
MORAN SISTERS SERIES BOOK THREE
trying not to
kiss you
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KAYLEE RYAN

trying not to kiss you

Moran Sisters

Book Three

kaylee ryan

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The following story contains sexual situations and strong language. It is intended for adult readers.

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blurb

NYT and USA Today bestselling author Kaylee Ryan brings you a new standalone series set in a small town, surrounding four sisters. Trying Not to Kiss You is a small-town, friends-to-lovers, secret-relationship romance.

Leighton
Dixon Turner has always been a part of my life. I never thought twice about him… until now.

Volunteering to help him launch his new agricultural mechanic shop seemed harmless enough.

But I wasn't prepared to spend every day with the guy I've known most of my life… and start seeing him in a way I never have before.

The quiet steadiness of him. The way he listens like he actually hears me.

Something has definitely shifted. And when the tension finally snaps, I make him an offer I really hope he doesn't refuse.

Friends… with benefits.

I know a guy like Dixon doesn't do forever.

But I'll take whatever he's willing to give.

Because it's a whole lot better than pretending there's nothing between us… and trying not to kiss him every time he gets too close.

Dixon

Leighton was always there… the little sister who tagged along.

Looking back, I can't remember a time she wasn't.

But somewhere between rebuilding engines and building my business, I realize she's all grown up.

Wanting Leighton and letting myself have her are two different things.

I've seen firsthand what happens when you build your world around someone and lose them.

My father never recovered, and I've spent years making sure that never happens to me.

Then Leighton happens.

And if I can't bring myself to love her the way she deserves, I'll lose her anyway.

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LEIGHTON

It’s been a long time since this house has felt like this—full, loud, and alive in a way that settles somewhere deep in my chest. It didn’t help that until this time last year, Baylor was all the way in New York, living a life that felt a million miles from ours. But now she’s home, back where she belongs. All of us together.

And that… that’s something to be thankful for.

For years after our parents died, the quiet wrapped itself around everything. It wasn’t just silence. It was heavier than that. Like the walls themselves were holding their breath. Even when we were all in the same room, there was always something missing. Something we didn’t say out loud but felt anyway, sitting between us like a ghost we didn’t know how to face.

We all learned how to live around it instead of through it. The pain of missing them is always there, lingering. But tonight feels different. The laughter comes easier, spilling out of every room. Ellison, my oldest sister, is in the kitchen with her daughter, Lainey, who is about to turn one, on her hip, swaying to the beat of “Jingle Bell Rock.” Lainey’s fingers are gripping

her mom's sweater, while her laughter, that tiny giggle, fills the air and drowns out everything else.

The happiness of a child is magnetic in a way I never realized until Ellison and her husband, Copeland, made me an aunt.

Speaking of being an aunt… As of last week, I now have two nieces and a nephew. My second-oldest sister, Baylor, and her husband, Macklin, had twins. They're tiny and adorable, and the perfect mix of my sister and her husband.

None of us minded pushing Thanksgiving back a week to give them time to settle in before we forced them into a large-family holiday.

My gaze drifts to the living room, where Baylor is curled up on the couch, a blanket draped over her legs and one of the twins—Waylon, I think—tucked carefully against her chest. Macklin hovers close, like he's still trying to figure out how to exist in a world where he's responsible for two tiny humans at once.

Hadley sleeps in Copeland's arms beside them, completely unaware of the chaos she's already a part of. Honestly, I don't know what Copeland did to wrangle Hadley away from her daddy, but props to him.

Courtlynn's voice cuts through my thoughts, sharp and playful. "If anyone touches my pie before dinner, I will fight you."

I glance over to find her leaning against the counter, arms crossed, expression daring anyone to challenge her. She looks completely serious, which only makes it funnier because everyone here knows she's not. Well, maybe a little serious. Courtlynn is a genius in the kitchen, just like our mom used to be. There's nothing she makes—even if it's her first time—that's not incredible. And yeah, my baby sister can be a little sassy—okay, a lot sassy—but we love her and wouldn't have her any other way.

"Relax," Baylor calls, her voice soft but amused. "No one wants your pie that badly."

Courtlynn gasps like she's been personally attacked. "That cuts deep, Bay," she replies. Her lips twitch, fighting back her own laughter.

I don't say anything, but I feel it—the small, quiet smile pulling at my lips as I watch them. It's so good to have Baylor here, knowing she's not leaving again.

"It's just a pie," Baylor tells her.

"This is not *just* a pie, Bay. This is an apple pie with streusel and caramel drizzle. This is a masterpiece, and it's going to be heaven in your mouth," Courtlynn explains.

"Let's not talk about what's been in your mouth, Brat," Bowen quips.

"You sound jealous, Captain Hangover," Courtlynn sasses.

"I own a bar. I'm not a drunk," Bowen fires back.

"You're the captain of the ship." She shrugs.

"What can I do to help?" I ask them, trying to steer the conversation. If those two get started with their sparring, they'll be at it all day.

"Nothing. Everything is ready. We're just waiting on the rolls," Ellison says.

"Thank you both for cooking."

"You helped," Courtlynn reminds me.

"I don't think making deviled eggs last night, and making mashed potatoes is much help." I laugh.

"Trust me, it is." She smiles.

"Well, since I'm not needed, come here, cutie." I hold my arms out for Lainey, and she reaches for me, allowing me to take her into my arms. I smother her face with kisses, and she giggles. I miss her now that they're living in their new house. "I think it's time for a Lainey and Leighton sleepover," I tell my niece.

"What? Now that I'm a mom, I no longer get an invite?" Ellison asks, trying to sound offended, but she's smiling.

"I just thought you and Cope might want a night to yourselves."

“We do!” Copeland calls out, making us all laugh.

“We do need one more,” Courtlynn chimes in. “One for each of us to snuggle. Since Baylor is out of commission for several weeks—Sorry, Mac! —” she calls out with a laugh, “it’s up to you.”

“You know how babies are made, Court,” Ellison teases. “If you think we need another so bad, you can make that happen.”

“Sadly, battery-operated boyfriends can’t make that happen. They can bring the *O*, but not the babies, so I’m out.” She glances over at me.

“Don’t look at me. I’m single and have no prospects. Ellie, it’s up to you and Cope,” I tell her, shaking my head, because the dating pool in Magnolia Ridge is not looking promising for my sister or me, if I’m being honest. Maybe we’ll both get lucky and someone new, a man for each of us, will move to Magnolia Ridge and change that.

Ellison snorts out a laugh. “Sure, pile the pressure onto the oldest sister. I see how it is,” she teases.

I shrug. “Just being realistic.”

Baylor appears next to me, grinning like she knows exactly what I’m thinking. “You’re too picky.”

“I’m not picky,” I tell her. “I just have standards.”

“Same thing,” she sings.

Ellison laughs, but there’s something softer in her expression when she looks at me. “You could try dating outside of town.”

I shake my head immediately. “And do what? Fall for someone who lives an hour or more away? Build something that’s doomed before it even starts?” I shake my head again, even though the thought presses heavier against my chest than I’d like to admit. “If he’s not willing to move, and I’m not leaving… what’s the point?”

“Yeah, I mean, this is home,” Courtlynn chimes in. “We just got Bay back. We’re not leaving for some man.” She scoffs, like the idea is

preposterous, and to us, it is. I nod at Courtlynn, and she smiles. We both feel the same way about this.

This town is everything to me. My job. My family. The rhythm of a place that knows my name and my history and all the versions of me I've been. The memories of our parents and the inn are things I'm not willing to walk away from.

"I get it," Baylor says. "Take it from someone who thought that running from things would make it better: it didn't. But also, look at Mac and me. I never could have pictured this life for us. Together."

"I mean, you crushed on him pretty hard growing up," Ellison teases.

"I did, but I grew up. When I came home, I was lost. I didn't know what I wanted or what I needed. I just knew that New York wasn't it, and in comes Mac, changing the way I see the world, and the way I see him. Now, we're married with twins." She grins, wiping at her eyes. "Sorry, hormones," she says, huffing out a laugh. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that even though you know all the guys in this town, don't count them out. You never know when things might change."

I glance over at Courtlynn. "I guess we'll both just have to get lucky," I say, half joking, though it doesn't feel entirely like one.

Courtlynn wiggles her brows. "Oh, I fully intend to get lucky."

Ellison groans. "Please don't. We're getting ready to eat."

Courtlynn cackles with laughter, and we all join in. Leave it to our youngest sister to come off with a comment like that. I swear she has no filter. Even through my laughter, there's a flicker of hope that Baylor is right, and my forever is close, and one day, I'll get to live out the fairy tale that they are.

"Come and eat!" Ellison calls out as she removes the rolls from the oven.

There's a flurry of activity. Copeland appears at my side, taking Lainey as he and Ellison work on making her a plate and getting her set up in her

high chair.

Macklin guides Baylor, who can walk just fine despite having twins last Sunday, to the dining room. He kisses her head and tells her he'll be right back with a plate. That makes me look for the twins, and I smile when I see Bowen and Dixon each sitting on the couch with a baby in their arms.

Stepping out of the kitchen, I walk over to them. "Designated babysitters?" I ask, smiling down at them as they hold my newborn niece and nephew.

"We have to take our turn when we can," Dixon says.

"How did you convince Mac to leave their side?" I laugh because Macklin is a proud daddy, and he's taking such good care of all of them.

"Baylor." Bowen smirks. "I offered to help make her plate."

I can't help it. I toss my head back in laughter. "Yeah, that would do it. Do you want me to take them so you all can go eat?" I offer.

"Nah, we're all set. Go have dinner with your family. I'm sure someone will be scarfing down their food to take their turn," Dixon tells me.

"You're both family," I tell them. They smile at the conviction in my voice, but it's true. They were there for Ellison when Copeland left and for all of us when our parents died. They're family. I won't ever see them any other way.

"Where are the best friends?" Bowen asks.

"Kinzie is out of town with her family, and the others all had to work today. They took off last week for shopping the day after the holiday."

Bowen nods. "Go eat, Lei," he tells me. "We've got the littles."

"Fine, but don't get too comfortable. I've yet to have my turn." I point at each of them, and they chuckle.

"Yes, ma'am," Dixon says, smirking.

I make my way back to the kitchen and get in line to make myself a plate. We're scattered between the dining room and the living room. It's chaos in the best kind of way. The house is full of our grandparents and, of

course, the family we've chosen. My sisters and I are lucky to have them here. While we're missing Kelly, Lorna, and Sophia, we're still surrounded by love, and in my heart, I know our parents are smiling down at us.

We're all piled into the living room, not ready for this day to be over. Our bellies are full, and Courtlynn let us cut into her pie. It was as delicious as she claimed it was. Macklin has Baylor in his lap. Copeland has Ellison in his, and both couples look more content than I've ever seen them. I'm sitting on the floor holding Waylon. Courtlynn has Hadley next to me, and Bowen and Dixon are building blocks with Lainey.

"Did you see that the Flannery place on the edge of town is on the market?" Macklin asks.

"Really?" Bowen asks, surprised. "Old man Flannery has been gone for years. I didn't figure his kids would ever sell."

"I saw Sally Roberts in town the other day," Copeland speaks up. "She's got the listing. She said his kids are tired of paying for the upkeep, and neither one of the boys has any plans or desire to move back to Magnolia Ridge."

"The place is pretty run-down. I don't know how much upkeep they've been doing," Dixon says.

Copeland shrugs. "I don't know. That's the excuse Sally is telling everyone."

"I wonder who will buy it?" Ellison asks.

"It would be nice to get another business here in town," I speak up. "Add some jobs."

"Bring in some new dating prospects." Courtlynn laughs.

"That, too," I agree with her.

Bowen huffs out a laugh, shaking his head. “Yeah, because this town’s definitely been the problem.”

Courtlynn’s smile tightens. “I’m sorry that I have standards. That’s not something you would know about.”

“Right, standards,” Bowen says, rolling his eyes.

“All right, you two,” Ellison interrupts before things get out of hand. “Let’s play nice. It is Thanksgiving, after all.”

“He started it,” Courtlynn spits.

“Court.” Reaching over with my free hand, I place it on her leg. Her shoulders fall, and I watch as the fight leaves her.

“It would be nice for some new jobs to come to the area,” Macklin says, helping to steer the conversation back on track.

“We could use a good ag mechanic shop in this town again,” Copeland agrees. “If whoever buys it keeps it as that, it’s the perfect place, and I know the farmers around here would love it.”

“That’s what you do, right?” I ask Dixon.

“Yeah.” He nods. “Right now, I’m mostly doing work in the fields, or wherever the equipment is. The shop I work for doesn’t have the space to house the equipment. It started out just as a regular mechanic shop.”

“Until they hired Dix,” Copeland tells me. “Thomas Miller hired him and expanded his business. Dix makes him a shit ton of money.”

“Language,” Ellison scolds him, and he smiles, kissing her cheek.

“I don’t know about that.” Dixon chuckles.

“Come on, man, you know Cope’s right,” Macklin speaks up. “You offer a service he couldn’t have before, and I know it’s not cheap to get you on-site. He’s making bank off you.”

“He pays me well,” Dixon says. “But yeah, I guess you’re right. I never really thought about it much. I just know he gave me a job, and I don’t have to travel to work every day.”

“You should buy it,” Courtlynn tells him.

“It’s not that easy, brat,” Bowen says. “There’s a lot of time and money that goes into owning your own business.”

“Oh, and I suppose you’re the only one who can manage that?”

Copeland raises his hand. “I have a business. Sure, Dad started it, and I run it with my brother, but—just saying,” he says.

“We do, too,” Ellison reminds her.

“I know, but it’s how he said it.”

“You don’t listen,” Bowen fires back.

“Okay.” I raise my hand to stop them. “Dixon can do it.” I smile at Dixon, and he nods as if saying, *I appreciate you*.

“I’ve never considered it,” he confesses. “Never had dreams of owning my own place. I know I don’t want to be stuck behind a desk all da—darn day,” he says, smiling at Lainey when she hands him a block.

“You could do it,” Baylor tells him.

“I’m happy where I am. I make good money, and I’m close by if Dad needs anything.”

“How’s he doing?” Macklin asks.

“Good. His blood pressure is still high, but he refuses to quit drinking coffee. The caffeine is not helping, but he’s old and set in his ways.”

Lainey, with a block in her hand, crawls over to Dixon and onto his lap. He smiles down at her, and it warms my heart. She’s got lots of aunts and uncles—blood and chosen—to look out for her, and one day, hopefully, when I meet a man who steals my heart, I know my kids will have the same. They might not have my parents to spoil them, but they will be surrounded by love.

“Well, it’s time for more pie,” Bowen says, standing.

I brace myself for Courtlynn to tell him he can’t have any of the ones that she made, but it never comes. Instead, my little sister watches him as he makes his way back to the kitchen. I can’t see her face, but something tells me that the hate between them is a very thin line.

“Anyone want anything?” Bowen calls out.

“I’ll help you,” Ellison says, hopping off her husband’s lap and practically skipping toward the kitchen. Lainey sees her momma, stumbles to her feet, and takes off racing after her. She’s so tiny, but she’s been walking for a few weeks now. She’ll be one in a couple of weeks. I can’t believe how fast time has gone.

“I see how it is!” Dixon calls out, but Lainey is on the move, not caring about him. She wants to see what her mom is up to.

“Cope, your daughter just dropped me like a hot potato.” Dixon chuckles.

“Because boys have cooties,” Copeland fires back, and we all laugh.

These moments. These people.

That’s what I’m thankful for.

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DIXON

The dishwasher hums to life as I spray out the sink, the steady rush of water filling the kitchen's quiet space. Dad dries the last pot with slow, careful movements, like he’s in no hurry to be finished. We’ve done this dance for years now. I wash, he rinses and dries, both of us avoiding the empty chair at the table without ever mentioning it.

We just finished Christmas dinner—just the two of us, the same way we have every year since I was thirteen and we lost Mom to cancer.

The house still carries traces of her this time of year. The same faded stockings hang over the mantle, a little more worn with each December. Dad insists on cooking her recipes, even though he always forgets something. Too much salt in the potatoes, not enough sugar in the pie. We never say it out loud, but we both notice. And we both eat it anyway.

It’s the same every year. Rinse and repeat.

“Good dinner,” I say, shutting off the faucet.

Dad nods, eyes fixed on the dish in his hands. “Yeah. Turned out all right.” He places his hand on my shoulder. “Merry Christmas, kid.”

“Haven’t been a kid for a long time, old man,” I tease. Mom’s been gone for twenty-three years. It’s hard to believe she’s been gone that long.

He chuckles. “Always be a kid to me, Dix.”

I smile because he’s told me the same thing every year since I turned eighteen. “Merry Christmas, Dad.”

He hangs the hand towel on the handle of the stove, just like Mom used to, and turns to face me. “Present time?”

“I thought we said no gifts this year?”

He huffs out a laugh. “Boy, you think I didn’t see you carrying in those gift bags?” he asks.

“So we both broke the rules?” I laugh.

“Your mother never would have allowed a Christmas to pass without a gift, even a small one.”

I nod. “I know. Let’s get to it, then,” I say. He turns toward the living room, and I trail after him. I grab the gift bags I brought with me from under the tree and hand them to him.

“Those are yours,” he says, just as he has every single year.

“Thanks, Dad.” I pick up the gifts and sit at the opposite end of the couch from him with presents piled between us.

He waits patiently for me to get settled. That same familiar half smile tugs at his mouth, like he’s amused by something he’s not saying. The Christmas lights on the tree blink softly behind him, casting red and gold across his face, and for a second, it feels like nothing has changed. It’s as if I’m ten again, sitting cross-legged on the floor instead of awkwardly perched on the far end of the couch.

“Go on.” He nods toward the gifts between us. “Open one.”

“You first,” I counter. This, too, is something we’ve done every single year—neither one of us wanting to be the first.

He raises an eyebrow. “Still stubborn, huh?”

“Learned from the best. Besides, can’t break tradition,” I tease.

“Since when is being stubborn a tradition?”

“Since always,” I counter, and we share a grin.

Dad leans forward, head turned, elbows on his knees, studying the gifts like they might tell him something about what’s inside.

Finally, he reaches for one of the bags I handed him, the smallest one. “This better not be something I have to pretend to like,” he mutters, though there’s no bite to it. It doesn’t help that the corner of his mouth is turned up in a smile that the old man doesn’t try to hide.

“If you hate it, I’ll take it back,” I say. “No hard feelings.”

“Mm-hmm,” he hums, already peeling back the tissue paper.

I give him my full attention as he carefully removes every piece of tissue paper I shoved inside the bag. His hands are slower than I remember, more careful. He pulls out the box and turns it over, squinting at the label before opening it.

“Well, I’ll be…” he murmurs as he pulls the gift out of the bag.

“You like it?” I try to sound casual and fail just a little.

“Yeah, I’ve been needing a new one. My blade broke,” he tells me.

I watch as he turns the pocketknife over in his hands. He sucks in a sharp breath, and his hands tremble, just slightly. He doesn’t speak, just stares down at the knife for several seconds, before turning it over in his hands, only to turn it back again. When he finally looks up at me, his eyes are brimming with tears.

“Dixon,” he croaks. He stares down at the knife while his thumb slides over the engraving that I know reads, *Love You More*. The engraving my mom had done for him. The company I found just outside of Knoxville did an excellent job on the restoration, and it looks as if it’s brand new.

“I hope it’s okay that I took it.” I was a little worried he’d be upset that it was different, yet still the same. I was hopeful he would be all right with it. While his reaction tells me he is, I still asked. Not that I can do anything about it now.

He nods, opening his mouth to speak, but he can’t seem to find the words.

It’s hard to buy for a man who claims to have everything he needs. There’s only so much fishing gear you can buy a man before he has one of everything. Then I remembered that the pocketknife Mom got him for our last Christmas together had broken. The blade snapped in two, and Dad was heartbroken. That was about six months ago. He shoved it into the drawer in the kitchen for safekeeping, and well, I stole it, had it repaired, and here we are. I know how much that knife meant to him.

Mom’s been gone for over twenty years, and he’s yet to look at another woman. My mother truly was the love of his life, and I’m glad that I was able to do this for him.

“Th—Thank you, son.” He reaches over the middle cushion on the couch and places his hand on my arm, squeezing gently. He nods as his lip quivers, and I know he’s on the verge of losing his battle with the tears that are threatening to fall.

“All right, old man, let’s see how well you did. This better not be something I have to pretend to like,” I tease, tossing his earlier words back at him.

To that, he laughs, wipes under his eyes, and grips that pocketknife tightly in his hand like it’s his lifeline, and for him, maybe it is.

It’s his connection to her.

His chuckle fills the air around us as I reach for a gift, tearing into the paper, just as I did as a kid. Pulling the lid off the box, I find a new pair of welding gloves. “I needed these,” I tell him, pulling off the tag and sliding one hand into a glove.

“You mentioned it a few weeks back. I was hoping you hadn’t bought a new pair yet.”

“Not yet. Thanks, Dad.”

We each open three more presents, going one at a time to see the other's reaction. It's also what Mom used to insist that we do. She wanted to see each person's joy as they opened their gifts, and Dad and I have kept that tradition alive, as well.

When I stand from the couch to start gathering the trash, my dad does, too, and before I can take another step, he wraps his arms around me in a fierce hug.

"Thank you, Dixon. Thank you," he says, his voice cracking. "She would be so damn proud of the man that you are," he says, and I find that I have to swallow hard to fight back my own emotions. "I love you, son," he rasps.

It takes another hard swallow past the lump in my throat before I can reply, "Love you, too, Dad." He embraces me for a few more seconds before letting me go. "I'm going to clean this up. You get the hot chocolate ready."

Dad smiles. "On it."

Together, we get to work, ready to end Christmas Day with yet another of my mother's traditions that we've kept alive.

Fifteen minutes later, we're in my truck and on the road. The drive to the cemetery is short. The sun is starting to set, and the place is deserted. Grabbing the flowers from the back seat, Dad collects the thermos of hot chocolate from the floorboard between his legs, and we both climb out of the truck, making our way to her gravesite.

"Merry Christmas, my love," Dad says, pulling a microfiber cloth out of his coat pocket to wipe the snow off her headstone.

"Merry Christmas, Mom," I say, removing the old flowers from the vase and adding the new ones.

"Dixon fixed my knife. It looks as good as the day you gave it to me," he tells her.

With the old, dead flowers at my feet, I shove my hands into my pockets and wait. Growing up, I was always worried about telling the guys that my dad and I visited the cemetery so often. All the holidays, her birthdays, and ours. I was sixteen when they drove by and saw my truck. We were supposed to be meeting in town at the diner, but I stopped here first. I told them I would catch up.

They saw my truck, stopped, and quietly joined me. They stood around me as I stared at her headstone with tears in my eyes. I'd just gotten my license, and I wanted to tell her about it. I froze up, waiting for the guys to give me shit for talking to a piece of concrete, but they surprised me.

Copeland was the first to speak. His voice was raspy as he said, "Hey, Mrs. Turner. We sure do miss you." The others murmured similar words, and a sob had broken free from my chest. I kept my eyes locked on my shoes, and I can still remember three hands on my shoulders, silently telling me they were there for me.

They were always my family, but that day, their silent support solidified it for me. There wasn't anything any of them could ask of me that I wouldn't do.

Brothers by choice.

Shaking out of my thoughts, I put myself back into the moment. We spend about twenty minutes just talking and talking to her as if she were still with us. It might be weird, and some might even say unhealthy, but these visits are what helped my dad heal, and me, too, if I'm being honest.

"We're headed to look at the lights," I say, stepping close to the headstone. I kiss two fingers and press them to the stone. "Love you," I whisper, before picking up the dead flowers, and turning, heading back to my truck to give my dad some time, just as I have every single time we've been here together over the past twenty-three years.

Not five minutes later, Dad's pulling open the passenger door, hooking his seat belt, and moving the vents to blow warm air over him as he tries to

get warm. “Where are we starting this year?” he asks.

I chuckle. “Age must be really catching up with you,” I tease. “You know we have a routine,” I say, putting my truck in Drive and circling around the cemetery to pull back out onto the road.

“What happened to respecting your elders?” Dad asks, amusement in his tone.

“Stick to the plan, old-timer,” I joke, and we both laugh. I drive to the north side of town, and we start our journey through pretty much every back road, around Magnolia Ridge, before working our way back through town.

“Look at that,” Dad says as we pass the Flannery place. “It’s for sale.”

“Yeah, I guess his boys are tired of paying for the upkeep and have no plans of moving back to Magnolia Ridge.”

“Mark was a damn fine mechanic,” he says.

“I would have thought someone would have wanted to take over the shop. I know it sure would be nice to be able to work on some of this equipment inside, out of the elements of Mother Nature.” As an agricultural mechanic, I get called off to the site, to the field, most of the time. Winter is more maintenance and long-term repairs, but summer is nothing for me to be welding in the fields or wrenching on a tractor in the middle of planting season, right where it broke down.

“You should buy it,” Dad says casually.

“What?” I turn to glance at him quickly before putting my eyes back on the road.

“You’re damn good at what you do, Dixon. You could open your own shop. Hell, Miller didn’t even offer your kind of service until he hired you. You know the customers would follow you.”

“I don’t want to do that to Miller.”

“Son, you’re a good man, but let me tell you, Miller wouldn’t think twice if it meant making him more money. You have to look at it for you,

my future daughter-in-law, and grandkids."

"Now, I know your age is getting to you. You hallucinating?" I ask.

He chuckles. "Nah, just manifesting. That's what you kids do these days, right? It's all the rage."

"You're manifesting a daughter-in-law and grandkids?"

"Yep," he says, popping the *p*.

"Not sure that's in the cards for me, Dad. This town isn't exactly crawling with options."

"What about those Moran girls? There are four of them, right? Two left, far as I can tell."

"There are four of them. You know this. You've lived here your entire life. Courtlynn and Leighton are the youngest two, and they're nearly a decade younger than I am."

"Both of them?"

"Close enough," I mutter. Courtlynn is eight years younger than I am, and Leighton is only six years younger. They're both beautiful ladies, but I could never go there.

"Fine, if not the Moran girls, I know there are plenty of single women in this town, and you can search outside of Magnolia Ridge."

"Sure, Dad, maybe," I say to pacify him.

"Dixon, I know what you're doing. You're protecting your heart, and I blame myself for that. Your mother was my world. You both were, still are. I loved that woman with every fiber of my being, and when I lost her, well, that changed nothing for me. Your mom was my one love, and I had no interest in replacing her."

"I know," I tell him, my tone soft. I worry that he'll be lonely, but after all these years, it's only ever been my mom for him.

"But I should have encouraged you more. Just because we lost your mother young, doesn't mean that will happen to you."

My heart begins to race, but I remain calm, not letting him see how close to home his words are hitting. I watched my father grieve—hell, he's still grieving—and the pain of losing her almost destroyed him.

Don't get me wrong, he was present for me. There for every school function, every sporting event, and is still to this day my biggest supporter. But losing the woman he loved changed him, and I never want to go through that kind of pain. I loved my mother; I miss her every damn day, but the love my father had for her was a part of him.

I don't see why I would allow myself to fall in love and potentially lose that love. It's easier to just not let it happen. I'll be the uncle to the guys' kids. Sure, I would like to have a few of my own, carry on the Turner name, but that thought stalls every time I remember what it was like to watch my dad lose my mom.

"Life is short, Dixon. None of us knows how much time we have left on this earth. We have to live each day to the fullest. Take the trip, date the pretty girl, fall in love with her, give your old man a couple of grandkids, and put yourself first. Buy the building… or at least schedule an appointment to look at it. Reach for the stars, son. Don't let life pass you by. I failed you in that regard. I was so lost in my grief, lost in my love for your mother, I didn't realize what I was doing to you in the process."

"What were you doing to me, Dad?"

"Scaring you away from love."

"I'm not scared." It's a lie, and we both know it.

"You are, and that's on me. Loving your mother was the best thing I've ever done. She was taken from us far too soon, but I wouldn't change a moment of my time with her. I vowed to love her until death do us part, and for me, that's my death, too. She would want you to find love, Dixon, so do I."

"Love isn't for everyone," I say, my voice flat, void of emotion.

“You have a big heart, son. It’s a shame for you not to share it with someone.” He reaches over the console, pats my arm, then points out the window. “Looks like the Andersons stepped it up this year.”

Just like that, the conversation is over, but the effects still linger. There’s a part of me that knows what he says is true. I’m scared, but at the end of the day, it’s my choice, and I choose to protect my heart.

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LEIGHTON

There are tears in my eyes as I watch Ellison and Copeland huddled together in their kitchen, smiling at Lainey, who's in her dad's arms between them, her soft curls still damp from her bath. They're the picture-perfect family, and my heart swells for them.

Today is Lainey's first birthday, and she spent twenty minutes absolutely demolishing the tiny princess cake Courtlynn made for her. Most of it ended up on the high chair tray, the floor, and Copeland's shirt, but she had the time of her life squealing and smashing frosting between her fingers.

I can't believe she's already one. It feels like just yesterday we were crowded into that hospital waiting room, exhausted and impatient, waiting to meet her for the first time. Now, she's running everywhere as fast as her little legs will carry her, laughing nonstop and somehow managing to keep every adult in this family wrapped around her tiny finger.

This past year has flown by and changed so much for our family. Three babies, including Lainey, turned our calm, mundane lives into happy chaos,

and I love it. We also gained two new brothers-in-law, and somehow, both men fit into this family like they were always meant to be here.

But watching Copeland with Ellison and Lainey does something to me every single time. The way his arm automatically tightens around my sister. The way Ellison looks at him as if she still can't believe he's really hers again. The way they both stare at their daughter like she hung the stars in the sky.

It's beautiful, and I hope one day I can find that kind of love.

Love brought them back together after years apart, after heartbreak, mistakes, and all the things that once stood in their way. And standing here watching them now, surrounded by frosting-covered counters and birthday decorations half falling off the walls, I know this moment is everything my sister always dreamed of.

A baby cries, which pulls my attention to the living room. I watch as Macklin stands with one of the twins in his arms, and by the pink blanket, I know it's Hadley. He bounces her gently, whispering soft words I can't make out. He and my sister Baylor both look exhausted.

"Let me try," Baylor says. She stands with Waylon in her arms, but my sister Courtlynn is there to whisk him into hers, allowing Baylor and her husband to settle their daughter. We all help out wherever we can. Not that it's a hardship. We love our nieces and nephews, but we know how hard it is with one baby, let alone two. I just wish that Baylor and Macklin would lean on us more.

Hadley continues to fuss, and I'm about ready to step in and offer to take her and tell her parents to go to a guest room or go home and nap, when Dixon taps on Macklin's shoulder. He holds out his arms, looking a little hesitant, but so does Macklin, to be honest. Not because he doesn't trust his best friend, but because he's super dad and wants to be the one to soothe her. And Dixon? Well, I can only assume he hasn't spent much time

around babies. He's an only child, so he didn't grow up with siblings always in your business.

I watch as Dixon cradles her to his chest, rubs her back soothingly, and starts to walk around the house. He's stiff at first, but with each step he takes, he starts to relax; in turn, Hadley quiets her fussing, too. When he's close, I offer him a smile.

"Dixon Turner, the baby whisperer," I tease, keeping my tone soft not to startle Hadley.

He chuckles softly. "Not really. They scare the shit out of me, if I'm being honest, but those two, they're exhausted." He nods toward the living room, where Baylor and Macklin are huddled together on the couch, both of them with their eyes closed.

"They are. Do you want me to take her?"

"Not unless she starts to cry."

"She calmed down for you." Reaching over, I run my finger over her soft hair, and she shudders a breath, settling deeply into Dixon's chest. "Babies can sense tension. I'm sure their exhaustion was what was setting her off."

"That's what I thought, too, which is why I offered. I remembered a similar moment when Lainey was smaller, and it was you, actually, who stepped up to take her from Cope."

"Copycat." I chuckle.

"Learning," he counters. "I was an only child, and if all my friends keep having babies, I need to figure it out. How else am I going to hold the favorite uncle title?"

"Just wait, when you have your own, they'll be battling it out, too," I tell him. "You can all be the favorite." I smile.

"Nah, I don't think that will ever happen for me," he says.

I hear something in his voice, something I don't get to dwell on because Copeland announces that it's time for presents. Everyone gathers back in

the living room. Dixon takes the recliner, with Hadley resting peacefully against his chest. I sit on the floor at his feet just in case he needs help.

Baylor and Macklin force their eyes open and immediately glance around to see who has the twins before they settle back with sleepy smiles to watch Lainey open her gifts. Ellison and Copeland are on the floor with Lainey, while Kinzie, Ellison's best friend, is taking pictures. Copeland's brother, Chandler, his wife, Macie, and their two kids, Maeve and Carter, have pulled chairs in from the dining room and are watching intently, while our grandparents take up the love seat, and Mary, Copeland's mom, sits on the couch next to Baylor and Macklin.

That leaves Courtlynn and Bowen. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Bowen grab two more chairs from the dining room, one for each of them, and he nods for Courtlynn to sit. I expect her to tell him she doesn't need a man to get a chair for her, or something even more… rude—because that's their MO. Surprisingly, my little sister takes the offered seat without fuss, her eyes on our niece as she tears into her first gift.

"Hey." Dixon leans forward. "Take this chair. I'll sit on the floor."

"What? No." I shake my head. "I want to be close to the action," I tell him.

"Lei, come on," he tries again.

"I'm fine, Dix. I promise. I'm the official trash collector." I reach over and snag the box of trash bags I saw Ellison place next to the pile of gifts earlier. "But if you need a break, I'm your girl."

He nods, not looking happy about me sitting on the floor, but he accepts my reasoning and sits back again, gently rubbing Hadley's sleeping back. He has no idea how hot he looks right now. I don't know why he thinks kids aren't in the cards for him. All he has to do is show any single woman a picture of him in this moment—hell, maybe even a few who are already taken—and he'd have ladies lining up to be Mrs. Dixon Turner.

Lainey loves her bows, the wrapping paper, and the bags more than anything. We all laughed at her excitement over the little things, not the floor of toys we all spoiled her with. By the time her daddy helps her with her last gift, she's rubbing at her eyes and losing steam.

"All right, Princess," Copeland says, pulling her into his lap. "I think it's time for a nap."

Ellison climbs to her feet and reaches for Lainey, but she turns her head, burying her face in Copeland's chest. "I see how it is." Ellison smiles down at her family.

"I'll take her to her room, Ells." Copeland somehow manages to stand with Lainey in his arms, kisses my sister, and disappears upstairs to lay her down for a well-earned nap.

Lainey has been a trooper today, all smiles and laughter. She's had a big day and deserves that sleep.

The house is quieter. All three kids are napping. The house has been put back in some sort of order, the decorations taken down, and it's just me, my sisters, their husbands, Dixon, and Bowen who remain. Kinzie had to leave for a hot date—her words, not mine.

"Thanks for coming to celebrate our girl today," Copeland says from where he and Ellison are sitting on the couch, next to Baylor and Macklin. Both couples are snuggled up.

I'm still on the floor, much to Dixon's dismay, and Bowen is on the love seat, while Courtlynn also sits on the floor, refusing to sit next to Bowen. She smarted off something earlier, he called her a brat, and they proceeded to ignore one another. You know, the usual sexual tension that everyone but the two of them can see.

Okay, well, maybe not everyone, but I observe. I pay attention, and one of these days, those two and the sparks that fly between them are going to ignite.

“Nowhere else we’d rather be.” Courtlynn smiles.

“And thanks for the help with the twins,” Baylor adds. “We’re still working on getting them on a sleeping routine at night.”

“It will come,” Ellison assures her.

“In the meantime, I’m happy to watch them while you all take a nap, or I can come stay at your place for a night.”

“I’ll help,” Courtlynn says, raising her hand.

Bowen mumbles something that sounds like “Who would leave you alone with their kids?” I could be mistaken, but the glare that Courtlynn gives him tells me I’m probably on the right track. Courtlynn hisses something in reply that I also can’t hear.

“Brat,” Bowen mutters. His tone is louder this time, and the name he’s called her for years is unmistakable.

“I did something today,” Dixon speaks up, trying to distract them, I’m sure. I turn to look at him over my shoulder. He has all of our attention as he clears his throat. “I put in an offer on the Flannery place before I got here.”

“No shit?” Copeland asks.

“That’s what I’m talking about.” Bowen nods.

“Hell yeah,” Macklin says, suddenly looking more awake.

“And you’re just now telling us?” Ellison asks.

Dixon chuckles. “It was Lainey’s day.”

“This is huge news, Dix. Please tell me that you’re going to open your own shop,” Ellison says.

“Yeah, I mean, that’s the plan. I don’t know shit about running my own business, but Dad’s been encouraging me, and I think it would be good to work for myself and bring that service back to Magnolia Ridge. But I’m not

getting my hopes up. They have twenty-four hours to accept or reject my offer, or they could counter, I guess."

"You're pretty much doing it now, right?" Baylor asks. "Just not at your own shop?"

"He is," Macklin answers before Dixon has a chance to. "Miller's shop is making bank off our boy here. This is badass, Dix. You're going to kill it."

"You already got people driving twenty minutes just to have you work on their trucks," Bowen points out.

"That's because Miller undercharges for labor," Dixon explains.

"Bullshit," Macklin says. "People go because of you."

Dixon shakes his head, looking almost embarrassed by the attention.

"You're pretty much running a shop already," Baylor says. "Just not one with your name on the building."

Copeland nods. "Every time I go in there, someone's asking for Dixon specifically."

"No kidding," Ellison adds. "You remember when old man Grady refused to let anyone else touch his tractor after Dixon worked on it?"

Dixon groans. "That thing was a nightmare."

"And you fixed it in two days," Bowen says. "Which Grady still brings up every chance he gets."

Macklin points his water bottle toward Dixon. "You're going to be kicking ass and taking names. Or fixing tractors or whatever," he jokes.

A grin finally breaks across Dixon's face. It's small at first, reluctant, but it slowly spreads under the weight of everyone hyping him up.

And maybe it's ridiculous, but my chest tightens watching it happen. Because these men love hard and loudly. Without hesitation. And Dixon? He looks like someone who still doesn't fully believe that he deserves the praise he gets for his work.

"So, what're you gonna call it?" Copeland asks.

Dixon immediately shakes his head. “I have absolutely not thought that far ahead.”

“Bullshit,” Ellison says. “Everybody thinks about the name first.”

“Dixon’s Ag,” Bowen offers.

“That sounds like a place with dusty vending machines and terrible coffee,” Baylor says.

“Macklin & Dixon Customs,” Macklin says with a grin.

Dixon snorts. “Why the hell would your name be on my shop?”

“Because I’m the personality hire.”

“You’d get Dix sued inside a week,” Copeland mutters.

The room erupts into overlapping laughter. I lean into Dixon’s leg, just a brush of my shoulder against his calf, and he turns his head to look at me, giving me his full attention.

“Proud of you,” I say, smiling up at him. It’s a big deal to go out on your own and start a business.

He shakes his head, like he doesn’t know what to say. But he doesn’t need words, because the look on his face says enough.

Hope looks good on him.

“What about Dix N Fix?” Courtlynn offers with a giggle.

She’s not the only one. We’re all laughing, even Bowen is cracking a smile, although I’m sure it pains him to laugh at something my little sister has come up with.

Copeland chokes on his water. Macklin folds over, pounding a fist against the arm of the couch while Baylor laughs so hard she’s practically wheezing. Ellison’s body is shaking with silent laughter, and me, well, I’m laughing right along with them. You never know what’s going to come out of Courtlynn’s mouth.

I glance at Dixon, and he’s laughing, too, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “Absolutely not,” he finally says. “We can do better than that.”

“Oh, come on,” Macklin argues. “That’s marketing gold.”

“That’s a lawsuit,” Ellison chuckles.

“That’s a line,” Courtlynn says between cackles. “Women would be around the block…” Her voice trails off, a sleepy smile tipping her lips.

“Yeah,” Bowen cuts in dryly. “Mostly to ask if you fix actual equipment or just disappoint women professionally with yours.”

The room detonates again.

Courtlynn gasps so loudly it echoes. Macklin falls sideways against the couch cushions, nearly crying with laughter, while Copeland points at Bowen like he’s just won something.

“That’s hilarious,” Baylor wheezes.

Bowen finally looks up, completely unbothered. “You set that one up yourself,” he says, smirking at Courtlynn.

Dixon drags a hand over his mouth, failing miserably at hiding his grin. “See? Terrible name.”

“I hate all of you,” Courtlynn announces.

“No, you don’t,” Macklin says immediately. “You thrive in this environment.”

I grin up at Dixon. “I still think it’s memorable.”

His eyes narrow at me with mock betrayal. “You, too?”

I press my lips together, pretending to consider it seriously. “Maybe just… not for the reasons you want.”

He huffs another laugh, shaking his head. “We need to keep thinking.”

“Turner’s Diesel Repair,” I suggest.

Dixon nods slowly. “Lei, I think we have a winner.” He smiles at me. My chest warms knowing I was able to help him.

“It’s better than what we’ve come up with so far.” Ellison sniggers.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Dixon says.

“You’ll get it,” Ellison tells him. “This was meant to be, Dix.”

“I’m glad you think so. I’m going to need help. I have no idea what I’m doing. Logo, branding, bookkeeping, employees, insurance, it’s a lot,” he

says, running his hands through his hair.

“You’ve got this, Dix. We’re all here to help you,” Ellison replies.

“That’s what family is for, right?” I ask, smiling up at him again.

He nods. “Yeah, that’s what family is for,” he repeats. His eyes soften as they take me in, and there it is again, the hope flashing in his eyes.

I want this for him.

Dixon looks around the room like he doesn’t quite know what to do with all of it. With people believing in him. He’ll see soon enough that we’ve got his back.

“You’ve already got the hard part down,” Copeland says from the couch. “You know the work.”

“Yeah,” Bowen adds. “The rest is just paperwork and pretending you know what QuickBooks is.”

“Excuse you,” Baylor says, turning toward Bowen. “Some of us actually know what QuickBooks is.”

“That’s because you’re terrifyingly good at your job,” Bowen replies easily.

She beams at him. “Thank you for recognizing my talents.”

“I hear grown men panic when you start talking about tax codes.”

“As they should.” Baylor nods, agreeing with Bowen, and I can’t help but smile.

Macklin chuckles. “My wife is a numbers genius,” he says, kissing her temple.

“Pretty sure we just found my accountant,” Dixon says, and I can hear the laughter in his voice.

“You absolutely did,” Baylor says. “I’ll even give you the friend discount.”

“Which is?”

“Still expensive, but with love,” she fires back.

A laugh slips out of me, and I turn to look at Dixon to see him softly laughing and shaking his head.

“I mean it, though,” Ellison says, leaning forward. “You don’t have to figure it all out tonight or on your own.”

Dixon nods slowly. “Feels like if I stop moving for five seconds, it’ll disappear.”

My chest tightens at that because I know exactly what he means. The fear that good things are temporary. That if you look away too long, life will snatch them back. Without thinking, I place my hand on his knee, and on instinct, he covers my hand with his own.

His eyes drop to our joined hands, then back to me.

“It won’t,” I say quietly.

Something shifts in his expression then. It’s a small change but noticeable to me. Like maybe a part of him believes me. Or maybe he just wants to.

The room falls back into easy conversation after that, everyone talking over each other about paint colors and shop services and whether Courtlynn should be legally banned from naming anything ever again.

And through all of it, Dixon keeps his hand resting on top of mine.

Absentmindedly.

Steady.

By the time midnight creeps in, people start filtering out one by one. Bowen leaves first, grumbling about heading to the bar to check on things. Dixon stands, taking my hand in his and helping me to my feet.

Baylor and Macklin stand from the couch, and Baylor heads toward Dixon, hugging him tightly before pointing at him. “Save every receipt. I’m serious.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He smiles at her, mock saluting with his free hand, because he’s still holding on to mine.

“And don’t buy anything stupid before talking to me first,” she adds, pointing her index finger at him.

“Babe, he knows that,” Macklin says gently.

“You’re bossy,” Courtlynn tells her.

“I’m an accountant,” she shoots back, as if that’s explanation enough.

“You sound hot,” Macklin says.

“Please shut up,” Courtlynn groans from the armchair.

Bowen sasses something back at her, and I feel a soft squeeze of my hand. The chaos slowly disappears as I peer up at Dixon. He lets go of my hand, and disappointment washes over me, which in turn confuses me. Why am I disappointed?

“You really think I can do this?” he asks after a minute.

“I know you can.” His gaze searches mine like he’s trying to decide whether he deserves that kind of faith. He must find what he’s looking for because a slow, sexy smile tilts his lips, and the hope is back in his gaze.

That’s the thing about hope. It starts tiny. So quiet you might miss it if you aren’t paying attention. However, once it takes root, once you allow it to truly settle inside you, it grows.

“Thanks, Leighton,” he says softly.

Stepping forward, I wrap my arms around him in a hug. “You’re welcome,” I say, before stepping back and going to see if Baylor needs help packing up the twins’ things.

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DIXON

The sun has barely begun to rise. Pale morning light filters weakly through the bedroom curtains, and my phone is ringing. The sound slices through the quiet room, instantly putting me on edge.

Nobody calls this early in the morning on a Sunday with good news. *Unless it's the realtor*, I quickly think, but shake off the idea instantly. That's definitely a way to lose a real estate deal.

Still half asleep, I reach over and fumble across the nightstand until my hand closes around my phone. The screen lights up the dark room.

Macklin.

Shit. Is it one of the twins?

I rush to accept the call, placing the phone next to my ear. "Mac?" I answer, my voice laced with sleep. I hear wind through the speaker of the phone, and I sit up on high alert.

"Please tell me I didn't wake you up," Macklin says. He sounds more irritated than scared, and that eases some of my panic.

I snort quietly and scrub a hand over my face. "You know damn well you did."

“Yeah, figured.” He chuckles.

Despite the early hour, there’s something lighter in his voice than I expected. Tired, stressed maybe, but not panicked. That alone settles me enough that I lie back on the mattress, pulling the comforter back over my chest to ward off the chill of the room.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“My tractor won’t start.”

I blink into the dim room. My eyes are adjusting as I process what he just said. “That’s it? Your tractor won’t start?” I ask.

“That’s it,” he says, sounding mildly offended. “Some of us have responsibilities, Dixon.”

I laugh under my breath. He has no idea he scared me half to death with his early morning call. With a sigh, I toss off the covers for a second time—this time, knowing I’ll need to leave the warm cocoon I was sleeping in—and swing my legs over the side of the bed, instantly regretting it when my bare feet hit the freezing hardwood floor. “You called me before sunrise because your tractor’s dead?”

“I called you because it’s ten degrees outside, I’ve got a barn full of horses waiting on hay, and I need to load some into my truck to take over to the estate’s stables for the horses there, as well. I have a wife who’s finally asleep, after we were both up half the night with two babies who think that it’s time to party at two a.m., and I haven’t slept more than two consecutive hours in over a month.”

“I’m getting dressed. I’ll be there to fix the tractor. Then you’re going to go upstairs and slide into bed beside your wife, and I’ll take care of the party animals when they wake up.”

“You’re going to take care of my six-week-old twins? By yourself?”

“You don’t think I can do it?” I ask, sounding far more confident than I really am.

“They scare you.”

“I was able to get Hadley to sleep yesterday. Your tired ass was stressing her out.”

“It’s fine. I can take care of my kids and my wife, but the tractor, I’m ready to set it on fire,” he seethes.

That pulls a chuckle out of me. Standing from the bed, I tug back the curtains to glance out the window. The world outside is frozen solid, the fields beyond town covered in a dull layer of frost beneath the fading dark. Even from inside, I can practically feel the Tennessee cold biting through the walls.

“You try jumping it?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Does it have fuel in it?”

“Fucker.” He barks out a laugh. “Yes, there’s fuel in it.”

“Whatever it is, I’ll get you back up and running. Maybe it was something you missed.”

“I looked at it with the mechanical abilities of a sleep-deprived man running on coffee and exhaustion,” he says. “That’s why I called an actual ag mechanic.”

Fair enough. I make my way toward the closet, grab a T-shirt and a hoodie, then move back to the dresser for a pair of jeans and some socks. I drag the shirt over my head. “You’re in the barn?”

“Yeah.”

In the background, I can hear horses nickering faintly and the clang of a gate closing. Then, softer and muffled away from the phone, Macklin says, “No, buddy, not yet,” presumably to one of the horses already impatient for breakfast.

“You know,” I say as I shove my feet into boots, “normal people would wait until daylight before harassing their best friend.”

“You know,” he shoots back immediately, “normal best friends don’t harass their stressed-out-new-father best friend,” he fires back.

“Normal best friends don’t own ancient tractors held together with zip ties and prayer.”

“She’s vintage.”

“She’s a hazard.”

“She has character.”

“She has rust.”

Macklin laughs. “You coming or not?” he asks.

“Yeah, yeah. Give me twenty minutes.”

“You’re a lifesaver.”

“No,” I say, grabbing my wallet from the nightstand, “I’m a mechanic. There’s a difference.”

“Tell that to the horses.”

The call ends, and I move to the kitchen to make some coffee. While it’s brewing, I pull on my work boots and grab my coveralls and coat from the closet. My truck is already set up with my tools, my welder, and pretty much anything I might need—minus parts—and I even keep a few spares of those. Grabbing my keys, I move to the front door and hit the remote start button—best invention ever—and let the truck warm up while I wait for my coffee.

I called Dad last night when I got home to tell him I was tossing around the idea of opening my own place. I didn’t tell him I put in an offer just in case it doesn’t go through, I guess? Maybe I don’t want to be seen as a disappointment. He reminded me that it was the right step. I mean, my truck and all the equipment belong to me. They’re things I’ve acquired over time to make my job easier. I also sometimes take side jobs on the weekends. I know this is the right next step, but that doesn’t make it any less nerve-racking to think about everything that needs to be done if the bid is accepted.

Filling a large, insulated travel mug with coffee, I slide into my coat, pick up my coveralls, making sure I have gloves, turn out the lights, and

head out to my truck. Knowing Macklin, he's probably been out in the barn, trying to fix his tractor, for far longer than he's willing to admit. For him to call me means he's desperate. Not just for the tractor to be fixed, but for some sleep. I'm going to have to find a way to convince him to let me help so he and Baylor can both catch a few hours of sleep. I don't have anything else going on today, so I might as well put on my uncle hat when I'm done fixing the tractor.

Pulling into the driveway, I drive past the house and down to the barn. Macklin is waiting, opening the barn doors and motioning for me to drive on in.

"Thanks for coming," Macklin says, exhaustion in his tone.

"Go on inside and get some sleep. I'll handle this and make sure the horses get hay. I'll load up your truck and take it over to the estate."

"You don't have to do that," he says, but I saw the way his eyes changed at the idea of getting some rest.

"Best friend… kind of my job." I chuckle. "Now, go. Be quiet as a mouse." I laugh. "You don't want to wake up my niece and nephew."

"You sure? What if you need help?"

"I've got it, Mac. Go." I wave my hand in the air, telling him to leave.

He nods. "If you need me, just call."

"I'll call one of the guys. Go get some sleep. I'll take care of this and then the horses."

"Thanks. I let the guys take off today since it's just the horses here and the estate that needs tending to. You need me to tell you what to do?"

"I can handle tossing out some hay. I've helped you enough in the past. I can figure it out."

“Thanks, Dix,” he says, his shoulders falling as exhaustion weighs down on him.

“That’s what friends are for. I’ll have old Bessie here purring like a kitten, and the horses will be taken care of.”

He offers me a tired smile with a nod as he turns and leaves me to get to work. It doesn’t take long for me to diagnose the problem. These old tractors sometimes develop corrosion at the cable ends and at the battery ground connection. After a good scrub with a wire brush and some parts cleaner, they look as good as new, and old Bessie fires right up.

I make quick work of putting hay out to the horses here, before loading up a hefty load into the back of Mac’s truck. It’s more than what I’ll need for today, but hopefully, that will help Mac and his guys out just a little.

Once the truck is loaded, I park the tractor back in the barn and head toward Magnolia Estates. It’s not a long drive, and the place is quiet since it’s barely eight in the morning. Driving past the inn, I park Macklin’s truck outside the stables. Pulling on my gloves, I hop out of the truck and get the hay unloaded, tossing the bales over the side, before packing each one inside.

By the time I’m finished, I’m sweating like a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. Plopping down on a bale of hay, I pull up the hem of my sweatshirt, move it aside, and use the bottom of my T-shirt to wipe the sweat from my face. The cool air hits my heated skin, and I shiver as a loud gasp fills the stables.

“Oh!”

Dropping my shirt and tugging down my sweatshirt, I smile at Leighton. “What are you doing out here so early? Going for a ride?” I ask, taking in the flushed tint to her cheeks.

Is that because I had my shirt up? Surely not.

“No.” She shakes her head. “I saw Mac’s truck. I was coming out to give him some coffee.” She offers me the travel mug.

“Thanks, Lei.”

“What are you doing here?” she asks. “Wait, I’m sorry that came out sounding rude. That’s not how I meant it. I’m just surprised to see you, is all,” she says, her cheeks turning a darker shade of pink.

“Mac had tractor trouble, so he called me. He was exhausted, so I sent him to bed and told him I’d take care of the tractor and make sure the horses at his place and here had hay.”

“Do you need any help?”

“Not here, but…” My voice trails off as an idea hits me.

“But?” she asks.

“I told Mac I’d go back and keep the twins for them so they could sleep. They’re both running on fumes. He didn’t seem to have much faith in me. But if you were with me, they’d agree to get some real sleep and let us handle the twins.”

“I’m in,” she says immediately. “I was going to call them and go over there today and try to do the same thing anyway. Two of us and two babies, we’ve got this.” She grins. “Courtlynn and Lorna ended up going to a concert last night. Lorna got tickets at the last minute, so as soon as she left Ellie and Cope’s, they ended up getting a room for the night. She won’t be home until this afternoon. The inn’s quiet, the staff has it under control, so I’m all alone today anyway.”

“Perfect. Do you want to ride over with me?” I offer.

“Nah, I’ll take my car so that you don’t have to bring me home.”

“It’s not like it’s hours out of the way, Lei. I don’t mind.”

She waves me off. “It’s fine. I’ll go get ready.”

“I’ve got about thirty minutes here. Feed, water, and fresh hay, and if there’s any mucking that needs to be done in the stalls, I’ll do a quick clean of those, and then I’m going to need a shower.”

She wrinkles up her nose, and it’s cute as hell. “Yeah, that’s a solid plan.”

“What? You saying I stink?”

“Not now, but after mucking the stalls, most definitely.”

“I don’t know… I’m sweating my ass off after unloading all that hay in these layers and then bringing it in. I’m sure I’m ripe right now. I wouldn’t come near me if I were you,” I tease.

“Noted.” She smirks, those big blue eyes of hers shining bright as a clear summer sky. “Okay, I’m going to go get changed. I’ll stop at the store and get some groceries to make us lunch and dinner, or whatever time it is when Bay and Mac wake up from their well-needed rest.”

“Solid plan. I’ll see you soon,” I tell her. “Thanks for helping me.”

“Always.” She smiles and leaves me to get back to work.

An hour later, I’m pulling Mac’s truck back into the barn after rushing through what needed to be done at the estate and flying home for the world’s fastest shower. Leighton pulls into the driveway at the same time.

Closing the barn door, I jog to her car and help her unload the groceries before we make our way to the back door. Leighton punches in the code for the door lock, and we step inside to find Macklin and Baylor sitting at the kitchen table, half-eaten bagels in front of them, both holding and feeding a baby while their eyes barely stay open.

“What’s going on?” Baylor asks, worry in her tone.

“Backup has arrived,” I tell her.

“What?”

“We’re taking over. Dix and I are sending you two off to bed, and we’re on baby duty,” Leighton explains.

“You don’t have to do that.” Baylor says the words, but I can hear in her voice the relief and emotion that only comes when you’re overly exhausted.

“No one said that we had to.” I walk over to Macklin and hold my arms out for Hadley. “Come to Uncle Dix,” I coo as I take her into my arms.

“Gimme,” Leighton says, holding her arms out for Waylon, and Baylor hands her son over.

“Now, you have two options,” I say. “One, finish eating and then go to bed, or two, go straight to bed.”

“I’ll have a hot meal ready for you when you wake up, and these two will be well taken care of,” Leighton adds.

“What’s it going to be?” I ask them.

They don’t even spare a glance at one another when they answer in unison: “Sleep.”

I chuckle. “Good. Now, go. I’ve got nowhere to be. Sleep as long as you need to. Take a long, hot shower. Hell, go out to dinner later. Whatever you need.”

“Same,” Leighton adds. “Do what you need to do to feel human again and let us take care of the rest.”

Baylor stands, wraps her arms around her sister, and kisses Waylon’s cheek before coming to me and doing the same. She then kisses Hadley. Macklin wraps his arm around his wife, mutters, “Thank you,” and they disappear upstairs.

“Now what?” I ask Leighton, and she snorts out an adorable laugh, which has me grinning.

“Now, we get comfy… not on these hard-ass kitchen chairs. We let the tiny humans eat, change their diapers, rinse and repeat.”

“You’re the boss,” I tell her, nodding toward the living room.

We both settle on the couch, pillows tucked close, with a baby each. Hadley stares up at me while she eats without a care in the world.

“They’re growing so fast,” Leighton says.

I glance over to see her smiling down at Waylon. “They are, which is great. I don’t feel like I’m going to break them, but they’re still pretty damn

tiny.”

“They were big for twins. A little over five pounds each. Baylor is a trooper,” she says. “Isn’t that right? Your mommy is the best,” she coos to Waylon.

“What else can we do?” I ask Leighton.

“I thought we could clean up a bit. I’ll make dinner. I also have ingredients to make a few casseroles to put into the freezer. All they’ll have to do is put them in the oven. Ellie, Court, and I did that when the twins were first born, but that was weeks ago. I should have kept it up, but Baylor assured me they were fine.”

“So stubborn,” I comment.

“Yeah, she’s always been one to feel like she had to do things on her own, in her own way.”

“Well, once we get them fed, changed, and occupied, put me to work. I’m not the best in the kitchen, but I can follow a recipe just fine. Dad and I had to learn together. We’re not Michelin star quality, but we can get it done.”

“You were young, too, right? When your mom passed?”

“Yeah, I was thirteen.”

“Three years younger than Court when we lost our parents. I knew you were young, but I couldn’t remember how old you were at the time.”

“A long time ago,” I agree.

“It never gets easier, does it? I mean, you learn to live with missing them, but the pain, it’s always there.” She clears her throat. “All right, mister. Time to burp.”

I assume Hadley needs to, as well. I know you have to do that a lot when they’re tiny, so I remove the bottle from her mouth. She pouts. Her tiny bottom lip pops out, and I smile. “I’ll give it right back. You have to burp for me,” I tell her, placing her on my shoulder and gently patting her back. It gives me something to focus on other than our conversation. I don’t

talk much about losing my mom. It was such a long time ago, but it's nice to talk to someone who understands that pain and the void that losing parents leaves in your life.

It's not long before a burp that could have come from a grown man fills the air.

"Goodness." Leighton smiles. "That was a good one, Had. Your sister is showing you up, Way man; you better—" Another loud burp fills the air, cutting her off, and she laughs. "Thank you."

I smile at her as we go back to giving the babies the rest of their bottles. We make a plan of attack for what to do next. I didn't know what I was getting into today. Spending it with Leighton and the twins was not on my bingo card, nor was being woken up at the ass crack of dawn to fix my best friend's tractor, but life is funny like that. It gives you things you don't know you need at the exact moment you do.

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LEIGHTON

Dixon and I manage to get the twins down in the bassinets without waking them. I motion for him to follow me into the kitchen, where there are bottles all over the counter, and the nonperishable groceries I brought but haven't put away yet.

"Put me to work," he says, pulling his hoodie over his head and tossing it over the back of the stool. His T-shirt rides up where his jeans hang low on his hips, exposing a strip of warm, tan skin and the hard lines of his stomach.

My breath catches for half a second before I force myself to look away. Which is ridiculous. This is Dixon. Steady, always around, sister- and brothers-in-law's best friend, my friend, Dixon. He's handsome, and sure, sexy, but he's Dixon. I'm not supposed to notice those things. Shaking out of my thoughts, I realize he's waiting for a reply.

"You can start by sterilizing bottles," I say, trying for casual while my pulse stumbles awkwardly in my chest. "There are a lot of them," I say, looking at the sink and the counter cluttered with now-empty baby bottles.

He grins, slow and crooked. "High stakes."

That grin has my body warming in ways it shouldn’t. Not where this man is concerned.

Shut it down, Leighton. Shut that shit down now. He’s your friend. A good, close family friend.

The kitchen light casts a soft golden glow over him as he moves beside me. His forearms flex while he gathers bottles from the counter.

What is going on with me? Why am I noticing these things about him now? Today of all days. Why is everything he does suddenly magnified and turning me on? Has it been that long since I’ve spent one-on-one time with a man?

Maybe Courtlynn is right—I do need to get out there and date more.

“More like high volume,” I tease.

“I’m glad we convinced them to let us help, and I’m glad you offered to save me. I would have done it on my own, because that’s what they needed, but I’m glad I’m not. Two at once is a lot.”

“Yeah, but that’s just because they’re little. As they get older and grow more independent, I imagine it will be easier. They’re always going to have a playmate their own age, be into the same things at the same time.”

“Never really thought of it like that. My mind went to two cars, two college educations, two of everything for the rest of forever. At the same time. Not staggered.”

“True.” I laugh. “But Bay and Mac have something a lot of other parents of multiples don’t have.”

“What’s that?” Dixon asks.

“Us. A massive support system.”

“Glass half full today, are we?” He smiles, bumping his shoulder into mine.

“Yeah, I guess I am.” I offer him a smile and get to work cleaning up the kitchen, loading the dishwasher, putting things away, and wiping off counters. We finish at the same time, and dive right into making meals.

“You’re better in the kitchen than you let on,” I tell Dixon. I’ve lost track of time as we’ve been cooking and cleaning as we go.

“I do all right. It always tastes better when someone else makes it, though.”

“It really does,” I agree. “Okay, we have four freezer meals prepped: lasagna, chicken and rice, taco meat, and pulled chicken. Today’s chili is in the Crock-Pot, and it smells wonderful. Thank you for all your help.”

“You bailed me out, remember.” He grins just as a baby starts to fuss. “I’m on it.” He tosses the dishtowel that was slung over his shoulder onto the now-clean counter and moves toward the living room. I hear another cry join in, which means he’s going to need backup.

Turning the light off over the sink, I follow after him. I don’t want Baylor and Macklin to wake up yet. They need the rest. When I step into the living room, his back is to me, but I can tell from the blankets that he has a baby in each arm. When he turns to face me, there’s panic, and if I’m not mistaken, a little humor in his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I raise a brow because I can’t decipher for sure the look he’s giving me.

“Two babies. Two overly full diapers, and me.” He nods to his chest, and I still don’t see what he’s talking about.

“Are you hurt?”

He tosses his head back in laughter. “Sure, if picking up a baby, and having the overfull diaper leak all over my hand, only for the other one to cry, so I lift him up, and the same thing happens. Lei, I’m covered in piss.”

His words register, and that’s when I see it. The white T-shirt he’s wearing is more translucent and clings to his abs. I slap my hand over my mouth to keep from laughing. He narrows his eyes at me, almost as if he’s angry, but he can’t hold on to the look for long before his lips tug up in a smile.

“That’s what Uncle Dix gets for being so confident, huh?” he asks the twins, and something in the way he smiles down at them melts my heart.

“Okay, well, baths are in order, with fresh clothes. You ready for this, partner?”

“For you to give me a bath?” he asks. There’s a wicked gleam in his eyes, and I freeze. Is Dixon Turner flirting with me?

“T-The babies,” I answer with a sputter.

“Oh, I see how it is. I take one for the team, get double-soaked in piss, and you refuse to help me. I’ll remember this day, Leighton Moran,” he teases.

“Here, give me a baby.”

“I’ve got them. There’s no use in both of us getting covered in piss. Tell me what you need me to do.”

“Well, since the bathrooms—other than the half bath—are upstairs, we’re going to bathe them in the kitchen sink.”

His mouth falls open in shock. “Can we do that?”

I smile at him. “We can. I’m going to quietly run upstairs and get what we need, and I’ll be right back. Are you sure you’re okay with them?” I raise a brow.

“Yep, we’re just going to stand here and marinate while you get what we need.”

I wrinkle my nose, and he chuckles. “We’re fine, Lei. I’ll meet you in the kitchen.” He smiles down at the babies in his arms. “Uncle Dix and Aunt Lei are going to get you all cleaned up,” he tells them as he takes slow, cautious steps to the kitchen. “It’s a good thing we got it all clean. We would have had to move all your bottles to make this happen,” I hear him tell them as I make my way upstairs as quietly as I can to grab the baby bathtub, some towels, and bath supplies. I then slip into their room for some clean clothes. I manage to make it downstairs without dropping anything or waking my sister and her husband.

Stepping into the kitchen, I smile when I see Dixon murmuring softly to the twins. “Aunt Lei is saving us. She’s our hero today,” he says. When he turns from his pacing, he spots me. “There she is, twinnies,” he says softly.

“Twinnies?”

“Yeah, it’s easier than saying both of their names, and it has a nice ring to it.” He gives me a boyish grin, and I can’t help but offer him a smile of my own.

“Okay, Operation Bathe the Twinnies is underway.” I chuckle as I start setting everything up. “I’ll bathe one, and then we can switch off. Once they’re cleaned up, we’ll feed them. Let’s hope they can hold off that long, because when they’re pissed off and hungry, that cry will most definitely wake their parents.”

“Maybe we should feed them first.” Dixon frowns. “I don’t want to starve them.”

I smile again, because this man, he’s such a softie. “They’ll be just fine.”

“How are you so confident with all of this?” he asks.

“I helped a lot when Lainey was smaller, and I babysat a lot growing up.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re here,” he says, relief evident in his tone.

“All right, who’s soiled the worst?” I turn to take a baby.

“Equal opportunity disaster over here, Lei. All three of us are covered in piss. Just pick one,” he says, smiling.

I snort and reach for Waylon when he starts squirming in Dixon’s arm. The second I take him, Dixon adjusts Hadley against his chest without a second thought, completely unconcerned that they’re both soaked in urine.

“You’re next, sweet girl,” he murmurs, brushing his knuckle against Hadley’s cheek. His voice drops into something softer, gentler. “Then we’ll get your belly full, and you and your brother, Aunt Leighton, and I can hang out until Mommy and Daddy wake up.”

Something in me absolutely caves.

I don’t know how else to describe it. It’s like my insides turn warm and liquid all at once. My chest tightens while my stomach flips, and suddenly, I can’t look at him too long without feeling completely exposed.

Why am I feeling this way around him all of a sudden?

Seeing Dixon in a kitchen we just cleaned together, holding my niece like she’s the most precious thing in the world, does something dangerous to me. I force myself to look away before he notices.

It’s just Dixon.

“Okay, mister,” I murmur to Waylon, carrying him toward the sink. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

The kitchen sink is already filled with warm water, and water splashes softly around us under the dim light over the stove. I strip Waylon out of his soaked onesie while he fusses unhappily, his tiny face scrunching up.

“Aww, little man, it’s okay,” Dixon says quietly from behind me. From the sound of it, he’s close. I glance over my shoulder to find him standing right at my back, Hadley tucked securely against his chest, while he watches me with an expression so unbearably tender it makes my pulse stutter.

“His little lip is quivering,” he says with a small smile.

“It’s warm,” I assure Waylon as I test the water with my wrist one more time. “Not too warm, though. We don’t want to burn you, buddy.”

Dixon murmurs his agreement. “I promise, your aunt knows what she’s doing,” he tells him.

“Of course, I do,” I say, as if Waylon understands every word we’re saying. I ease Waylon into the water slowly, supporting his tiny body as he lets out an offended little cry while settling into the bathtub seat. The seat fits perfectly in my sister’s farmhouse sink.

“Oh, I know,” I soothe. “I know, sweetheart. Mean old auntie making you take a bath.” His cry tapers into a pitiful sniffle, his tiny bottom lip

trembling exactly the way Dixon said it was.

And then, without warning, Waylon pees.

A sharp stream shoots straight out of the sink and across the counter.

I yelp. “Oh, no!”

Dixon bursts out laughing behind me as I blindly grab the nearest dishtowel and throw it up like a shield.

“Holy shit, he’s got range!” Dixon laughs. Hadley grunts with a startle, I’m sure, at the shouting.

I’m cursing myself. I hope I didn’t wake Baylor and Macklin.

“I tried to warn you,” Dixon says through a grin.

“You absolutely did not warn me about projectile fire!” I whisper-hiss, still holding the dishtowel in the air, just in case there’s residual fire aiming at the counter. I’m laughing now, too.

“Buddy,” Dixon says, shaking his head at the baby like he’s personally betrayed him. “You can’t attack your aunt. She’s helping you. You won’t attract the ladies smelling like pee,” he tells him.

Waylon blinks up at me with wide, innocent eyes, and I smile down at him. “You’re lucky you’re cute.”

“At least you’re not wearing it. He missed you,” Dixon says, nodding to his wet T-shirt.

I giggle. “Good point, but we’re going to have to triple sanitize this counter after bath time.”

Dixon steps closer beside me, shoulder brushing mine. He smiles down at Waylon, Hadley still resting against his chest. The contact is brief and barely there, but my entire body notices.

Every single nerve ending.

“Okay, bud, time to get you cleaned up.” I dump some baby body wash onto the small washcloth and begin his bath. My movements are quick but gentle, because we don’t need any more accidents.

“You’re good with them,” Dixon says quietly.

I glance up and see nothing but honesty in his gaze. My chest tightens, and the attraction I've been feeling all day is back with a vengeance. The polite thing to do would be to ignore my racing heart and my attraction to him and say thank you. Besides, he's great with them, too. I open my mouth to tell him that, but before I can form the words, Hadley spits up, and it goes directly down the front of Dixon's already-soiled shirt.

Dixon freezes, his mouth falling open in disbelief.

I try hard to reel it in, but I choke on a laugh. Because what else could go wrong in this babysitting adventure?

Slowly, his head falls as he looks down at himself, then over at me with pure betrayal in his eyes.

I lose all control of my laughter. My hands grip the sink, while Waylon peers up at me like I've lost my damn mind.

"Lei," Dixon breathes. "I—I need a towel." I reach over to the one lying on the island, soaked with pee, and hold it up. "No," he growls, and I laugh harder.

It takes me a few seconds to get myself under control. "I was only teasing," I say, pulling open the drawer and grabbing a clean towel. I toss it to him, then hurry to finish Waylon's bath. I lift him out of the tub that's in the sink, quickly wrap him in his baby hooded towel, and turn to face Dixon.

Big mistake.

Huge mistake.

Dixon is leaning against the island, his shirt discarded, and baby Hadley is now nestled against his bare chest. "It was pointless," he says, smiling down at Hadley. "These two did a number on Uncle Dix today, huh?" He lifts his eyes to mine.

I swallow hard.

"They have," I say slowly, and nod as well, because I'm not sure my words come out or if I'm just thinking them. Dixon is scrambling my brain

today.

“Well, I’m safe now. Let’s switch,” he suggests.

Again, I nod and take the few strides to stand before him. He takes Waylon before transferring Hadley into my arms. “Let’s get you cleaned up,” I whisper to my niece, turning back around and starting fresh bath water. I’m sure it would have been fine to keep the same water, but I need something to keep me busy.

I feel heat behind me, and then Dixon’s arm shoots around me to grab the container of formula. “I’m going to go ahead and feed him.”

“Good idea,” I murmur and get to work on Hadley’s bath. Thankfully, there’s no mishap, and fifteen minutes later, she’s smelling fresh as a daisy while she sucks down her bottle.

“I understand why they’re exhausted,” Dixon says. “Two babies are a lot.”

“More to love,” I coo down at Hadley.

He chuckles as his phone rings. He reaches around him and pulls it out of his pocket, checking the screen. “It’s the realtor.”

“Answer it.”

He nods, swipes at the screen, and places the phone next to his ear. “Hello?”

I watch him intently, trying to see if I can tell what kind of news he’s getting, but he’s giving nothing away.

“Thank you for letting me know. I’ll be in touch soon,” he says, ending the call and placing his phone on the couch next to him.

“Well?” I ask. I’m being nosy, but the suspense is killing me.

“They accepted my offer.”

“Dixon! That’s amazing. I’m so excited for you.”

He nods. “Thanks, Leighton.”

“Why are you not smiling and cheering and bouncing off the walls with excitement? Do you not want this?”

“I want it,” he says, his voice gruff. “I’m also scared out of my mind,” he says, huffing out a breath. “I don’t know how to do all of this, Lei. I have so much to do. It’s overwhelming.”

I can hear the panic and the stress in his voice.

“I’ll help you. We’ll all help you. That’s what friends are for.”

He glances down at Waylon and then lifts his head, his eyes finding mine. “Do you really think I can do it?” he asks. There’s vulnerability in his voice. It has me wanting to wrap my arms around him and tell him everything is going to be okay.

My smile is genuine. “I know you can, Dix. You’re already doing the work. On the business side, we’ll all help you get up and running, and you’ll hire someone to do the things you don’t enjoy. That way you can focus on doing what you love—turning wrenches.”

“I need a business name, a logo, a website, branding, employees, and the place needs work. That’s just the short list that I got from the internet.”

“Dixon.” I wait for him to take a deep breath. “You’ve got this,” I assure him. “This is a new adventure, and it’s huge and scary, but you can do it. I know you can.”

He nods, swallows hard, and peers down at Waylon in his arms. “You hear that, little man? Aunt Leighton thinks I’m going to be just fine.”

“Where in the hell is your shirt?” Macklin’s sleep-laced voice asks, and he and Baylor enter the living room. Macklin sits down on the love seat and pulls Baylor onto his lap.

“Oh, today has been an adventure,” I tell them, before sharing a smile with Dixon. We both launch into how the day went, filling in places where the other leaves off, and by the time we’re finished, we’re all laughing. Dixon goes on to tell them that his offer was accepted. Just as I did, my sister and Macklin offer to help in any way that they can.

“You just raise these babies,” he tells him. “You all have your hands full. Leighton and I got a taste of that today.”

Macklin chuckles. “It won’t be like this forever,” he tells his friend. “Besides, my parents would be thrilled to watch them for a few hours so we could help you.”

“Yet, you don’t ask them to watch them to help yourselves?” Dixon says.

“Touché, my friend, touché.” Macklin chuckles. “We’ll do better. I feel human again, so thank you both for helping out today.”

“You’re welcome,” Dixon and I say at the same time.

“It was our pleasure. Anytime.”

“But maybe call us together,” Dixon adds, chuckling. “At least until they get a little older.”

“You scared, Turner?”

“Not scared. More cautious,” Dixon says, making us all laugh.

Dixon and I end up staying for dinner, letting Baylor and Macklin eat first. By the time I make it home, it’s late. Courtlynn’s car is in the driveway, and the lights are off in the house. There’s no sound coming from her room, so I take a quick shower and dive into bed.

Two babies are exhausting, but I love those little buggers with all my heart.

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DIXON

I don’t know what I expected today, but it wasn’t for my hand to shake as I signed my name on the loan papers. I masked it as best as I could when I shook the relator’s hand, but now that I’m sitting in my truck, and my copies are in a branded folder in the passenger seat, it’s settling in.

Now that I’m sitting alone in my truck, the engine roaring as it warms, it’s hitting me even harder. I glance over at the passenger seat, my eyes landing on the folder holding my copies. *Holy shit. I just bought a business.*

Not a thriving one. Not some polished, successful operation with employees waiting for me on Monday morning. No, I bought a place that’s been out of operation for over a decade. Forgotten. Shut down. Left to rot while people drove past it without a second glance.

And now it’s mine.

Talk about pressure.

I’m the one who has to bring it back to life. I have to fix it up, learn how to run the administrative side, hire a couple of employees, and somehow turn it into something that can keep the lights on and put food on the table. Not just for me, but for my future employees, too.

The weight of that sits heavily on my chest.

This is more than just pressure. This is sink or swim. I'll have people depending on me to feed themselves and their families.

Damn, what did I get myself into?

I'm equal parts nervous and excited, and I have a hell of a lot of work to get done before I can open. I also have to keep my day job, which I currently need to pay for this place until it pays for itself. There are a lot of long days and longer nights in my future.

Pulling in a deep breath, I slowly exhale and reach for my phone, which sits in the cupholder. I dial my dad, and when the phone rings through the truck's Bluetooth, my nerves ramp up.

"Hello?" Dad answers.

"Hey, old man. You feel like taking a drive?"

"Sure. Only if you feed me. It's almost dinner time," he says, laughing. "Save me from my own cooking, son. I beg you." He chuckles.

"You've got a deal. I'm on my way."

"I'll be ready," he assures me, and I end the call. Putting the truck in Reverse, I back out of the lot and head that way. I glance over at the folder in the passenger seat more times than I can count. This is real. I'm not dreaming. I'm doing this. I'm starting my own business.

I was never one with big aspirations to own my own place. I like working on tractors, grew up doing it with my dad because my grandpa's was old and worn out, but I loved it. I went to vocational school and then took a certification course after graduating from high school. It's something that I'm good at, and I enjoy it. Never in my wildest imagination did I think I'd be opening my own shop.

It's surreal.

Ten minutes later, I'm pulling into Dad's driveway. I honk the horn as the door opens, and he steps outside, making sure the door is locked before heading to the passenger side of my truck.

“Where are we headed?” he asks, as he closes the door behind him, shutting out the cold February wind.

“I have something to show you,” I tell him.

“What?”

“You’ll see when we get there.”

“I’m too old for surprises,” he grumbles good-naturedly.

“Hush it,” I tease, and we both laugh.

I didn’t tell my dad that I put an offer in on the building that used to be Flannery’s Ag Mechanic Shop. I don’t know why. I guess if the loan fell through, or if they didn’t accept my bid, I didn’t want to disappoint him. I did tell my friends, and they’ve been celebrating since I told them all the bid went through. They offered to throw me a party today, but I declined. I knew today was going to be big, and I was already nervous. I didn’t need or want the pressure of a party on top of it. I mean, nothing is set in stone until my name and theirs are signed on the dotted line.

If I’m being honest, it was more than fear. This is all too good to be true, and I didn’t want to be riddled with disappointment if, in fact, something did happen and the deal failed.

When I start to slow near the property, Dad says, “I heard this place was under contract.”

“Not anymore.”

“Who bought it?” he asks as I turn my signal on to turn into the lot.

“I did,” I say, pulling in and stopping as soon as my truck is off the road.

“Did you already hire the staff?” he asks with a chuckle, eyeing the collection of cars outside the building.

“No.” My eyes widen as I recognize every single car. “I told them no party or celebration.”

“What? Why on earth would you do that? Dixon, son, this is a big damn deal, and it’s something to be celebrated. I’m glad they didn’t listen.”

“It was their wives and their sisters, I’m sure.” I shake my head, but I’m smiling. I don’t need to look into the rearview mirror to see it. My face is sore from how wide my smile is.

“Ah, those Moran girls. There are still two left, remember. You should grab one since you’re acquiring new things,” he says, with humor in his tone, but I know my dad. He’s also serious.

“Dad, I can’t just ‘acquire’ a woman,” I grumble. Although at the mention of the Moran sisters, there’s one in particular of the two he’s referring to that comes to mind. If I’m being honest, Leighton has been on my mind a lot lately. It’s only because we’ve been spending more time together, but still. She’s the first one to pop into my head.

“No, but you sure as hell can date one. Woo her like I did your mother. Best decision I ever made,” he says.

My heart aches because my dad will never move on from my mother. That’s not a bad thing, but I hate the thought of him living alone and being by himself all the time. While I don’t want him to replace my mom, I want him to be happy and have companionship. There’s a voice in the back of my head, telling me that Dad and I are two peas in a pod, but I shove it to the back corner where it belongs.

“I just bought a business that’s going to soak up all my time, attention, and money for the next several months, if not longer. It’s safe to say I don’t have time to woo anyone. Not even you, old man,” I tease, letting off the brake and easing the truck forward.

As soon as we stop, everyone starts piling out of their vehicles, hands full. Grabbing my phone, I hop out of the truck and meet them all in front of the door. “What’s going on?” I ask, shoving my hands into my pockets to ward off the cold.

“Let us in first,” Macklin says.

I nod, pull the key out of my pocket, and unlock the door. I hold it open so that everyone can step inside, and a flurry of activity breaks loose. The

guys haul in tables and chairs, the ladies, babies, and food, while I watch it all go down.

In a matter of minutes, tables and chairs are set up, pizza boxes and bags of chips are opened, and a cooler is full of drinks.

“We know you said no celebration, but, Dix, this is a huge deal. We’re here to celebrate you,” Ellison explains.

“This is too much.”

“This is huge for you, and we wanted to be here to support you,” Baylor replies.

Leighton steps next to me, and before I know what’s happening, she’s leaning in close, sliding her arms around my waist, and popping a kiss to my cheek. “Congrats, Dixon, this place is going to be incredible,” she whispers, before stepping away.

I miss her touch instantly, and my brow furrows, because it’s Leighton. It was a simple hug. It’s not like she’s moving across the country or something. Shaking off the weird feeling, I accept hugs from the rest of the ladies and handshakes from the guys.

“Damn proud of you, son,” Dad says, his voice a little gruff from emotion.

“Speech!” Bowen calls out.

“Maybe he doesn’t want to make a speech,” Courtlynn sasses.

“Shut it, brat,” he fires back.

“Interesting,” Dad mutters, and I have to bite my tongue to keep from laughing. The hate that Courtlynn and Bowen have for one another is charged. We can all feel it. It’s only a matter of time before they figure it out. For all our sakes, I hope it’s soon. Age gap be damned, those two have some serious sparks flying between them.

“Thank you. This is unexpected, but I’m pretty damn lucky to have all of you in my corner.”

“So, you think of a name yet?” Copeland asks, using a pair of scissors, which I have no idea where he got, to cut up some pizza for Lainey, who sits beside him on her mom’s lap.

“Where did you get scissors?” I ask, instead of answering his question.

He shrugs. “I brought them from home. We use them a lot for things like this, and I figured it would be easier.” He glances over at Macklin. “Are you taking notes?”

Macklin grins. “Yep.”

“So, the name?” Courtlynn asks.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about it, and I think I want to go with Turner Diesel Mechanics. I like the idea of having our last name attached.” I glance over at Dad. “Maybe somewhere down the line, when I’m too old to run it, the name will carry on.”

“You know, most people have kids to carry on the family name,” Dad chimes in.

“Mr. Turner.” Courtlynn leans over the table and offers her hand to my dad. He slaps his palm against hers, giving her a high-five. “Nice.” Courtlynn grins.

“Don’t encourage her,” Bowen grumbles.

“So, you have a name,” Baylor says. “You’ve got the building. Now, you need a logo, a website, social media, insurance, employees, an employee handbook, and payroll…” She keeps rattling off a long-ass list, and I start to sweat just thinking about it.

Maybe this was a bad idea.

“Lei can design you a logo, website, and social media, and she did our handbook, too,” Ellison says.

My eyes fall to Leighton, who’s sitting next to me. She’s smiling and nodding, and some of the tension inside of me uncoils.

“I’m happy to help. We can meet after work or on the weekends. We’ll have you up and running in no time,” she assures me with a kind smile.

“I’ll set you up with an accounting software that also handles payroll, so you only have one system to learn, and if you hire it out, I can train them,” Baylor tells me.

“And you know that you can put us to work,” Bowen adds. “We’re going to help you get this place up and running.”

“My parents would love to come over and help with the twins,” Macklin adds.

“Mom would be thrilled to keep Lainey for a few hours.” Copeland smiles down at his daughter.

My throat feels tight as I try to swallow back the emotions of the unwavering support of my friends. They’re more than that. These people are my family. Knowing they’re in my corner no matter what is overwhelming in the best way.

I scrub a hand over my jaw and let out a quiet laugh, mostly because if I don’t, I’m pretty sure I’ll embarrass myself right here at the damn dinner table. “Careful,” I mutter, shaking my head. “You all keep talking like this, and I’m gonna start thinking that buying this place wasn’t completely insane.”

Bowen snorts. “Too late for that. Papers are signed.”

“Yeah,” Macklin adds with a grin, lifting his drink to his lips. “Now you just get to panic with company.”

A round of laughter moves through the air. It’s easy and warm, and for the first time since I signed the closing documents this morning, the crushing weight on my chest eases enough for me to breathe.

Barely.

Because the truth is, I am terrified.

Not of hard work. I know hard work. I grew up on it. Early mornings, busted knuckles, exhaustion that settles into your bones so deep you stop noticing it. I can handle all of that. But owning something? Having people depend on me? Employees. Customers. Bills. Payroll.

Failure suddenly feels a whole lot more expensive.

“You’re thinking too hard again,” Leighton says softly.

I turn to look at her, and fuck, has she always been this beautiful? Her blue eyes sparkle with quiet confidence in me, and my heart kicks up a gear. I sure hope I don’t disappoint her.

She’s smiling at me, one elbow resting near her plate, her expression calm, which weirdly settles me. The noise fades a little around the edges when she looks at me like that. Like she sees every worried thought rolling through my head, and none of it scares her away.

“I’m not thinking too hard,” I lie.

Her mouth curves. Damn that smile.

“You get this crease right here.” She points at the spot between her brows. “Means you’re spiraling.”

Everyone at the table turns to stare at me.

“Wow,” Courtlynn says. “That’s specific.” There’s humor in her tone, but I don’t pull my eyes away from Leighton. I can’t.

Heat crawls up the back of my neck.

Leighton’s eyes widen slightly, like she didn’t realize she’d said it out loud, and a faint blush colors her cheeks.

“Interesting,” Baylor muses.

“I notice things. I pay attention,” Leighton says quickly.

“Didn’t say you didn’t,” Courtlynn sasses.

“You implied it,” Bowen accuses.

“I did not. I was just stating an observation. Butt out, barkeep,” Courtlynn spits.

Everyone laughs, the sound breaking through the pounding of my heart. I’m surprised I can hear the sound with the way blood is whooshing through my ears.

Because Leighton noticed something about me.

I’m spiraling, having an out-of-body experience. It’s the stress. I suddenly have a debt hanging over my head and a lot of responsibility sitting on my shoulders. That’s why her noticing unravels something inside me. It was a small thing, something nobody else caught. That’s why, right?

It shouldn’t matter that she noticed a worry line between my brows, but fuck me, it does. I lean back in my chair, trying to look unaffected, while my heart kicks hard against my ribs.

“Well,” I say slowly, forcing my attention back to the group, “I appreciate all of you. Seriously. I know I’m walking into this blind. I know how to do the job—the diesel mechanic side—but the rest, I’m basically tossing spaghetti at the wall to see if it will stick.”

“You’re not blind,” Baylor corrects. “Inexperienced, maybe. But not blind.”

“You know the business,” Bowen adds. “That’s the important part.”

“And everything else?” Copeland shrugs. “You learn.”

I nod, but my eyes drift back to Leighton again without permission. She catches me looking and doesn’t glance away. Her eyes are saying *you’ve got this*, and why, all of a sudden, do I believe her? The look she’s giving me… Fuck me, it makes me want to succeed that much more just to see that approving smile light up her face.

What the hell is happening to me?

Thoughts like that are dangerous. My eyes find Courtlynn, and she smiles, but turns back to her conversation with Baylor. I wait for something to spark, some sort of lust or appreciation, but it never comes. Nothing. My heart doesn’t even seem to care that I’m looking at a beautiful woman, but when I turn back to Leighton, that rapid pulse beats yet again. Courtlynn is like a little sister to me, whereas Leighton, well, she’s not at all like a little sister to me. Not anymore.

I’ve spent a long time keeping my distance from anything that could touch my heart. My life has always been work first, my friends, Dad, and

everything else somewhere far below that. I've never felt… whatever this is before, and I can't say that I'm a fan. This is Leighton. Our lives are so tangled with her sisters, my best friends, and hell, even our friendship. This has to be stress, but yet, when I look at her younger sister, I feel nothing.

Fuck.

"So," Macklin says, leaning forward with a smirk that means he's about to become a problem, "what are we doing first?"

"I have no idea where to start," I confess.

"Make a list," Bowen says. "We'll work through it until it's all done, and you open your doors for business."

"If Bowen can manage not to run his bar into the ground, I know you'll succeed," Courtlynn says sweetly.

"Brat," Bowen mutters.

"I know. You all are killing it. The bar, the manor, the horse rentals, the farrier business… I'm surrounded by people who are doing the damn thing, and I'm so grateful to have all of you in my corner. I absolutely could not do this without you."

"We know," Baylor says, winking at me.

"Bay!" Ellison laughs.

"What? The man speaks the truth." Baylor shrugs, but the smile on her face tells me she's teasing and trying to ease some of my worry. It's working.

"Thank you," I say. "I'm glad you're all here."

"Me, too," my dad speaks up. "Once he gets this place opened, you can help me find him a nice woman to settle down with and have me some grandbabies."

Leighton laughs softly, and the sound hits me square in the chest. I don't dare turn to look at her. I don't know what this is, but fuck me, I don't want to risk anyone else noticing either. Especially Leighton.

"I have two we can loan you," Macklin tells him.

“We’ve got one, too,” Copeland adds.

“I’ll gladly spoil all three of them rotten, but this one”—Dad points an index finger at me—“he needs a good woman in his life. Help me out here,” he tells my friends.

“Mr. Turner, there is nothing wrong with staying single,” Bowen comes to my defense.

“Yeah,” Macklin agrees. “But,” he says, drawing out the word, “nothing is better than having someone you love to come home to.”

“What he said.” Copeland nods his agreement.

“Hear, hear,” Dad says, holding his can of Dr Pepper in the air as if he’s toasting their words.

My mind instantly goes to Leighton, but I shut it down. At least, I try to, but she’s right next to me, and without conscious thought, I turn to look at her. She smiles and leans her shoulder into mine, and that simple touch sets me on fire.

Well, fuck.

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LEIGHTON

It’s a cold, snowy Saturday afternoon. I’m curled up on the couch with my laptop and a cup of hot chocolate that’s probably now cold, because I can’t seem to get this right. I’ve been working on a logo for Dixon all week, and there’s just something I don’t love, but I can’t put my finger on it.

The cursor blinks at me from the middle of the screen like it’s judging every bad decision I’ve made in the last three hours.

“You’ve been staring at that same screen for, like, an hour,” Courtlynn says from the kitchen.

I glance up. My younger sister is leaning against the counter in fuzzy socks and an old hoodie, eating whipped cream straight from the can like it’s a completely normal life choice.

“I have not.” I totally have, and we both know it.

“Mm-hmm.” She tilts the can toward me. “Looks great to me.”

I huff out a laugh despite myself and scrub a hand over my face. Outside, snow falls in thick, lazy sheets, coating the street in white. The world looks soft and quiet. Inside, the furnace hums while some old country song plays low through the speaker on the bookshelf.

I should be relaxed. Cozy, even. Instead, my stomach knots every time I look at Dixon's name across the top of the design file.

Turner's Diesel Mechanics.

The man repairs everything from tractors to combines to diesel trucks for a living, and I can't seem to do my damn job and design him the perfect logo. His job is obviously way more complicated, and I… well, I can't seem to get it right.

"You know," Courtlynn says casually, "most people would just ask the client what they think."

"I know what he'll think." He'll say it's perfect and roll with it. He won't want to hurt my feelings, but there's something off about it. It's not there yet.

She arches an eyebrow. "That you're talented and pretty?" She smiles sweetly.

Heat creeps into my cheeks immediately. "Court."

"What?" She grins, completely unapologetic. "The man looks at you like you're his next meal. That's new, by the way. Is there something you're not telling me?"

"He absolutely does not. And no, there's nothing to tell. We watched the twins together, and I'm helping him out with this." I point at the computer in my lap.

"Uh-huh," she says. "I'm not blind. We all saw it."

"You're imagining things that aren't there." He wasn't looking at me with want. He was just thankful for the help. I know how overwhelming this is for him. As for me, well, I can't help but notice him. I mean, let's be honest, I've always noticed him, but this is… different. Not that I would ever act on it, but still. It's totally one-sided.

My side.

No way is he feeling whatever this is, too.

I try to focus on the screen again, but now, all I can picture is Dixon sitting next to me, his eyes holding mine. I'll admit the look he gave me was intense, but he's stressed and has a lot going on. He was probably just staring, lost in thought, and it had nothing to do with me.

It took effort to pretend like I didn't notice how good he smelled, and I'm certain my cheeks turned pink every time he looked at me, but I acted as if nothing was amiss.

"Maybe that's why you can't finish it," Courtlynn says softly.

I blink. "What?"

"You care too much." She shrugs.

I look back down at the logo. Clean lines. Crisp font. Technically, it's good work.

But it doesn't feel like him.

Dixon is warm smiles and rough hands. He's laid-back and even a little reserved at times. He's dependable in a way that makes my chest ache a little. He's the kind of man who offers to keep his friends' newborn twins so they can get some sleep, when the thought of keeping them on his own scares the hell out of him.

My fingers hover over the trackpad, staring at the screen, and it finally hits me. I know what's wrong. "It's too polished," I whisper to myself.

Courtlynn snorts. "You say that like it's an insult."

"No, I mean…" I sit up straighter, my pulse quickening as ideas finally begin clicking into place. "His work isn't polished in a corporate way. It's blue collar. Strong. Simple. Rustic."

I quickly delete the sleek, modern font and replace it with something a little more edgy. Something with character. My mind races as it all comes together in my mind, and fifteen minutes later, I love it. Warmth blooms in my chest because this logo, this is Dixon.

Courtlynn walks over behind the couch, peering at the laptop. "Oh," she says immediately. "That's very him."

I smile before I can stop myself.

And right then, as if summoned by the universe itself, my phone buzzes where it's sitting on the arm of the couch.

Dixon.

Just his name lighting up my screen is enough to make my stomach flip stupidly. I have to stop this. This is Dixon. *Our* Dixon. There will be no stomach flipping, no pining, just working together. Helping out a friend.

Courtlynn sees it and gasps like she's witnessing a celebrity sighting. "Speak of the diesel-mechanic devil." She chuckles.

I throw a pillow at her face before grabbing my phone. I told him I was working on the logo today. I'm sure he's just checking in.

And still, my thumb hesitates over the message.

Dixon: How's my favorite designer doing? Still alive over there?

A laugh slips out of me as another message appears.

Dixon: Thought I'd bring dinner by if you two haven't eaten yet.

Dixon: As a thank-you. I know you've been working on this all day.

I stare at the screen for entirely too long.

Courtlynn chuckles. “It’s Dixon, Lei. Whatever is or isn’t”—she holds her hands in the air, palms out as if to keep me from coming at her—“going on, you should say yes. I’m heading out. Lorna and I are helping her sister, Millie, with wedding shower favors. I’ll probably just stay at Lorna’s. You know, give you lovebirds the house all to yourselves.” She snickers.

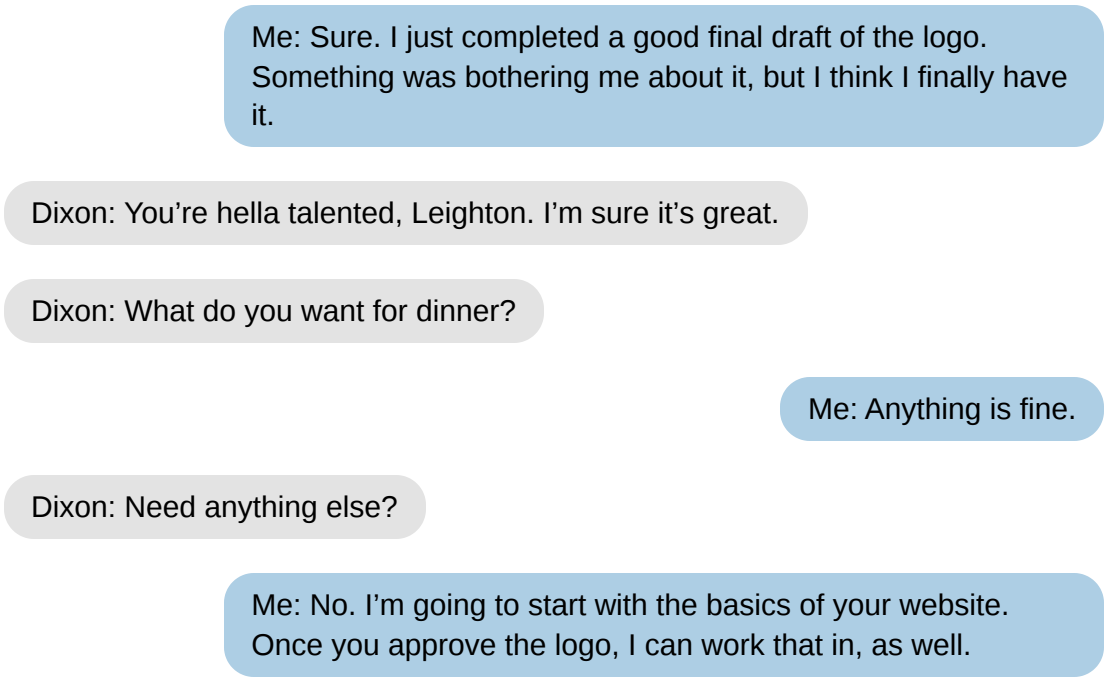
I reach for something to toss at her, but the pillow is all the way on the other side of the couch, and I don’t want to risk my laptop for revenge. “Stop,” I whine. “It’s nothing, Court.”

“Okay.” She nods. “It’s nothing. But, if it were to turn into something…” she says, smirking.

“Go.” I laugh at her antics.

“Have a good night. Please do everything I would do,” she says, her voice disappearing with her upstairs.

That’s the thing about Courtlynn. She talks a good game, but she’s not one to sleep around. None of us are, but she sure does like to give us all hell. I guess that’s what little sisters are for.



Dixon: Just relax for the rest of the night. You've done enough today.

Me: Oh, no, Mr. Turner. We're going to have you up and running in no time. See you soon. Be safe.

I place my phone back on the arm of the couch, set my laptop aside, toss the throw blanket off my lap, and dash up to my room to make myself look less of a snowy-Saturday-afternoon mess.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm back downstairs. My teeth have been brushed, my hair is combed, and I'm burrowing back under the blanket on the couch. Thankfully, Courtlynn is already gone, so she can't give me a hard time about freshening up. It has nothing to do with Dixon coming over. I was a hot mess and would have done the same for anyone.

There's a knock at the door, and I call out, "Come in." I hear the door open, boots stomping on the rug, and then there he is. Dixon is standing with two pizza boxes in his hands, scowling. "What's wrong?"

"You didn't even know it was me."

"What?"

"The door, Lei. You can't just call 'come in.' You live here alone with Court. You have to be more careful."

I smile. "Dixon, this is Magnolia Ridge. We're fine."

"You have strangers staying at the manor. I could have been anyone. You need to keep your door locked, and don't just call 'come in.'" His tone is stern, but not harsh, and his concern has my belly doing flips.

“Okay,” I agree easily. One, because he’s not wrong—we should be more careful—and two, it’s what he needs to hear. He’s stressed about this new adventure he’s going on. I know he’s not mad at me; he’s just being cautious. And that he cares and worries for me just makes those butterflies in my belly flap their wings a little harder.

“Thank you.” He nods, stepping further into the room. I notice he’s taken his boots and his coat off. “Pizza. I figured it was easy. I also got the cinnamon dessert pizza.”

“I love that stuff. It’s so addicting.”

“Agreed. Do you want to eat in here or…?” His voice trails off.

Setting my laptop aside, I toss off the cover and stand. “In here is fine. Let me grab some plates and napkins. What do you want to drink?” I rattle off our options, and once he’s told me what he wants, I make my way to the kitchen to grab what we need.

When I make it back to the living room, arms full, it’s to find Dixon sitting on the floor, with his back against the couch, the coffee table pulled close, pizza boxes open and ready, and my laptop in his hands.

“Leighton,” he says, glancing up at me. “This is unbelievable.”

“I can make any changes you want,” I tell him, setting everything on the table and taking a seat next to him on the floor. I lean over to look at the screen with him.

“Changes? No. I don’t want any changes. This is it. I can see this hung on the building, the business cards, all of it. It’s perfect, Leighton. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you like it.” Relief washes over me. “I love this version,” I admit. “The one I had before this wasn’t right, but this one, well, it feels like you.”

He nods, his eyes still glued to the computer screen. “Thank you,” he says again.

“Here.” I hand him a plate, and he places my laptop on the floor next to him and takes it. However, he also reaches for mine, adds two slices, then hands it back to me and grabs two slices for himself.

“What now?” he asks.

“Well, now that I have your logo finalized, I’ll add that to your website. We’ll get some business cards ordered, and I’ll send you all the files you’ll need to send to the sign company.”

“This is really happening.”

“It is, and it’s going to be amazing.”

“There’s so much to do. I’ve started making a list, but it’s overwhelming.”

“We’ll go over your list, and I’ll see what I can do to take some of the burden off you.”

“You don’t have to—” he starts, but I stop him, placing my hand on his arm.

“I want to help you, Dixon. We all do. Just take the help. That’s what friends are for.” I smile, and he swallows hard. The movement drags my attention straight to his throat, to the tense flex of his jaw right after, and heat curls low in my stomach before I can stop it. It’s such a small reaction, but I’m suddenly hyperaware of how close we’re sitting, and of how attractive he looks when he’s trying so hard to keep himself composed.

For a second, neither of us says anything. My hand is still resting on his arm, and I become painfully aware of it all at once. The solid warmth of him beneath my palm, the way his muscles tense like he’s resisting the urge to lean into the touch.

His eyes lift to mine, softer than they were a moment ago. Vulnerable, almost. And I have this urge to lean in and kiss him, which freaks me the hell out. I don’t kiss my friends.

“Yeah,” he says quietly. “Okay.”

The word comes out rough around the edges, and my pulse stutters for no good reason. I force myself to pull my hand back before I do something embarrassing, like lean in and press my lips to his. That's not me. I'm not the forward Moran sister. That's Baylor and Courtlynn. But the second the contact breaks, I miss it. Which is dangerous.

"I mean it," I say, aiming for lighthearted and only mostly succeeding. "You don't have to do everything yourself."

A faint smile pulls at his mouth. "You saying I'm stubborn?"

"I'm saying you should let us help you. It's not like it's an imposition. It's quiet around here now that Ellison and Baylor have moved out. It's just me and Court, and tonight, she's busy, so I'm helping you. You bringing dinner keeps me from spending the night all alone."

He shakes his head as he looks down at the list he's pulled up on his phone. "I just… don't know how to let people do things for me sometimes."

"Well," I say softly, leaning my shoulder into his, "you're gonna have to learn."

His gaze flicks back to mine, and the look in his eyes makes the air between us feel thicker, charged in a way that screams I need to put some space between us. Which is exactly what I do, as I pull away from him.

"I mean, I guess I can get used to spending time with you," he teases.

"Hey! I'm a delight," I counter, and he chuckles.

"I know you are, Lei."

The way he says it, his voice low and certain, sends warmth spreading through me. I busy myself with reaching for another slice of pizza, pretending that my body isn't betraying me. The cardboard box sits open between us on the coffee table, already half-demolished, with grease staining its bottom. Beside it, the cinnamon dessert pizza is untouched, the icing already starting to melt into the warm crust.

Dixon glances at my laptop. "So. Website."

“Right.” I clear my throat, dragging my thoughts out of dangerous territory. “Business. Professional things. Definitely what we should focus on.”

His mouth twitches like he knows exactly where my brain has wandered. “Probably safer.”

Heat climbs into my cheeks. Did I really just say that out loud?

Get a grip, Leighton!

I grab a napkin and throw it at him. He catches it easily, grinning now, and damn, that smile should honestly come with a warning label.

“Okay,” I say, scooting closer as he makes room for my laptop in between the pizza boxes. “Tell me what you want people to see when they pull up the homepage.”

He leans in, too, our shoulders brushing immediately. Neither of us moves away this time.

“I don’t know,” he admits. “Something simple. Clean. I’m not good at all this”—he gestures vaguely toward the screen—“design stuff.”

“That’s why you have me.”

His eyes flick to mine for half a second before he looks back at the computer. “Yeah,” he murmurs. “Guess I do.”

My stomach does a stupid little flip, but I ignore it. I click through a few template options. “Okay, so definitely dark colors. Black, charcoal, maybe some steel-blue accents. Very rugged. Very diesel-mechanic chic.”

He snorts. “Diesel-mechanic chic?”

“It’s a thing,” I tease.

“It absolutely is not.”

“It is now.” I point at the screen. “Look at this one. Bold lettering. Big photo banner. Very masculine. Very capable.”

“Very expensive-looking.”

“That, too.” I grin. “People trust expensive-looking websites.”

He studies the screen, one arm stretched across the back of the couch behind me. Not touching me but close enough that I can feel the heat of him there. “I like it.”

“Yeah?”

He glances over at me and nods. “Gives off the manly mechanic vibes.”

“Hold up. Women need diesel mechanics, too.”

He chuckles, the sound spreading heat to my core. It’s deep and so damn sexy. “You’re right, but I don’t need a girly, chic website.”

Forcing my eyes back to the screen, I click into the template before I can stare at him too long. “Agreed. As long as you are aware that women need your services, too.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says, his mouth tilting in a smile.

“Okay.” I turn back to the screen because I can’t stop looking at him when he’s this close. I rattle off everything we’re going to need. “Homepage, services page, contact form. Oh, an online payment page. How do you feel about a newsletter?”

“You make this sound easy.”

“It is easy.” I pause. “Well. For me.”

He huffs out a laugh and reaches for another slice of pizza. “Showoff.”

“Please. You haven’t even seen my color palette skills yet.”

“I’m terrified.” He grins.

“You should be,” I say, my tone light.

He shakes his head, smiling to himself as he takes a bite, and I catch myself watching him again. The scruff along his jaw. The way his forearm flexes when he reaches for his drink. The relaxed look on his face that’s slowly replacing the tension he walked in here carrying.

It hits me suddenly that this—pizza boxes on the table, my socked feet tucked under my legs, Dixon beside me, laughing quietly while we build his future—is dangerously close to domestic.

And the scary part?

I think I could get used to it.

“Hey,” he says, nudging my knee lightly with his. “You still with me?”

Barely, I almost say. Instead, I force a smile. “Yeah. Sorry. I was thinking.”

“That’s always dangerous.”

“You’re hilarious.”

“I’ve been told.”

“By who?”

“Lainey,” he says deadpan.

I laugh before I can stop myself, and his expression softens as if he likes hearing the sound. Then he reaches into the dessert pizza box, pulls off one of the cinnamon squares, and holds it out toward me.

“Peace offering,” he says solemnly. “Since apparently I’m not funny.”

“You’re a little funny.”

“A little?”

I lean forward and take a bite directly from the piece in his hand before I realize what I’m doing. The second I do, both of us go still. His eyes lock on mine. My lips are barely an inch from his fingers, cinnamon and sugar melting on my tongue, and suddenly, the room feels way too quiet. Way too warm.

Dixon swallows hard again.

And this time, I know for a fact I’m not imagining what it does to me. “Sorry,” I mumble, pulling back and placing my hand over my mouth while I chew. “It looked so good, I couldn’t wait,” I tell him, grabbing my plate and holding it out for him.

He drops the piece that I just took a bite out of onto my plate, and I just about choke on the mouthful I have yet to swallow when his eyes lock with mine, and he places his fingers into his mouth to lick them clean.

“Let’s do this,” I mumble, my gaze locking on the screen, refusing to look at him. My cheeks are heated, and I’m sure my complexion is giving

me away with a blush, but damn, that was hot. Why was that so hot?

Why am I lusting after Dixon?

I need to keep my head in the game and focus on what I can control. Stop flirting and seeing things that are not there, and just do what I told him I would do. Help him. I can replay this night and second-guess every word, every touch, later. Right now, I have to remain focused.

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DIXON

I stare at Bowen, who's sitting across from me, trying to get a read on him. It's poker night, and we're at his place this time. He smirks, and I'm pretty sure he's bluffing. Fuck it. "I call," I say, counting out my chips and tossing them into the pot.

He nods and flips his cards over. "Full house," he says smugly.

I don't even bother to hide my grin. "That's great, bud, but I win," I say, flipping over my cards to show I have four of a kind.

"Well, damn." Bowen laughs as I start to rake my chips and add them to my stacks.

"How's the shop coming along?" Copeland asks.

"Good." I pick up my beer and take a sip. "Leighton designed a kick-ass logo. I've got a few companies I'm waiting on to give me quotes for signage."

"I saw it." Macklin nods. "It's sick."

Reaching for my phone on the table, I pull up the logo and pass it to Bowen. Copeland leans over to look from his seat next to him.

“Damn, Dix, that’s you. She killed it.” Bowen nods, handing the phone to Copeland so that he can get a better look.

“She did.” I nod. “She’s been working on my website. It’s pretty much done, but I need to add hours, services, phone number, all things I don’t have definite answers for yet, so we’re in limbo. She also wants to add a frequently asked questions section. I’ve been trying to think of things that I get asked a lot. She’s going to help me come up with answers that aren’t ‘mechanic speak.’ Her words, not mine.” I chuckle.

“What’s next?” Macklin asks.

I rattle off the items on my list that are at the front of my mind. “I have a company coming to epoxy the floor. It’s expensive, but it’s easy to clean and looks better after an oil or grease spill. After that, I’ll work on patching up the walls in the office, some paint, a new desk, and mostly cosmetic stuff. I’ll start moving my tools over, and I’ve ordered a four-post lift.”

“Sounds like you have a good handle on things. What can we do?” Copeland asks.

“I’ll need some help with the toolboxes and larger items like the air compressor, moving them from my shop at the house to the new shop once it’s ready.” I run my fingers through my hair. “It’s a much larger space, so my small collection won’t be much.”

“You’ll acquire more as you go. It might be ‘Oh, this job needs this tool that I don’t have,’ and you buy it. You can make sure you account for some of that cost on the customer’s bill. You’re the only show in town, and I hear Miller is not impressed that you’re leaving,” Bowen says.

“Yeah, he was short when I told him what I was doing. I get it. It’s shitty to do it in the same town, but his focus has always been gas cars and trucks, not heavy equipment. He only started offering that when he hired me. I feel bad, but at the same time, this is a huge opportunity for me.”

“He’ll get over it.” Bowen shrugs. “You only get one life, and you have to live it for you.”

“What he said,” Macklin says, popping a pretzel into his mouth.

“Where are your wives tonight?” I ask, changing the subject. It has nothing to do with the fact that I’m curious where Leighton is this evening. I’ve talked to her almost every day over the last few weeks, and we’ve met up a few times to go over the website, business cards, and other branding ideas she has.

I’m being nosy, that’s all.

“Lainey is cutting teeth, so Ellison is staying home with her. She said she had plans to get our girl in bed and curl up with a book for a few hours. I’m actually going to be heading out soon, just in case Lainey has a hard time going down. That way, I can be there to help. I got some guy time, and Ells can still spend some time lost in her book.”

“I should head out soon, too,” Macklin says. “The twins are finally getting on a routine. Baylor insisted she could handle them for a few hours on her own. I think Courtlynn was coming over just in case. We’re trying to keep them on a strict schedule as much as we can, and it’s finally working, and we’re getting sleep.”

“No wife.” Bowen shrugs, and we all laugh.

I want to ask what Leighton’s doing, but I know that will only raise red flags. I mean, I shouldn’t care what she’s doing on a Saturday night. She’s an adult and can do whatever she wants. Before I can think of something to say to change the subject, Copeland grabs his phone.

“It’s Leighton.” He swipes at the screen and places the phone next to his ear. His brow is furrowed, and instantly, I’m on alert. “Where?” he asks, nodding as she answers. “Yeah, stay there. I’m on my way. Lock your doors. Is Kelly with you?” he asks. He listens for a beat. “Good. I’ll be there soon.”

“What’s up?” Macklin asks. She is his sister-in-law, too, after all.

“That was Leighton. She’s got a flat. She and Kelly went into Franklin and did some shopping and got dinner. Her tire popped. She’s okay. They

both are. She was able to steer to the side of the road. I'm going to get her."

"I'll go," I say, standing and shoving my phone into my pocket. "You need to get home to help Ellie, and you, Bay. I don't have anyone waiting at home for me." I shrug like it's not a big deal, but something inside me says I need to go and check on her. She wasn't in an accident, and she's not mine, but my gut tells me I need to go.

"You sure, man?" Copeland asks.

"I'm sure."

"She's our sister," Macklin says.

I nod. "I know. I'll change the tire and follow them home just in case."

"I'll go, too, just in case Dix needs an extra set of hands," Bowen offers. "If I stay here, I'll just end up working on this week's books for the Hideaway," he says, referring to his bar.

"Thanks," Copeland says. "I'll text Leighton and let her know that you're on your way. She was sending me a pin, but I'll have her send it to Dix."

"Let's cash out," Macklin says, standing, "so you two can get on the road."

"Just figure it out," I say, taking a step away from the table. "I don't want them on the side of the road any longer than they have to be."

"Just lock up when you're done, and we can get our winnings after," Bowen tells them, as he moves to follow me out the door.

I hop in the truck and start the engine as Bowen slides in next to me. My phone pings, and I pull up the pin that Leighton sent, and I know exactly where they are on that stretch of highway. She was halfway back to Magnolia Ridge. Dropping my phone into the cupholder, I back out of the driveway.

"So," Bowen says casually. He doesn't say more, which has me glancing over at him in the passenger seat, before turning my eyes back to the road.

“So, what?”

“How long?”

“How long, what?”

“How long have you wanted Leighton?”

I keep my face neutral and my breathing even. “I don’t.”

“Come on, Dix. We’ve known each other a long damn time.”

“How long have you wanted Courtlynn?” I fire back at him.

“I don’t.”

“Come on, Bo. We’ve known each other a long damn time,” I toss his words back at him.

He chuckles. “Fair enough.”

He doesn’t ask more questions, and I’m grateful. Besides, I don’t know what I want with Leighton. She’s beautiful, talented as hell, and an absolute sweetheart. We’ve been spending more time together, so it’s only natural that I would notice those things, and I’m fond of her. We’re closer than we used to be.

That’s all this is.

“Who do you think won tonight?” Bowen asks. He’s changing the subject, and I’m not mad about it. Neither one of us wants to talk about the youngest two Moran sisters.

“Hard to say. I think Cope had the most chips, but that doesn’t always mean he won.”

“I guess we should get used to guys’ nights being early ones, huh?”

“Probably. At least until the kids get older, but my guess is they’ll both have more by then.”

Bowen laughs. “I’m not arguing that one,” he says as we head close to where Leighton and her best friend should be. I see the flashers on her car up ahead, and something inside me that was stirring starts to settle.

I flash my lights and drive past, only to make a U-turn and park right behind her, letting the headlights of my truck light up her car to change her

tire. Bowen and I climb out of the truck and make our way toward the car. Leighton pushes open her door and steps out.

“Thank you so much for coming. I’m sorry to ruin your night. I really need to learn how to do this on my own,” she says, scowling down at her flat tire.

“Are you okay?” I ask. Even though I can see that she is, I also need to hear her say it. My eyes scan over her, which is ridiculous. It’s a flat tire, not an accident.

“Yeah, just annoyed that I had to call my brother-in-law, who had to send his best friends to help me. I’m sorry I ruined your Saturday night.”

“You didn’t ruin anything,” Bowen says before I can. “Cope and Mac were both ready to bail and head home. If anything, you gave us something to do,” he tells her, and her shoulders relax.

“You and Kelly can go wait in my truck, and we’ll get this changed.”

“What? No. What if you need help?”

“That’s what I’m here for,” Bowen tells her.

“It’s dangerous to be standing on the side of the road at night,” I explain.

“It’s fine.” She waves me off.

I take a step closer, her perfume invading my senses. “Lei, please, can you both just wait in the truck so we don’t have to worry about both of you while we get this done? It’ll take us fifteen minutes, tops.”

“One condition,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest to ward off the chill. I fight the urge to pull her into my arms to warm her up.

“Where’s your coat?”

“In the car. I hate driving in it.”

I sigh. “The truck’s warm.” I nod for her to go.

“One condition,” she says again.

“Depends on what it is.”

“I want you to teach me to change my own tire. This is the first I’ve ever had, and I should have learned long before now.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her she doesn’t need to know. She can just call me, but I can see how important this is to her, and I need her off the side of the road so we can get this tire changed and get them both home safely. “Deal,” I answer, and she juts her hand out for me to shake. No way in hell am I passing up a chance to touch her.

I wrap my hand around hers, and the second our palms touch, every coherent thought in my head scatters like leaves in the wind. Her fingers are cold from the night air, soft against my rough skin, and she gives my hand one firm shake like we’re striking some kind of business deal instead of standing three feet apart on a dark stretch of county road with my pulse pounding like an idiot.

“Deal,” I repeat, my voice rougher this time.

Leighton smiles, small but triumphant, like she just won the lottery or something. “Good.”

Behind me, Bowen clears his throat dramatically. “It’s cold as balls out here. You, ladies, get in the truck so we can get this handled,” he says, bringing me back to focus.

Kelly’s teeth chatter. “I’m with him. It’s freezing.”

Leighton immediately drops my hand and steps back, cheeks turning pink beneath the glow of the truck’s headlights. “We made a deal, Dix.”

I nod. “Truck.”

She sticks her tongue out at me. “Bossy.”

“You’re standing on the shoulder of a highway in forty-degree weather wearing a sweater that barely counts as fabric. Get in the truck.”

For a second, she just stares at me, and there’s something dangerous in it. Something soft and curious, like she’s trying to figure me out while I’m desperately trying not to unravel in front of her.

Why am I responding to her like this?

Then she huffs out a breath. “Fine. But you’re going to teach me,” she sasses, sounding like her sisters, Baylor and Courtlynn.

“Tomorrow,” I promise.

“Tomorrow,” she agrees. “I’m holding you to that promise, Dixon Turner,” she says finally, before turning and heading toward my truck.

Bowen laughs outright. “Brother, you are so screwed.”

I ignore him. Mostly because he’s right. Leighton is the quiet sister, but with me, she’s never afraid to speak her mind. I love that for me, but tonight, it’s freezing and dangerous, and I just want to get her tire changed and get her home.

Leighton’s steps falter when she’s almost to the driver’s side door of my truck. “Wait.” She turns back.

I brace myself. “Leighton.”

“My coat. It’s freezing. Kelly needs hers, too.”

I shut my eyes briefly, already exhausted. “Stay there.” If she had gotten in my truck when I told her to, she wouldn’t need her damn coat.

“They’re literally in the back seat.”

“And we’re on the side of the road, at night,” I shoot back. “Stay. There.”

Her lips twitch like she’s trying not to smile at me ordering her around. Why in the fuck do I find that adorable? Shy, quiet Leighton Moran is coming out of her shell for me.

I don’t hate it.

Pulling open the back door, I reach into the back seat until my fingers find a thick cream-colored coat tangled beneath a tote bag. The inside of the car carries the faint scent of her perfume—warm vanilla and something floral, maybe. It hits me hard enough to make my chest ache. I grab the other light-pink coat and slam the door.

Stalking toward her, I hold the cream-colored coat open for her before I can second-guess myself. For one suspended second, she hesitates, surprise

flickering across her face, but then she steps closer and slides her arms into the sleeves.

Close enough that I catch the soft inhale she takes.

Close enough that if I leaned down even an inch…

I tug the coat gently up onto her shoulders, my knuckles brushing the side of her neck. Her breath catches. Mine does, too. “There,” I murmur. “Better?”

Her eyes lift to mine, wide and impossibly dark in the low light. “Yeah,” she says softly. “Better.”

For a beat, neither of us moves. Silence stretches between us, and everything around us fades away. It’s just Leighton and me on the side of the road, staring deeply into each other’s eyes, and while I know I need to turn away, I can’t.

All I can focus on is her.

The way she’s looking at me, like maybe she feels this, too. And that’s a dangerous thought to have about a woman I should absolutely not be falling for.

“Get in the truck, Leighton.” My voice is gruff, not with anger. With something I’m too chicken shit to name.

“Okay,” she whispers, peering up at me under long lashes. “Thank you for rescuing me, Dix.”

She turns on her heel and rushes to my truck. I watch as she swings open the driver’s door and slides behind the wheel. With the glare of the headlights, it’s hard to see her, but I know she’s there.

Satisfied she’s off the road, I turn back to Bowen, who’s already got the jack and the spare out of the trunk.

“Thanks, man, I can take it from here,” I tell him, crouching down next to him.

“It’s fine,” he says. He pauses, then turns to look at me, the lug wrench paused. When he smirks, I know whatever he’s about to say isn’t going to

be good. “You got some drool.” He lifts a hand and taps at his chin.

“Fuck off,” I grumble, and he almost falls on his ass laughing. “That tire’s not going to change itself.”

His laughter fills the night air.

We work in silence—well, unless you count Bowen’s snickers of laughter. The spare slides on easily, and Bowen tightens the lug nuts while I toss the flat into the trunk.

“Take my truck back. I’m going to drive them back. I don’t want this donut to give out on them.”

“You want me to follow you to her place?”

“Yeah,” I agree. Moving to the truck, I motion for Leighton to roll down the window. I explain the plan, and she nods.

“Thank you, Dixon.”

“Anytime, Lei,” I say, pulling open the door.

“Kelly, you just want to stay at my place tonight?” she asks her friend.

“I wish I could. I have an early shift at the diner in the morning,” Kelly says apologetically.

“I’ll drop Kelly off at her place and meet you at Leighton’s,” Bowen offers.

“Is that all right with you?” Leighton asks her best friend.

“I’m not a damn serial killer,” Bowen mutters.

“Kelly?”

Kelly grins. “It’s fine, Leighton. I’m not worried about being alone with Bowen. Should I call you Captain Hangover?” she teases.

“Fucking Courtlynn,” Bowen grumbles. “We’ll follow you until we get to Magnolia Ridge,” he says, sliding behind the wheel of my truck and slamming the door.

With my hand on the small of her back, I lead Leighton to the passenger side of her car, opening the door for her. She turns to face me. “Thank you for this, Dixon.”

My hand lifts and settles on her cheek before I can stop it. “Anytime, Leighton, you know that.” My voice is soft, matching hers, and all I can think about is whether her lips are as soft as they look. Clearing my throat, I drop my hand and take a step back. Leighton settles in the passenger seat, and I close the door. I don’t dare look at my truck, because I know Bowen and Kelly both saw the move. He’s never going to let me live this down.

“Fuck,” I mutter under my breath, before sliding behind the wheel of her car and cautiously pulling back out on the road. Bowen pulls out behind me.

We don’t speak. I’m lost in my thoughts, and I can only assume that she is, as well. But it’s not uncomfortable. It seems that, recently, any time spent with Leighton never is.

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LEIGHTON

My cheek still tingles from his touch. It was innocent, meant to be reassuring, but it set my soul on fire. Now, I have to sit in the passenger seat of my car while he drives us to my place. Not because I'm not capable, but because Dixon is a good man, a close friend of the family, who wanted to make sure I got home safely.

That's all this is.

I repeat the words in my head like a prayer as Dixon guides my car into the corporate limits of Magnolia Ridge, one big hand loose on the steering wheel of my Honda. The dashboard lights cast shadows across his jaw, catching on the dark scruff there. He looks unfairly good tonight. His broad shoulders fill the driver's seat, sleeves pushed up his forearms, regardless that it's freezing outside. He has a calm steadiness about him that makes me feel both safe and wildly unsteady at the same time.

Outside, headlights sweep behind us. Dixon glances in the mirror. "Bo's still back there."

They've been trailing us the whole drive in his truck after helping change my tire on the side of the highway. Apparently, the men in my life

have formed a convoy over one blown tire. Bo flashes his lights, and I know he's turning off to take Kelly home, who lives on the opposite side of town from me.

"I could have driven us home," I mutter. It's true. I'm not some damsel in distress. My sisters and I have been surviving just fine. However, it's not lost on me that I called my brother-in-law Copeland for help. I knew that he and Macklin were with the guys playing poker. He's family, and I'll admit I needed help, but this, having Dixon come to my rescue, showing his worry and concern, I was not prepared for that.

A low chuckle rumbles out of him. "Thanks for humoring me."

I cross my arms and stare out the window. It's not that I'm humoring him. I didn't even try to fight him on his demand. Not really. And it wasn't really a demand, more of a statement. It meant I got to spend more time with him, and that's selfish, and something I absolutely should not want, but one night won't hurt, right?

I just went along with whatever he said, like there wasn't another option. My pulse skips at the memory of seeing the concern in his eyes, of hearing it in his voice. The way his palm rested against my cheek. No. I'm not going there. This is ridiculous. This is Dixon. He's a family friend.

My friend.

Nothing more.

What's even more ridiculous is that lately, I've had to constantly remind myself of my place in his life. He's a good guy. I'm helping him, and he's being nice to me. He's always been nice to me. Nothing has changed.

Yet, at the same time, it feels as if everything has.

Dixon has known me for years. He's my brothers-in-law's best friend, one of my oldest sister's best friends. Basically family. He's the dependable one everyone calls when something breaks, when someone needs moving, when life goes sideways. He'd probably do this for anybody.

Right?

The car slows as he turns down the long driveway. He drives past the manor and parks outside our house. It's a large five-bedroom two-story, but only two of those rooms are occupied. The house feels too big, too quiet, with neither Ellison nor Baylor living here anymore.

Dixon parks, and neither one of us moves to get out. I tell myself I'm being polite, waiting for Bowen to get here to pick him up. I could invite him inside, but with how I'm feeling, how my heart is racing, and my hands are sweating, I'm certain I'd just embarrass myself.

I turn to glance at him, only to find his eyes are already on me. The air shifts as he asks, "You okay?"

The question is innocent, or it would be if his voice didn't drop to a low timbre, something rough around the edges. Suddenly, I'm hyperaware of how small the car feels. Has my car always been this small? His hand rests on the console between us, close enough that I could reach over and hold it.

But I won't.

"I'm fine." My voice comes out as if I'm breathless from running. His gaze flicks to my mouth, and I lick my lips. He leans in, just a fraction, but I catch it. I do the same, but before he comes, he moves again. Headlights flash as Bowen pulls up next to us in Dixon's truck. Not just Bowen, but Courtlynn pulls in on the other side.

We're surrounded, and the moment, even if I was imagining it, is broken.

Dixon exhales softly, almost like he's relieved by the interruption. Wish I could say the same. Instead, I reach for my seat belt and quickly unbuckle.

"I'll walk you to the door."

"That's really not necessary."

"Probably not," he says. He turns off the engine and reaches for the door handle. We climb out, only to be met with Bowen and Courtlynn.

"What's going on? You decide to have a party without me?" Courtlynn teases. Her eyes flash to mine. I'm sure she's trying to figure out why

Dixon was driving my car and why he and Bowen are with me at all.

“I got a flat. Bo and Dix saved me. Dix didn’t want me driving home on the donut, so here we are.”

“Well, it’s cold as hell out here. Might as well come in. Have a drink, get warm, and all that,” Courtlynn says, already turning to walk up the steps to the front porch.

“Come on in. I can make us some snacks. It’s still early. It’s the least I can do for you both coming to my rescue.”

“Cope or Mac, either one would have come for you,” Dixon tells me. “We just offered so they could get home to their wives.”

“What he said,” Bowen says, turning to watch my sister as she disappears inside the house.

“I’m not taking no for an answer. Come on.” I nod toward the house and start walking up the steps, not looking back to see if they’re following me. Not that I need to. I hear their heavy footsteps.

In the house, I take off my coat and kick off my shoes. The guys slip out of their shoes, and we move to the living room. “Are you hungry?” I ask Courtlynn.

“Depends, what are you making?”

I chuckle. “I don’t know yet.”

“Oh, buffalo chicken dip. We have some canned chicken, and I got the stuff to make apple turnovers. I can do that really fast.”

“I won’t say no to either,” Dixon says, taking a seat on the couch.

“Bo?” I ask.

He looks at Courtlynn, and their gazes collide. I wait for the insults to fly, but instead, I watch as Bowen swallows hard before turning his gaze back to me. “That sounds great, Lei.”

“Need help?” Dixon asks.

“Nope.” I bend over and grab the remote from the coffee table. “You two find us something to watch. We’ll whip up the snacks, and we can do a

movie night.” I glance between Bowen and Dixon, waiting for one of them to object. Instead, they both get settled and grin at me.

In the kitchen, Courtlynn is already working. “Do we have chips for the buffalo chicken dip?”

“We do. I bought some when I went to the store this week. I knew you and I were having a movie night tomorrow, so I was going to make it then. Are you okay with this? Them being here?” I ask.

“Of course,” she says as if it’s something we do every weekend.

“I just know that you and Bowen butt heads a lot.”

She shrugs. “We do, but I can admit I don’t hate the guy. He’s just annoying as hell, and it’s fun to get him all riled up.”

I smile, not knowing if she’s in denial or still trying to hide it, but my little sister has a thing for the sexy bar owner.

“What’s that?” she asks, pointing at my face.

“What’s what?” I grin wider. I know exactly what she’s talking about.

“That smile?”

“Nothing. Just glad tonight ended with spending time with my little sister.”

“Leighton,” she warns.

“Courtlynn,” I fire back. She holds my stare, and we both end up laughing.

“Okay, so, apple turnovers, buffalo chicken dip, and there’s some lunchmeat in there. How about some pinwheels, too?”

Before I can answer, the guys walk into the kitchen. “Sounds like this is where the fun is.” Dixon smiles.

“Of course, it is, I’m here,” Courtlynn fires back.

“Not everything is about you, brat,” Bowen says, but his tone is softer, and the heat that’s usually there is missing.

“Before the two of you can open fire, tonight is a fire-free zone. No insults, no one-liners, just politeness. If you don’t have something nice to

say, don’t say it at all.” I mock glare at them, and they both nod their agreement. “Good. Now, help yourselves to drinks in the fridge. We’ll have this ready in no time,” I say as Courtlynn and I get to work.

Twenty minutes later, we all have plates full of food. Bowen and Dixon take up either end of the couch, while Courtlynn takes the love seat, and I take the recliner.

“Can you see the TV from that angle?” Dixon asks.

“Yeah,” I say after swallowing a bite of my pinwheel. “We just have to turn our heads,” I tell him.

“That looks uncomfortable.” His brows pull together. “You two should come sit over here so you don’t end up with neck cramps.”

“We’re fine,” I assure him.

“Might as well move,” Bowen says lazily, shoving a chip full of buffalo dip into his mouth. “He’s going to keep worrying about it until you do.”

Dixon points at him with a chip loaded with dip, ready to pop it into his mouth. “I’m being considerate,” he says.

“Is that what we’re calling it?” Bowen asks with a smirk. They share a look that I can’t decipher.

I look between the couch and the two very broad guys currently taking up most of it. “You do realize all four of us are going to be smashed together, right? There’s not exactly a lot of room left.” My eyes bounce between Courtlynn and Bowen.

Bowen shrugs. “You can sit next to me, and Court can sit next to Dix.”

A mischievous grin crosses Courtlynn’s face. “Aw, what’s wrong? You scared of a little close contact?”

“I’m not scared,” Bowen scoffs.

“Oh, okay.” She nods dramatically. “So, it’s intimidation, then. Too much attractiveness in one confined space? And by that, I mean everyone but you,” she sasses.

“Court,” I warn, already feeling heat creep into my face.

“What?” she asks innocently. “I’m trying to make everyone comfortable.”

“You’ve never made anyone comfortable a day in your life,” Bowen says.

“That’s not true. You’re the only one I ever leave off the list.” She smiles sweetly.

Dixon laughs quietly, shifting to make room anyway. “Come on. Worst-case scenario, we have to split them up. Besides, I don’t think these two can do it.”

“Bold assumption,” Courtlynn mutters as she stands. Plate in her hand, she plops down on the couch right next to Bowen. He doesn’t shift to make room for her, but I do see his eyes widen before he schools his features.

I roll my eyes at their antics but get up, balancing my plate carefully while squeezing between Dixon and Courtlynn. The second I sit down, our shoulders bump together.

Courtlynn wiggles in her spot next to me. “See? Cozy.”

“Tight,” Bowen corrects, even though he doesn’t attempt to move away from her.

Courtlynn grins triumphantly. “And nobody has burst into flames from proximity. Growth.”

“Stop moving.”

“You could scoot over a little,” she grumbles.

Dixon leans over and whispers in my ear. “Should we separate them?”

I turn to look at him, his face mere inches from mine. “Not unless we have to.” The air stills between us. It feels suspended yet charged at the same time.

“Damn,” Courtlynn mutters. “We should have turned out the lights.”

“I’ll get the lights,” I offer. “Does anyone need anything while I’m up? More food? More drink? Blankets?”

“Oh, yes, I’m going to need to snuggle,” Courtlynn says.

“Me, too. Is that okay?” I ask the guys.

“It’s our house. They can deal,” Courtlynn says, turning to glare at Bowen.

Bowen lifts his hands in surrender, plate balanced on his lap, amusement tugging at his mouth for once. “I didn’t even say anything.”

“You were thinking it. Loudly,” she fires back.

I chuckle because at least they’re not staring daggers at each other.

“Anything you want, Lei,” Dixon replies softly. The room stills. My heart stutters and begins to race.

It’s not what he says that catches everyone off guard. It’s how he says it. Gentle. Careful.

Courtlynn’s eyebrows shoot up immediately. Bowen slowly turns his head toward Dixon like he’s witnessing a rare wildlife sighting.

Dixon notices and raises his brow. “What?” he asks, already defensive.

“Oh, nothing,” Bowen replies, grinning now. “You just sounded one second away from offering her warm milk and reading her a bedtime story.”

Courtlynn gasps dramatically. “Wait, does this mean Lei is officially Dixon’s favorite?”

“I hate all of you,” Dixon mutters, though there’s no heat behind it.

My cheeks warm, and when I glance at him, I catch the faintest hint of pink creeping up the back of his neck. He offers me a small smile.

That does something dangerous to my heart. Because Dixon usually keeps people at arm’s length, it seems instinctive. But every once in a while, usually with the kids, something softer slips through the cracks. And somehow, that version of him feels even more intimidating.

“I’ll get the lights and the blankets,” I mumble.

“I’ll hold that.” Dixon takes my plate, and I can’t look at him. This man is twisting what I know is right and what my heart thinks is right. Two very different things.

Courtlynn claps her hands, her plate wobbly on her lap. “We’re building a blanket nest.”

“A what?” Bowen asks.

“A blanket nest,” she repeats slowly, like he’s the idiot here. “With pillows, snacks, and at least one emotionally supportive movie.”

“You mean a fort?” he asks, raising a brow.

“No. Forts are for children. Nests are for emotionally exhausted adults. And we’re basically just snuggling, not actually building an overhead fort and moving furniture. That’s too much work, at least for tonight.”

Shaking my head, I flip off the lights and grab a couple of blankets, just two, because I’m hoping I can share with Dix, and my sister won’t admit it, but she’s more than okay with sharing with Bowen, too.

Back at the couch, I hand Courtlynn a blanket, and I watch as Bowen reaches for her plate and allows her to cover her lap before he hands it back to her. He doesn’t look at her. We all know this is different for them, but none of us will say it out loud.

I take my seat, spreading the soft throw blanket over my lap. Once I’m settled, Dixon hands me my plate and starts the movie. It’s one I’ve seen before, but it’s a good one. No romance to make any of us—okay, me—uncomfortable being this close to Dixon.

“*Law Abiding Citizen*, a classic,” Courtlynn says.

“You’ve already seen it?” Dixon asks.

“Yeah, it’s good.”

“I’m surprised,” Bowen says, but instead of more verbal sparring, they settle into the comfortable silence.

I finish my food, trying not to think about how Dixon’s body is pressed against mine. He takes my plate without a word, setting it on the table next

to him. Ten minutes later, I feel my body start to relax, and I lean my head against his shoulder.

Dixon stiffens for half a second, like he's surprised by the contact, but then his arm shifts behind me along the couch. Not touching me exactly. Just there. Warm. Solid. Safe. I tell myself it's because I'm tired. It has nothing to do with his clean scent, which keeps wrapping around me every time he breathes.

On the screen, Gerard Butler's character is being interrogated, but my focus drifts. Courtlynn mutters commentary under her breath every few minutes while Bowen argues with the logic of the justice system, and somehow, it all fades into background noise.

Because Dixon's thumb brushes lightly against my arm. Just once. It was probably an accident, but my breath catches anyway. I tilt my head slightly, looking up at him. The glow from the television sharpens the hard line of his jaw and casts shadows beneath his eyes. He's focused on the movie, expression unreadable, but there's tension in his shoulders now.

Does he feel this, too?

"You okay?" he asks quietly, not taking his eyes off the screen.

The concern in his voice does something dangerous to my heart. "Yeah," I whisper. "Just comfortable."

His throat moves with a swallow. "Good," he answers, still keeping his gaze locked on the TV screen.

Courtlynn suddenly gasps. "See? *See?* That's why you don't mess with intelligent people."

Bowen snorts. "You say that like you'd survive five minutes in this situation."

"I absolutely would."

"You'd die first."

"I'd die hot, though," she counters, confident in her response.

I laugh before I can stop myself, and Dixon's body shakes with his own quiet laughter. The sound surprises me more than anything else tonight. I don't think I've ever heard him laugh this quietly before. Like this moment belongs only to us.

The realization settles heavily in my stomach. My head is screaming, *Danger, abort mission!* I know that I should move. I know that I'm making this harder on myself, but I stay rooted in my spot. Instead, I curl a little closer, nestling beneath the blanket with my head resting against his shoulder.

Dixon finally looks down at me then, and the air changes. His eyes drop to my mouth for the briefest second before returning to mine. Every sound in the room dulls. The movie might as well not be playing.

My pulse stutters.

Bowen suddenly stands with a groan. "I need another drink. Anybody want one?"

The moment breaks instantly, and disappointment washes over me. I don't know what was about to happen, but I was willing to risk the outcome just to find out.

Courtlynn lifts her hand. "Yes. And popcorn. It's in the cabinet to the left of the microwave. The bowls are next to it."

"That's a big ask," he tells her, but doesn't say no.

As Bowen disappears toward the kitchen, I start to sit up, suddenly aware of how close I am to Dixon, but his hand catches gently around my wrist. The touch is gentle, just enough to stop me.

"You can stay," he says softly.

Three simple words.

And my traitorous heart twists like they might mean more—like maybe I'm not the only one feeling this pull after all.

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DIXON

I’m just finishing taping off the trim in the office when my phone rings. The sharp buzz cuts through the quiet hum of the shop, echoing off the half-finished drywall and metal shelves stacked with supplies. For a second, I stare at it from across the room, with a roll of painter’s tape, what’s left of it, in my hand.

There’s a part of me that wants to ignore it. I’m sweaty, covered in dust, and balanced halfway up a ladder that’s already tried to kill me twice today. But then the other part of my brain kicks in. The part that always assumes the worst. What if someone needs help? What if it’s important? I’d never forgive myself for missing it.

With a sigh, I climb down the ladder and wipe my hands on the front of my jeans before walking across the room to grab my phone. The second I see Leighton’s name lighting up the screen, my entire mood shifts. I smile before I can stop myself. “Hey, you,” I answer.

The grin in my voice is obvious, embarrassingly obvious, and I know she catches it immediately. Hell, I catch it immediately. It’s ridiculous how fast she can affect me. But damn… It’s Leighton. That woman could

probably ask me to help bury a body, and I'd grab a shovel before she finished the sentence.

You'd think that was the scariest part, but it's not. It's the way I can't stop thinking about her, or how, all of a sudden, she's all I can see. I don't date, don't get serious. It's too big a risk. I've seen the agony my dad has been in since we lost my mom. I never want that to be me. So, I stay unattached. But the last several months, being around Leighton, well, let's just say the idea of being attached to her is scary and compelling all at the same time.

Basically, I'm screwed.

It's been two weeks since Bowen and I helped her with her flat tire. Two weeks since we'd stayed afterward, sitting shoulder to shoulder on her couch watching a movie that, thankfully, I'd seen many times. Otherwise, I never could have contributed to the conversations. I didn't pay a bit of attention to the screen, even if I was staring at it. All my attention was on her.

I haven't stopped thinking about her since.

"Hey," she replies, and just hearing her voice eases something in me I didn't realize was tight. "What are you up to?"

I glance around the office. Blue painter's tape lines every edge of the room with varying levels of precision, and there's an open paint can sitting dangerously close to my boots.

"I'm at the shop," I tell her. "Getting ready to paint the office."

"Wow. Look at you being productive on a Saturday night."

I snort. "That's generous. So far, I've mostly been arguing with tape." It's true, but it could be because I want it to be perfect. This place is my image, my name, my brand, and I want it to be right.

She laughs, warm and easy, and I lean back against the desk behind me, suddenly forgetting all about the painting. "Been there, done that." She chuckles.

“This was intense,” I say, just to hear her laugh again. She rewards me with the sound, and I want to keep her laughing.

“I’m serious,” she says. “That stuff is evil. I tried using it once and somehow ended up taping my own hair to the wall.”

I bark out a laugh loud enough that it echoes through the empty garage. “Please tell me there’s photographic evidence of that.”

“Absolutely not. Some things die with me.”

“Coward.”

“Smart,” she shoots back.

The teasing settles into something comfortable, familiar in a way that catches me off guard. Every interaction, every moment shared with Leighton is easy. It always has been, but now, that easy grips my chest like a vise, keeping me craving more easy moments, but only with her. I toss the roll of painter’s tape from one hand to the other, distracting myself from reaching for her. “So,” I ask, trying for casual and probably failing, “you call to make fun of my painting skills, or did you need something?”

“Oh, right. I have your website ready. I added the hours and the frequently asked questions. I was going to see if you wanted to come over, or I could come to you so that I can show you.”

“Come now.” The words fly out of my mouth like a desperate plea.

“You sure? I know you’re busy.”

“Lei, I’m sure. I can’t wait to see the finished product.”

“Okay, well, let me pack up my laptop, and I’ll head over.”

“See you soon,” I tell her before ending the call and sliding the phone back into my pocket. Setting the paint roller back on the paint cloth, I put the lid back on the paint can. Luckily, I hadn’t started mixing or pouring any into the pan yet. With Leighton on her way, this can wait a little longer.

Instead, I head into the main part of the garage and start tidying up. This side of the shop is finally ready. It just needs a deep clean before the lifts are delivered and I start moving in toolboxes. I’ve also got a set of wall

cabinets arriving in a couple of weeks. Everything's really starting to come together. Honestly, I never would've made it this far without everyone's help.

The guys have spent countless nights and weekends helping me get this place finished, and I don't think I'll ever be able to repay them for everything they've done. I need to plan a big barbecue or something at my place, or hell, even here when it gets warmer, and for Macklin and Copeland, I can offer to watch the kids for them while they take their wives out on a date.

Ten minutes later, I hear her car pull up, and because I apparently have zero chill when it comes to Leighton, I drop what I'm doing and head for the door to meet her.

"Hi," she says with a wave as she walks toward me, her laptop bag slung over one shoulder. My gaze drifts over her—old jeans, faded sweatshirt, effortlessly beautiful.

"Hey." I hold the door open and follow her into the shop.

"Wow, this place looks so different from the last time I was here."

"Yeah, it's coming along. Starting to look alive again." I look around, trying to see it in her eyes, and the transformation is pretty damn impressive.

"Okay, so are we looking at the website first or painting?" she asks, pulling the bag off her shoulder and setting it on the scaffolding I was using to hang lights earlier this week.

"Painting?"

She nods and waves at her outfit. "I came ready to get dirty."

A million inappropriate thoughts run through my mind all at once. "You don't have to spend your Saturday night painting," I tell her.

"Courtlynn is out with Lorna, Kelly has a date, and my sisters are with their husbands and kids, so here I am. Painting beats the hell out of sitting at home alone."

“Are you sure you’re up for the challenge? I can be pretty particular.”

“I can handle it,” she assures me.

“Well, I’m not going to say no to the help. But I get to buy you dinner.”

“Deal.”

She sticks her hand out for me to shake, and I take it automatically. This ten-thousand-square-foot shop suddenly feels too small.

Big mistake.

Her hand is soft, warm, and tiny compared to mine, and for one reckless second, neither of us lets go. Her eyes flick down to our joined hands before lifting back to mine, and the air between us shifts. It feels thicker somehow.

Hotter.

Clearing my throat, I reluctantly let her go. “Why don’t we take a look at the website now so we don’t get paint on the computer later?”

“You planning on getting messy, Dix?” she teases, a slow grin tugging at her lips.

With you? Hell fucking yes. “It’s paint,” I say instead. “It’s messy all on its own.”

She laughs softly and wanders farther into the office, stopping near the stacked paint cans against the wall. “Wow. You weren’t kidding. This place looks like a construction zone.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “It’s a work in progress, but now, it’s pretty much cleanup before I start moving everything in—well, outside of the front office. The breakroom and restrooms are all finished. Oh, and my office is done. So, really just the main office, which is what I was getting ready to paint when you called.”

“Makes sense. Okay, the website.” She turns, grabs her bag, pulls out her laptop, and fires it up.

“Do you need the Wi-Fi? It was installed yesterday,” I tell her.

“Nah, my laptop is already hooked up to my phone’s hotspot.” She taps at the keyboard before glancing at me over her shoulder. “Come look.”

She’s smiling, and I don’t need to be told twice to get closer to her.

Stepping up behind her, I’m surrounded by her scent—something floral, lavender maybe—and instead of stepping to the side, I place my hand on her hip, aligning her body with mine while I stare over her shoulder. Her breath hitches, but she clears her throat and begins to show me the site and everything she’s added.

My fingers trace her hip gently, and the more she talks, the longer we stand together, her body relaxes into my touch. She’s fucking addicting in the best way, but I can’t let this happen. This is Leighton. She’s a forever kind of girl, not someone you get your dick wet with. No, she’s the kind of woman you take home to meet your family, the kind you plan forever with.

I can’t give her forever.

That sobering thought has me letting go of her waist and stepping back. “Leighton, you knocked it out of the park. Thank you. Seriously, it’s incredible. What do I owe you?”

Leighton turns to face me, settles her hands on her hips, and glares at me. The intensity of her gaze tells me she’s 100 percent serious right now. “Dixon Turner!” she scolds. “You are not paying me. That’s what friends are for. Consider it a gift. This is what I do, and to be honest, it doesn’t feel like work.”

“It’s also how you live,” I remind her.

“It is, but I make a good salary at the manor with my sisters, and I have several other businesses that I work for, as well as some online freelance stuff. I don’t need nor want your money.” She pauses, her hands fall to her sides, and her shoulders sag. “I just wanted to do something nice for you,” she murmurs.

Fuck. I hate that I hurt her feelings. Without thinking, I step toward her and wrap my arms around her in a hug. Damn, she feels good in my arms. She exhales and returns my embrace.

“I’m sorry. I just wanted to pay you for your time. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.”

“You helped me with my tire. We’re even.”

I pull back, reluctantly releasing my hold on her. “That was one night. I know you gave a lot of time and energy into this, the logo, the flyers, and everything else you’ve done for me. And I still need to teach you how to change your own.”

“I wanted to, Dix. And you can teach me when this place is up and running.” She offers me a breathtaking smile.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “I appreciate you, and anytime you need help, no matter when or where, you call me. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.” She grins. “Let me pack up my laptop, and you can put me to work.” She quickly stows her laptop back in her bag and turns to face me.

I don’t know why I do it, but I hold my hand out for her. She hesitates just a couple of seconds before placing her hand in mine, allowing me to guide her to the office area, which I guess is really like the reception area of the shop. Once we step inside, I release her hand, even though it’s not what I want to do.

“Wow, you’ve been busy,” she says, taking in the painter’s tape that’s all around the trim in the room.

She crouches beside one of the paint trays and drags her finger through a streak of gray on the rim. “What color is this?”

“Storm cloud.”

Her lips twitch. “Of course, it is.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It sounds aggressively masculine. Like you stood in the paint aisle looking for the manliest shade of gray available.”

“I did not.”

“You absolutely did.” She points at me accusingly. “I bet there was another option called ‘morning fog’ and you rejected it on principle.”

I bark out a laugh before I can stop myself. “Morning fog sounds weak as hell.”

“There it is.” She beams like she’s won something.

Fuck me. That smile could ruin a man.

“I just liked it,” I say.

“If you say so.” She chuckles.

Her eyes lock on mine, playful but uncertain underneath, like she feels this thing pulling between us, too. The tension crawls over my skin, tightening every muscle in my body. Then she blinks and steps back, putting some much-needed distance between us. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t want the distance, but it’s necessary.

“So,” she says brightly, “where do you want me?”

Every filthy thought in my head comes roaring back full force.

I drag a hand down my jaw, fighting off visions of her bent over the counter. I cannot go there, so I shake those thoughts off. “I’ll take the high, you take the low.”

“I can use a ladder, you know.”

“I know you can, but I’ll take that part. Let me pour some paint into a pan.”

She studies me for a second, like she’s trying to figure me out, then huffs a quiet laugh. “Are you always this bossy?”

“Only when I’m trying to prevent someone from falling off a ladder in my shop. We’re not even open yet. I don’t need any workers’ comp claims.”

“I have excellent balance, thank you.”

“Mm-hmm.” I pry the lid off the paint can. “That sounded confident. Not convincing, but confident.”

“You’re too much.” She grabs a brush out of the tray and points it at me. Her smile breaks loose before she can stop it, bright and warm enough to hit me square in the chest.

Damn. She does that too easily. Makes this feel easy. Normal. Like I haven't spent the last two weeks thinking about her at inappropriate times.

I pour paint into the tray, trying not to notice her moving around as if she belongs here.

"You know," she says casually, "most people would just say thank you for the help."

"I did say thank you."

"You argued."

"That was a grateful conversation."

She laughs again, shaking her head. "You're unbelievable."

I glance over at her and catch her already looking at me.

The air shifts.

It's subtle, but there. That quiet little pull that keeps happening between us, no matter where we are. The teasing fades, leaving something softer underneath it. Something a hell of a lot more dangerous.

She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. "You were really going to paint all of this tonight on your own?"

"It needs to be done."

"That's not what I meant."

I know. The problem is, if I let myself think too hard about why I wanted her here, I'm screwed. So, I keep my focus on the paint tray. "You sure you want to help?"

Her voice softens. "Yeah."

I finally look at her again.

Big mistake.

She's close now, closer than she was a second ago, and her expression has changed completely. No more joking. No more easy grin. Just those blue eyes holding mine with this open, uncertain warmth that makes my chest feel too tight.

Fuck.

I can practically feel the moment stretching between us. One step. That's all it would take. My gaze drops to her mouth before I can stop it. She notices, her eyes betraying her as she licks her lips. A tiny inhale parts her lips, and suddenly, every thought in my head turns dangerous.

"So," she says quietly, "high and low, huh?"

I blink, dragging myself back to reality. "Probably safer for both of us."

Her cheeks turn pink instantly, and satisfaction curls low in my stomach.

"Oh," she says, recovering fast. "So you have thought about it."

"Thought about what?" If she's talking about me being high, and her being low, preferably with my cock in her mouth, then yeah, I've fucking thought about it, and I'm probably going to hell because of it.

She gives me an innocent look that would work a lot better if her eyes weren't sparkling. "The process," she replies, her cheeks turning pink. That's not what she was going to say, but I'm too chicken shit to call her out on it, because whatever this is, acting on it would be wrong. I could lose my friends, my brothers, and that can't happen.

I shake my head, laughing under my breath as I hand her the roller. "Paint the damn wall."

Her fingers slide against mine when she takes it. The touch is light, accidental maybe, except neither of us lets go right away.

And there it is again.

That pull.

That terrifying, addictive feeling that one of these days, we're going to stop pretending this is harmless.

And maybe that's what scares me most. Not that we'll ruin everything, but that some reckless part of me already knows I'll let it happen anyway.

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LEIGHTON

As I lie here in bed, staring up at the ceiling, I've realized it's time for me to be honest with myself.

I'm crushing hard on Dixon Turner.

I'm aware that I'm a thirty-year-old woman, and crushes should be a thing of the past, but here I am, sitting home alone on a Saturday afternoon, and he's all I can think about. We've been spending a lot of time together lately, which is the reason for my crush, I'm sure, but my heart doesn't seem to understand that we don't get to keep him. It keeps reacting to him like I'm sixteen again. Like every smile means something. Like every text message matters more than it should.

It's ridiculous, honestly.

I've built an entire adult life for myself. I pay bills on time. I meal prep on Sundays. I have opinions about mortgage rates and orthopedic pillows. I should not be lying here replaying the way he laughed at something I said last weekend. Yet that's exactly what I'm doing.

No one tells you that attraction can sneak up on you quietly. There's no dramatic lightning strike. No movie soundtrack swelling in the background.

One day, you're perfectly normal around someone, and the next, you're standing in your kitchen, smiling at your phone like an idiot because he sent you a message that says, *Today, I was victorious against the painter's tape.*

I think about him when I wake up. I think about him when something funny happens, and he's the first person I want to tell. I think about the way his eyes crinkle at the corners when he's genuinely amused, and the low warmth of his voice when he says my name. It's embarrassing how easily he occupies my thoughts, like he moved in without asking permission and decided to rearrange the furniture while he was there.

What makes this even more dangerous is that being around him feels effortless. Comfortable. Safe. I don't have to perform some polished version of myself with Dixon. He's seen the real me. The quiet sister who prefers to stay in the others' shadows. He's seen me in old sweatpants with my hair piled on top of my head, complaining about work while eating takeout straight from the container. And somehow, he still looks at me like I'm someone worth paying attention to.

That's probably what did me in.

Not the flirting—if you can even call our recent interactions flirting. Not his stupidly attractive smile. Not the fact that he smells unfairly good all the time. It's the way his deep brown eyes watch me, as if he knows my secret. Or the way he runs his fingers through his hair when he's nervous or stressed. It's definitely the way my body responds when he's near, heating to the point that I know my cheeks are red, but Dix, being the gentleman he is, ignores it, or at least pretends to.

And now I'm stuck here, wondering if he pays attention because he cares or if this is just who Dixon Turner is with everyone. I've been around him a lot growing up, but never just the two of us, working side by side as we have been. Maybe this is just who he is, which is likely the reason, but tell my traitorous heart that.

That question has become its own special form of torture.

Because lately, I sometimes catch him looking at me for a beat too long, and my stomach flips so hard it's pathetic. Sometimes he stands too close, his shoulder brushing mine, and suddenly I forget how conversations work. Sometimes he smiles at me in this quiet, almost hesitant way that makes me think—just for a second—that maybe I'm not alone in this.

But then he'll act completely normal the next day, and I'll convince myself I imagined everything. It's an emotional roller coaster.

So here I am. Flat on my back, staring at the ceiling fan spinning lazily overhead while my brain performs emotional gymnastics over a man who probably has no idea what he's doing to me.

Or maybe he does.

Honestly, I don't know which possibility is worse.

My phone chirps, pulling me out of my thoughts. Glancing at the screen, I see my best friend Kelly's name pop up.

Kelly: What are you up to?

I huff out a laugh because I'm doing absolutely nothing. My laundry is done, I've gone grocery shopping, and my clients are all caught up. Sure, there's work I could be doing, but I'll need something to do this week, so here I am, staring up at the ceiling, thinking about a man I absolutely should not be thinking about.

Me: Absolutely nothing. You?

Kelly: Same. I think we need a night out.

Me: What are you thinking?

Kelly: The Hideaway? Not really feeling like going too far.

Me: LOL. This is why we're besties.

Kelly: Facts.

Kelly: What about Court? I'd say the others, but I'm sure they're busy with the kiddos and their husbands.

Me: Court is in Gatlinburg for the weekend with Lorna. They took a mini vacation.

Kelly: Why didn't we think of that?

Me: We literally just said we didn't want to venture far from home.

Kelly: I know, but it's been ages since I've been to Gatlinburg.

Me: Me too. We'll plan something. I vote for fall. We can drive into the mountains when the leaves are changing.

Kelly: Yes!

Kelly: Okay, so the Hideaway?

Me: Let's do it.

A couple of hours at the only bar in town, which happens to be owned by Bowen, sounds like just what I need to get out of this room and out of my head.

Kelly: I'll pick you up at seven.

Me: I'll be ready.

Tossing my phone on the bed, I close my eyes and exhale. I have to stop this infatuation with Dixon. Yes, a night out with my best friend is exactly what I need.

I didn't know how much I needed this night until we actually got here. It's been ages since I've truly let loose. Honestly, it's not something that comes naturally to me, and definitely not something I do often. I usually overthink, hold back, or stay tucked safely in my comfort zone. But tonight feels different. Tonight, I'm finally allowing myself to breathe, to laugh too loud, to be present without worrying about anything else.

I'm letting my hair down, both figuratively and literally, and for once, I'm not feeling guilty about it.

My hair falls in soft, effortless curls down my back. My makeup is done just right. Nothing over the top, just enough to make me feel put together in a way I haven't felt in a while. I'm wearing my favorite pair of skinny jeans, the ones that somehow always fit better when I need a confidence boost, along with my worn-in cowboy boots that have seen more nights like this than I can count. A simple tank top sits under a loose, holey sweater that hangs just off one shoulder. It's April in Tennessee, so I'm sure I'll be hot on the dance floor, but chilly when we leave. I can take the sweater off if I need to, without being too revealing. It's better than having to carry a coat around.

“Why don’t we do this more often?” Kelly shouts over the music, never once stopping the shimmy of her hips to the beat of the music blaring through the speakers.

“I don’t know,” I tell her honestly. Right now, I’m feeling the buzz of the alcohol through my veins, and I can’t think of a single reason we don’t let our hair down more often.

Kelly spins in a quick circle, laughing when she nearly collides with a guy stepping backward off the edge of the dance floor. She catches herself on his shoulder, flashes an apologetic grin, and he waves it off like it’s all part of the night.

“I’m serious,” she says when she’s back in front of me, leaning in so I can hear her over the bass thumping through the walls. “We work, we sleep, we complain about working and sleeping… and then we do it again. We’re boring, Lei,” she says, moving back to do another quick spin.

I take a sip of my drink, surprised I haven’t spilled it all over me and the floor. It’s something too sweet and dangerously easy to forget the strength of. I forgot the name, but Bowen made it for me, so I know it’s safe.

The Hideaway’s crowded in that familiar weekend way, with bodies packed close enough that personal space is more of a suggestion than a rule. Neon lights wash everything in shifting colors, turning everyone into versions of themselves that feel a little looser, a little braver.

“You’re not wrong,” I admit, watching a group of girls at the bar cheering like they’ve just won something important. Maybe they have. Maybe it’s just making it through the week. They’re younger than us. They barely look old enough to be served.

Kelly hooks her arm through mine, tugging me a step closer to the dance floor. “So tonight counts as doing something about it. No thinking. Just moving.”

“I’m all danced out,” I protest automatically, even as my hips sway keeping time with the music.

“That’s a lie,” she says, like she’s known me forever and has receipts to prove it. “Look at those hips,” she says, placing her hands on my hips, and we both groove to the beat.

Before I can argue, she drags me back to the middle of the dance floor. The music swells, louder, heavier, pulsing in my ears. I lose track of where the bar is, where the exit is, where anything is except the rhythm and the way we both move to the beat.

One song ends, and another begins, and I notice my drink is empty. Huh, I don’t remember finishing it, but it’s time for a refill. I tip my empty cup to my lips and point behind me, where I’m pretty sure the bar is. Kelly nods, and I turn, and I was right. I thrust my empty cup in the air in celebration as I dance my way to the bar.

“Bowen!” I shout, and the man himself appears before me.

“How you doing, Lei? Need some water?” he asks.

“Water?” I crinkle my nose. “No, I want more of this—” I thrust my empty cup toward him. “Pretty please,” I add sweetly.

The cold glass slides across the bar toward me, stopping just short of my fingertips. Tiny beads of condensation cling to the sides, dripping onto the polished wood beneath it.

“Have some water for me first,” Bowen says, his tone caught somewhere between amused and concerned.

“No,” I whine, dragging the word out dramatically. Even to my own ears, I sound ridiculous. Somewhere in the very back of my mind, I’m aware I’m acting completely out of character. Normally, I’m the responsible one. The careful one. The girl who watches everyone else let loose while she keeps herself neatly in check.

But tonight, I can’t seem to find it in me to care.

Thank you, fruity drink.

Bowen opens his mouth, probably ready to argue, but before he gets the chance, the opening notes of “Can’t Fight the Moonlight” blast through the

speakers.

Kelly gasps loudly beside me. “Lei! This is our jam!”

I squeal right along with her, both of us instantly transported back to sleepovers, mud masks, popcorn, and rewatching *Coyote Ugly* until we could quote every line. The familiar beat pulses through the bar, infectious and impossible to ignore.

Kelly grabs my wrist so fast that I almost topple over. “Come on!”

Laughing, I let her pull me through the packed crowd. Bodies sway shoulder to shoulder beneath neon beer signs and strings of warm amber lights. The air smells like spilled liquor, perfume, and sweat, but no one seems to mind. I know we don’t.

We’re almost to the dance floor when Kelly suddenly veers toward the opposite side of the bar. She taps Johnny Carter, a guy we graduated with, on the shoulder. He turns on his stool, already grinning like he knows exactly what she’s about to ask. Kelly bats her eyelashes, and I know Johnny will do whatever she asks. He’s always had a crush on her.

“Oh, absolutely not,” Bowen mutters from behind the bar. “Leighton,” he warns, but I choose to pretend I don’t hear him.

Kelly ignores Bowen, too, as she points dramatically toward the top of the bar.

Johnny laughs. “Hell yes.”

Johnny grips Kelly by the hips and hoists her effortlessly onto the counter. She throws her arms in the air triumphantly while the people nearby erupt into cheers.

Then all eyes land on me.

“Oh no.” I laugh breathlessly, though I’m already stepping closer.

Johnny reaches for me anyway. “Your turn.” His hands grip my hips tightly, and I’m lifted into the air, my head tossed back in laughter.

The second my boots hit the bar top, adrenaline shoots through me. The music feels louder up here, vibrating straight through the soles of my feet.

Kelly grabs my hand, spinning me toward her, and together we start swaying to the beat.

The crowd goes wild.

Cheers and whistles rise around us, feeding the reckless energy buzzing through my veins. We dance harder because of it, hips rocking, arms lifted high above our heads as we sing every word at the top of our lungs.

For the first time in what feels like forever, I'm not thinking about Dixon. I'm not worrying about responsibilities or consequences or whether I'm making a fool of myself.

I'm just here.

One song melts into another, then another, and we never leave our perch on top of the bar. At some point, I notice Bowen weaving through the crowd below us, his hand reaching up like he's trying to coax me down before one of us breaks an ankle.

"Absolutely not!" Kelly yells over the music.

I laugh so hard my stomach hurts. We step further down the bar to get away from him, still dancing and laughing, the crowd cheering us on.

Bowen shakes his head, and there's a look on his face, one that tells me he's either constipated or not impressed we're dancing on his bar. We're not the first to do this here. I've seen it with my own eyes, so maybe he needs more fiber in his life.

Whatever the reason for his sour look, we ignore it and keep dancing. Because tonight, under the flashing neon lights of the Hideaway, surrounded by music and what looks like half of Magnolia Ridge, Kelly and I are living out our *Coyote Ugly* dreams.

No way are we ready to come down yet.

I don't know how much time has passed by the time someone curls their fingers around mine. The songs have blurred together, the bass thumping so hard beneath my boots it feels like my heartbeat has synced with it. My

cheeks hurt from laughing, my hair is sticking to the back of my neck, and the room spins just enough to remind me I'm definitely drunk.

Still dancing, I glance down lazily, expecting to see Bowen making another failed attempt to drag me off the bar.

But it's not Bowen.

It's Dixon.

For a second, I genuinely think I might be hallucinating him.

The flashing lights catch against the sharp line of his jaw, shadows dancing across his face as he looks up at me. His ball cap is pulled down close to his eyes, worn backward tonight, and his dark T-shirt stretches across broad shoulders that somehow seem even broader from up here. One hand grips mine tightly while the other rests against the edge of the bar beside him, steady and solid amidst all the chaos.

My stomach flips so hard it nearly sobers me.

"My Dixon." I laugh, breathless and disbelieving. "Are you real?"

His mouth twitches like he's trying not to smile. "Depends. How much have you had to drink?"

"Enough to think dancing on a bar is a good idea."

"I gathered that."

There's amusement in his voice, but his eyes move over me carefully, almost cautiously, like he's checking to make sure I'm okay. The attention sends warmth flooding through me, absolutely nothing to do with the fruity alcoholic beverages buzzing in my veins.

Kelly leans over, nearly falling into me as she points dramatically at him. "Leighton!" she stage whispers loudly. "Your boyfriend is here."

I choke on air. "He is not my boyfriend."

Dixon finally laughs at that, low and rough, the sound curling through me in the most unfair way.

"Come here," he says, giving my hand a gentle tug.

Instead of climbing down, I sway closer to the edge of the bar until I'm standing directly above him. "No," I tease. "I'm busy living my *Coyote Ugly* moment."

His eyes lift to mine, and for a heartbeat, the noise around us dulls. Or maybe I just stop hearing it.

"You look like you're about two seconds from falling," he says.

"Maybe," I admit with a grin, as my legs quiver.

Without warning, his free hand settles against my thigh to steady me when I wobble slightly in my boots. The touch burns straight through my jeans, warm and firm, and suddenly, I'm acutely aware of every inch between us.

My breath catches.

Dixon notices. At least I think he notices, if his heated gaze is any indication.

His gaze flicks up to mine again, slower this time, heavier somehow. Like he feels it, too.

The crowd erupts around us as another song starts, but it all fades into background noise. The only thing I can focus on is the way his thumb brushes absentmindedly over my knuckles while he holds my hand.

"You having fun up there?" he asks quietly.

I grin down at him, drunk on more than alcohol now. "I was."

One eyebrow lifts. Why is that so sexy?

"But I think I'm having more fun now," I say as I take a leap into his arms. He catches me with an *oomph* as I wrap my arms around his neck. "Hi."

He smiles, shaking his head. "Hi. You ready for me to take you home?"

"With you?" I ask. Even in my drunken state, I can hear the hope in my voice.

"Is that what you want?"

"Yes, please."

“I’ve got this one,” Bowen says, and I glance over to see Kelly in his arms, and then we’re on the move.

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DIXON

An Hour Earlier

My storage wall of cabinets was delivered today. I've spent the afternoon setting them up, labeling drawers and shelving, to make sure everything stays organized. That way, when we're low on a supply, it will be easy for me to tell.

This was actually Leighton's idea when I told her I was feeling overwhelmed by keeping supplies stocked on top of all the other hats I'm going to have to wear as a business owner. It's something they do at the manor, and she said it was very helpful. Already, I feel calmer about just eyeballing a shelf or drawer to order supplies.

I've just taken the last of the boxes out to the dumpster when my phone rings. I see Bowen's name flash across the screen, and curiosity has the best of me, because I know he's short-staffed and working the bar at the Hideaway tonight.

"What's up?" I answer. The bar's loud music flows through the line.

“Where are you?”

“Just wrapping up at the shop for the night.”

“Can you come here? I need you to get Leighton and Kelly.”

“What? What happened?” I’m instantly on alert.

“Alcohol.”

“I’m going to need more than that,” I say, already quickening my steps to lock up the shop and head that way. A million scenarios run through my mind.

“Let’s just say they’ve had too much, and they’re both dancing on my bar.”

Fuck. Leighton is on the bar? That’s out of character for her, but it’s not unheard of—at least with anyone but Leighton. Hell, I’m pretty sure all three of her sisters have done the exact same thing at least once in their lives. “That happens periodically,” I say, trying not to let the panic of knowing that Leighton has had enough alcohol to let her guard down this much.

“Dixon. Leighton and Kelly are dancing on the bar. They’re both three sheets to the wind, won’t drink water, and nothing I do gets them down. One or both of them is going to fall and get hurt, and I’m short-staffed and don’t have time to deal with this. I called you first, but I can call Cope or Mac. I just thought you’d want to be the one to handle this.”

“What makes you say that?” I ask, shutting off the lights and pulling the door to the shop closed, checking to make sure it’s locked.

“I don’t have time for this. Are you coming or not?”

“I’m getting in my truck now. I’ll be right there.”

“That’s what I thought.” He chuckles, and the line goes dead.

Hopping into the truck, I toss my phone into the cupholder and peel out of the parking lot. I hope I can be convincing enough to get them to come down. My stomach twists at the thought of her falling—well, either of them

falling—but to see Leighton hurt, yeah, I'm not a fan of the thought. Not to mention all those drunk guys staring at her.

They don't deserve her attention.

The parking lot of the Hideaway is packed, which is normal for a Saturday night. It's the only bar in town. I find a spot near the back and jog to the front door. Instantly, the warmth of the room, the smell of beer, and the blaring music attack my senses all at once.

My eyes instantly scan the bar, and there they are. Leighton and her best friend, Kelly, are shaking their asses, and there's a crowd of men surrounding them. Hoots and hollers come from the men—hell, even some of the women—and suddenly, my feet are moving. I have to get her down from there.

Working my way through the crowd, I slide in next to the bar just beneath where Leighton is dancing. Reaching up, I gently take her hand in mine to get her attention.

Leighton's blurry gaze lands on me, and her mouth falls open in shock, and then, even though the music is blaring, and tonight's crowd is loud, I hear her plain as day when she says, "My Dixon." She leans over, and I'm worried she's going to lose her balance. "Are you real?" she asks, as if her mind is playing tricks on her.

My mouth twitches. "Depends. How much have you had to drink?"

She offers me a sloppy grin. "Enough to think dancing on a bar is a good idea."

"I gathered that."

Before she can say more, Kelly appears. She leans over, nearly falling off the bar, as she points a manicured nail at me. "Leighton!" she says loudly, although from the tone of her voice, I think she's trying to whisper, and failing spectacularly. "Your boyfriend is here."

Leighton coughs. "He is not my boyfriend," she replies, still watching me, with a grin tilting her lips.

This time, I can’t stop my laughter from breaking free. “Come here,” I say, giving Leighton’s hand a gentle tug.

She wobbles a little. “No. I’m busy living my *Coyote Ugly* moment,” she says, laughing.

I hold her gaze. “You look like you’re about two seconds from falling.”

“Maybe,” she says, as she wobbles on unsteady legs.

Without warning her, my free hand settles against her thigh. Her breath catches, and her eyes land on mine once again. This time, there’s something there. Something that looks a hell of a lot like desire, and I can only imagine that she also sees the same look in mine. Luckily for me, she’s drunk and won’t remember.

“You having fun up there?” I ask. I need to say something to break this spell.

“I was.” She pouts. I lift an eyebrow, hoping she’ll keep talking and tell me what she’s thinking. “But I think I’m having more fun now,” she says, then she’s leaping into my arms.

Thankfully, I catch her easily, and she wraps both arms around my neck.

“Hi,” she says softly.

My grin widens. This is my Leighton. “Hi. You ready for me to take you home?”

“With you?” she asks.

I don’t know if it’s her tone or the look in her eyes, but it’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her I’ll take her to my place, and she never has to leave, but I go for, “Is that what you want?” as my reply instead.

“Yes, please,” she says, laying her head on my shoulder. Her hot breath fans against my neck, and a shiver of need races down my spine.

“I’ve got this one,” Bowen says.

I glance over to see Kelly in his arms, and with a nod, we’re on the move out of the bar and to my truck.

Once Kelly is settled in the back seat, and Leighton is in the passenger seat, I wave to Bowen as he rushes back inside to handle the bar. Then it's just me and my two drunk princesses. "Kelly, is there someone at your place to keep an eye on you?" I ask her, glancing in my rearview mirror.

"I'll be fine," she slurs. "Some water and some sleep, and I'll be good as new."

"You sure?" I turn to look at her, and she nods.

"I'm sure." She bobs her head, and I'm worried about leaving either of them alone.

"Why don't you just stay at my place so I can keep an eye on both of you?" I ask, and it hits me I'm trying to negotiate with a woman who's consumed too much alcohol tonight.

"I want my bed. I'm not a puker unless I drink liquor. Wait, no, beer before liquor never sicker. Liquor before beer, never fear. Yay!" she cheers. "Just liquor, no beer. Does that mean I'm safe, Dix?" she asks.

I chuckle. "If you say so."

"Dix." Leighton commands my attention with just the soft whisper of my name.

I turn to look at her and reach over to push her hair out of her eyes. "Lei?"

"I want to go home with you."

Fuck me. Drunk Leighton is proving hard to resist. "Okay, baby. We're going home," I assure her.

"Aww, he lurves you," Kelly slurs from the back seat.

I just laugh off her words. I doubt either one of them will remember this tomorrow. With one last glance at Leighton, I pull out of the lot and head toward home. The drive is entertaining to say the least. The ladies recount their *Coyote Ugly* debut, as they're calling it. They ramble on back and forth, and I don't need to glance in the mirror to see that my smile is taking over my face.

That’s just what happens when I spend time with her.

“I don’t live here,” Kelly says as we pull into my driveway. “Lei, do you live here?” she asks.

“My Dixon does,” Leighton says.

“Oh, your boyfriend,” Kelly says again.

“Okay, you two. Stay put, I’ll come around and help you out.” I don’t wait for them to agree or argue before grabbing my keys and climbing out of the truck. I rush to the passenger side and help Kelly out first. She wobbles a little, but she manages to stay upright. Next, I pull open the front passenger door, lean in, and unbuckle Leighton’s seat belt. She turns to face me, and I grip her hips, lifting her out of the truck.

Once I get the door shut, I offer each of them an arm, and we make the slow trek into the house. I’m able to guide them to the couch in the dark, before turning on the lamp on the end table. “Stay put,” I tell them, before rushing off to the kitchen for some headache medication and four bottles of water. One for each of them now, and one to keep with them during the night.

“Drink up,” I tell them, handing them each a bottle of water. Kelly is sprawled out on the couch, while Leighton is in the recliner.

“Why is your boyfriend so bossy?” Kelly asks, struggling to take the lid off the water bottle.

Moving to the couch, I help her sit up, take off the cap, and hand the bottle back to her before doing the same for Leighton. Then I shake out a couple of tablets for each of them and make them take them.

“He’s not bossy,” Leighton finally answers.

It’s not lost on me that she’s called me “my Dixon” twice now, and she’s not discouraging her best friend from referring to me as her boyfriend—not vocally, but there is a scowl on her gorgeous face. I know they’re both intoxicated, but still, that knowledge is hard to ignore. Especially when Leighton has been on my mind a lot more than usual lately.

“More drinking,” I tell them. They both scowl at me, but do as I ask and finish off their bottles of water. “Now, I have a guest room. Kelly, that’s where you’ll sleep, and Leighton, you can take my room.” I’ll sleep on the couch so that if either of them gets up, I can help them if they need it.

“Kelly, let’s get you settled first,” I tell her.

She nods and holds out her hand for me to help her stand. Gently, I tug her to her feet and glance at Leighton. Her eyes are closed, and her head is tilted back. I don’t think she’s sleeping, but I don’t want to risk waking her up. I can just carry her to bed.

In the spare bedroom, I place the extra bottle of water on the nightstand. “Let me go grab you something to sleep in,” I tell Kelly.

“Too tired,” she mumbles. She burrows under the covers and closes her eyes.

Well, all right, then. One down, one to go.

Back in the living room, I take a minute to watch Leighton. I stand rooted in place, my heart racing as I take in the sight of her. She’s still sprawled across the recliner, her long blonde hair cascading over the armrest like a golden waterfall.

The soft glow of the lamp casts a warm light, highlighting her features. Like the delicate curve of her jaw and the gentle rise and fall of her chest. She looks so peaceful, so vulnerable, and for a moment, I forget she’s not mine.

“You’re beautiful,” I whisper to myself. My feet start moving on their own, needing to be next to her, even if she’s asleep. I’ve known Leighton for years, but seeing her like this makes something inside me shift. It’s as if I’m seeing her for the first time. In the past few months, that’s been happening a lot more. She’s not just Leighton, one of the Moran sisters. She’s this incredible woman I can’t stop thinking about.

I shift closer, careful not to make any noise. My heart swells with a mix of admiration and protectiveness. I can’t help but think about how she’s

been there for me since buying the shop. She's been my constant sounding board, and even my painting buddy. And tonight, it's my turn to step up for her.

Crouching beside the recliner, I hover my hand over her thigh in those tight jeans that look painted on. I want to touch her, to shake her awake gently, but I hesitate. She's sleeping peacefully. I could just carefully lift her into my arms and carry her to my room. To my bed, where she'll be sleeping while I'm out here on the couch.

I've imagined Leighton in my bed more times than I can account for recently, but this was not the scenario I imagined.

Leighton stirs, and her eyelids flutter open. Her eyes are glassy as she takes me in.

"Hey," I say softly. "You fell asleep on me."

"I was just resting my eyes," she says, her lips quirking in a smile.

"Uh-huh," I say. "Come on, let's get you to bed."

She groans, no doubt at the thought of moving.

"I'll carry you," I tell her, and she nods. My heart races as I slide my arms under her, lifting her into my arms. Her glassy gaze locks on mine, and the moment feels charged. Finally, she closes her eyes, resting her head on my shoulder as I take the smallest, slowest steps possible to prolong the time I get to hold her.

"I'm sorry I drank too much," she says, a hint of embarrassment in her tone.

"You don't do that often. Everything okay?" I ask as we finally step into my bedroom. I don't bother with the light, instead moving on memory alone to the bed, where I lay her down gently. Only then do I reach over and flip on the lamp, but it's for purely selfish reasons. I need to see her in my bed, even if I'm not going to be in there with her.

"It was your fault," she says, turning sideways and clasping her hands beneath her cheek.

“My fault?”

“Yeah.”

“Why was it my fault?” I ask, pushing her hair out of her eyes.

“You were in my head,” she mumbles.

“Is that a bad thing? Me being in your head?” I ask. I shouldn’t. It’s wrong to ask her these things when she’s intoxicated, but I need the answer like I need air.

“Yes. You’ll never want me like I want you.”

My heart stalls, then thunders back to life with a roar. I tell myself not to ask the follow-up question that’s on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t help it. I’m probably going to hell for this, but it will be worth it. “You want me?”

“I know I’m not supposed to. I know that we’re friends, but it’s your brown eyes, and the way you look at me, or the way I think you’re looking at me. I think my mind is playing tricks on me,” she says, yawning.

Her eyes are closed, and she’s so damn beautiful—even a sweaty, drunk mess—that it almost hurts to look at her. “Do you need anything? Want to change?” I ask her.

“Just you.”

Fuck. Me.

“I’m right here,” I whisper, my voice raspy, but it’s hard to hear over the sound of my pulse thundering in my ears. I need to get out of this room. My room. Where she’s sleeping in my bed. I need to put distance between us.

I stand, and her eyes pop open. “Dix?”

“Yeah?”

“Will you hold me? Just until I fall asleep?”

I should say no. I need to say no. That’s the right thing to do, but instead, I find myself saying, “Whatever you want, baby.” Kicking off my shoes, I turn off the light, then climb over her. She turns and settles against my chest, and I wrap my arms around her. She sighs, and her body relaxes into my embrace.

I tell myself it’s just until she falls asleep, but then I close my eyes, and I can’t ever remember a time when I’ve been this comfortable. Have I ever been this content?

It’s not long before sleep takes me, with Leighton nestled in my arms.

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LEIGHTON

I wake up too warm.

At first, that's the only coherent thought I have. I'm warm and comfortable in a way that makes me want to burrow deeper into the mattress instead of opening my eyes. However, my bladder is screaming. I blink a few times but end up slamming my eyes shut. My head feels fuzzy, and my lids are heavy. Both things that only happen when too much alcohol and not enough common sense are used.

Blinking again, I open my eyes, staring into the dark room. That's when I really start to register the heat.

A solid wall pressed against my back.

An arm draped over my waist.

Long legs tangled with mine.

For one terrifying second, I have absolutely no idea whose bed I'm in, because I know from the firmness of the mattress, it's sure as hell not mine. For one horrible second, panic slams into me so hard that I forget how to breathe.

Memories hit me in fractured pieces. Kelly and I are hanging out at the Hideaway. Bowen is making us something fruity, something that you couldn't even taste the alcohol in. I let out a soft groan. I'm never drinking again.

Ever.

I'm usually the responsible one. The one holding purses, ordering fries, pushing water to prevent hangovers, and making sure everyone gets home alive. However, last night, I needed something to shut my mind down. I know alcohol wasn't the right choice, but for a few hours, I forgot how I'm falling for Dixon.

Dixon, the man who showed up at the bar to take care of me and my best friend. He's also the man—at least I hope he is, if my foggy memory is serving me correctly—who is sleeping peacefully with me wrapped up in his arms.

Squeezing my eyes closed, it all comes rushing back. The way he was smiling up at me, and oh, shit! I called him my Dixon. Fuck. This just cements it. Never again. I am never drinking again. Not ever.

I asked him to stay with me, and well, here we are. My bladder is screaming at me, so I carefully pull back the covers and try to remove his hand without waking him. The response is immediate. He makes a low, almost growling sound, and tightens his hold on me.

My heart stops. Literally stalls in my chest, before resuming at a rate so rapid, I'm sure Kelly can hear it all the way in the guest room. That's not healthy, right? For my heart to beat this fast?

I'm suddenly aware of every inch of him. His warm chest, rough stubble brushing the side of my neck, his slow, even breaths against my skin. And—oh shit. He's hard, and from the feel of his… length pressing into my ass, Dixon is blessed in that department.

"Shit," I mutter.

“Mmm,” he mumbles, and the sound rumbles right through me. I have to pee like it’s my job, and now, I’m more turned on than I’ve ever been in my life.

This is a problem.

“What do you need, baby?” he asks in his sexy, sleep-laced voice, and fuck me, my head is too fuzzy for this.

Scientists should study Dixon’s sleepy morning voice. It’s deep and rough, and sexy enough to make my knees weak, even lying down.

“Pee. B-Bathroom,” I manage to stutter.

“You need help?” he asks, lifting his arm and moving his legs, releasing his hold on me.

“What? No,” I say too loudly. “No,” I say again, calmer this time. “I’m fine.”

“Okay, come back to bed when you’re done. The sun’s not even up,” he rasps.

Scrambling out of bed on shaking legs, with my heart racing so fast it feels as if it could jump right out of my chest, I stumble to the en suite bathroom. My hands feel around on the wall for the light, and I gasp when I look at my reflection in the mirror. “I look like death,” I mutter, but first, my bladder is about to burst.

After taking care of business, which was sweet, sweet relief, I move back to the sink and wash my hands. I grimace when I glance up. My mouth tastes like ass, or what I assume ass would taste like. Maybe a dead animal? Either way, this needs to be rectified. My hair is a tangled, sweaty mess, and basically, I’m a wreck.

Digging around, I find a new toothbrush that I don’t think twice about using. I’ll replace it. Quickly, I brush my teeth, and that makes me feel a little more human. Next is the washcloth I found while searching for a toothbrush. I make quick work of washing my face and wiping the sweat off

the back of my neck. I'm in a tank top and this sweater, but these jeans are sticking to me.

I wish I had a hair tie, but it is what it is. Flipping off the light, I make my way back to the bed, but I don't move to get in. I'm sweating just thinking about it, and I know a big part of it is these tight-ass jeans I'm wearing. Last night was definitely a night of not-so-good choices.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm hot."

"Dresser. Bottom drawer. Grab a T-shirt to sleep in."

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him I'll be fine, but I'm miserable in these hot pants. The bedside lamp comes on, and I want more than anything to look at a sleep-rumpled Dixon, but I hold strong and make a beeline for the dresser. I find a T-shirt and rush off to the bathroom.

As soon as I strip out of my clothes, I stand there in my bra and panties and just breathe. Lifting my hair off my neck, I sit on the edge of the tub and let my body cool down. Finally, I slip the worn cotton T-shirt over my head, fold my clothes, and leave them in a pile next to the hamper, flip off the light, and open the door. The room is once again bathed in darkness.

"Better?" Dixon asks.

"Yes, thank you."

"Come back to bed." I hear rustling, and I know he's moving the covers, and I want more than anything to curl back up in his arms and fall back to sleep. Instead, I slide beneath the covers, curl my hands under my chin, and stare at him. It's dark in the room, so I can't make out his features, but I know he's facing me, too.

As I lie here next to him, memories from last night roll through my mind. My mind is still fuzzy, but not so much that I don't remember the way he looked at me while I was dancing on the bar. I remember how it felt to be in his arms, and while I'm glad I remember, it's also dangerous,

because lying here next to him, all I want to do is kiss him. Well, let's be honest, more than just kiss him, but that's a good start.

"I can hear you thinking." Dixon laughs. It's deep and rough. "What's going on in that beautiful head of yours?"

"I'm trying not to kiss you," I blurt out before I can think better of it.

Never. Drinking. Again.

More of his deep laughter fills the room. "Stop trying."

"What?" I ask. Surely, I didn't hear him right.

He moves closer, sliding his arm around me, pulling me close. "Do you want to kiss me, Leighton?"

"Is this a trick question?" I ask, starting to sweat again.

He leans in close. So close that I can feel his hot breath fan across my lips. His nose touches mine, and my body heats, but not because I'm nervous—that ship has sailed. Now it's pure desire lighting me on fire.

"Can I kiss you?" he whispers.

How is this real life? Am I dreaming?

"Dixon," I breathe.

"Right here," he answers, sliding his hand up my spine to cradle the back of my neck.

"Is this real?"

"Let's find out," he murmurs, and then his lips are pressed to mine.

His lips are soft. That's my first coherent thought as the world tilts under me. Not soft in a hesitant way. Not careful. Dixon kisses me like it's the last kiss he'll ever get.

A sound slips out of me, and he swallows it with another kiss, deeper this time. His hand tightens at the back of my neck, holding me close.

The room spins warm around us, the sound of my own heartbeat thumping in my ears, but not so much that I don't hear the rough inhale he takes when I kiss him back, sliding my tongue against his. It's as if he expected me to hold back, and maybe in the light of day, I would. But right

now, this moment, I've thought of it more times than I can count, and if this is my only chance, I'm taking it.

My fingers curl into the front of his shirt, and he groans quietly against my mouth. The sound nearly kills me.

"Leighton," he murmurs, my name dragging from his lips like it means something dangerous.

I pull back just enough to breathe. Barely. My chest is heaving for each breath I draw into my lungs. His forehead rests against mine, both of us breathing too fast. He rolls over, pushing me onto my back. The hand that was on the nape of my neck lands on my thigh as he lifts it, guiding me to wrap my leg around his waist as he settles between my thighs.

We both groan on contact, because all that's between us is his underwear and mine. Never in my entire life have I ever been this turned on.

One second, I'm trying to remember how oxygen works, and the next, his mouth is back on mine, slower now. Hotter. It's the kind of kiss that feels like it could stretch for hours. I melt into him before I can stop myself. His thumb brushes along my waist underneath the hem of my shirt, and every nerve ending in my body lights up at once.

"This okay?" he asks softly against my lips.

The fact that he asks, that he sounds wrecked and still checks on me, does something stupidly emotional to my heart.

I nod too fast. "Please don't stop."

A low laugh rumbles out of him, equal parts smug and disbelieving. "Trust me," he says, kissing the corner of my mouth, "that wasn't part of the plan. How buzzed are you?"

I grin before I can help it. "You had a plan? And I'm not, not anymore."

"You think I survive being around you without one?"

My stomach flips violently. "What does that mean?" I ask because I need this spelled out for me. I'm having a hard time believing that he wants

me, Leighton Moran, the quiet sister.

“Your smile,” he says quietly. “It makes me forget my own name.”

Heat rushes into my cheeks so fast it’s honestly embarrassing. I’m glad the room is dark. “Dixon Turner,” I say stupidly, more drunk off his kiss and his touch than the alcohol.

“Leighton Moran.”

“So, you do know it’s me,” I tease him.

His body shakes with silent laughter. “Yeah, baby, I know it’s you.” His fingers brush my cheek gently, completely different from the way he kissed me, and somehow, that tenderness hits harder.

“Tell me to stop,” he says quietly.

I should. Instead, I lean up and kiss him first this time. And the noise he makes in response? Definitely worth every bad decision that’s about to follow.

I don’t know how much time passes, but I know the next time we come up for air, my lips are swollen to the point of pain, and my heart… it feels full. Like this is where I was always meant to be.

His hard cock is still pressing against my now-soaked panties, and I’m ready to move this show to the next act, but Dixon has other plans. He plants a kiss on my lips, just a soft peck, before rolling to his side and pulling me against his chest. I settle against him, like he’s mine, not sure where we go from here.

“We’ll talk in the morning. You need some more rest.”

“I think more kissing,” I say, and he chuckles.

“After we talk.”

“Are you mad?”

His tone softens. “No, baby, I’m not mad. There are just some things we have to talk about before we go any further. Besides, you need a clear mind for both our conversation and anything else that happens between us.”

“I’m not drunk.”

“I know, but I’d feel better if you were rested.” I feel his lips press to the top of my head. “I like you here,” he whispers.

All I can do is nod. I don’t know what he wants to talk about, but whatever it is, I’m in. If it means I get more kisses from this man, sign me up. Cuddled up in his arms, exhaustion starts to pull me under, and that’s my last thought before drifting off to sleep.

The next time I wake up, the sun is up, shining through the blinds. I peel my eyes open and blink, getting my first look at his room in the daylight. Glancing over to the other side of the bed, I find it empty.

My lips feel swollen. I touch them gingerly. My face heats up as I remember everything that happened last night, both at the bar and after. Tossing the covers off, I make another quick bathroom stop. This time, I find a comb and try to make something of my rat’s nest of hair. It’s as good as I’m going to get. I bend over to get my clothes. I dread putting them back on, but I can’t walk around Dixon’s house in his T-shirt. What if someone shows up? And it’s not just us. Kelly is here, too. With a sigh, I quickly get dressed, trying to decide how I could sneak his T-shirt home with me, then decide against it and toss it into the hamper before leaving the bathroom.

Quietly, I open his bedroom door and step out into the hall. The door across from his is open, but when I peek my head inside, there’s no sign of my best friend. Moving down the hall, I come to a stop just inside the kitchen, where Dixon is at the stove, and Kelly is at the island with her head resting on her forearm.

As if he can feel me, Dixon turns and smiles. “Hey, you. How are you feeling?” he asks, his eyes soft, but his brow furrows when he says, “You changed.”

“Oh, yeah,” I say, looking down at myself. “Thank you for the T-shirt.”

He nods and turns back to the stove.

“There’s coffee, milk, water, some Dr Pepper, and sweet tea. Take your pick and help yourself,” he says.

I smile my thanks before looking at my best friend. “Kell?”

“I’m dying.” She doesn’t lift her head but does manage to raise her hand and wave me off.

“I’ll grab you a water,” I tell her. “Dixon?”

“I have coffee. Thanks,” he replies without looking at me.

I stop next to him, and he peers down at me. “Are you mad at me?” I ask, keeping my voice quiet, just between us.

“No, just disappointed,” he confesses.

“I’m sorry I drank so much. I took Ad—” I start, but he shakes his head, and I stop talking mid-sentence.

He leans over, placing his lips next to my ear, his hot breath coating my cheek. “I wanted to see you in my shirt.”

It takes me a second to comprehend what he just said, and my mouth falls open in shock. When I finally close it, Dixon glances toward the island, then places a soft kiss on my lips before turning his attention back to the eggs he’s cooking.

I pour myself a cup of black coffee because I need the jolt, and grab two waters from the fridge, one for me and one for Kelly. “Here,” I say, placing the water in front of her. This time, she lifts her head and groans.

“How are you not miserable?” she asks.

Dixon’s kisses, I think to myself; instead, I just shrug innocently. “I guess I can hold my liquor better than you.”

“Bitch,” she mutters, and I chuckle. “I love you, but I also kind of hate you right now.”

“Drink your water.”

“Dixon already made me drink one and take some headache meds.”

“More water,” I say, taking a quick sip of my coffee and pushing her bottle toward her. We’re quiet while we both rehydrate and Dixon makes us breakfast. A few minutes later, the three of us have a plate of eggs, bacon, and toast in front of us. We’re quiet while we eat, nothing but the clanking of forks on our plates.

“That was delicious. Thank you, Dix.” I smile at him.

He winks. “You’re welcome.”

“Ugh, I need a shower,” Kelly groans.

“Me, too.”

“Let me just toss these in the sink, and I’ll take you ladies home.”

“Our hero,” Kelly muses. “Lei, your boyfriend is a keeper.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.” I roll my eyes. I remember her calling him that last night, and I’m pretty sure I corrected her. The details are fuzzy.

“You two should do something about that.” She chuckles.

Dixon grins at her. “Not really a boyfriend kind of guy. But if I were, Leighton would be at the top of my list. Now, are you ladies ready to head out?”

Nothing more is said, but I’m feeling all gooey inside from his confession. I know we still have to talk, and it’s obvious that we’re not headed toward a relationship, but Lord help me, wherever we are headed, I hope there are more kisses next time. The naked kind.

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fourteen

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DIXON

The ride to the Hideaway is quiet. When I finally pull into the lot, my stomach is in knots, because I'm not ready to be away from her yet. We started something in the middle of the night, and it feels unfinished.

"Thanks, Dixon!" Kelly says, rushing to climb out of the back seat and slamming the door closed.

Leighton turns to me and smiles. "Thank you for the ride, and for taking care of us." She unbuckles her seat belt and leans over the console to peck a kiss on my cheek.

Before she can reach for the handle, my hand is on her arm. "Wait." She freezes and turns to look at me. "Stay." I swallow hard. "With me. Today. Stay with me." I'm suddenly nervous, because pursuing her means that when this ends, it might end badly, and her sisters and my best friends are surely going to be in the middle of it.

"Okay." She nods.

"Okay," I repeat, feeling the knot ease.

"I should go tell Kelly?" She nods toward Kelly's car.

"Yeah," I agree.

She grins at me before climbing out of the truck and rushing over to her best friend's car. They say a few words, then Leighton blows her best friend a kiss, and she's bouncing back toward my truck, climbing into the passenger seat as if she was always meant to be there.

"I need a shower and some clean clothes." She wrinkles her nose.

I nod. "Is Court home?"

"Not yet. They won't be home until later tonight."

"So, I'll take you to your place to get some clothes and then bring you back to mine?"

"Do you want her to see you dropping me off later?" she asks, biting down on her bottom lip.

"Do you not want her to know?" I ask, cautiously. Not telling anyone would make this a hell of a lot easier when it's over.

She shrugs. "I don't know what this is, Dix. I think we should talk about that, and it's better that no one knows until we do. I mean, last night—we don't have to talk about it, but I assumed when you asked me to stay…" Her voice trails off again.

"Drive to my place. We can pull your car into the garage." We do need to talk about what happened last night, and I hope that if I'm lucky, there will be a repeat.

She nods. "Okay." She puts her seat belt back on and turns to look at me. "Ready?"

I look at her for several heavy heartbeats, because no, I'm absolutely not ready. Not for the way she's sitting in my passenger seat as if she belongs there. Not for the way last night keeps replaying in my head every time she looks at me with those big blue eyes and swollen lips. Not for the fact that last night, she somehow managed to wedge herself under my ribs and stay there. Honestly, she's been there for far longer than I'm willing to admit. I nod anyway. "Yeah," I say, starting the truck. "Ready." She gives

me a small smile, one that feels different in a way that I can't name. It makes something tight pull in my chest.

The drive to her place is quiet at first. Not awkward exactly, just… careful. Like we're both trying not to move too fast and scare this thing away before we even know what it is.

There's also the fact that I know this could blow up in a bad way, but fuck, this woman, she's all I've been able to think about. We can't keep dancing around this attraction. We have to do something about it.

Her fingers tap against her thigh while she stares out the window.

"You're thinking too hard," I tell her, nodding toward where her fingers are tapping, before setting my eyes back on the road.

She glances over. "You know that from finger tapping?"

"I know that because you only do the tapping when you're stressed or trying not to say something."

She huffs out a laugh. "You've been paying that much attention to me?"

The question hits harder than it should. "Yeah," I murmur before I can think better of it. "I can't seem to help myself," I confess.

Her tapping stops.

The truck suddenly feels smaller. Warmer. I reach over to make sure the heat's not on. It's not. It's just us and the combustible energy that flows between us. It's almost suffocating in the cab of my truck.

I clear my throat and focus back on the road. As we pull into the estate, I drive past the manor and park outside their house. I don't turn off the truck as she unbuckles her belt and turns to face me. "So, I'll see you soon?"

"Just grab what you need. You can shower at my place." I don't know why, but I need her with me sooner rather than later. Maybe because the longer she's away from me, she might change her mind? Maybe I might lose mine if I don't get my lips on hers again.

Her eyes widen, but instead of arguing with me, she nods. "Okay."

Just like that. Everything with Leighton is easy. She's easy to be around, easy to talk to, and easy to kiss while lying in bed next to me. I clear my throat. "Are you hungry yet?"

She smiles. "Not yet. We just had breakfast."

"Right," I agree. "We can figure all of that out later. So, you're coming right over?" I ask. "I'll have the garage door up for you."

"Yes." She smiles softly, and damn, I want to kiss her again. I don't think I can wait, so I lean over the console, rest my palm against her cheek, and press my lips to hers. It's just a peck compared to last night, but it's enough to hold me over.

"I'll see you soon," I say, dropping my hand and moving back to my side of the truck.

"See you soon, Dix," she says sweetly, before reaching for the handle and climbing out of my truck. I don't pull out until I see her disappear inside her house.

I take the drive back to my place slower than I normally would. Suddenly, coming home to an empty house isn't very appealing. One night in my bed, lying next to her, and she's already making my life feel different.

Once I get home, I rush to open the garage door and take a seat on the steps of the front porch to wait for her. I don't have to wait long before her car turns into the drive. I point toward the garage, and she drives in slowly. I rush after her, closing the garage door and then pulling open the driver's side door.

"Hey," I greet her.

"I've never parked in a garage before," she says, taking my hand and allowing me to help her out of the car. I wrap her in a hug before reluctantly releasing her.

"Glad mine could be your first." I wink at her, and her cheeks turn a very light shade of pink. She peers up at me under long lashes, and my willpower is nonexistent, so I bend and press my lips to hers.

“My bag is in the back seat,” she says when I pull away.

Releasing my hold on her, I open the back door, grab the small overnight bag, and close it before offering her my hand and leading her into the house. I don’t stop until we’re in my bedroom with the door shut. I toss her bag on the bed and turn to face her. “Talk first or shower first?”

“Definitely a shower,” she says, crinkling up her nose. “I’m ready to get out of these clothes.”

“Toss those out once you’re undressed, and I’ll wash them with mine. I have laundry to do today anyway.” I don’t know who I am right now. I’ve never cared about washing a woman’s clothes for her before. In fact, there’s never been a woman who’s stayed here with me. My hookups over the years have been few and far between, and well, none of them have ever been here to my place.

Just Leighton.

I refuse to think about why that might be. I know the answer. She’s not just a hookup. She’s a friend. Two of my best friends are married to her sisters, one of whom is also a good friend, so of course, I’d treat her differently. That’s all this is.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” she protests.

“It’s not a big deal.” I nod toward the bathroom. “You know where it’s at. Help yourself to anything you might need.”

“Thank you, Dixon.” She grabs her bag from the bed and disappears behind the bathroom door. A few minutes later, I hear the water turn on, and I fist my hands on my lap. Leighton Moran is naked in my shower. The woman I can’t stop thinking about, the one whom I made out with like a teenager in this very room mere hours ago.

The bathroom door opens, and I jump to my feet. Leighton stands there with her long blonde hair falling over her bare shoulders, wrapped up in a towel, her dirty clothes in her hands. I don’t stop until I’m standing toe to toe with her.

“My clothes,” she says, nodding to where they’re pressed against her chest, her chest that’s bare inside the towel wrapped around her, but she makes no move to hand them over.

My throat is thick, and I swallow hard, but words still won’t come. It takes two more times before I can force words past my lips. “Do you need help in there?” I rasp. If I weren’t so fucking turned on by this woman, I’d be kicking my own ass for asking that question, but damn, she’s basically naked in front of me, and well, my cock is speaking for my brain right now.

“I—” She pauses. “My back. You can wash my back.”

My chest feels like it’s being hammered on from the inside. Each violent beat of my heart threatens to break something vital. The sensation is so extreme, so all-consuming, that my immediate thought is that I must be dying.

“I can do that,” I say, my voice gravelly.

“Okay,” Leighton whispers softly. With one hand holding on to the towel, the other hand offers me her clothes. “For after” is all she says before she turns and steps back into the bathroom. The door stands wide open, which means I have a perfect view of her dropping the towel to the floor, covering her breasts with her arms, but I saw them, pert and round, a perfect fucking handful, before glancing at me over her shoulder and disappearing into the shower.

I peer down at the dirty clothes in my arms and drop them to the floor. I strip out of my own, leaving them in a pile, and step into the steam-filled bathroom. My hands tremble as I pull back the curtain and step inside. Leighton’s back is to me, and again, she glances at me over her shoulder.

Her face is flushed, and I know it’s not from the heat of the water. It’s the moment. She turns back toward the water, and I step closer. I rest my hands on her bare hips, and damn, her skin is soft. Knowing that I need to control myself, I reach for the body wash, lather my hands, and rasp, “You’re going to smell like me.”

“I forgot mine in my bag,” she tells me, gathering her hair and moving it to lie over her shoulder, baring her back to me.

“Want me to get it?”

She shakes her head, and I step a little closer, just in time to hear her whisper, “I want to smell like you.”

My cock is as hard as granite, begging to get in on the action, but I ignore it and stay on track. With my lathered hands, I start at her shoulders and gently rub. I take my time running my soapy arms all over her back, neck, and shoulders. As I reach her ass, I cup each round globe in the palm of my hands, squeezing gently. Fuck, she’s the sexiest woman I’ve ever seen in my life.

I lather my hands again before crouching down and paying extra attention to each leg. She parts for me, and my breath hitches. I want nothing more than to bury my face in her pussy, but I swallow back the need and focus on washing every inch of her skin. Once her entire backside is complete, I stand and align my body with hers, letting her feel what she’s doing to me.

“Turn for me, baby,” I whisper, my lips next to her ear.

Doing as she’s told, she slowly turns. Her eyes land on my chest, but that’s not going to work. Carefully, I place my index finger beneath her chin and lift her eyes to mine.

“There they are.” I smile. “My blue-eyed girl.” Bending, I press a kiss to the corner of her mouth before reaching for the body wash, lathering my hands, and getting to work. I wash her neck, front shoulders, and down her arms, then move to her breasts. I make sure to wash each one thoroughly, causing a little moan to slip free from her lips.

Dropping to my knees, I wash her belly, her legs, her feet, and finally, my hand gently finds its way between her thighs. I keep my movements as clinical as possible, even though my cock is weeping for more of her, and my mouth is dry, demanding a taste.

“Turn,” I rasp. She does as I ask, and I can’t take it. I stand, fist my cock, and pump fast a few times, trying to alleviate the ache of needing her. I can’t recall ever needing a woman this badly.

When she turns back around, her mouth falls open in shock as she catches me stroking my cock. She stands there, water hitting her back, as she watches me. When she licks her lips, I growl out her name, and her eyes snap to mine.

I don’t know what I expected, but it’s not for her to step toward me, lick those perfect, luscious lips again, reach her hand out, and place hers over mine. My eyes fall closed, and I let my hand fall away, leaving her to grip my cock with her small, soft hand.

When I finally get the courage to open my eyes, because I don’t want to miss this, it’s to see her staring at my cock like it’s her last meal. Snaking an arm around her waist, I tug her closer, sliding my free hand between her thighs. My fingers trace through her pussy, and she’s soaked for me. It’s a silky wetness against my fingers, and it’s fucking heaven.

“Is this for me?” I ask, my voice gruff.

Her eyes find mine. “Is this for me?” she asks, stroking my cock from root to tip, trying to make me lose my mind.

“All you.”

She smiles. “Only you,” she answers, and fuck, my heart thuds in my chest.

Bending, I trail kisses over her neck, nipping and sucking gently, while lazily sliding two fingers in and out of her wet heat. Her hand strokes me faster, and I try to think of anything but what she’s doing to me, because I’m already close.

“Leighton, baby,” I beg.

“Oh,” she moans, her forehead coming to rest on my shoulder. Our movements sync. With every push of my fingers inside her, she strokes up. The rhythm is set as we both chase a high that only the other can give.

“Dix,” she moans softly, and that’s it. It’s over for me.

“Fuck. Come for me,” I demand, and her pussy clamps down around my fingers as my cock spills over into her hands. I’m spent. My limbs feel heavy, and why wouldn’t they? That was the hottest sexual experience of my life, and my cock didn’t get anywhere near her pussy.

Pulling my hand from between her thighs, I bring them to my lips to lick them clean. Leighton, well, she surprises me when she lifts her hand and does the same to her palm.

Just like that, I’m hard again.

“Let’s clean you up,” I say, my voice barely sounding like my own. Together, we take turns washing one another before I reach around her and turn off the water, pulling back the curtain. I hand her a towel for her hair, give her another, and help her dry off. It’s not until she’s stepping out of the shower, with the towel tied around her waist, that I grab one for myself, quickly drying off before tying it around my own waist, and climb out, following her into my bedroom.

She’s digging through her bag for clothes when I step up behind her, wrapping my arms around her and burying my face in her neck. “No clothes.”

“What?” she asks, laughing. “We can’t lie around naked all day.”

“We can.”

She stops digging through her bag and turns to face me, sliding her hands around my neck, running her fingers through my wet hair. “Is that what you want? To lie around naked?”

“Yes. At least for a little while. We’ll have to get dressed to eat, because I’m not risking someone walking into my house and seeing you. This is all for me,” I say, tapping her ass cheek and making her giggle. “Get in bed, woman,” I say, kissing her forehead and pulling back. Reaching around her, I grab her bag and place it on the floor, before pulling back the covers.

“We’re going to get everything wet.” She laughs.

“Don’t care. In you go.” She turns to look at me, grins when she releases the towel around her body, and tosses it into the bathroom. It hits the floor with a thunk. I do the same with mine, tossing it next to hers. She climbs into bed, and I follow after her, pulling the covers over us, before wrapping my arms around her.

Her naked body is aligned with mine, and I sigh with contentment. Fuck eating. We’re staying like this until the very last second possible.

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fifteen

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LEIGHTON

My body is still humming with desire as Dixon gathers me into his arms. We're both a little damp, and the towel wrapped around my hair is guaranteed to soak the pillow, but he doesn't seem to mind.

"Is that comfortable?" he asks, nodding to the towel on my head.

"It's not uncomfortable."

He chuckles. "So, here we are," he says, his fingers trailing patterns over the small of my back.

"Here we are." I smile.

"What's going through that pretty head of yours?" he asks me.

"I'm thinking about how messy this could get."

"Do you want to go home?"

"No. Despite knowing that, I still want to be here. I think… maybe we could just keep this between us," I say. Even I can hear the hope in my voice. I know Dixon isn't someone who ever wants to settle down. I've known him a long time, so I know that this isn't going anywhere. No matter that I'm falling hard and fast for this man, I know what I'm doing.

What's that saying—it's better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all? That's how I feel about Dixon. He's sexy as hell, he's good to me, his kisses make my toes curl, and while I know I'm just another woman to him, to me, it's more, and I know I'm going to be crushed when this is over.

However, if we keep it between us, I can suffer with my broken heart in silence. There's no need for my sisters or my brothers-in-law to get involved. We can just do us, until he no longer wants there to be an us, and then, I'll have all these moments to look back on. Sure, it's not my smartest move—setting myself up for heartbreak—but I know deep in my soul that any time with Dixon will be worth it.

"You want to hide this? Us?" he asks, and I can hear the shock in his voice.

"I mean, I don't know what this is, if anything, and I know you've never wanted anything serious. It makes the most sense for this to be just between us, and then whenever"—I wave my hands between us—"whatever this is fizzles out, we won't have friends and family all up in our business."

"Our lives are pretty entwined," he says, chuckling.

"They are, and I know Cope and Mac, they're going to want to step in for me, and I don't need them to. I'm an adult. I can make my own choices."

"And you choose me?" he asks, almost sounding uncertain.

"Yeah, I mean, as long as you can agree that it's just the two of us. When you're done, or if you want to see someone else, just tell me. I can't do that. I can't be with you while you're with someone else."

"Of course not," he says, sounding offended. "There's only you, Leighton. Hell, you're all I've been able to think about for months, it seems like," he confesses.

"Glad it's not just me. I mean, we've been spending a lot of time together, so it's understandable."

“It’s more than that,” he says, leaning in and pressing a kiss to my lips. “It’s you. It’s these sweet lips.” He steals another kiss. “It’s the way you fit against me.” He pulls me even closer, his hard length pressing against my belly.

“So, we keep this on the down-low. We act as if nothing is amiss when we’re with everyone else, and we’ll have to get creative.”

“They already know you’ve been helping me,” he says.

“That’s true,” I agree.

“I’m going to need you to tell me exactly what you want, Leighton.”

I run my fingers through his wet strands of hair. “You, Dix. I want you.”

“But what does that mean? You want to hang out, watch a movie, and have dinner? Does that mean I get to shower with you, hold you like this? Do I get to see those big blue eyes of yours turn into royal lava when my cock is inside you? Tell me what you want. Tell me what you need, and I’ll make sure you get it.”

“Yes.” I nod, and he tosses his head back in laughter. The sound is raspy, yet warm, and I want to bask in it for hours.

When he finally sobers, he rolls to his back, pulling me with him. “Closer,” he murmurs, and I toss a leg over him and straddle his hips. His hard length sits nestled against my core, and I shiver at the possibility of what comes next. “Show me, Leighton.” His large, calloused hands rub up and down my thighs in a soothing motion.

“W-What?”

“Show me. It’s just you and me. We’ve established that. I don’t want anyone else. We’re keeping this between us. We’ve talked it out. Now, baby, I want you to show me.”

“Show you what?” I ask, biting down on my bottom lip.

“Everything.” He moves his hands to lock them behind his head. “You said you want it all, so take it, baby. I’m all yours.”

Something inside me shifts, hearing his words. My stomach twists with want. Because no matter what he says, I know Dixon will never be just mine. He won't be confessing his love for me. He won't be dropping to one knee to ask me to marry him, but he will give me this.

He'll give me as much as he can, and that's all that I can ask for.

Bracing my hands on his chest, I stare into his eyes, and his gaze softens. I've never been with a man like Dixon. One who's willing to sit back and let me take control. I don't know what I want beyond just him. More of him. More of all of it.

He must be able to see the indecision in my eyes because he raises a hand and cradles my cheek. "I'm yours, Lei. As much of myself as I can give, it's yours. You're the sexiest woman I've ever laid eyes on. You're giving me you. Time with you. A piece of you that I know is bigger than what I should take, but I'm a selfish man, baby. I know I can't give you what you deserve, but I want you anyway."

"I've never just… taken what I wanted before. I'm always the one to go along with it."

His eyes darken. "Tell me some fucker didn't hurt you," he says, sitting up, which pushes me back to a sitting position, bringing our naked chests together.

"No, it's not that. It's just, well, I'm not good at this part. I'm quiet and reserved, and I don't know how to ask for those things. It's embarrassing."

"Anything, baby. You hear me? There isn't a single thing you could tell me you wanted that, if it's within my power, I wouldn't give to you."

I know what I want. Something I've never done but always wanted to. I've never been brave enough to ask, and the small handful of men I've been with never wanted to, at least they never tried or offered, and I never brought it up.

Dixon's arms circle around me, holding me close as he buries his face in my neck. I hug him just as fiercely as I work up the nerve to ask for what I

want. It’s a new concept for me, but I know this man. He’s been in my life for as long as I can remember. Not as mine, but there, steady and present, and I know if I’m going to ever ask, it’s going to be with him.

Besides, I’m tired of sitting on the sidelines, too shy to ask for what I want.

“I—I want your mouth,” I whisper.

He kisses me, just beneath my ear, causing me to shiver, before he pulls back to face me. “Where?”

“What?” I ask, panicked. I thought that would be enough, but from the smirk he’s giving me, I know he’s going to make me say it, and I can feel the heat flood my cheeks.

“Where do you want my mouth, Leighton?”

Not sure I can say it, I take his hand and move it between my thighs. “Here.”

His grin widens. “You want my mouth on your pussy, baby? Is that what you’re telling me?”

I nod, and he raises his eyebrows. “Yes,” I breathe.

“My pleasure,” he says, lying back on the bed. I open my mouth to ask him what he’s doing when he taps his chin. “Come here.”

“W-What?” I ask.

“I want you to sit on my face, Leighton.”

“I can’t do that!” I blurt. “You won’t be able to breathe.”

“Good. I’ll be smothered in you. Now, come here.” He taps his chin a second time, but I don’t move. “You want this, right?”

I nod.

“Then you have to trust me. I’ll never do anything to hurt you, and if you ever want to stop, all you have to do is say stop, and it’s done. That’s all.”

“I’m not worried about me, Dix. I’m worried about you.”

“I’ll be fine, baby. Come here.” He grips my hips and pulls me further up his chest. His hard length rubs against my folds as he does it, and we both moan. “Rise up,” he says, tapping my thigh.

I do as I’m told, and he shimmies down the mattress, putting his face right beneath me. “Dixon?” I reach up and tear the towel off my head. It was falling anyway. I don’t even care that my hair is going to be a ravaged mess, not with his mouth on me.

“Trust me,” he says, kissing my inner thigh, and my legs quiver. “Now, sit on my face, beautiful.”

“Oh—” I say, because his hands on my hips guide me to his face, and the first swipe of his tongue has me reaching for something to hold on to. It just so happens to be his hair, and when I tug gently, not meaning to, he groans and sucks on my clit, and I’m starting to see the error in my ways.

This is what the shy girls miss out on.

His hair is tangled in my fists as his grip my hips, and his tongue, well, it’s got magic powers because in no time at all, I feel my orgasm building. It’s a tingling pleasure at the base of my spine, and without warning, I’m calling out his name, rocking my hips, and cursing myself for missing out on this.

I don’t remember him moving me, but when I open my eyes, he’s lying next to me, smiling down at me. His mouth is glistening from my climax, and never in my life did I think that would be sexy, but on Dixon, it is.

Reaching up to wipe at his lips, he catches my wrist. “No.”

“You’re all messy,” I tell him. He shocks the hell out of me when he dips his tongue to capture every drop.

“Not wasting any of you,” he says, before bending and pressing his lips to mine. I can taste myself on his tongue, something else I’ve never done before, and I’m not as grossed out about it as I thought I would be. I think that has more to do with the man, and maybe a little of my post-orgasmic bliss.

“You didn’t die,” I say, and he chuckles. The deep sound fills my chest, making it tight with so many different emotions.

“No, baby, I didn’t die. But damn, if I had, I would have died a happy man,” he says, bending to suck a nipple into his mouth, before letting it go with an audible pop. “Can I get you anything?” he asks.

I nod. “Lie back.” He does as I ask, and I roll to my side, reaching out and fisting him. My mouth waters at the need to taste him. I’ve only done this a handful of times—again, being single most of my adult life, being reserved and shy, and not being crazy about one-night stands, the opportunity just hasn’t been there.

“What are you thinking about?” he asks.

“Tasting you,” I say, licking my lips.

“This isn’t tit for tat, Leighton. I don’t expect you to do that. Just let me hold you.”

“You don’t want me to?” I ask, and even I can hear the hurt in my voice.

“Hey.” He reaches out and pushes my hair out of my eyes, holding my stare. “There is nothing that I don’t want you to do to me, baby. I just needed you to know that I don’t expect it.”

“I want to, but I might be bad at it.”

He smiles. “No way you could be bad at it.”

“If you don’t like it, you can tell me.”

“Leighton, baby, your mouth is going to be on my cock. There is no right or wrong way to do that, and I can tell you with absolute certainty that I’ll love every fucking minute of it.”

I nod and move down the bed so that I’m face-to-face with his dick. It’s long and thick, and there’s precum already waiting for me. Without further thought, I swipe his head with my tongue, and he groans.

“Motherfucker,” he says, his legs going stiff.

I do it again, and this time it’s his hands that are tangling in my hair. That’s all the encouragement I need. I take him into my mouth as far as I

can go and hold. His cock twitches, and I pull out, only to repeat the process a few more times, using my tongue as I go.

“Leighton,” he warns.

I’m pretty sure that means that he’s close, but I’m not stopping. I want the full experience, something else I’ve never done, but with Dixon, I crave it. So, I keep going, lapping at him like I know what I’m doing. When his legs start to quiver, and his grip on my hair tightens, I know he’s close.

“Lei, baby, you have to stop,” he says. “I’m going to—” he starts, but I take him as deep as I can go, and that’s what does it. He shouts out my name, spills into my mouth, and I swallow him down.

His body falls lax onto the mattress, and I wipe my face with the back of my hand before moving up the bed and settling against his chest. Somehow, he manages to reach for the covers and pull them over us.

I feel his lips press to the top of my head as I close my eyes.

Heartbreak be damned, this was the right choice. Every moment with Dixon will be worth the pain of losing him. I don’t know how long this will last, but I’m going to relish every moment, every touch, every second I get to be with him like this.

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DIXON

This is harder than I thought it would be. When Macklin called and said everyone was coming to his place tonight, kids and all, I didn't blink before asking what time and what I needed to bring. That's what we do.

However, this thing with Leighton is new. I assumed she would be there. I mean, Macklin is married to one of her sisters, so of course, she was going to be there. It's not a situation we haven't been in before.

This time, though, it's different, and I was an idiot to assume it wouldn't be. This time, I know what the silky strands of her hair feel like beneath my fingers. I know the sounds she makes when she comes. I know how she tastes, how she smells, and I know how it feels for my cock to hit the back of her throat.

It's definitely fucking different.

"Okay," Courtlynn says, clapping her hands together. "These kids are asleep. Time for some adult fun." She waggles her eyebrows.

"No one wants to see you strip, brat," Bowen smarts off to her.

"Pfft, you wish you could see all of this," Courtlynn says and stands, swiveling her hips. "No, let's play Never Have I Ever." That earns her a few

groans. “And I know, you old fuddy-duddies who have kids to look after, so we’re going to mix it up.” She holds up an index finger. “Be right back.” She darts off toward Macklin and Baylor’s kitchen.

“What is she up to?” Ellison laughs, used to her youngest sister’s antics.

“It’s hard to tell.” Leighton grins.

I turn my head to look at the television that’s still playing some princess movie that Lainey was watching before falling asleep. It’s muted, and I have no idea what’s going on, but if I keep looking at Leighton, I’m going to give it away that there isn’t an inch of her skin my hands haven’t traced.

Courtlynn comes back into the room, holding up a bag of jelly beans. “Found the stash.” She grins.

“Hey, those are the good ones, too.” Macklin grins. “Gimme.” He holds his hand open, but Courtlynn shakes her head.

“Nope.” She places a bowl in the center of the coffee table and dumps two bags of jelly beans into the bowl. “Same rules apply; however, instead of drinking, you eat a jelly bean.” She grins widely, and I have to admit, it’s not a bad alternative on the fly.

“Are you trying to make us all diabetics?” Bowen asks.

“That’s not how you become a diabetic, Captain Hangover.” She rolls her eyes. “Besides, maybe you’ll be lucky, and you won’t be eating them.” She shrugs.

Macklin leans forward to grab a handful, and Baylor pulls him back to the couch. “No cheating, husband.”

His reply is to kiss her soundly, not giving a single fuck we’re all sitting right here watching.

“Okay, I’ll go first.” Courtlynn drops to the floor, leaning her back against the recliner that Leighton is sitting in.

“You can sit here,” I tell her. It’s the second time I’ve offered tonight, but she doesn’t want to sit next to Bowen.

“Nah, thanks, though. I’m good here.” She grabs the pillow that’s beside her and places it in her lap. “Never have I ever danced on the bar at the Hideaway.” She snickers.

“Ugh.” Leighton groans, holding out her hand. I watch as Ellison and Courtlynn do the same. “You’re cheating,” Leighton accuses her younger sister, but there is no heat behind her words.

“Why did you ask a question you’d have to eat a jelly bean for?” Bowen asks. I don’t have to look at him to know he’s rolling his eyes at her. I can hear it in the tone of his voice.

“I wanted a jelly bean, duh. And this one”—she points over her shoulder to Leighton—“is a recent offender.”

“Can we not talk about that?” Leighton’s face turns bright red.

“Okay, Lei, your turn,” Courtlynn says.

“Never have I ever had sex in a vehicle.”

No lie, every single one of us, all except for Leighton, reaches for a jelly bean. As I pop one into my mouth, I’m already making plans to change this outcome for her.

“What? Really? All of you?” Leighton asks, her mouth hanging open in shock.

“You need to loosen up and live a little, Lei,” Baylor teases.

Leighton’s eyes flash for a brief second, not long enough that anyone would think of it as out of character, but long enough to see the wheels turning in her mind. The words “I’ve got you” are on the tip of my tongue, but I keep my mouth shut as a plan starts to take shape in my mind.

“Okay, Mac, you’re up,” Leighton calls to her brother-in-law, her face still adorably red.

I peel at the label on my sports drink bottle, pretending to think, while my eyes drift straight back to Leighton. She’s curled into the recliner, knees tucked under her, still looking mildly traumatized.

Cute.

Too damn cute.

Macklin grins. “Never have I ever fathered twins.” He smirks, reaching for a handful of jelly beans.

“That’s cheating!” Leighton laughs.

“I helped with those twins. Hand ’em over.” Baylor grins, holding her palm open for a jelly bean, which Macklin gives her. He’d never deny his wife anything.

“Dix, you’re up,” Macklin says.

I grin. “Never have I ever…” I drag the words out slowly, grinning widely. “Had a crush on someone everyone told me was a bad idea.”

The room immediately explodes.

“Oh, that’s messy.” Ellison cackles.

“Specific, too,” Bowen adds.

Courtlynn points between Baylor and Ellison. “This feels targeted.”

“It’s not targeted,” I lie easily.

Across from me, Leighton’s brows pull together. She studies the group for a second before slowly reaching for a jelly bean, as do all of us.

Every muscle in my body tightens. Is it me? Am I the crush?

“Details, little sister,” Baylor demands.

Leighton groans softly. “It was forever ago. Besides, why single me out? Everyone took a jelly bean.”

“We’ve all admitted to our crushes.” Courtlynn shrugs.

“Anyone new, little sister?” Baylor asks Courtlynn.

“Nope. Not since Jeffrey Stone in high school,” she quips.

“Or married them,” Ellison adds.

“Who?” Courtlynn demands, eyes instantly locked on Leighton.

“Nope.” She shakes her head hard enough that her blonde hair slips over her shoulder. “Absolutely not.”

“You can’t just admit that and not tell us,” Ellison whines.

Leighton laughs nervously, but there's something underneath it. Something guarded. "Trust me, it's embarrassing. Besides, you're not hounding the guys," she points out.

Courtlynn waves her hand in the air. "Two of them married their crush, the other two, who cares, we're talking about you," she says, turning to face her sister.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "How bad could it be?"

Her eyes lift to mine. And there it is again. That strange little pause between us that keeps happening lately. The one that lasts a second too long. The one that makes me feel like everybody else disappears for a minute.

Her throat bobs. "You'd be surprised," she says quietly.

Hell. Something warm settles low in my chest, dangerous and addictive. Because suddenly, I'm wondering who this guy is, and how I can erase him from her memory.

"Fine, I'll get it out of you one day." Courtlynn throws popcorn at Bowen, breaking the tension. "Your turn, Captain Hangover."

I don't look at Leighton. Instead, I pull my gaze to Bowen, but I can still feel her eyes on me.

Then Bowen grins wickedly. "Never have I ever had a crush on someone in this room."

Jesus Christ.

Ellison cheers.

Courtlynn practically folds in half, laughing.

And Leighton? She goes completely still.

I shouldn't do it. Really, I shouldn't. It's a bad idea, but I can't seem to help myself. Without taking my eyes off Leighton, I reach for the bowl, grab a jelly bean, and pop it into my mouth.

Thankfully, everyone is cheering and talking about how the question was cheating because two of the couples are married, so no one catches it.

Well, no one except for Leighton, and she's the only one that matters.

"We're going to wake the kids," Baylor says, still shaking with laughter. "New game," she says, and everyone agrees.

"We should probably get going," Ellison says.

"I'm going to head out," Bowen says. "I need to run by the bar and check on things. Holly called in again. They should be fine, but if they need help with the late crowd and closing, I should be there."

"Thanks for coming," Baylor tells him.

"I'm out, too," Courtlynn says. "Lorna had her wisdom teeth removed yesterday. I think I'll drop in and check on her. She was sleeping earlier when I stopped by."

"Lei, want me to drop you off at home before I go to Lorna's?" I hear Courtlynn ask.

"I can take you home," I tell Leighton. "I need to stop by the shop, but just for a quick second."

She bites down on her bottom lip. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Nah, it's fine."

"Thanks, Dix. See y'all later." Courtlynn waves over her shoulder, and she's out the door, Bowen right behind her.

Leighton hugs everyone goodbye, then comes to stand next to me. It's the closest I've been to her all night long, and my fingers itch to reach out and touch her, but I hold strong. Just a few more minutes of pretending I don't crave her.

"See ya." I wave and turn my attention to the blonde beauty standing next to me. "Ready?"

"Are you sure this is okay?"

"I'm sure," I tell her.

"He'd just be going back to the shop to work," Copeland tells her. "You're doing him a favor." He chuckles.

With another round of waves, we're on the move. I walk her to the passenger door and pull it open for her.

"Dix, we're supposed to keep this under wraps."

"Baby, opening your door for you is something they'd expect. That's how I was raised."

She nods and climbs into the passenger seat without another word. I have to force myself to lazily walk to my door and slide behind the wheel. I check to make sure Leighton has her seat belt on before fastening my own and pulling out of the driveway. It's dark out, but I'm not taking any chances of us getting caught. It's not until we're at the end of the road, at the stop sign, that I reach over and take her hand in mine.

I want to kiss her. Fuck me, more than anything, I want to lean over this console and taste those sweet lips, but we're still too close. The last thing I need is for Copeland and Ellison to drive up on us and catch us. So, instead, I settle for taking her hand in mine as I drive ten below the speed limit all the way to the shop.

I park near the back of the lot, where the side employee-only entry door is, which is my first stroke of luck. The second is that my truck faces the drive, so I can see if anyone pulls in. And the third is that my shop is on the opposite end of town from where everyone was going, but I still keep my truck running, remove my seat belt, and slide the seat as far back as it will go.

"Come here," I say gruffly, patting my lap.

"What?" Leighton asks.

"Come sit with me."

"Here?" she asks, looking around.

"No one is here, babe. I'd never let someone see you, and the truck's windows are tinted." I point to where my headlights shine brightly toward the road. "We'll see if anyone pulls in."

“Just because I’ve never…” Her voice trails off as she clears her throat. “We don’t have to.”

“Oh, we have to, darlin’. I need my hands on you. It’s been far too long. That is, unless you’ve changed your mind about us?” I hope like hell that’s not the case, but if she has, I’d respect her choice.

“No. Of course not. I just don’t want you to feel like you have to do this for me.”

I laugh. “Leighton, baby, this is for me as much as it’s for you. I get to be the man who experiences this with you. In twenty years, no matter where we are, that fact will remain the same. It will be me.” I tap my chest a little rougher than intended because thinking of her with anyone else right now pisses me the hell off, and the fact that it pisses me off only makes me angrier. It’s ridiculous, but I can’t stop it.

She takes off her seat belt and sits forward. “How do I do this?” She laughs.

“Just climb over and sit on my lap. Straddle me, face the window, whatever makes you the most comfortable. I don’t care how you do it. I just need my hands on you.”

Sitting back in her seat, she pulls off her tennis shoes and climbs over. She ends up sitting on my lap, her back to my chest, and I waste no time wrapping my arms around her and burying my face in her neck.

“I didn’t know it would be this hard to pretend.”

“I was worried they’d figure us out,” she tells me, relaxing into my hold.

I nod against her neck and just hold her, breathing her in. Six days. That’s how long it’s been since I’ve had her in my arms. If you had told me two weeks ago, I’d be craving a woman this badly, I would have laughed in your face. Well, unless you named Leighton specifically, because it’s something about her that reels me in.

Slowly, I slide my hand beneath the long-sleeved T-shirt she's wearing. My movements are slow, and I cup her breast over her bra. "This okay?" I ask, my voice gruff with my need for her.

"Uh-huh," she says, tilting her head back to rest on my shoulder.

Pulling the cup of her bra aside, I tweak her nipple, causing her to moan. "So responsive," I murmur, nipping at her lobe. She squirms a little, and my cock twitches. It's already trying to bust out of my jeans. "You feel that? That's all for you." Her hands fall to her sides, telling me silently that my hands can roam wherever they want.

"What about here?" I ask, slowly trailing my hand over her belly. I reach the waistband of her black leggings and pause. "May I?" I ask sweetly, and she giggles.

"Anything, Dix."

"Anything? So, this?" I ask, pushing my hand past the waistband of her leggings. I slip my entire hand beneath her panties—silk from the feel of them—and slide my fingers through her pussy.

"Fuck, Lei, you're soaked."

"It's your fault."

"Well, I guess if it's my fault, it's my job to make it better." Pushing my hand lower, I slide one long digit inside her, and she moans. "Is this what you need?"

"Y—Yes," she pants.

"Pull these down." I tap on her leggings. She lifts, and with my one free hand, I help her pull her leggings down. "Spread for me," I say, and she obediently does as I ask. "That's my girl," I praise. "Now, let's take care of that ache, shall we?" I ask.

Without the restriction of her clothes, and her legs spread wide for me, I'm able to push in another finger, pumping them slowly inside her. My free hand moves to join in the fun as my thumb rubs at her clit.

“Dix,” she moans, and it’s the sexiest fucking sound I’ve ever heard in my life.

“I’ve got you, baby,” I tell her. “Just feel.” I pump faster, keeping my strokes consistent. My hand is soaked, and her pussy is already going crazy. “I feel you, Lei. You ready to come for me? Is this pussy ready to cry for me?” I ask her.

“Yes! Oh! Di—” She chokes on a moan as I quicken my pace.

“Let me have it, Leighton. I want it all, and I want to hear you screaming my name,” I tell her. That’s all it takes. My name tears out of her throat, her body trembles, and her hands grip my forearm, her nails digging into my arm, piercing the skin, but I welcome the pain. That pain tells me she’s experiencing bliss. I did that. I gave her that release. She can claw at me all she wants for being such a good girl. When her hands release their grip on me, I slowly remove my hand, bringing it to my lips, sucking my fingers clean.

“Never have I ever,” she whispers, and I chuckle.

“You’re fucking adorable,” I say, kissing her cheek. “Lift this sexy ass for me.” She does as I say, and I pull up her panties, then her leggings, then pull her back onto my lap. I wrap my arms around her again. Her body is lax against mine, and I’m content to just hold her.

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You didn’t get to—” She doesn’t say it, but she’s worried about me getting off.

“This was for me. I got to feel your pussy, taste it, and play with these,” I say, cupping her breast through her shirt. “I got time with you. I’m perfect.”

“That’s not what this is about, though, right? I mean, if we’re hooking up, you should get to reap the benefits, as well.”

“Trust me, baby, my benefits are perfect.”

You’re perfect.

“Does it count if you don’t get to get off?” she whispers.

“It counts.”

She doesn’t say more, just settles into me, and while I’d love nothing more than to feel her hands or her mouth on my cock, I’m also not ready to let her go. I know we can’t sit here all night, and if we stay too long, Courtlynn might beat us back, and we can’t have that.

“I should get you home.”

She turns to look at me, and I can’t help myself. I cup her cheek and pull her lips into mine. My tongue lazily duels with hers. My cock is screaming for some attention, but I can take care of that when I get home.

Pulling out of the kiss, I rest my forehead against her shoulder. Eventually, she makes a move, and I release my hold on her while she climbs into the passenger seat, slips her shoes back on, and buckles her seat belt.

Leaning over the console, I kiss her one more time before readjusting my seat, fastening my belt, and putting the truck in Drive.

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LEIGHTON

I'm going stir crazy. It's been raining for two days straight, and I'm losing my mind being cooped up in the house. It's Saturday, and everyone is busy. Ellison and Copeland are at a birthday party for his niece, Maeve. Baylor and Macklin are having dinner at his parents' place. Courtlynn is out with Lorna, and my best friend, Kelly, is on a date with some guy she met from Franklin.

Lying back on my bed, I pull up Dixon's name. It's the perfect time for us to be together. Everyone is occupied, too busy to notice, but he already told me he was having dinner with his dad, and I know Bowen's at the bar. He's there most nights, even when he doesn't need to be. That doesn't mean I'd ask him to do something, but I couldn't leave him out.

So, here I sit, all alone, and I'm about to wash my hair for the second time today just to have something to do. I've already cleaned the house, done my laundry, painted my nails, and sure, I could work, but I don't want to work. I want to get out of this house before the walls close in on me.

I'm scrolling through social media when an ad pops up for the movie theatre in Franklin. It's an eighties night, and they're playing *Dirty*

Dancing. “Yes!” I say, celebrating. Decision made. I’m going to the movies. It’s the perfect thing to get me out of the house and out of this pouring rain.

Climbing out of bed, I look down at what I’m wearing. Black leggings, my go-to really, and a long-sleeve Magnolia Manor T-shirt. I know without looking in the mirror, my hair is in a twisted knot on the top of my head, and I don’t have on a single stitch of makeup. Honestly, I don’t even care. It’s still pouring rain, and I’m going to be sitting in a dark movie theatre. With a shrug, I grab my phone and head downstairs.

I’m pulling on my tennis shoes when I get a text. I smile, and my heart flutters when I see Dixon’s name.

Dixon: How’s your day going, beautiful?

I never had a chance in hell of resisting him. He says he’s not meant to settle down, but damn him, he’s been the perfect boyfriend. Attentive, sweet, sexy as hell. I shake out of that dangerous thought, because that’s not what this is, and type out a reply.

Me: Good. I’m going stir crazy. I’m headed to Franklin to catch a movie.

Dixon: It’s still coming down pretty hard out there. Be safe. Text when you get there and when you leave.

See? I know he might sound bossy or possessive to some, but he’s just Dixon. He cares, even though he refuses to let himself see it that way.

Me: I will. How’s dinner with your dad?

Laughter bubbles out of me when he sends me a picture of a pizza box on the couch between them. Both of their legs are propped up on the coffee table.

Dixon: Same old over here.

Me: Enjoy your time with him.

Dixon: I always do.

He lost his mother, so I know that he knows. I would give anything for one more dinner, one more conversation with my parents. Dixon understands that in a way that most don’t.

Me: Heading out now.

Dixon: Be safe. Maybe I can see you after.

Me: Maybe…

Dixon: What if I beg?

Me: Are you willing to beg for time with me, Dixon Turner?

Dixon: Only for you.

Dixon: Text me when you get there.

Me: Will do.

With a happy smile on my face, I finish with my shoes, grab my purse, lock up the house, and rush out to my car in the pouring rain. It's funny how one small text message from him brightens my spirits. I know that means I'm in trouble, that my heart is in this thing with him, but I choose to ignore it. I'm not going to back out now, and besides, I don't want to. I want anything and everything Dixon is willing to give me, for as long as he's willing to give it.

Forty minutes later, I'm pulling up outside the movie theatre. The drive was a little longer than usual due to the rain, but I'm here, and I'm ready for some Patrick Swayze. I go through the line, secure my ticket for one, a large bucket of popcorn, a large Dr Pepper, and some Twizzlers, and I'm ready to go. I hand the usher my ticket; he rips it in half, handing me one side and pointing down the long hall.

"Last theatre on the right," he says, his tone bored.

The foyer is practically empty, likely because of the heavy rain. There's a new kids' movie playing, and I make a note to bring Lainey next time. She's still small, but I think she'd love the big screen. Pulling open the door for the *Dirty Dancing* theatre, I'm shocked to see it's completely empty. My smile widens. This has never happened to me before, but I'm digging it. I get the place all to myself. Sure, some stragglers might roll in, but Swayze all to myself on the big screen? Day made.

Choosing a seat in the very top row, right in the middle, I plop down with my treats. I don't have to worry about someone asking me to get up to let them through during the movie, or me having to do the same. This is awesome. *What a great idea this was*, I think as I prop my feet up on the chair in front of me. I know that's not allowed, but it's just me. Surely, they'll let me get away with it. It feels dangerous, like I'm breaking the rules, and anyone who knows me knows I'm more of a rule follower than a rule breaker.

The previews start, and I settle in, popping a few kernels of popcorn into my mouth. I'm munching away, engrossed in the action movie being advertised on the screen, which is why I don't notice that I'm no longer alone until I feel someone sit next to me. Why? Why in a theatre full of empty seats does this person sit next to me? It's the same way at the grocery store or the mall. I'll park at the very end because it's not going to hurt me to walk, and someone might need a handicap spot, and it's not available or something. Anyway, every single time, I'll come out, and there are cars on both sides of me, with a million empty spaces in between. I just don't get it.

Finally, I glance over out of the corner of my eye to see who this person is. Is it a man? Should I worry about being in here all alone with him right next to me? Suddenly, my heart starts to race. Fear takes hold of me. I glance, then do a double take.

"Dixon!" I say way too loudly, so damn happy to see him. "What are you doing here? I thought you were some freak, sitting next to me in an empty theatre," I say, swatting at his arm.

He reaches over and places his hand on my thigh. "I'm sorry, baby. I didn't mean to scare you. I wanted to surprise you."

"I thought you were having dinner with your dad?"

"We did, and then he told me to go see whoever was making me smile at my phone like a fool." He shrugs. "Listen to your elders and all that."

"This is a romance movie," I tell him.

He grins. “I know, Lei. I’m not here for the movie. I’m here for you.” He lifts his hand, reaching into the popcorn bucket, and grabs a handful. “And maybe the popcorn. Did you plan on eating all that by yourself?”

“Hey, no judging, mister.”

He laughs. The sound wraps around me like a warm embrace. “Should I go get my own?”

“Of course not. I can’t eat all this by myself. I got these, too.” I reach into my purse and pull out my pack of Twizzlers.

“I’m going to go grab a drink before the movie starts. Do you need anything?” he asks, as he stands.

I smile up at him, my heart warm in ways I’m certain it’s never been. “No, thank you.”

Dixon bends his head and kisses me softly. “I’ll be right back.”

I watch him walk away, and I hope he doesn’t turn back because if he did, he’d see me smiling like a lovesick fool. Once he disappears, I sit back in my chair, and realization washes over me.

I’m falling in love with him.

Hell, I’m probably already there, but I need to keep a small piece just for me. Dixon is so good to me; he’s kind, gentle, and just the simplest touch from him, or a soft press of his lips, sets my body on fire. He showed up here tonight because he knew I was alone. That makes my heart hurt because he won’t allow himself to believe in more when he’s already everything.

Dixon settles in next to me just as the movie is starting. We eat our shared popcorn until we’ve both had enough, then he lifts the armrest and pats his lap.

“What?”

“Come sit with me.”

“We’re in a theatre,” I remind him.

“An empty one. Come here, baby. Let me hold you while you watch your movie, and I watch you.”

Again, I’m not much for breaking the rules, but the theatre is empty, and I want nothing more than to be wrapped in his arms. Decision made, I stand, settle on his lap sideways, and prop my feet up in the chair next to me. I rest my head against his shoulder as he wraps his arms around me.

He never stops touching me. His hand is rubbing lazy circles on my thigh, running his fingers through my hair, kissing my temple, stealing kisses from my lips, and the list goes on. Basically, if he can reach that part of me, he’s touching me there, and I don’t hate it. In fact, I relax further into his embrace, loving every second of this unexpected stolen moment with him.

By the time the credits roll, there are a few things I’m certain of. One, I’m in love with him. I’m no longer falling, and I was fooling myself earlier to even think I stood a chance of not completely losing my heart to this incredible man. Two, I’m glad I’ve seen this movie hundreds of times, because I was so distracted, so tuned in to how his hands were all over me, that I missed pretty much the entire thing. And third, my panties are utterly ruined.

“Now what?” he asks me.

“I’m all yours,” I tell him. My words, of course, have a double meaning, but he doesn’t know that. That’s a secret I’ll keep locked away, holding it close to me until the day I take my last breath, because I’m certain I’ll never feel for anyone what I do for Dixon.

“Are you hungry?”

I groan. “Not after all that popcorn,” I say, and he chuckles.

“Okay then,” he says, tucking my hair behind my ears. “I’ll follow you home.”

“You don’t have to do that if you have somewhere you need to be.” I’m fishing for what he’s going to do now, and we both know it.

He smiles, kissing the corner of my mouth. “There is nothing more important to me than making sure you get home safely.”

“Or, maybe we can park one of our vehicles somewhere and just… I don’t know.” I shrug. “Drive around. I know the weather is shit.”

“My place,” he says instantly. “We can go back to my place.”

“Are you sure?” I bite down on my lip. “What if we get caught?”

“You can park in the garage again. When do you expect Courtlynn home?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure. She and Lorna were headed to Nashville to go dancing. I should check on her,” I say, already reaching for my purse and texting my sister.

Me: You good? The weather is terrible.

Courtlynn: Yes, we’re good. We’re headed back home now. We left about fifteen minutes ago.

Me: Be safe. Pull over if it gets too bad. Are you driving?

Courtlynn: Yes, and we will. We’re taking our time. We just stopped to get gas, and I got drenched.

She follows it up with a picture of her wet hair and shirt.

Me: I’m in Franklin. The theatre was showing “Dirty Dancing.” I should beat you home.

Courtlynn: Be safe.

Me: Love you.

Courtlynn: Love you, too.

“They’re on their way home. She said they’re taking it slow.”

He nods. “I guess we’d better get moving so I can get a goodnight kiss,” he says, squeezing me tightly.

“Yeah,” I agree reluctantly. I hate that I can’t invite him in or, hell, have him spend the night, or have me stay at his place, but it was my choice to hide this, and I can’t go back on that now. I can’t change the rules.

We gather our trash and my purse and head out of the theatre. The rain is really coming down, and Dixon holds tightly to my hand. It’s a risk that someone from Magnolia Ridge might see us, but if he’s not letting go, then neither am I.

“Maybe I should drive you home. We can come back tomorrow to get your car.”

“And how would we explain that?” I ask him.

He sighs, running his fingers through his hair. “Fine, but baby, you take it slow and watch for high water and debris in the road. I’ll be right behind you the entire time.”

“I’m a big girl, Dix. I’ll be fine.”

“I know, but…” His voice trails off, and he pulls me into a hug. “Just be safe, baby.”

Tilting my head back, I smile at him. “I will. I promise.”

“I parked beside you,” he says, staring outside at the torrential rain.

“I hate storms,” I mutter. It’s how we lost our parents. It was just raining when I left, but the wind is picking up, and thunder roars as lightning lights the night sky.

“I know you do. I’ll be right behind you.”

“I don’t know why you showed up tonight, but I’m glad you did. Not just because I’ll feel safer knowing that you’re behind me, but because I missed you. I know I’m not supposed to say things like that, but I did, Dixon. I missed you, and you showing up here tonight made my entire week. Thank you for… well, being you.”

His brown eyes soften. “I missed you, too, Lei. Come on. Let’s get you home before this gets worse.” He squeezes my hand and pushes open the door. We make a mad dash for our cars. When we get close, I try to let go, but he holds strong, running to my car with me. He pulls open the door, standing in the pouring rain, waiting for me to get inside. I do so quickly so he can get out of the rain. Once he’s in his truck with the door closed, I call him.

“You’re soaked.”

“I won’t melt, baby.”

“What am I going to do with you?” I ask, with awe in my tone.

“I can think of a few things,” he says huskily.

I swallow hard, ignoring what his deep, husky voice does to me. “Be safe, Dix.”

“I will. I’m right behind you. Take your time. If at any time it’s too much, pull over. I’ll be there.”

Tears well in my eyes, but I blink them away. “Thank you.”

“I’m coming all the way to your place, Leighton. I don’t care who sees me. I’ll tell them I was in Franklin and recognized your car or something and followed you home.”

“They’ll believe you.”

“Don’t care either way. Not where your safety is concerned.”

“I’ll see you soon, then?”

“Yeah, baby. I’ll see you soon.”

He ends the call, and I’m glad because it was on the tip of my tongue to ask him to stay on the line with me. I know I can’t do that. I can’t lean on

him because he’s not always going to be there. I mean, he will be. He’ll be Dixon, my brothers-in-law’s best friend, my sister’s close friend, hell, my friend, but not in the way he is tonight.

Tonight, he was just mine. It was wonderful and everything I could have hoped for, but it won’t always be this way. So, yeah, it’s better that I didn’t ask him to stay on the line. I might hate storms, but I can drive in them just fine. I’m a big girl.

I don’t need him to save me.

But that doesn’t mean that I don’t want him to.

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DIXON

The rain hasn't let up the entire drive home. If anything, it's worse. The wind is whipping my truck all over the place, so I know that it's doing the same to Leighton's car, as well. She took it slow all the way, and as we pulled into her driveway, I heaved a sigh of relief. My knuckles are stiff from gripping the steering wheel.

I wasn't worried about me, but her being in front of me stressed me the fuck out. I refuse to think about what that means. Instead, I turn off the truck, grab my phone, and join her on the front porch.

"Do you want to come in for a few?" she offers. "I mean, that's the least I can do after you spotted me and followed me home to make sure I was safe." She winks at me, and it's the cutest fucking thing I've ever seen.

"Yeah, baby. I want to come inside." I smirk, and her face turns bright red.

"You're bad," she says, pushing at my chest.

"You're the one with the dirty mind, Moran," I tease her.

"You—fine." She laughs, unlocking the door and stepping back for me to walk into the house.

We both kick off our shoes and take a seat on the couch. “So, you come here often?” I ask, and she sputters with laughter. That’s the thing about Leighton. She’s not only the most beautiful woman I know, inside and out, but she’s also just easy to be around. I don’t think I’ve ever laughed with a woman as much as I have with her. Then again, I spend more time with her than anyone before her, and it’s been years since I’ve really actually dated anyone.

Because even I can admit that’s what we’re doing. It might be a secret just between us, but this thing between us is exclusive, so yeah, we’re dating. I wait for the panic to come, but it stays silent.

“What are you doing all the way over there?” I ask her, holding my hand out for her.

“I wasn’t sure.” She shrugs.

“Leighton, baby, if I’m near you, I want to be touching you.” That earns me one of her beautiful smiles as she takes my hand and moves closer. She’s sitting sideways, facing me. Lifting my hand, I brush her damp hair out of her face. It’s pulled back, but pieces have fallen, most likely due to the rain.

“I like it when you touch me,” she says.

I like it when I touch her, too, a little too much. So much so that I’ve yet to let us take things all the way. We’ve messed around, and I’m pretty certain I could map out the curves of her body in my sleep, but I’ve yet to feel her around my cock, because it scares me shitless. This woman, she’s more than I ever expected, and I know, with everything inside me, that once we take that step, I’ll be a changed man, irrevocably.

I didn’t plan for this—for her. I never wanted to feel this type of connection because I know what it did to my dad. I watched him lose my mother, and to this very day, all these years later, he’s never looked at another woman. His heart is broken, and it hurts to see him like that. I never

wanted that for me. I never wanted to care this much. Then Leighton Moran, the quiet sister, turned my world upside down.

“What are you thinking about?” she asks, tilting her head to the side.

“How badly I want to kiss you.”

She leans in close, and I lift her onto my lap, slide my hand behind her neck, and kiss her deeply, like I’ve been dying to do all night. Her body melts into me, and a little moan slips past her lips. I angle her head just a little and dive back in for more. I can’t get enough of her. It’s fucking scary as hell to think that I never will. I don’t know how not to want her, and that’s a problem, but one for another day.

“Dix,” she breathes, and my cock hardens.

I’ve never felt this kind of deep-rooted need inside me for another person. It’s unnerving. I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to hold us off on actually sleeping together, but I know I need to figure my shit out and soon.

Leighton moves to straddle my hips, never breaking our kiss, and I groan as she rocks over my hard cock. She’s in leggings, and fuck, the sounds she’s making tell me she can feel how hard I am for her.

I slide my hands up the back of her shirt as my phone rings. I want to ignore it; in fact, I plan on ignoring it. Thankfully, it stops ringing only to start again, and that’s when the worry kicks in. We pull out of the kiss, her lips swollen, but Leighton’s brow furrows in concern, as well.

“It’s Bowen,” I tell her as I answer. “Hey, man, everything okay?”

“Dix,” Bowen says, sounding panicked. “Where are you?”

“I’m at Leighton’s. I got behind her on her way home from Franklin and followed her home in this storm to make sure she got home safe.”

“Fuck. Okay. Good. I was going to send you to her. I need you to meet me in Franklin at Franklin General.”

“What’s going on, Bo?” I try to keep my voice even and calm to not upset Leighton, but my gut is telling me this could be bad.

“C—Court. Court was in an accident.” His voice breaks.

“Tell me,” I demand, my arm banding around Leighton to hold her close to me.

“I don’t know, Dix. I don’t fucking know, okay. Just get there. I’m riding with her. I’m here, Court,” he says gently. “I’m right here. It’s Bo,” he says, calmer than what I know he’s feeling. I can still hear the edge of panic in his voice.

“The others?” I ask. There’s a knot in the pit of my stomach. I can feel Leighton’s eyes on me, but I stare at the wall over her shoulder, avoiding her gaze.

“I called them already. Told them I’d have you get Leighton. Text them and tell them that you’ve got her. I didn’t want to tell Leighton if she was alone. Can you come?” His voice cracks again, and that tells me it’s bad.

“On our way,” I assure him.

“Thanks, brother,” he says, ending the call.

“What’s going on?”

“Baby, that was Bo,” I say, wrapping both arms around her now, holding her closely. “There’s been an accident,” I tell her, and her face goes ghostly white.

“What?” she asks, as if she can’t believe what I’ve just said. “Which one?” she asks before I can repeat myself. She sits up straighter on my lap, her eyes brimming with tears. “Tell me, Dixon. Which one of my sisters?” She fists my shirt.

“Court. Bo is with her,” I rush to explain. “He’s riding with her to Franklin General. He wanted me to go tell you so you didn’t find out alone.”

“The others?”

“He told them. I’m supposed to text them and let them know that I’m bringing you,” I assure her, before leaning forward and crushing her in a

hug. I don’t get a chance to call either of her brothers-in-law before my phone rings again, this time, Copeland.

“Hey, Cope, we’re on our way. I’ve got Leighton.”

“Thank fuck. Okay. Mom’s on her way to stay with Lainey. We’ll meet you there?”

“Yeah, we’re coming.”

“Fuck, I can’t—” Copeland’s voice cracks.

“We’ll see you soon,” I tell him, ending the call. I immediately dial Macklin. “Hey, man, I’ve got Leighton.”

“Fuck, good. Okay. My parents are coming to sit with the twins. Bo didn’t tell me anything. You?”

“No. Just to get there. He was talking to her.”

“That’s good, right? Fuck, Dix, they can’t lose her. We can’t lose her,” he says, his voice thick with emotion.

“I know, brother. I know. Drive safe. Leighton and I are on our way.”

“You, too,” he says, ending the call.

“Do you need anything?” I ask her.

“No, but Court… I need to pack her some things, right? You do that? What if she needs clothes or wants a phone charger or—” She bursts into tears.

“We can do all of that, Leighton. Whatever you think she’ll need, we’ll take it with us.”

“How bad, Dix?”

“I don’t know, baby. Bo was talking to her, so that’s a good sign, right?”

She nods through her tears.

“Come on. Let’s pack a bag so we can get to her. We can lay eyes on her ourselves.”

“They didn’t call me,” she says as she stands from my lap. I stand and offer her my hand, and she doesn’t hesitate to lace her fingers through mine.

“They didn’t want you to find out when you were alone. That’s why they called me,” I remind her.

“And you were here,” she whispers. “I’m glad, Dix. I couldn’t—” she says as we reach the top of the steps.

“Shh.” I pull her into a strong hug. “I’m right here, baby. I’ve got you. I’m here,” I say again, because I don’t know what else to say. Nothing will make this better. She needs to see her sister, and I just pray that everything is okay. They can’t lose her. These ladies have been through enough heartache.

“My grandparents. What about my grandparents?”

“That’s your call, baby. Do you want to go wake them up? See if they want to go with us?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what to do, Dixon. I don’t know.” The pain in her voice guts me.

I think about my dad, and I’m certain he would want to know, and with their parents being gone, their grandparents were there for them after. “I think we should tell them. They might not want to come with us, but they should know, and we can call them with updates.”

“Yeah, okay. We’ll tell them. I just need to… pack for Court.”

“What can I do?”

“Just be here. I know that’s a girlfriend thing to say, and I’m sorry, but I need—I don’t know what I need, Dixon.”

“Hey.” I cradle her cheeks in my palms and bend my knees so that we’re eye to eye. “I’m right here. Whatever you need, it’s yours. Lean on me.”

Tears race down her cheeks as she nods. Then she squares her shoulders for a second time in a matter of minutes. I watch as she wipes her cheeks with the backs of her hands and turns into Courtlynn’s room.

I stand in the doorway, watching as she tosses clothes and a phone charger, pulls a soft blanket off the end of the bed, and shoves them into a

floral tote bag.

“If we miss anything, we can come back and get it,” I assure her as she takes a long look around Courtlynn’s bedroom.

“Is she going to be okay, Dix?” she asks, her voice small.

“I don’t know, baby.” I wish I could tell her yes, reassure her, but I won’t lie to her. I don’t know any more than she does. “I do know that Bowen is with her. I know they’ve had their differences, but he’s got her, Lei. I can promise you that.”

“I know he does. Okay. Let’s go tell my grandparents.” She reaches for my hand before pulling me out of the room.

We stop to slip on our shoes, turn off all the lights, and make sure the house is locked up before climbing into my truck and driving the short distance to the inn. We head to the private entrance of their grandparents’ suite and knock on the door. It takes a few times before her grandmother, Ruby, pulls open the door.

“What happened?” she asks.

“Can we come in?” I ask her.

“Of course.” She steps back, just as her husband, Dean, enters the room.

“We’re sorry to barge in on you like this. There’s been an accident. Courtlynn was involved. We don’t know how bad it is, but they’re taking her to Franklin General. We’re headed there now. The others are meeting us there,” I explain calmly while Leighton curls into my chest, crying silent tears.

“Give it to me straight, son,” Dean says, his voice pained.

“I don’t know, sir. We wanted to let you know. If you want to come, you can ride with us. If not, I promise to keep you updated.”

“Of course, we’re coming. You go on ahead.” He waves me off. “We’ll be right behind you.”

“You’re welcome to ride with us.”

“I’m slower in my old age. I’d rather you get there and keep us posted. Can you or one of the boys do that?” he asks, his voice cracking.

“Is someone there with her?” Ruby asks.

“Yes.” I nod. “Bowen was with her, and he was talking to her while we were on the phone.” I don’t tell them that I have no idea if she was talking back, but I need to give all of them, all of *us*, something to hold on to.

“Good. Good,” Ruby says. “Go on now. We’ll be heading out soon. We just need to get changed.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to ride with us?”

“We’re sure,” Dean says, reaching for Ruby’s hand and leading her out of the room.

“Ready?” I ask Leighton.

She nods, and with her hand in mine, I lead her back out into the rain and to my truck.

When we finally make it to the Franklin General Emergency Room, I grab the bag we packed for Courtlynn and climb out of the truck. Leighton meets me at the hood, and I offer her my hand.

“We can’t. They’ll see us.” Instead, she wraps her arms around her waist and starts moving toward the doors.

I want to tell her I don’t give a fuck if they see us. She needs me. She needs comfort, and I want to be that person for her. I have no fucking idea what we’re walking into, and damn it, I need to be there for her. However, I don’t fight her on it. I just make sure I’m close to her at all times so if and when she falls apart, I’m there to catch her.

Pushing open the door to the emergency room, I notice everyone sitting off in the corner. With my hand on the small of Leighton’s back, I guide her toward them.

“How is she?” Leighton asks.

“We don’t know. They’re looking her over,” Ellison says, sitting on Copeland’s lap.

“Bo?” Leighton’s voice cracks, and I have to fist my hands at my sides to keep from reaching for her.

“I was at the bar. The weather was nasty. It was a slow night, but I was letting the storm die down, and even sent some of the staff home,” he says, his tone soft, yet pained. “Two regulars, Earl and James, came in and sat down at the bar, talking about a bad accident on the edge of town.” His voice cracks.

“I didn’t think much of it at first, but then they said it was a small red Jetta, and I knew,” he says, his tone haunted. “I didn’t think. I just shouted to the staff who were left that I had to go, rushed to my truck, and drove. When I got there, I instantly recognized her car. I was with her, holding her hand until they could get to her. The other car was trapped, but Court and Lorna were less injured, I guess. Either way, Shelia from the sheriff’s office sat holding Lorna’s hand, and I had Court.”

“Was she awake?” Leighton asks.

The others are quiet, so I assume they’ve already heard this story.

“Yeah, she was awake. She was a little disoriented, but she knew me.”

Before Leighton can ask more questions, a doctor steps into the room asking for the family of Courtlynn Moran.

“That’s us,” Bowen says as he stands and wipes his hands on his jeans. That’s when I notice the blood and turn Leighton to face away from him, hoping she misses it.

“All of you are family?” the doctor asks.

“Us, too!” Ruby calls out as she and Dean make their way to our group in the corner of the waiting room.

The doctor looks resigned as he nods. “Right. Ms. Moran has a severe concussion, a broken wrist, and a laceration to her spleen and liver. We

expect her spleen and liver to heal on their own, but we'll watch them closely in the coming weeks. Her wrist doesn't require surgery, and ortho will cast it tomorrow once the swelling has gone down. We do want to admit her overnight just as a precaution."

"When can we see her?" Baylor asks.

"As soon as we get her into a room."

"What about Lorna?" Bowen asks. "Her friend who was with her? How is she?"

The doctor sighs. "That's confidential, but I can tell you both ladies are expected to make a full recovery."

"Thank you, Doctor," Copeland says, and we all murmur our agreement.

We settle back into our seats and wait for Courtlynn to be taken to a room so we can see her. It takes them two hours to get her into a room, and we're all dead on our feet. We all insist that Ruby and Dean go first so they can go home and get back into bed.

Copeland and Ellison go in next, since we can only do two at a time, and then Baylor and Macklin, so they can get home to their kids.

"We'll all go back," Leighton tells us. "You two can go with me."

"Breaking the rules, Moran?" I tease. She gives me a sleepy smile. "Sometimes rules are meant to be broken."

With my hand on the small of her back and Bowen leading the charge for us, we make our way into Courtlynn's room. When she sees us, she bursts into tears. We all three stand frozen. Leighton takes a step forward until Courtlynn speaks, stopping her.

"Bo—" she cries.

I've never seen Bowen Nichols move that fast in my life. He rushes to her side, taking her hand gently in his. "Hey, brat," he says, only this time it sounds more like affection than annoyance. "You gave us a scare," he tells her.

“Thank you, Bo. I don’t know how you found me,” Courtlynn says, “but thank you.”

Bowen swallows hard, stands, and kisses her forehead. “I’m just glad you’re okay,” he says. He lets go of her hand, but it looks like he’s reluctant to do so, and steps back, allowing Leighton to take his place.

Leighton hugs her sister, and they talk in hushed tones.

“You good?” I ask Bowen.

“Yeah,” he says, running his fingers through his hair. “Just tough, seeing someone you’re close to like that.” His eyes never leave Courtlynn.

I step up behind Leighton and smile down at Courtlynn. “Can I get you anything?” I ask her.

“No. Thank you, though. I’m really sleepy.”

The door to her room opens, and a nurse walks in. “Okay, one of you can stay with her. The rest of you have to go. She needs her rest. We’re already going to be waking her every few hours for concussion protocol,” she explains.

“I rode here in the ambulance. I’ll stay. I’ll hitch a ride home tomorrow,” Bowen says.

Leighton’s eyes widen as she turns toward her sister. “Court?”

Courtlynn clears her throat. “It’s fine. I’m going to be sleeping a lot. I don’t need any of you to stay,” she says with a quiver shaking her voice.

“I’m not going to get much sleep anyway,” Bowen says. “My adrenaline is still pumping. I’ll stay. I can wait in the waiting room if she’d rather, but at least one of us will be here in case she needs us.”

“Thank you, Bo,” Courtlynn replies, her voice small.

This is so unlike the two of them. Maybe this accident will finally open their eyes to the fact that their feud is really just masked attraction. Life is short, and you should seize every opportunity. That thought has me wanting to pull Leighton into my arms, but I refrain.

Barely.

“Are you sure?” Leighton asks her sister.

Courtlynn smiles, and this time it feels more genuine. “I’m sure. Bowen will be here,” she says, almost as if he’s always been there for her and they haven’t insulted each other at every conversation for the last decade. “Dix, take her home.”

“You call us if you need anything, no matter what time. We’ll be back to pick you both up tomorrow to take you home.”

“Thanks, brother,” Bowen says. He sits down on the chair that turns into a bed, props up his feet, and closes his eyes.

Leighton hesitates, but eventually, she turns toward me. I offer her my hand and lead her out of the room. “That’s weird, right?” she asks.

I nod. “Yeah, but we weren’t there,” I remind her. “It was traumatic for both of them, so maybe they both need to just be for a little while.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’re right,” she says as we make our way outside to my truck. I open the door for her and wait for her to be belted in.

Thankfully, the rain has slowed, but the roadways are still covered in water, and there’s debris everywhere. Reaching over the console, I take her hand in mine, needing to touch her. It’s dangerous, but she’s had a tough night. I just want to be here for her. That’s all that this is. The drive to her place is quiet. We’re both lost in our own thoughts. When I pull up to her house, I put the truck in Park, but I don’t turn off the engine.

“Dix?” she asks softly.

“Yeah, baby?” I take off my seat belt and turn to face her.

“Will you stay?” Her voice shakes, and I need to hold her.

“Of course,” I answer, turning off the truck and grabbing my phone from the cupholder. I’m out of the truck and heading for her door, but she beats me to it. She reaches for my hand, and together, we make our way inside the house.

Stopping at the door, we kick off our shoes, and she leads me upstairs to her room. When she asked me to stay, I didn’t worry about who might see

my truck here all night, certain that her staff and grandparents would. I didn't worry about hiding that we're together. All I could think about was that she needed me, and there's no way in hell I'm saying no. If they find out, we'll deal. Right now, she's scared, worried, and I'm sure overwhelmed with grief from almost losing her little sister the same way she lost her parents.

This is where I need to be.

In her room, she turns on a small lamp beside her bed, and a soft, warm glow fills the space. I watch her, waiting to see what she'll do next, taking my cues from her. Leighton's eyes lock on mine as she pulls her shirt over her head and drops it to the floor. She shimmies out of her leggings and stands with her arms at her sides, looking like my every fantasy come to life.

I don't speak because my throat is thick with desire. Not that I could anyway—words have escaped me as I take in the beauty that is Leighton Moran. Our eyes are locked, and there's a silent communication happening between us. She's asking me if I want her, and I hope like hell she can see in my gaze that I do.

When she reaches behind her, unsnaps her bra, and slowly peels it over her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor, my mouth waters. Her panties are next, and my eyes roam over every inch of her. I'm greedy, wanting to see all of her at once. I need to memorize this moment, one I'm sure I'll never forget in a thousand lifetimes.

"You're beautiful," I rasp. My cock is painfully hard, pressing against my zipper, but I ignore it, waiting to see what she does next.

"My mind keeps racing," she says, her voice small. "What if we lost her like we lost Mom and Dad? I know she's okay. I saw it with my own eyes, but that was too close. I miss them, and I just… I need to turn it off, Dix. Help me turn it off," she pleads, and fuck me, my heart is breaking seeing the tears in her eyes.

“Tell me,” I reply, my voice thick. “Tell me, and I’ll do it. Anything.”

“Make me feel something… something else.”

I nod, reaching behind my neck and pulling off my shirt, dropping it to the pile of clothes she started on the floor. I make quick work of the rest of my clothes, and now, we’re both on a level playing field. We’re both naked, drinking each other in with our eyes.

I stand frozen as she takes small, cautious steps toward me. Once she reaches me, her hands, soft and warm, land on my bare chest. She takes her time, exploring, and I remain like a statue, letting her do with me as she wishes. When she steps closer, her breasts press against my chest, and my cock, thick and hard, presses against her lower belly.

Leighton reaches between us and fists my cock, and I can’t stop the heavy exhale that leaves my body as my abs twitch with her touch. “Do you not want me?” she asks softly.

“W-What?” I ask, my voice strained.

“You touch me, you kiss me, but you don’t actually have sex with me.”

My heart is racing because she’s touching me, and because there’s a single fucking doubt in this beauty’s mind that I don’t want her. “I crave you,” I tell her, my voice low and laced with my need for her. “Of course, I want you, Leighton.”

I want her so badly it scares the absolute shit out of me.

“Show me, Dixon. I need you to show me. Make me forget, even if just for tonight.”

Fuck. Me.

It’s not that I don’t want her. I meant it when I said I craved her, almost like a drug, but I know what’s going to happen. I’m already too attached, too invested, and I can’t be. I won’t end up like my father, but I also can’t say no to her. I promised her anything, and I’ll never break a promise to her. I can do this. I can have sex with her and keep my heart out of it. I can. I

have to, because love has the power to destroy you, and I told myself I'd never let anyone have that kind of power over me.

I swallow hard. "On the bed," I say huskily.

Her hand falls from my cock, and she climbs into bed, lying on her back, her blonde hair splayed out on the pillow, and those big blue eyes of hers filled with trust and need.

For me.

I need to be closer. I need her close, so I climb into bed and lie next to her, pulling the covers over us. I tug her into my arms and relish the feel of her body pressed to mine. My hand finds its way to the back of her neck, and I pull her into a kiss.

I don't rush it. No, I take my time, tracing her lips with my tongue, before slowly stroking my tongue against hers. She moans, and my cock weeps for her.

Needing to make sure she's ready, I remove my hand from the back of her neck, never breaking our kiss, and my hand finds its way between her thighs. "Fuck," I rasp against her lips when I find her wet and ready for me. She feels like silk beneath my fingers, and when I slide one long digit inside her, she presses her body closer to mine.

"Dix," she moans, and I add a second finger. "Please," she pleads, and something happens inside me. It feels almost as if my heart is flipping inside my chest.

"Condom," I rasp.

"I'm on the pill," she says. "I don't have one. I don't—do this."

"I don't have one either. It's been a long time for me."

"Me, too. I trust you, Dixon."

Four words, and it feels like her soul is tethered to mine. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. If you are."

I nod, because I've never done this. I've never been inside a woman without a barrier between us. I've never even considered it, not until Leighton. I know this moment is going to change everything, and while I want to pull back, I can't. I'm going to allow myself this, and then, then—I don't know what I'm going to do, because no matter how hard I tried to prevent it, this moment, Leighton owns a piece of me that I know I'll never get back.

Moving, I settle between her thighs, bending so my elbows are on the bed next to her head. I stare into her eyes, and I see things I never wanted to let myself see, but with Leighton, I couldn't stop it from happening.

"Guide me in, baby," I murmur, pressing a soft kiss against her lips. She reaches between us, and the instant my cock presses against her folds, I have to bite down on my cheek. Slowly, I push forward, my cock sliding into heaven, inch by inch.

Leighton lifts her hands, burying them in my hair, and I dip my head, because I'm barely holding on. Never in my entire existence have I felt something like this. This tight, silky smooth, warm heat swallowing my cock like this is where I was always meant to be.

When I'm finally all in, my hips locked tightly against hers, I lift my head to find her eyes on me. "You okay?" I ask, my tone soft.

"I'm perfect."

"Fuck yes, you are," I say, pulling out and slowly pushing back in. "I didn't know it could feel like this," I confess.

Her eyes soften. "Me either, Dix. I've never let another man inside me without something between us."

"While I love that, darlin', I do, let's not talk about another man being inside you while my cock is buried eight inches deep. In fact, let's never talk about it again. Not ever," I say, hating every faceless, nameless bastard that was here before I was.

She giggles, and the sound lights me up. My cock twitches inside her, and she moans. My hips set a lazy rhythm as I take my time soaking up this experience as if it is my last, and let's be honest, it very well might be. I can't imagine ever feeling this connected with anyone other than Leighton.

Her legs clamp around my waist, locking her feet at her ankles, holding me close to her. She tugs at my hair and pulls me into a deep kiss. With each thrust, my movement becomes faster, steadier, and her grip on my hair tightens. Eventually, her hands move to slip under my arms, and she digs her nails into my back.

I thrust harder. Faster.

Her nails dig deeper.

I never want this moment to end, but I feel her pussy flutter around my cock, and I know we're both there. "Come for me, baby."

"Dix," she moans. "Don't pull out."

My brain short-circuits. "Get there," I demand, because she can't say something like that and expect me to be able to hold on.

"Dixon!" she cries out my name, and that's it.

Game over.

My release comes fast and hard, and I release every bit inside her. We both still, my forehead resting against hers as the moment settles between us.

I don't know how long we stay this way, but eventually, I pull out, and she wrinkles her nose. "Messy."

I can't help it. I toss my head back in laughter. "Come on, beautiful. Let's get cleaned up so we can get some sleep."

"Will you stay?" she asks, her voice now small.

Climbing out of bed, I scoop her into my arms and carry her across the hall to the bathroom. "There's nowhere else in the world I'd rather be." She smiles at my confession, and just like that, I lose another piece of myself to Leighton Moran.

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LEIGHTON

I wake to gentle fingers running through my hair. I'm more comfortable than I think I've ever been curled up on Dixon's chest. I don't want to move for fear of breaking the moment. Last night was a lot. It wasn't my intention to ask him to stay, but the thought of him leaving gutted me. And then in my room, it just kind of happened. I'm not usually that forward, but with Dixon, I know that I can be. I know him, and he knows me, and that makes all the difference.

"Morning, baby," he says, his voice all sleep-laced and sexy.

"Morning," I say, lifting my head just enough to see him.

"It's just after seven," he tells me. "I need to run home and shower. Then I'll come back and get you, and we can go back to the hospital. I'm going to run by Bo's place and grab him some clothes."

"I can't believe he insisted on staying with her."

"They'll figure it out."

I narrow my eyes at him. "Do you know something I don't know?"

He smiles. It's a slow, sexy tilt of his lips, and if I didn't need to brush my teeth, I'd kiss him. "No, I don't. But I've been watching."

“What does that mean, Dixon?” I ask, laughing. “You’re holding out on me.” I slap softly at his chest in protest. He grabs my hand and brings it to his lips for a kiss.

“All I’m saying is that the tension between them is like watching a firecracker get lit. It’s bound to explode. Maybe last night was the wake-up call they both needed to stop fighting and start loving.”

“You really think so?” I ask him.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” he says, still running his fingers through my hair. “It’s not like Bo has said anything. It’s just something I’ve been thinking about for the last few months.”

“I don’t know. They’ve always been like this.”

“I could be wrong,” he says, but his tone tells me he thinks the opposite.

“I guess only time will tell. How about I shower, then we can go to your place? Maybe pick up breakfast at the diner for all of us? I’ll text my sisters and let them know that I’ll pick Court up, and then, maybe we can have sisters’ night tonight.”

“Sure, baby. Anything you want or need, you know that.”

His words make my heart flutter, and my brain thinks I get to keep him long-term, but I know better. I press a kiss to his bare chest. “Thank you.”

Tossing off the covers, I grab some clothes and head across the hall to the bathroom. I don’t look back at him or say anything else because my throat is clogged with emotion, and I need a few minutes to get my shit in order.

I’m in love with him.

I know he cares about me, but this… what I feel for him is beyond care. There’s a huge chunk of my heart that is only his, and I’m pretty sure no matter what happens between us, that piece will always be his.

Rushing through a shower, I quickly get dressed and blow-dry my hair. I don’t bother with fixing it. Instead, I pull it up in a messy ponytail and call

it good. Dixon's not in my room, so I head downstairs and find him sitting on the couch, scrolling through his phone.

"Ready?"

"If you are." He smiles at me. Standing from the couch, he shoves his phone into his pocket and walks toward me. When he reaches me, he bends and kisses me soundly. "Ready," he says, and it's a good thing his arm is around me because I might fall for how weak I am for this man.

An hour later, we're walking into Courtlynn's hospital room loaded down with breakfast for the four of us. I called my two older sisters on the way and let them know I would handle her release and that we were having a mandatory sisters' night at our place. Baylor and Ellison are handling the snacks, and I'm supposed to text them when we get home.

Stepping quietly into the room, in case she's resting, my mouth falls open at what I find. Courtlynn is sound asleep, and Bowen is sitting in the chair, pulled close to the bed, holding her hand while he, too, sleeps peacefully. The sight tugs at something deep in my chest, and I glance over at Dixon, and he winks.

I think he is right about the two of them.

Bowen must hear us because his head shoots up, and he gently pulls his hand from Courtlynn's, which has her eyes popping open.

"Hey," she says, her voice thick.

"How are you feeling?" I ask as I place the bag I'm carrying on the small table.

"Good. Sleepy. They kept waking me up." She holds up her arm, showing me the cast on her wrist. "Ortho was here before the sun came up."

"Clean break," Bowen says. "Concussion protocol, but her vitals look good. They said she can go home today," he adds. "Lots of rest, limit screen

time, none at all for the first few days, avoid loud noises, no heavy activity, and no driving until she's been cleared. They'll organize another scan in two weeks to check the lacerations on her liver and spleen, and more than likely, another one in two to three months if there are no changes to make sure she's fully healed."

My sister turns to look at him, and I'm expecting a jab, an insult, hell, even a dirty look, but instead, he's rewarded with a small smile. As if she realizes that Dixon and I were witnesses to her being kind to him, she turns her attention back to me. "What's in the bag?"

"Oh, Dixon picked me up, and we decided to grab breakfast, but then thought we could all eat together." It's a lie, but just a little white one. They seem to buy it.

"I'm starving," Courtlynn says.

"Well, you're in luck." Reaching into the bag, I hand her the to-go container that matches the other three. They call it the White Star breakfast. Two eggs, bacon, hashbrowns, and toast. It's a popular breakfast order at the Wooden Spoon, the small diner in town.

Conversation lulls as we all devour our food. The nurse comes in to check on Courtlynn just as we're finishing up and tells her that as soon as the doctor arrives to sign the discharge papers, she'll be on her way. She disconnects the IV and tells Courtlynn she can get dressed.

"Want me to help you get dressed?"

"Yes, please." She tosses off the covers, and before I can move, Bowen is there. He offers her his hand, and she takes it without complaint as he supports her while she stands. Slowly, he assists her to the bathroom, and I quickly grab the overnight bag I brought last night and follow them.

As I pass Dixon, he reaches out and takes my hand, stopping me. He leans in close so only I can hear him. "Told you." He winks before letting me go. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling.

When I make it to the bathroom, Bowen is there, still holding on to my sister, while she braces one hand on the edge of the sink. The room is bathed in a low ambient light from above the sink. The overhead lights are off, as they should be, considering her condition. The lights in her room are down low, as well.

“She can’t have bright lights,” Bowen tells me, as if he didn’t just go through the rules with us not ten minutes ago.

“I got it. Thanks for helping her.” I drop the bag on the small counter and move toward him to take his place. He hesitates but nods, saying, “I’ll be right outside the door if you need me.” He clears his throat. “Dix and I both are,” he says, as if including Dixon changes things.

It doesn’t.

“What’s up with that?” I ask my sister, keeping my voice quiet so the guys can’t hear.

“What’s up with what?” Courtlynn asks, pretending she has no idea what I’m talking about.

“Fine. Play that game.”

“What about you? You were with Dix last night and again today?”

I open my mouth to tell her that it’s nothing, but the truth comes out before I can stop it. “We’re just… having fun.”

“Lei, that’s not what you do.”

I nod. “I know.” My voice cracks. “I’m in love with him,” I whisper because the last thing I want is for Dixon to hear me.

“Oh, Leighton,” she says, her eyes soft.

“I know. I thought I could handle it, but Court, he’s so good to me.”

“He’s always said he’d never settle down.”

I nod. “His mom.” I don’t say more because I don’t need to. She knows his story just as I do. “It was my idea to hide it, and now, I’m just… loving him while I have him.”

“Maybe things will change. I see the way he watches you.”

“That’s the concussion talking,” I tease, trying to break the heaviness of the moment. “Besides, I could say the same about you and Bo. Enemies to lovers.” I waggle my eyebrows.

“That’s not what this is. I just… last night scared me, and he was there, you know? I just… I guess I just needed someone who was there with me. But we’re not—that’s not us.”

“Uh-huh. Let’s get you dressed.” I help her sit on the toilet, and then we work on getting her clothed. She’s got lots of bruising and scrapes, but she’s here. She’s alive. That’s what matters.

“Want me to brush your hair?” I ask her.

“It’s nasty, and I’m pretty sure there’s glass in it, and blood, and I need a shower, but I want to go home and do it there. Will you help me?”

“You know I will.”

“Bowen picked some of the larger pieces out last night,” she says.

“What I told you about Dix and me, it’s just between us, okay?”

She nods.

“So, you can tell me if you’re feeling something for Bo.”

“I just… I don’t know, Lei. I just don’t know. My head is jumbled, and now, in my current state, it’s not a good time to be making confessions or decisions.”

“Okay, but just know, you can come to me.”

“I know. I love you, Lei.”

“I love you, too. Now, we’d better get back out there before your man beats down the door to check on you.”

“You’re delusional,” she says.

“I bet you five dollars that he’s standing there waiting when we open this door.”

“This is Bo we’re talking about. And me. I’ll take that bet.” She holds her hand out for me, and we shake on it.

Zipping up the bag, I sling it over my shoulder and help her stand. Sure enough, as soon as I open the door, Bowen is there, sliding an arm around her waist and helping her back to her bed. I cough loudly, and Courtlynn glares at me.

Once she's back in bed, we settle in and wait for the doctor to clear her.

Three hours later, we finally got her home and settled. Dixon and Bowen left after helping me get Courtlynn into the house, and then I had to push them out the door. They made me swear we'd call if we needed anything, and I promised to text them both later with an update.

Now we're in the primary bedroom, which used to be our parents' room, on the first floor. It has a big garden tub, and I'm helping Courtlynn wash her hair. She was right—there was a lot of glass. This is my third round of shampooing her, making sure we get it all.

"I think he's in love with you," she says, her head tilted back and her eyes closed.

"Stop," I warn her. "My heart is doing a bang-up job all on its own with trying to make me see things between us that aren't there. I don't need you filling my head with it, too."

"Want to bet?" she asks.

"You've already lost once today. You sure you're up for losing again?" I tease. Not that I'd actually take her money.

"You'll see," she says as she reaches up and places her hand on my arm. "Thank you for this, Leighton, for taking care of me." Tears shimmer in her eyes. "I was so scared."

"Me, too," I say, my eyes misting to match hers. "But you're here, and you're safe."

She nods. "I might fall asleep for sisters' night."

“That’s okay.”

“We can’t watch a movie or listen to loud music.”

“That’s okay, too. Really, they just need to lay eyes on you. We can keep it short.”

“Okay.”

I nod. “Okay. Now, how does that feel?” I ask her, nodding toward her hair.

“So much better. I feel human again.”

“Good. All right, well, keep that arm out of the water.”

“Lei, you have this trash bag taped so well, there’s no chance of water getting in.”

“I’m not risking it. Hold still,” I say as her phone rings. I glance at the floor. “It’s Lorna.”

“Answer it for me.”

Quickly drying off my hands, I answer, putting it on speaker. “Hey, Lorna, it’s Leighton, I’m with Court, but I just finished washing her hair.”

“How are you feeling?” Lorna asks.

Courtlynn bursts into tears. “I—I’m so sorry, Lor,” she cries.

“Hey, it was an accident. I’m okay. A few bumps and bruises. I didn’t even have to stay in the hospital overnight. I don’t blame you, Court. It was nasty weather, and that car was going too fast and would have hit us had you not swerved. If anything, your quick response, even with that storm, saved us. I love you, bestie,” Lorna says.

“I love you, too. It’s sisters’ night. Do you want to come?” Courtlynn asks.

“Nah, I’m at Mom and Dad’s being waited on hand and foot.” She chuckles. “Mom was freaked out, so I told her I’d stay the rest of the weekend. You enjoy time with your sisters.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“You bet,” Lorna says, and ends the call.

“I’m glad she’s okay,” Courtlynn says, sniffling. I stand and grab a box of tissues. Because one hand is in the water and the other is taped up in a trash bag, I hold it to her nose and tell her to blow, and we both burst out laughing.

“Ow, my head,” she says, her body shaking. “You’re too much,” she says, once our laughter subsides.

We finish her bath, and I help her get dressed, braid her hair, and move her to the couch. Not ten minutes later, Baylor and Ellison roll in with their arms full of food. It’s chaos for a little while. I help them unpack everything, and we make sure Courtlynn has a plate and a drink before we make our own, and we all settle in the living room with the lights down low.

“How are you feeling?” Ellison asks.

“Okay. My wrist hurts, but it’s not something I can’t handle. I’m sore, the headache is a bitch, but other than that, not too shabby.”

“You scared us,” Baylor says.

“I scared me.”

“What happened?”

“A car was driving too fast and swerved to miss a branch in the road, which put it in our lane. I don’t know if they didn’t see us through the sheets of rain or what, but I swerved, trying not to hit them head-on, and lost control in the high water. I don’t know who it was, but my nurse did tell me that they’re okay. Banged up, but whoever they were, they also made it.”

We’re all quiet while we process what happened, and I know that we’re all thinking about the night we lost our parents. It was storming badly that night, as well.

“I miss them,” Courtlynn says, sniffling.

“Me, too,” I answer.

“Yeah,” Baylor says, wiping at her eyes.

“I love you. I needed this,” Ellison says, tears also welling in her eyes. “I love my husband and my daughter more than life, but I need sister time, too.”

All four of us are crying, but it’s a good cry. It’s the kind that reminds you that you’re loved and you have something to live for. We talk a little more while we eat, and then Courtlynn’s eyes start to get heavy.

“Want us to stay?” Baylor asks me.

“Nah, I’ll handle it. I already planned to sleep in her room with her tonight, to watch her.”

“We can stay, too,” Ellison says, almost hopeful.

“Go home to your families,” Courtlynn says. “I love you. All three of you, but I’m fine. I’m going to be okay. I just need to rest. And maybe some Tylenol for this wrist. I don’t want the pain meds. It’s just a dull ache.”

Baylor and Ellison hug her goodbye while I get her meds and help her upstairs to her room. I grab a bottle of water for both of us and my Kindle so I can read while she sleeps. I’m not ready for bed yet; my mind is racing.

I’m barely three pages into a new book when Courtlynn’s voice pulls my attention. “I think you should tell him, Lei. Life’s too short not to shoot for the stars.”

“I can’t tell him,” I whisper. “That wasn’t a part of the deal.”

“Fuck the deal. None of us knows how much time we have left on this earth,” she murmurs.

“I know,” I tell her. “That’s why I want whatever time with him that I can get. Loving him is worth the pain of one day losing him.”

“You might not lose him.”

“Stop. That’s not what this is. Aren’t you supposed to be resting?”

“Fine, but I’m here when you need to talk.”

“Thanks, Court. Now go to sleep,” I demand, and she chuckles softly.

I don’t go back to my book. Instead, I lie awake listening to her breathe and think about what she said. I want to build a life with Dixon, but I know

that’s not what he signed up for, and I won’t be the one to change the rules, no matter how badly I might want to.

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LEIGHTON

I’m finishing up putting the dishes away after unloading the dishwasher when Courtlynn steps into the kitchen. It’s been two weeks since her accident, and she’s doing well. The bruises are fading, most of them gone. The cuts are healing, and there are no complications from her spleen and liver, but they’re still going to monitor her just to make sure.

The only thing left is the fact that she has not replaced her car yet. The insurance check finally arrived yesterday, after they declared it totaled, and Copeland and Macklin are taking her car shopping. Oh, and Grandpa Dean is going, too. They’re going to make sure she gets a good deal.

Other than that, it’s the cast on her wrist, which she says itches like crazy, but she follows each complaint up with “It could have been worse,” and I know she’s thinking about our parents.

I can’t imagine what she’s going through. The fear of the accident brings back memories of the night we lost our parents. We’re all thinking about it, but none of us really knows what she went through. I know it’s tough on her. I can see it. Her smiles are not as bright, and she’s not as

quick with her smartass remarks, which is the Courtlynn we all know and love.

She's still healing, and I remind her often that I'm here, that we're all here for whatever she needs. Maybe she needs to talk to someone. I've mentioned it a few times, but she insists that she's fine. I know the cast is a constant reminder, and she only has to wear it for another two weeks before they X-ray to see how it's healing. Maybe then, she can start recovering without the constant reminder hanging over her shoulders.

"Thanks for doing that." Courtlynn nods toward the dishwasher. "I feel like I've been slacking off for the last couple of weeks."

"It's fine," I tell her. "You've got a good excuse."

"Yeah," she agrees, looking down at her cast. "I think it itches because I know I can't reach to scratch it."

"We just need to keep your mind occupied."

"Good idea. How's Dixon?"

"Not with me." I laugh.

"Too late. Spill it."

"I've not seen much of him since the accident." I say the words as if it's not a big deal, as if I don't miss him terribly.

"What do you mean?"

"We've not hung out since the day we brought you home from the hospital. He's been busy at his day job and at the shop at night. It's all things he has to handle, like interviewing staff, ordering in supplies, and waiting on final inspections from the state, that sort of thing." I shrug. "Time just hasn't lined up."

"Have you talked to him?"

"Yeah, we text." Just not as much as we were before that night. The night I gave every piece of me to a man who will forever hold my heart, no matter where life takes us.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

“We slept together,” I confess. “I think he might be done with me.”

“What?” Courtlynn says, her mouth falling open in shock. “He’s not done with you, Lei. You don’t see the way he looks at you. Hell, I’m surprised someone else hasn’t brought it up before now.”

“Then why the distance?”

“He’s scared.”

“What? That’s ridiculous.”

“I’m telling you, Leighton. You laid the goods on that man, and you stole his heart, and now he doesn’t know what to do.”

I can’t help it. I laugh. Not just a “ha-ha, you’re funny” laugh. No, I toss my head back and belt out my amusement, because she’s wrong. “Are you taking the pain meds or something?”

“Nope. I know these things.” She taps her index finger against her temple. “So, how was it?”

“How was what?” I know exactly what she’s asking, but I pretend otherwise.

“The sex.” She grins.

“We are not talking about this.” My face heats.

“Come on… I’m not getting any. I need to live through you.”

“I’m not getting any either. Not anymore,” I add, which makes her chuckle.

“That good, huh?” she asks.

“Life changing,” I tell her, and it’s the truth. I’ve never felt that connected, that seen, or cared for during sex. It was more, so much more than I ever could have imagined it would be, and now, he’s pulling away from me.

“I knew it!” Courtlynn cheers. “Okay, so it’s time to reel him in.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“He’s running scared. We all know Dix has always said he never wanted to settle down. He’s having a hard time coming to terms with what he

thought he wanted and what he wants, which is you."

"Court, no. I don't need you filling my head with things that will never be. I knew going in that this wasn't anything serious. I suggested we hide it. Hell, I wasn't even supposed to tell you."

That makes her grin widen. "I have my ways." She chuckles.

"Really, can we not do this?"

"Fine. If you won't do it, I'll take care of it on my own. Trust me, Lei, he's going to be back in your bed in no time." She winks.

"No. Just don't, okay? Can you just leave it be? I'm fine. He's fine. Our friend group, our family, it's all a twisted mess, but it's fine. Everything is fine." It has to be. This was my idea. I went into this… situationship with my eyes wide open. No one needs to know that my heart is breaking.

"It's not fine if you're hurting."

"The pain is worth it," I whisper, fighting back tears.

"Lei," she says and steps around the counter to pull me into a hug. "You love him."

"Yeah," I agree.

"I'll bet you that five dollars that I owe you that he loves you, too," she says, lightening the mood.

"Keep your five dollars, and we're not betting on hearts, Court. Come on. We're going to be late." I swipe my phone from the counter and move toward the door. We're picking up Grandma Ruby and meeting our sisters at the farmer's market in town. It's Mother's Day weekend, and we've done this every year since I can remember. We're missing Mom, but we're keeping the tradition alive.

"I can't wait until Lainey and Hadley are older and join us," Ellison says.

“You could have brought them,” Grandma Ruby tells her. “They would have loved this ice cream.”

“Yeah, but Cope was taking her to his mom’s. Chandler and his family were going to be there, too. I’ll stop in once we’re done.”

“My in-laws are at my house helping Mac,” Baylor says. “He said he could handle it, and I’m sure he could, but his mom insisted.”

“Good families.” Grandma Ruby nods.

“Let’s sit and eat our ice cream,” Courtlynn suggests, and we all agree, taking one of the picnic tables to enjoy our sweet treat.

I’ve just shoved a large bite of ice cream into my mouth when I feel a shadow fall over the table. I look up and see Andrew, my high school boyfriend. My first. It’s been ages since I’ve seen him. He moved away from Magnolia Ridge for college after graduation and never moved back.

“Andrew! Hi.” I stand and give him a hug. We parted on good terms, and he’s a part of my journey. “It’s good to see you.”

“You too, Leighton. You look incredible,” he says, smiling at me, his hand still on the small of my back from our hug. “How have you been?” he asks.

“Good. Still working at the Manor with my sisters.” I wave toward the table. “Baylor moved back home.” I point toward my sister. “She’s married to Macklin, and Copeland is back, and he and Ellison are married, too.”

“What about you? Are you married?” he asks, interest in his eyes.

Sorry, bud. That ship has sailed. “No, not married.”

“Dixon! Donald!” Courtlynn exclaims. “Fancy seeing you here,” she says.

I turn to look, and my eyes meet Dixon’s. There’s an expression on his face I’ve never seen before. One I can’t name.

“Ladies,” he greets us.

“Hello,” Donald, his dad, says. “Looks like you ladies are having a good day. My Hazel loved this market. Dix and I come every year to honor

her," he says, smiling widely, but you can see the sadness in his eyes.

Dixon moves around his dad, bringing him to stand next to Andrew and me. "Ice cream?" he asks, bending over to look at Ellison's cup.

"So, not married. Boyfriend?" Andrew asks loud enough that everyone can hear him.

I swallow hard. "Not married. No boyfriend," I answer. It's the truth, even if it feels wrong saying that with Dixon standing next to me. The fact of the matter, even though it's painful, is that he's not mine.

"Oh, how rude of us. Donald, Dixon, this is Andrew. He and Leighton dated in high school."

Dixon leans around me, pressing his body against my right side, and offers Andrew his hand. "Dixon Turner," he says, then nods to his dad. "My dad, Donald. Nice to meet you." He shakes Andrew's hand, and I can't look at him when he does it.

This is a complete shit show.

"You, too," Andrew says, before bringing his eyes back to mine. "I'm in town for a few more days visiting my parents." He nods to where his mom and dad are waiting in line for ice cream. "We should have dinner. Catch up," he says. Those are the words he says, but his eyes, and the way he scans them over my body, tell a different story.

"Oh, um, maybe. I've got plans all weekend with my sisters, then work on Monday."

"Maybe I'll stop by the inn, and we can have lunch. You do take a lunch break, don't you?" He smiles.

I laugh nervously. "Yeah, I take lunch breaks."

"Monday at noon," Courtlynn chimes in helpfully. "I'll text the staff now and see if one of the meeting rooms is open so you can dine and not have the guests around," she says, pulling her phone out of her pocket, her fingers already flying across the screen.

My eyes widen. "Oh, you don't have to—"

“Thanks, Court,” Andrew says at the same time.

I clamp my mouth shut. I don’t want to have breakfast, lunch, or dinner with him. Sure, it’s good to see him, but a friendly hug, a “how ya been,” is all I want. Nothing more.

“I’ll see you Monday. I’d better get back.” He leans in and presses a kiss to the corner of my mouth. “See you soon, Leighton.” He grins before dropping his hand from the small of my back and sauntering away.

“Damn, Lei, I’m thinking there might be some sparks with that old flame,” Baylor says.

“No.” I rush to shut her down. “Just catching up.”

“The look in that man’s eyes was not one that says, ‘We should catch up.’ Well, unless he meant the bedroom,” Courtlynn teases.

It’s the old Courtlynn, the one before the accident, and I smile, because damn, I’ve missed her. “That’s not it.”

“Old boyfriend, huh?” Dixon asks. His tone is deep, and his eyes are darker than normal. Almost black.

“Yeah, we dated our last two years of high school. He was going away to college, and this is my home, so we called it quits after graduation,” I explain. “It’s been years since I’ve seen him,” I add.

“Hmm” is all he says, running his hands through his hair.

All I can think about is how soft his strands are and if I’ll ever get the chance to have my fingers buried in them again. I swallow past the lump in my throat.

“I need the facilities,” Grandma Ruby says, standing.

“Oh, I’ll go with you,” I tell her. “I need to go, too.”

Grandma stands, and I link my arm with hers. “Donald, good to see you. You, too, Dixon,” Grandma says. I toss them a wave, and we walk away, my heart in my throat.

We move to the line of Porta-Potties, and Grandma turns to look at me, our arms still linked. “How long?” she asks.

“Oh, the line’s short, so I think it will be quick,” I tell her.

She waves her free hand in the air. “Not the toilets. How long have you been in love with Dixon Turner?”

“What?” I ask, my mouth falling open in shock.

“It’s written all over your face, sweetheart.”

“I’m not,” I say, and even I can hear how defensive my tone is.

“It’s okay. Does he know?”

I sigh. There’s no getting out of this, and I can’t lie for shit. “No.”

“You should tell him. Men are funny creatures, sweetheart. They don’t know to woo you or court you if they don’t know you’re interested.”

“It’s not like that. Dixon’s never wanted anything serious.”

“Life is short, Leighton. You have to go after the things you want, even if that means fighting for an old love or moving to New York, only to realize your heart was back at home. And even if you have to put your heart out there for a man who doesn’t know how you feel about him. Sometimes in life, we don’t know what we want until it’s presented to us. Don’t be afraid to take a chance.”

“It’s messy. He’s friends with Cope, Mac, and Ellie… all of us, really. It could mess up the dynamic.”

“It could,” she agrees. “Or it could make it better. It could make your life and his better, and, in turn, everyone around you. Tell him. Take the chance.”

“We’ll see,” I tell her, because it will pacify her. I can’t tell her about what I agreed to, or that I know for certain that he’s done with me. His distance these past few weeks is telling.

“All right, you think we’ve been gone long enough?” she asks, leaning into me.

I chuckle. “Yeah, I think we have.” With our arms still linked together, we make our way back to the picnic tables where my sisters are waiting for us. Dixon and his dad are gone, and I sigh in relief.

Hopefully, there are no more awkward moments the rest of the day.

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DIXON

This week has been hell. All I can think about is whether Leighton had lunch with her ex. Did he kiss her? Touch her? I've never wanted to break a hand so badly in all my life. Seeing him with his palm on the small of her back, as if she were his, had me seeing red.

I gave his hand a tight squeeze when we shook, but that still didn't stop the asshole from asking her out. She's not mine. I know that. I've been avoiding her. Forcing myself not to call her just to hear her voice and to limit my messages to just replies.

It's been three long weeks without her.

I stare down at my phone while sitting next to Dad on the back patio. We just had dinner—steaks on the grill and baked potatoes. I have a message from Bowen telling me everyone is getting together at the Hideaway tonight.

I don't have to ask him to know if everyone includes Leighton. I know that it does, and fuck me, what am I going to do if her ex is there? Is he still in town? Did they even meet? I've typed out a text more times than I care to admit, asking her, but I never send any of them.

It’s not my place.

She’s not mine, and that thought alone has my chest feeling too tight.

“What’s got your mind spinning, son?” Dad asks.

I lift my head to see him kicked back on the lounge chair next to mine, watching me intently. “Nothing, just thinking.”

“About the Moran girl?”

My chest seizes. “What? The Moran girl?” I say, my voice hitting a high note that hasn’t been heard since before puberty. “What are you going on about, old man?”

He chuckles. “You know which one. The pretty blonde you couldn’t take your eyes off at the farmer’s market. Leighton, was it?” He smirks.

“She’s a Moran sister.” I nod.

“And you’re in love with her.”

“What?” I sit up in my lounger and swing my legs to the side to face him. He does the same, mimicking my stance with his elbows resting on his knees. “You feeling all right? Maybe we need to get you an appointment to have your eyes checked?”

“My eyesight is just fine, son.” He smiles at me, all while I’m panicking inside.

I don’t love her. I mean, I care about her, but love? No, that was never in the plan for me. However, even as the thought rolls through my head, I know that I’m lying. I didn’t want to love her, but Leighton and her sweet smiles, and that blush of hers, she caught me, and now, I’m fucked.

Before we started—whatever this is or was—I thought about her all the time. But now, she’s in my every thought. She’s the first thing I think about when I wake up. I can’t tell you how many times in the last three weeks something has happened, and she’s the first person I thought to tell. And at night, when I’m lying in bed, my body aches to have her next to me. To hold her in my arms and breathe her in.

Yeah, I’m fucked.

“I’ve failed you, son,” Dad says.

I glance up to find him staring down at his feet. “What? That’s crazy talk, old man.”

“No, I have. I loved your mother. She was a part of me. She was the air that I breathed, and we lost her way too soon. There will never be another love for me. I gave that woman my heart, and she took it with her when she left this earth.”

“I know, Dad.” I’ve watched the heartache he’s gone through all these years since losing her, and it tears me open inside.

“I know you do, but there’s something you might not know. Something I don’t think I’ve ever explained in detail.”

“What’s that?” I ask, my voice thick with emotion.

“I wouldn’t change it, Dixon. Don’t get me wrong, I’d give anything to have my Hazel here next to me. You missed out on having your mother for so many important parts of your life, even this one. I know she’d tell me to fix this, so that’s what I’m trying to do.”

“Dad? You’re not making any sense.”

Finally, he lifts his head. “I’m getting there,” he assures me. “I loved her yesterday, I love her today, and I’ll love her tomorrow. If I knew back then, on the day I met her, that I would lose her far too soon, I still would have married her. She gave me two of the greatest gifts in this life. Her heart and you.”

“Yeah,” I say, my voice cracking.

“Life is unpredictable, Dixon. It’s painful at times and joyous at others. You can’t let fear control you. You can’t let it keep you from the joy or the pain.”

“I’m not.”

“You are. You love that girl. I know my son, and I could see it in your eyes. You love her, but you’re scared, and that’s on me.”

“It’s not,” I say, not denying that I love her, because my dad knows me, and he’s ready to call me out on my bullshit.

“I don’t regret a single moment with your mother. She was my light, and even though she’s left this earth, she still lives here,” he says, patting his hand over his heart. “You can’t hide from it, son. Love sneaks up on you when you least expect it. I’ve honored your mother every day since we lost her, but along the way, I didn’t see what it was doing to you. You’re afraid to end up like your old man.”

His words hit me square in the chest. I swallow hard. I want to argue, tell him he’s wrong, but I can’t. “What if I do?” I finally ask. His brows pull together. “What if I get all of it?” My throat burns. “The love. The happiness. The family. What if I get everything I’ve never known I wanted, and then one day it’s gone?”

Dad studies me for a long moment. “Then you’ll grieve.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “That’s supposed to make me feel better?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “It’s supposed to be the truth.”

I look away. The evening sun casts long shadows across the porch, and suddenly, I feel like I'm sixteen again instead of a grown man.

“Son,” Dad says softly. “Do you know what losing your mother taught me?”

I tear my gaze from the setting sun to look at him.

“That love is worth the cost.”

The ache in my chest deepens.

He nods toward me. “You think the pain is the story because it’s the part that lasted. But it isn’t. Your mother and I had nearly twenty years together. Twenty years of laughter, arguments, raising you, building a life.” A small smile tugs at his lips. “Nearly twenty years of loving each other.” His eyes shine with that love. “I’d live through every second of losing her again if it meant getting those years first.”

Emotion clogs my throat. “Dad—”

“No.” He points a finger at me. “Listen to me. Really listen.”

I clamp my mouth shut and listen. “Your mother wasn’t the tragedy of my life, Dixon.” His voice cracks. “She was the two greatest blessings of it.”

A lump forms in my throat so thick I can barely swallow around it. This is not what I expected when I stopped by for our weekly dinner.

“She’d be furious with me,” he continues with a wet chuckle. “Knowing I accidentally taught my son that love ends in loss instead of teaching him that it starts with living.”

I scrub a hand over my face. “I’m not scared of loving her.”

“Yes, you are.”

The immediate answer stings because it’s true. I’m scared out of my mind because losing Leighton would end me.

Dad sighs. “And that’s okay. Love should scare you a little. It means it matters.”

I stare out at the fading sky. Her face fills my mind. I miss her. I miss her smile and her laugh. I miss… everything about her. Staying away from her for the past few weeks has been torture. Leighton is the kind of woman you take home to your mom.

“Mom would have loved her,” I croak.

“No doubt,” Dad agrees.

My beautiful girl knew what this was. I told her I didn’t do serious, and that’s who she is. She’s not a booty call. She’s the kind of woman who sneaks in quietly and steals your heart when you’re not looking.

She accepted me into her life, into her body, anyway.

I’m in love with her, and I’m scared out of my mind.

“So, what do I do?” I whisper.

Dad's answer comes without hesitation. “You choose her. You choose her every day she's yours.”

My chest feels tight when I ask, “And if someday she's not?”

Dad's gaze bores into mine. “Then you’ll survive it. If you’re lucky like I was, you’ll have a kid, or a handful, to remind you every day of the love that you shared. That child or children will be a constant reminder of how wonderful that love was, and what it created. You are my reminder, Dixon.”

My chest caves under the weight of the love I have for her. The love I tried to run from because I was scared.

“The part nobody tells you,” he says quietly, “is that the pain doesn't come from loving someone. The pain comes from losing them. And the only way to avoid that pain,” he continues, “is to never love at all. Trust me, son. That's a far worse way to live.”

Lifting my head, I look at him. Really look at him. At the man who had loved one woman so completely that even after all these years, her absence still lives beside him. And for the first time, I don't see a man destroyed by love. I see a man made better by it.

Dad smiles. “Go get your girl.”

A laugh breaks through the emotion clogging my throat. “I’m in love with her,” I say the words out loud.

“Told you.” He grins. “And if she's anything like your mother, she's already waited longer than she should have.”

For the first time in weeks, maybe months, the fear loosens its grip around my heart. Not because I know everything will work out. But because I finally understand that loving her is worth the risk. Just like Mom was worth it to him.

“I gotta go,” I tell him, standing and shoving my phone into my pocket. Dad stands, too, and I pull him into a tight hug.

“I love you, son. Your mother would be so damn proud of the man you are.”

Fuck. My eyes burn, but I blink hard, fighting against it. “Love you, old man,” I tell him, stepping out of the hug.

“Go on now. Bring my future daughter-in-law for dinner next week, yeah?” he asks.

I husk out a laugh. “If I haven’t fucked this up, you’ve got a deal,” I say, waving goodbye and rushing toward my truck.

Before I pull out, I grab my phone and respond to the group chat with the guys I’ve been avoiding.

Me: I’m on my way. Had dinner with Dad.

Copeland: He’s alive!

Macklin: I was about to drive to the shop to make sure you didn’t fall off a ladder or something.

Bowen: Everyone is already here.

Me: Who’s everyone?

I’m pretty sure Bowen is reading between the lines, but if she’s not there, then I need to be where she is.

Copeland: Everyone. My wife and her sisters, all of us, Kinzie, Sophia, Lorna, and Kelly. You’re literally the only one missing.

Me: Leaving Dad’s now.

Tossing my phone into the cupholder, I pull out of Dad's driveway and point my truck toward the Hideaway. My hands are sweaty as they grip the steering wheel. Thankfully, the drive is short. I park in the back of the lot, grab my phone and key fob, and rush into the building.

I don't have a plan. I don't know what I'm going to say to her, but I know that I owe her an apology. The distance that I put between us over the past three weeks was wrong, and I know I hurt her. I hurt myself because being away from her has felt like a punishment.

Music hits me before I even open the door. The place is packed. I work my way through the crowd, waving hi to those who call out my name, but I don't stop to talk. I have to see her. I have to tell her how sorry I am for pulling away. I have to tell her that I'm in love with her.

Finally, I make it to the back of the bar where our usual long table sits. Sometimes, we take the private room in the back, but apparently, not tonight. There's an empty seat at the end of the table, but I don't want it. I'm about five feet away when Leighton and Kelly stand.

I quicken my steps, and when Leighton turns, I'm standing there facing her. Her big blue eyes widen in surprise. At first, they light up with her smile, but that light fades when I'm sure she's remembering how I've ghosted her over the last few weeks.

She peers up at me.

I stare down at her.

Several heartbeats pass, and I'm sure we've garnered our friends', hell, if not the entire bar's, attention, but I couldn't give a fuck. All I care about is her. My hands find their way to her cheeks, and I lean in close. Her eyes widen in panic, and I smile softly. It's loud in here, but we're so close, I know she'll be able to hear me.

"There are so many things I need to say, but there are a few that can't wait. I'm sorry, baby," I say, my voice gravelly. "I'm sorry I pushed you away, and—I fucking love the hell out of you, Leighton Moran."

Her mouth falls open in shock, and all I can think about is kissing her sweet lips, so that's what I do.

I kiss her like there's nobody watching. Like she's the only person in the world that matters to me, because she is. She's everything. I don't know when it happened, but somehow, this woman climbed her way over the walls around my heart, and now it's hers.

Slowing the kiss, I pull back into those pretty blue eyes of hers. "I love you. I'm sorry, please forgive me."

"Dix." Her eyes are swimming in tears. "I don't know what…" Her voice trails off.

"This means I want you. I want you to be mine. I want to be your boyfriend, and I want everyone to know it. I want more than that, baby. I want forever, but we'll start there."

"You want me?" she asks, a single tear rolling down her cheek. I catch it with my thumb.

"Only you," I say, leaning forward and pressing my forehead to hers. "Tell me you didn't go out with him."

"Who?"

"Your ex. It's been driving me insane all week."

"No. I told him I was busy."

"Thank fuck," I say, pressing a hard kiss to her lips. "Mine, Leighton. You and me, that's it."

It's delayed, but a breathtaking smile lights up her face. "I love you, too."

"Thank fuck," I say again, pulling her into a hug and seeing our friends and her sisters staring at us with their mouths hanging open in shock. "Hey." I wave at them, and Leighton moves to my side, where I keep an arm wrapped around her waist, holding her close where she's always meant to be.

“You just kissed my sister,” Ellison says, shock still written all over her face.

“That’s usually what you do when you love someone.”

“What?” Baylor exclaims.

“You better treat her right, Turner,” Courtlynn warns me.

“You have my word.”

“How long?” Kelly, Leighton’s best friend, asks, almost sounding hurt.

“A while,” I answer. “We didn’t know where this was going, if anywhere, and we knew that if it ended and everyone was involved, it would get messy.”

“Now it’s not messy?” Macklin asks.

“Oh, it’s messy.” I laugh. “But it’s the perfect kind of messy.”

“That’s our sister,” Copeland speaks up.

“I know.” I turn to look down at Leighton. “She’s my heart, Cope. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“I thought you didn’t want to settle down. Like ever?” Ellison asks.

“I guess I was just waiting for her to help me see the error of my ways.”

“This is real?” Baylor asks. “You’re not punking us? Is there a cameraman about to jump out?” she asks, her eyes looking around the bar.

I guide Leighton to stand in front of me so that I can wrap my arms around her. She relaxes into my embrace, and fuck, it feels good.

She’s mine.

I’m hers.

She glances at me over her shoulder. “I love you, Dix.”

I peck a kiss on her lips. “No more trying not to kiss you where we can get caught. Let them look,” I say, kissing her again. She turns in my arms and wraps her arms around my neck, as she opens for me.

“Get a room!” Courtlynn calls out, and everyone laughs.

Forcing myself to pull out of the kiss, I take the seat Leighton was just occupying and pull her onto my lap.

“You need a beer?” Bowen asks.

“Nah, man, I’ve got everything I need right here.” I don’t want to forget a single second of this moment. I want to remember the day I pulled my head out of my ass, thanks to my dad, and claimed the love of my life.

This is a moment I’ll cherish for as long as I live.

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epilogue leighton

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LEIGHTON

Tomorrow is the big day. After talking it over, Dixon decided to hold his grand opening on a Saturday. He'll have limited weekend hours, but he wanted people to be able to come in and tour the shop, take a business card or brochure, and just build awareness that there's a new agriculture mechanic in town.

All of our friends are here, our family, because tonight is just for them. It's a soft opening, if you will—if you can even call it that, because it's just our small group. Everyone we love is here to support Dixon in this new adventure.

"I still can't believe you and Dix," Ellison says, coming to stand next to me. She has our nephew Waylon on her hip. He's grinning like a fool with the toy wrench in his hand. I found them online and got one for each kid. I thought they were cute, and it's fitting for where we are.

"It just happened," I tell her. It's the same conversation I've had with her for the last month since Dixon walked into the Hideaway and kissed the breath from my lungs.

“This is a whole new side to him we’ve never seen. It’s as if you’ve cast a spell on him.”

I laugh, reaching for Waylon, but he turns his head, wanting to stay with Aunt Ellie. “No spell, I promise.”

“Well, whatever it is, it looks good on both of you.”

“Thanks, Ellie.”

“Now, if we could just find Court a good man.”

“It’s going to take someone who’s strong-willed to handle her,” I tease. “She’s back to her old self. Well, mostly. We had our first storm since her accident last week, and I heard her cry out in her room. I rushed across the hall, but I heard her on the phone, so whoever she was talking to helped calm her down.”

“Incoming,” Bowen says. He’s got Lainey in his arms, flying her around like an airplane. Her arms are out at her sides, and her little giggle echoes throughout the room. When they reach us, Bowen pops her onto his hip.

She grips his shirt and bounces. “Fwy,” she demands, and we laugh.

“Lainey, give Uncle Bo a break. Plane’s arms get tired,” Ellison tells her daughter.

Waylon reaches for Bowen, and I’m not sure if it’s because he’s also holding Lainey or if he, too, wants to fly. All the guys take these kids on “airplane rides,” and they love it.

“Come here, you.” I reach for Lainey, and she comes to me. That allows Bowen to take Waylon. “Love you, Lainey bug,” I say, kissing her cheek.

“Daddy!” she cheers, and the next thing I know, Copeland scoops his daughter out of my arms, and I pout.

“Baby hog,” I mutter.

Copeland just laughs. “Hey, Dix!” he calls out. Dixon turns to look for Copeland, and when he sees me with him, he smiles and heads our way.

“What’s up?” he asks, stepping up behind me and wrapping his arms around my waist. I love it when he does this. I’ve never felt safer or more

loved than when I’m in his arms.

“Your girl here is calling me a baby hog. Maybe you should have one of your own so she quits stealing mine.”

“I mean, we’ve been practicing.” Dixon chuckles.

“Dixon!” I turn to look at him over my shoulder, and he kisses me as he laughs.

“Just saying, baby. We’re really good at it.”

“You did not just— Subject change. Please,” I beg, feeling my face flare with heat.

Copeland grins like he’s won something. “See? Even he agrees with me.”

“Oh, I hate all of you,” I mutter.

“No, you don’t,” Dixon says against my temple before pressing a kiss there.

He’s right. I don’t hate them. I glance around and smile. This place, all the hard work everyone put into making this dream a reality for Dixon, brings tears to my eyes. This is his. Something he built, and I know it’s going to be a huge success.

I’m so damn proud of him.

“Seriously, though,” Copeland says, bouncing his daughter lightly in his arms. “I’m just saying, this little one could use a cousin.”

“You’re relentless,” I tell him. “Besides, she has two cousins.”

“Yeah, but she needs another one.”

“That would be one for each of them, then no one is complaining about not having a baby to snuggle,” Ellison says helpfully.

“Wait, then if that’s the case, we need at least eight in total,” Dixon says.

“Please stop encouraging them,” I say to Dixon. Then I glance between my sister and her husband. “Y’all better get busy. We’re about five shy of meeting that goal.”

“Hey, I did my part, and Baylor overachieved.” Ellison chuckles.

“We’re not even married. We just stopped hiding our relationship. Don’t scare him away by talking about babies.”

Dixon’s arms fall away as he turns me to face him. He wraps one arm around my waist, and the other rests gently against my cheek. “Is that what you want, Leighton? To be my wife? To have my babies?”

I love this man. Completely. Unconditionally. And somehow, every day, I love him more than the one before it.

I reach up and cup his cheek. “When you’re ready.”

His eyes soften as he leans into my touch. For a moment, the noise around us fades away. It’s just us. The way it’s always been. The way it always will be. “I love you,” I whisper.

A slow smile spreads across his face. “I love you, too.”

Then he kisses me. The cheers that immediately erupt around us make me laugh into his mouth.

“Get a room!” someone shouts.

“Or make a baby!” Copeland adds.

The entire room cheers.

Dixon pulls back, shaking his head. We’re both smiling, and I don’t know what our future holds, but I know whatever it brings, we’ll face it together.

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epilogue dixon

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DIXON

I couldn’t have set this moment up better if I tried. Stepping back from the crowd gathered inside, I reach for Leighton’s hand and lace my fingers through hers. “Excuse us for a minute,” I say.

A few curious glances follow us, but no one questions it. They think we’re just slipping away for a second. Only three people know what’s really about to happen. My dad and her grandparents. Everyone else is completely in the dark.

Exactly how I wanted it.

“Where are we going?” she asks, laughing softly as I lead her toward the door.

“I want to show you something.” She narrows her eyes suspiciously but follows without protest.

The late-afternoon sun casts everything in gold as we step outside. The sounds of our family and friends fade behind us. We stop on the walkway, surrounded by the property that helped set our love story in motion.

I turn to face her, and for a second, all I do is stare. She’s wearing a simple cream-colored dress that dances around her ankles in the summer

breeze. Her feet are bare because she's spent half the afternoon chasing Lainey around the shop and refused to risk falling in sandals. Her blonde hair falls in soft waves down her back, and those impossibly blue eyes are shining with happiness.

She’s beautiful.

Not because of the dress.

Not because of the sunlight.

Because she’s her.

The woman who somehow found every broken piece inside me and loved me anyway. I hear the door behind us open, and I don’t have to look to know what’s happening. My dad has told everyone to join us outside. Our friends and family join us. I’m sure they can guess what’s about to happen, but my girl, she’s just smiling up at me with those big blue eyes. Without a shadow of a doubt, I know this woman is my future.

Everyone is watching.

My heart pounds against my ribs, but my hands are steady as I reach into my pocket. The velvet box feels warm from where I’ve carried it all day. Leighton’s smile falters when she sees it.

Her eyes widen. “Dix?”

Slowly, I lower myself onto one knee, and a sharp gasp leaves her lips. The world seems to stop. The breeze is gone, and our family’s voices disappear. There’s nothing but the roaring rhythm of my heart, every single beat just for her.

Just us.

I swallow hard, suddenly feeling every emotion I’ve ever felt with her, trying to put them into words. “I spent years being afraid to love,” I begin. “Afraid to trust someone with my heart. Afraid that if I gave someone all of me, I’d lose them.”

Tears immediately fill her eyes.

“And then one day, there you were.” My voice cracks, but I don’t care. “The woman who’d been standing right in front of me all along.”

She presses a trembling hand to her mouth.

“You are my best friend and the love of my life. You know every flaw, every scar, every mistake I’ve ever made, and somehow you chose me anyway.”

A tear slips down her cheek. I want to stand and wipe it away, but I have more to say.

“You loved me when I didn’t know how to accept that love. You believed in me when I couldn’t see my own worth. And every single day since then, you’ve made my life better just by being in it.”

More tears spill down her face. Behind her, I can see our family trying, and failing, not to cry.

“Leighton, you gave me a home without ever building a house. You gave me a family before we had children. You gave me a future I never let myself believe was possible, when I was convinced it wasn’t what I wanted.”

Her shoulders shake as she quietly sobs.

“And every morning, I wake up grateful that somehow, against all odds, I get to call you mine.” I open the ring box. The diamond catches the sunlight, and she gasps. “But I don’t want forever to be an assumption anymore.”

Her breath catches.

“I want it to be a promise.” I hold her gaze. “Leighton Moran, will you marry me? Will you spend the rest of your life letting me love you the way you deserve to be loved? You’re already my best friend, you’ll forever be the love of my life, but I’d also like to call you my wife. Marry me, baby.”

For one heartbeat, she just stares at me, and I start to sweat, but then her blinding smile lights up her face, and even through the tears, I can see the love reflecting back at me.

Then, she says it. One word, written into a moment that I know I'll remember for the rest of my life.

"Yes," she whispers.

"My wife," I say, sliding the ring onto her finger.

She shakes her head and drops to her knees in front of me. "Yes, Dixon. A thousand times, yes." She kisses me soundly, and then together, we stand. My hands are on her hips as I rest my forehead against hers. "My husband," she breathes, and fuck me, do I love the sound of that.

Cheers erupt behind us, but I barely hear them. Because the only thing I care about is the woman in front of me.

My future wife.

My best friend.

My forever.

I catch sight of my dad out of the corner of my eye, and he nods as he claps, and I'm pretty sure even from here, there are tears in his eyes. Okay, so maybe my dad should get some credit here, too, but it was this woman, the one who owns every piece of me, who made me fall in love with her. The woman who taught me that love wasn't something to fear. She taught me it was something worth fighting for.

And I'll spend the rest of my life proving that to her every single day.

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thank you

Thank you for taking the time to read Trying Not to Kiss You.

Want more of Dixon and Leighton? Download their bonus scene here.
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appreciation

There are so many people involved in bringing a book to life, far more than most readers ever see. While I may be the one who writes the words, those words are shaped, refined, and strengthened by an incredible team standing behind me every step of the way. My editors, proofreaders, and beta readers pour their time and care into every page. They challenge me to do better, to dig deeper, and to see my own work through from a different angle. Because of them, each story grows into something stronger, something more complete, and something I'm truly proud to share.

But the team doesn't stop there. Behind every book is a network of talented, dedicated individuals who each play a vital role in turning an idea into something tangible. Photographers who capture the perfect image and mood, models who help bring characters to life, cover designers who create that crucial first impression that draws readers in, and graphic designers who craft beautiful, eye-catching promotional pieces that help stories reach new audiences. Formatters work behind the scenes to ensure every page looks beautiful and professional, making the reading experience seamless from beginning to end. Bloggers and influencers generously share their platforms and voices to help spread the word, giving each book a chance to find its readers.

I’m also incredibly grateful for my fellow author friends, who understand this journey in a way few others can. They offer advice, encouragement, late-night pep talks, and constant reminders to keep going, even on the days when doubt creeps in. Their support means more than I can ever fully explain. And beyond all of that are so many others who contribute in ways both big and small. My family, who cheer me on, offer unwavering support and simply believe in me and what I’m creating. It truly takes a village, and I am so lucky to have mine. I could not do this without them.

And woven through every part of this journey are my readers, who make it all possible.

If you’re reading this, please know how deeply grateful I am for you. Thank you for choosing my books in a world filled with endless options. Thank you for spending your hard-earned money, your valuable time, and your emotional energy on the stories I’ve written. Thank you for taking a chance on my words, for connecting with my characters, and for allowing these stories to become even a small part of your life.

Whether you’ve read one book or every single one, whether you leave reviews, recommend my stories to friends, or quietly turn pages late into the night, your support matters. It matters more than I can ever fully put into words. You are the reason I get to keep doing what I love. You are the reason these stories exist beyond my imagination.

So, from the bottom of my heart, thank you. Thank you for your support, your trust, and your belief in me and my work. I appreciate you more than you will ever know.

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