

“That’s so sweet. Too sweet. I think you’ve already done enough for me, including taking a stabbing,” she says, her eyes shining. “Plus I still owe you, remember? Pearl.”

“There’s no ‘owing’ between us, Dixie. We’re a partnership. Right?” I add. I’m pretty sure that kiss was my answer to us exploring a relationship, but a vocalization wouldn’t hurt.

“Partnership? You mean marriage.”

I gaze at her in shock as she turns the truck around and heads for the main road.

“I mean, you’re still looking for a wife to secure your portion of Forester Ranch, right?”

“I am, but I’d never marry you just for land. If you’re willing to be my wife, you have to do it for real, because once I marry you there won’t be any fakeness about it.”

Dixie’s smile sets my heart racing. “Who says I want it to be fake? I’ve never felt safer and more loved, adored, and cared for than when I was your friend all those years ago and again when I was your fake wife for the past couple of days, Heath. You’ve shown me time and again how much you love me... And I love you.”

The vulnerability in her eyes makes me reach for her thigh and squeeze reassuringly as we bank a corner.

“And I love you, peanut. Always have. Always will.”

Chapter Ten

Three weeks later, Dixie Rose

I want to be Heath's wife. *Now.*

I don't care about the swirling rumors that I must be pregnant for us to get married so soon. Heath and I both decided to wait for our honeymoon, that's in less than five hours, to finally make love. It would've been a lot sooner if the courts had a closer date available for our courthouse wedding.

Another rumor that's spread like wild is that our love is fake. A ruse to get a portion of Buckee's land and nothing more. The first rumor didn't bother me as Heath and I do plan to get pregnant soon. The second would only frustrate me if Buckee thought it was true. Fortunately, he doesn't. In fact, he's our biggest cheerleader.

Over Heath's shoulder, I glance at Buckee in his wheelchair. He's dressed in his finest bull riding outfit, with a cowboy hat resting in his lap. Next to him, Ash is snapping photos while Kai holds my bouquet and Cole pretends there's something in his eye.

My dress is a simple mother-of-pearl satin. I'd curled my hair myself and followed a YouTube bridal makeup tutorial I'd practiced for a week. It didn't come out too bad if I do say so myself.

I've never seen Heath in a suit before and today's no different, though he did comb his hair back and is wearing a crisp white button-down. He always looks wickedly handsome to me, with dark hair and stormy eyes that are locked on mine.

"Dixie Rose Fox. When you came into my life, I didn't know at the time how much my world would change once you were in it. You have shaped me into the man I've always desired to be. You've shown me love and forgiveness even when I didn't deserve it. You've shown me patience, strength, and endurance I don't think I could ever possess. No one else on this earth could ever measure up to you in my eyes and my

love for you is eternal. I am so blessed and honored that you will be my wife, my soul partner that I've yearned for. The mother of my future children I never thought I'd have. Thank you for trusting me. Thank you for letting me in."

Tears prick at both our eyes as Buckee blows his nose loudly on a handkerchief and it's my time to recite my vows.

"Heath, you've always been my protector, the one person aside from my Gran who's shown me true, consistent, unconditional love especially when I was so broken that I didn't know how to receive it for the longest time. With you, I feel safe, loved, and completely at peace even if chaos surrounds us. Thank you for bringing me into your family who's the epitome of light, love, and tranquility. Thank you for seeing the light in me even when all I saw was darkness."

The officiant smiles when I finish. "Dixie Rose Fox, do you take Heath Forester as your lawfully wedded husband?"

As Buckee wheels forward, and Heath takes the ring from Buckee's cowboy hat, I gasp. It wasn't the rubber rings we'd been wearing for the past three weeks, but a moissanite, emerald cut ring set on a thin silver band.

I want to say how much Heath didn't have to do that, but it's like he already knows what I'm about to say because he shakes his head in warning.

Live in the moment.

I smile and give him my hand. "I do."

I barely have time to push Heath's ring onto his finger before he's pulling me into his arms and kissing me before the officiant can finish the words, "You may now kiss your bride."

When we pull apart and Kai hands me my bouquet outside on the front steps, I toss it gently over my shoulder where Cole catches it, much to his cousin's teasing delight.

"Bucks," I hear Heath whispering. "I think you're wrong a lot. But this time you were right. This is the life I want, and without your kick in the ass, I'm not sure if I would've pursued it. *Thank you.*"

* * *

One could say having your honeymoon in your Gran's cabin isn't very romantic, but it's the best surprise I've ever gotten.

As Heath carries me over the threshold, I'm awed by the amount of work he and his cousins were able to accomplish in just three short weeks. Not only is the cabin fully restored, but it's an exact replica, right down to the lacy curtains fluttering in the light breeze.

"H-how were you able to..." I'm lost for words as I spot the same, yet brand new, flamingo area rug beneath the rebuilt coffee table.

"Inside your Gran's old bedroom was a photo album. There were dozens of photos of you all around the house and grounds. Cali helped me out a lot at thrift stores in town, and we managed to get pretty close to the original."

I spot a new photo on the wall, one that must've come from the album. I'm fishing down by the lake with a massive smile on my face that's actually genuine. My clothes are clean, though second-hand, and my hair is brushed and pulled into a shiny braid. Gold knobs Gran gifted me that Christmas shine in my ears. The same pair I now wear in my second ear piercing. Gran wasn't thrilled about that, but she was just happy I still wore them constantly.

"I know it's not the same but—" Heath begins, but I jump into his arms and press my lips against his and he scoops me up for a better reach.

"I should thrift for you more often."

"This is the best surprise ever, Heath. I don't think I could ever thank you enough."

Though I tried. Without Heath's knowledge, I've been paying off the mechanic who's fixing Pearl from my meager savings. She should be done in a few days and I can't wait to see Heath's face when she's parked in our driveway on the lot Buckee gifted us early as our wedding present. Despite Heath's offer for us to live in Gran's cabin, I want to settle somewhere else and Forester Ranch is the perfect spot to do it

surrounded by family. Besides, it's a lot closer to the Forester cabin business.

Gran's cabin will remain a time capsule and a weekend getaway for any Forester or Woods.

As I admire the new photographs lining the hallway leading to my old bedroom, Heath wraps his arms around my waist and begins trailing kisses down my neck.

"So many buttons," he says, running a hand tantalizingly slow down my back as I spin around to face him.

"Perhaps I should've gone for a zipper?"

"No. Each button counts down the seconds before I can finally see your beautiful body again."

I inhale in anticipation as he reaches for the first one.

"Ten." He pulls it open. "Nine."

When he gets to two, I hold his wrist to stop him. "Heath, I have something to tell you." Something I didn't remember the first time when I was desperate to make love with him. "I haven't done this before."

"One." He kisses my lips. "Neither have I. But we have an eternity to figure it out together."

Together. I love the sound of that.

When my dress falls to the ground, I don't have a chance to step out of it before Heath stops me.

"Don't move. I want to remember you like this. The sunlight streaming in behind you and illuminating your hair. Your wedding dress pooled at your feet. Every delicate curve and line. Every day I swear you can't get more beautiful, and every day I find out how wrong I am."

A flush crawls across my chest, but I hold my position and let him drink me in until finally, he peppers kisses down my neck and to my breasts. He pulls on the thin straps of my white lingerie and peels it down to my waist before taking a nipple into his mouth. Immediately heat floods my core as I grip his head and run my fingers through his wavy hair.

But in seconds he's slipping from my grasp and dropping to his knees. Grabbing my ankle, he throws my right leg over his shoulder and I instinctively grab onto his head again to brace myself as I stumble forward.

"Just what I wanted," Heath groans against my slit that's pressed against his full lips. His tongue swipes at me slowly at first, flicking my clit with each lick until he latches onto it.

My head falls back, my hands keeping his head locked into place as he takes me to new heights no toy ever could. With each suck and flick of his tongue my supporting leg grows weaker until finally it gives out entirely, but Heath isn't done. He holds me up against him by my ass, his tongue unrelenting until I climax again and he finally releases me by depositing me onto the bed on my back.

I want to squeeze my eyes shut in the aftershocks that wrack me, but I can't take them off of Heath as he slowly slips off his belt before reaching for the buttons on his shirt.

"I want to drink in every second too," I say, standing on the bed so that I can reach his top button. As I begin to undress him, he uses my new height advantage to suck, lick, and gently squeeze my nipples again. By the time I've reached the last button and exposed his muscular chest, I'm dripping for him.

Running my hands down his massive biceps that flex at my touch, I drop to my knees on the mattress and reach for his belt as he massages my scalp like I'd done when I was planted on his face. When his rock-hard cock springs free, it only feels natural to take as much of his shaft into my mouth as I can manage without gagging. As my tongue swirls around the salty head, Heath continues his massage, gently guiding me and encouraging me with whispers of praise.

I don't know what the hell I'm doing, but Heath's moans tell me that I'm doing something right. His balls tighten in my palm, and just when I think he'll release, he tugs me off of his cock by my hair and pulls my head back so I'm looking up at him.

Suddenly, I find that I *love* this angle. I love the slight pain of his hand fisting in my hair. I love him looking down at me with his eyes full of lust and possession like I bring out something primal in him.

“I want every drop in your pussy until you’re carrying our child.”

I swallow and nod eagerly before laying back and spreading my legs to accommodate him as he crawls over me, the weight of him dipping the mattress.

“I’ll go slow,” Heath grunts, his voice low and thick as he lines up his cock to my opening.

I dig my fingers into his shoulders and wrap my legs around his hips in preparation. I don’t feel an ounce of fear, just pure anticipation of finally feeling all of him.

When he slips inside, the pinch of pain that burns through me is short-lived. Soon there’s just pressure. Glorious pressure as he slowly inches in with each thrust that stretches me wider.

“How do you feel baby?” His words are choked, as is his expression. I may be the one in a little pain, but Heath’s face tells me that he’s the one being tortured.

“Full,” I grip him tighter. “You?”

“Strangled.” He bends down to kiss me. “In the best possible way.”

When he finally bottoms out, we move our hips together, finding the perfect rhythm. Grinding against his public bone gives me another release that makes my toes curl and has me inching up the bed, but Heath has other ideas.

Grabbing my knees, he pins them to the mattress as he drives into me without restraint. *Hard.*

It only makes my orgasm that much more intense. That plus the feeling of his hot release spilling inside of me.

It’s like he’s literally pouring *all* of him into me.

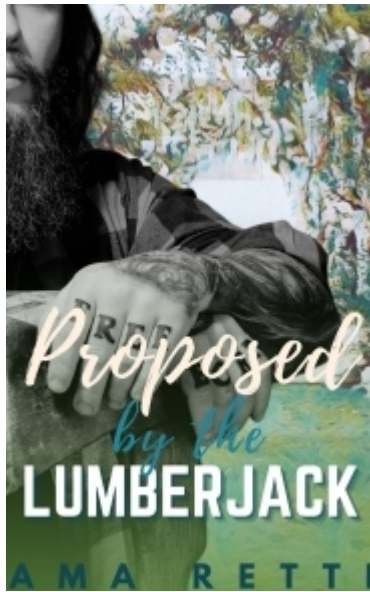
And I take every last drop, hoping we’ve just created a new life together.

The End.

Thank you for reading Heath and Dixie's story. Please
consider leaving a rating

You know what they say– the person to catch the bouquet will
get married next.

Cole, looks like that's you. Read about his story next in
[Proposed by the Lumberjack.](#)



Happy reading :)

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