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# *Whistlin'* DIXIE

A TEMPERED STEEL NOVEL

MAGGIE ADAMS

# **WHISTLIN' DIXIE**

*Book One in the Tempered Steel Series*

**Maggie Adams**

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## CHAPTER ONE

Mac Coalson drove his black GMC truck through his hometown, the tiny riverside community of Grafton, Illinois, and onto the blacktop road that headed toward Jerseyville, the local county seat. He gripped the wheel firmly as he tried to control his anger. The last thing he needed was to wreck his new truck. March had been an icy month in the Midwest.

The vandalism of the past few months to the new homes built by his construction company was about to finally come to an end. And the little punks were going to pay. Big Time. All that damage, the mess, the financial strain on the company, all caused by a bunch of juvenile delinquents bent on a destructive binge.

A little over a year ago, the tiny community of Grafton, Illinois, had been sandbagging against the rising waters of the Mississippi River. Ben Yates, the local sheriff, had even brought prisoners from the area correctional facility to help. It hadn't mattered. The mighty Mississippi broke through and all but decimated the tiny village. Mac's construction company, along with several others, had undertaken the arduous task of clearing, cleaning and reconstructing whatever they could, alongside the villagers who lost almost everything.

How could these brats justify destroying what everyone, their relatives included, had tried so hard to rebuild? Well, one way or another, Mac was getting some answers tonight. He cruised into the police department parking lot, slammed the brakes and hit the cement parking block.

"Where are they?" he growled, blowing through the double doors of the small county jail and jangling the front bell. He brushed his hair off his forehead with an impatient gesture as his gaze locked on the portly man in a sheriff's uniform.

"Now, calm down, Mac." Sheriff Ben Yates tried to placate the large man bearing down on him. "Those kids didn't know what they were getting into. It was a dare; nothing more. They are not the main source."

"And you believe them?" Mac was incredulous.

"Yes, I do. None of them boys have any priors and their stories match."

"So they've been ruining my business and others on a childish prank, and you're just gonna stand there and defend them? Have you forgotten the reason my construction business has been so busy here?" Mac roared. His left eye began to twitch, a sure sign that his temper was about to be unleashed.

"I remember I saved your butt when the sandbags you were trying to hold onto with your feet washed out from under you and almost landed

you headfirst in the rushing water, that's one thing I remember. So don't take that tone with me, boy!" Ben's wrinkled face took on a purplish hue as he wagged his stubby finger in Mac's face.

Mac passed a weary hand over his eyes as he tried not to grind his teeth in frustration. "I'm sorry, Ben. This whole mess turns my stomach." He sighed in defeat. "Who's involved?"

Ben snorted as he acknowledged Mac's apology with a curt nod. "The Riley twins, Becky Jamieson's boy, Todd, and the new schoolteacher's brother, Jamie Harris. And I'm warning you now, all the parents are here except for ..." he trailed off, his eyes widening as the bell pealed once again on the front door of the precinct, announcing a visitor. Mac watched Ben hastily hitch up his pants and straighten his glasses. He turned to see what in the world the old guy was looking at.

"Excuse me, but I believe you're holding my brother here? My name is Dixie Harris." The soft, throaty drawl belied the spark of fire in the blue eyes of the petite woman as she closed the distance between them and held out her hand to Ben in polite introduction. She completely ignored Mac.

Mac's gaze slowly raked the newcomer from head to toe. The woman was short, barely above five feet tall, he estimated, but she was definitely curved in all the right places. He took in the faded jeans that hugged her curves and the unzipped brown leather jacket that did little to conceal breasts that would overflow from even his large hands.

Sighing inwardly, his gaze returned to the expressive face with a studied interest. There was no denying the new kindergarten teacher was a beautiful woman. Her silver blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail that made her look almost childlike. The freshly scrubbed face, completely devoid of makeup, was a velvety mixture of rose petals and cream. The full pink lips she was unconsciously biting were moist and luscious, begging for a man's kiss. An unexpected burn of sexual heat coursed through his body. Damn, but he should have made that school board meeting last fall.

At that instant, she turned slightly and noticed him watching her. Mac didn't look away, even as her eyes narrowed and her mouth turned down in a frown at his rude appraisal. She deliberately turned her back on him.

Ben brushed past Mac. "Hello, Miss Harris. We're sorry to bother you like this, but your brother and some others were apprehended on private property. If you'll follow me, I'll take you to him."

"Thank you," she murmured, casting another glance from beneath her lashes at the stone faced man in front of her. "Excuse me," she murmured as she tried to skirt around him. The keys on the sheriff's belt loop jangled

as he walked. She enjoyed the sound more than his poor attempts at small talk.

The trio emerged into a large waiting area in the back of the jail. Several empty cells were along one wall, but the boys were lounging on nearby benches on the opposite side of the room, where the parents had already gathered. Embarrassment, anger, and nervousness were just a few of the emotions reflected on their faces as the sheriff approached the group and explained the reason for their summons.

Dixie allowed herself a calming breath as she unclenched her fists in the front pockets of her jeans. She risked a fleeting look in the direction where her brother now stood talking to another officer. *Dear Lord in heaven what had her brother done?* Her view was suddenly blocked and all she could see was the man that had followed them into the waiting area. She darted a glance at his face, then swallowed swiftly. He regarded her in silence for several seconds, then gave her a small nod, which did nothing to alleviate her frayed nerves, and headed toward the boys.

Was he the father of one of the boys arrested? He didn't appear old enough to have a teenager. His black hair gave only a hint of gray, the same steel color of his eyes. His build was definitely fit. His shoulders were as broad as a linebacker, tapering down a firm back to long lean legs encased in worn jeans. And his butt... *Good heavens, what was the matter with her?* She was appraising a stranger while her brother was being arrested! She blushed furiously at her thoughts and prayed no one had noticed. Her pale complexion and vivid eyes always gave away her every thought, much to her disgust.

"Mac, you want to come here a minute? You can sign some papers to press charges, and then you're free to go on home. We'll deal with the boys and their parents. There's no need for you to be here for the questioning," the sheriff grouched.

"You're the man pressing charges?" Dixie turned to the dark haired man. His penetrating gaze shifted to her face, and she instinctively stepped back. The anger emanating from their depths was palpable in the air.

"Yes, I am. Vandalism is a stupid act of an ignorant mind, but in this case, it's personal. They've ruined the homes my company built specifically for the folks left homeless from the flood. And now, because of your brother and his friends, my company is working overtime to clean up the mess and keep our promises to these people. I believe they've been through enough without facing another delay. Excuse me." He raked her with a withering glance and started toward the one desk in the area.

“Wait!” She grabbed his arm. “There must be some mistake. My brother would never do anything to harm anyone.”

He lifted one eyebrow. “Ben Yates has been sheriff here for over twenty years. We’ve got security cameras hooked up. He apprehended them himself outside one of my partially constructed homes. Are you calling him a liar?”

“No! Yes, er, please, I’m sure it’s just a misunderstanding. If you would let Jamie explain...” she trailed off as his eyes narrowed to mere slits.

“Your brother will have plenty of time to explain to his lawyer. If you don’t have one, I suggest you get one. You’re gonna need it.” He removed her hand from his arm, sending her a look of contempt that made her cringe inside, but she was determined to make him see reason. There was no way her brother could have done this.

“Now wait just a gall darn minute ...” she cried, hurrying on her stiletto boots to catch up with him. The rude man ignored her, so she turned to Ben. Her chest heaved with righteous indignation as he, too, ignored her. “Sheriff, I demand to know exactly what my brother is being charged with.”

“Sis, stay out of this,” Jamie whispered as he approached her. He nodded to Mac. “His family practically built this town. That’s Mac Coalson. I’m as good as convicted.”

“Well,” Ben scratched his gray whiskers and approached the boy. “That remains to be seen, young man. However, I suggest you keep quiet for the time being.” He turned to Dixie. “Ma’am, your brother was trespassing on private property with the intention, we believe, of vandalizing it. Several incidents have occurred which have made us very suspicious of anyone trespassing in the new subdivisions under construction.”

“That’s not true, Sis. We didn’t touch a thing. If someone would just listen, we would explain,” Jamie announced loudly.

Dixie turned back to Ben. “Did you find evidence that it was definitely the boys?”

“As to that, we arrived before any damage was done,” he mumbled.

“Well, it would seem to me that if you don’t have any positive proof that my brother and his friends were involved in the vandalism going on around here, y’all are gonna have to let these boys go.” Her temper was boiling and as a result, her southern drawl was more pronounced. She smiled in triumph as she nodded vigorously to the other parents, looking for support. Her grin faltered as Ben slowly shook his head in the negative.

“Sorry, ma’am, I didn’t mean to imply that they were being charged for the vandalism. We simply wanted to question them about it. But there’s still the problem of trespassing.”

Dixie looked at Mac Coalson. She now knew where she had seen him. His picture was all over the local paper. The Great Savior of Grafton. Everything she had read about this paragon who was determined to rebuild his hometown after the devastating flood was in direct contrast to the formidable figure attired in black jeans and a black sweater. His tall frame gave off an arrogance that was compellingly dangerous. The chilling glint from his silver eyes told her he was a force to be reckoned with. Still, she had to try. Her brother’s reputation depended on it.

Summoning her most cheerful smile, usually reserved only for weeping children on the first day of school, she walked over to Mac. “I’m sure Mr. Coalson would be willing to drop the charges since no damage was done. After all, it’s more important to catch the real culprits than to smear the good names of some decent boys.”

“Like hell I will!” he growled as he covered the space between them in two strides. “Listen lady, I’m not gonna let these hoodlums get away with damaging another piece of property. If they walk, who’s to say they won’t be back tomorrow night to finish the job?”

“I say, that’s who!” Dixie shot back, stepping up to glare at the large man and stiffening her five foot frame. So much for trying to reason with the devil. Apparently, Mac Coalson was a bully. He was bullying the sheriff, the parents, and maybe this whole town. She hated bullies. Being so small, she had always had her fair share of them.

Mac looked her up and down. “Honey, you may be good for a lot of things, but keeping a rowdy bunch of boys under control ain’t one of ‘em, so I’ll thank you to stay out of this.” He watched her eyes flash blue fire.

Dixie gasped at the intended sarcasm. “Those boys haven’t done anything wrong except setting foot on your precious property. If you ask me, you’re a more likely suspect for sabotage than these boys. You’ve got insurance and you’re certainly ornery enough.”

Dixie took an instinctive step back as Mac drew in a sharp breath at the implication that he could even be remotely responsible for the damages. Everyone in the room seemed to wait in suspense at what he would do. This man was known to have quite a fiery temper. And Dixie’s anger had just poured gasoline on the fire.

Mac leaned down to snarl in her face. “Look, Blondie, face the fact that your juvenile delinquent of a brother got caught this time. Maybe a night in jail will set him along the straight and narrow.” He appraised her once

again with a derisive twist to his lips. "Of course, he might enjoy the peace and quiet compared to an evening of you, no doubt, harping at him."

Dixie suppressed the incredible urge to slap the arrogance right off his smirking face. Her fingers curled into fist. *If she wasn't standing in the middle of a police station....* He snorted as if to challenge her to do it.

"Now hold on, both of you," Ben interceded, his arms extended in a conciliatory gesture. "No one is spending a night in jail. Trespassing doesn't warrant that." He looked over his glasses at Jamie. "What it does warrant is an apology. The posted fine for trespassing on private property is \$500.00. Since there's five of you, that's \$2500. That should put a dent in the damages incurred." He slid an uneasy glance at Mac who had stiffened in disbelief.

"What?" he exploded then uttered an expletive and paced the room. "Ben has your mind turned to mush? A smile from a blue-eyed blonde and you're babbling nonsense. I want that boy," he pointed to Jamie, then waved a hand in the general direction of the others, "and his friends behind bars."

Emboldened by Dixie, the parents began to protest.

"Now hold on a minute, Mac..."

"Listen to reason, would ya .."

"You can't be serious, ..."

Ben once again held up his hands for silence, but he was ignored as the parents rounded on Mac with angry protestations, Dixie Harris leading the uproar. Ben shouted for silence and when that too, was ignored, he blew his riot whistle shrilly. "Quiet! You're all gonna get a chance. Harris, you go first," he pointed to Dixie's brother, who appeared to be the leader of the boys.

"Look, mister, I didn't vandalize your houses. I'm telling you the truth," Jamie exclaimed heatedly. "The others with me can tell you the same thing we told the cops." Jamie glanced at the boys, who nodded. "It was supposed to be a joke. You see, there was this man ..."

Mac's eyes burned like those of a great beast deprived of its prey as he stepped up to Jamie and listened to his tale. Dixie knew he didn't believe a word of it, and Jamie's insistence that there was another man involved made little sense, even to her. Her brother wasn't responsible for the vandalism, however, just in using bad judgment. She was sure of that, and it was up to her to make Mac Coalson understand it as well.

She stepped between him and Jamie, intending to do just that. Looking up at Mac's face as he listened to her brother, she noticed the deeply etched lines of fatigue and felt a twinge of sympathy. She reined in her



temper. After all, he had a right to be angry at the persons responsible, but it wasn't her brother. "I'm sorry for the trouble you've been through, but Jamie was not a part of it. I'll get to the bottom of tonight's escapades, let me assure you. And I do apologize for the inconvenience you have suffered tonight. I truly wish you luck in finding the real criminal."

She touched his arm in a small gesture of comfort and felt his muscles contract. His flesh seemed to burn her hand through the fabric. Hastily, she withdrew from the contact as she met the fire in his eyes. Well, drat. Apologies were obviously not accepted.

She shivered as she remembered an artist's rendering of the Gates of Hell she had seen at a museum. Mac Coalson and Satan now shared the same look of bored indifference. No reason to continue with apologies, so she gave up. Turning to Ben, she offered a small smile. "Sheriff, where do I pay the fine?"

Dixie turned back to Mac as his deep voice rumbled like thunder over her head. "I appreciate your concern for my company, but you would do well to concern yourself with your future employment. After this year, I'll make sure you're not needed as a teacher in this area. I do apologize for any inconvenience this may cause you, and I wish you luck in finding a new position." Turning her words as well as his back on her, he signed the papers Ben offered him, curtly dismissing her.

Dixie's eyes widened in disbelief. "Influential you may be, but you can hardly expect to get away with that threat. I have witnesses!" She looked around, and then laughed incredulously, as everyone, including the sheriff, hung their heads and refused to meet her gaze. Well, it was obvious she wasn't getting any help from these people, despite the fact that they were on her side just a few minutes ago. Her brother had trespassed on the Coalson's private kingdom and now there would be a heavy price to pay.

Her temper flared again at the injustice of it all. "It appears we are at a stalemate," she began, "but please allow me to say that I think you are the most obnoxious, arrogant, chauvinistic man that I have ever encountered. I will dance with joy when I clear my brother's name and make you the laughingstock of the county. I promise you that." She punctuated the last sentence with little jabs to his chest with her finger.

Mac smiled evilly as he grasped her hand and brought it to his lips. "I look forward to the experience, little lady. And while you practice your dancing, you might want to brush up on your singing, because when I prove that your brother is guilty, you may wind up singing for your supper." He kissed her hand lightly, then turned to one of the parents, completely dismissing her. Dixie's tempered reached its boiling point.

Ben proceeded to hand the release papers to a sputtering Dixie. "I've talked to Judge Larkin and he agreed with me. Since your brother and these boys have no priors, we feel it's safe to let him go into your care." He slid a glance at Mac over the rim of his glasses. "And unless Mr. Coalson changes his mind, the court date is set for two weeks from today at 2 p.m., unless we turn up some other evidence. If we do, we'll be in touch."

Dixie smiled at the older man. It couldn't be easy dealing with a tyrant like Mac Coalson. And the fact that her hand still tingled from his kiss was something she didn't even want to think about. "Thank you, Sheriff. I assure you, when I find out who is behind this mess, you will be the first to know." She flung her handbag over her shoulder, hitting Mac in the chest with grim satisfaction, then proceeded down the hall toward the entrance without a word of apology. "C'mon, Jamie. We're gonna find us a vandal."

Mac passed her in two strides and held open the door with a smirk that belied the gentlemanly gesture. After a moment's hesitation, Dixie passed through, her head held high and her nose in the air. As she walked to her car, she felt the eyes of that odious man on her, mentally stripping her bare and taking in her, uhm er, attributes. She glanced back in time to see the slow grin that lit his face. He winked. He had done it deliberately, and he wanted her to know it.

Dixie slammed the door to the white Jeep and started the engine. She would not glance at the doorway of the station again to see if he was still watching her, she wouldn't. *How could she have been attracted, even for a moment, to that, that, ooohh, horrible man?* The situation must have addled her brain, that's the only explanation. As she drove away, she sent her brother a fulminating stare. "Now, suppose you tell me what really happened tonight?"

Mac watched Dixie and her brother whip out of the parking lot. She was the most exasperating female he had ever encountered. Such a tiny slip of a woman standing up to him and giving him *what for*. It had been somewhat amusing until she had accused *him* of the vandalism. Then he had gotten pissed.

Mac had been silently amused as the little scenario played out before him. Ben, trying his best to act like a big city law enforcer, citing this case and that to the parents of the kids; the Harris kid playing the belligerent teen, all righteous indignation and stiff pride; and Miss Harris was obviously the tragic heroine of this little play. But her remarks about insurance fraud definitely cast him as the villain; and for some obscure

reason, he hadn't cared for that one bit. Not to mention the fact that the damn kids *were* trespassing.

He followed the red taillights as they receded into the night, grimly aware that the sexual awareness of her had not abated and he was getting hard. He could still feel the touch of her fingers on his arm. Hell, this was totally crazy. The absolute last thing he needed was to get sidetracked by some sexy blonde. People were counting on him. He couldn't allow himself to get distracted, even if he hadn't been *this* attracted to a woman in quite a while.

"She kinda makes your blood boil, don't she?" Ben asked as he came up behind Mac and handed him a cup of coffee.

Mac acknowledged the question with a shrug. He was usually so calm and controlled. Granted, there were extenuating circumstances here, but he had never been known to lose his temper with a woman. Usually, he retreated into his icy politeness routine. But, he had admired the way she stood up to him, blasting him with her fury. At least, until she had pissed him off royally by accusing him of the vandalism.

Ben smiled slightly. "Yes sir, she's enough to make a man's blood boil." He peered at Mac who was still staring out into the night, sipping absently at the horrible coffee. "Question is, precisely why does she make your blood boil, my boy?"

He cackled when Mac rolled his eyes at him.

## CHAPTER TWO

The next afternoon, Mac was in his office, mentally calculating the approximate supply costs of a new condominium proposal, but his mind just wasn't on his work. He gazed at the whitewashed walls of his office, smiling softly at the muted footsteps of one of his brothers overhead in what had once been the hayloft of the old barn. Now it housed the offices of three of his younger brothers. He swung around in his chair to the plate glass window behind him, where he could see the activity of the people he employed.

Yes, the old barn he had bought and rehabbed for his company offices might not be the image most contractors wanted to cultivate, but it suited Mac just fine. Solid and strong, it had withstood the ravages of time and weather. Around here, that was an important factor in building anything.

He swore under his breath as he once again reflected on the events of last night. He didn't care that Ben hadn't found any evidence to convict those boys; they were guilty as sin in his estimation. And if they ever did find anything to pin them to the crimes, those boys would be lucky if the whole town didn't lynch them. Tempers ran high in a town devastated by disaster.

He looked further out and down the hill to see the lazy activity of Main Street. Grafton was nestled between the banks of the Mississippi River and the Piasa Bluffs. It was a quiet village that had been a popular tourist spot complete with antique shops and quaint family restaurants featuring home style food and friendly hospitality. The twenty mile bike trail that meandered through the woods and ran parallel to the Mississippi River was a favorite attraction, as well as the Barge Bar, which boasted rides on a renovated steamboat or a pirate ship.

But all that had changed with what was known now as the Damn Flood. Not as epic as the Great Flood of 1993, which had completely devastated towns all along the Mississippi as the muddy river breached dams and flooded thousands of acres, but it was bad enough two years ago to close down the entire town of Grafton. Flooding and wicked storms had left the community a quagmire of mud, snakes, and mold. Most buildings had been torn down rather than face the exorbitant costs of renovation, but several townspeople were determined to save the old, beautiful limestone homes and businesses, including the Catholic Church. Mac was one of those people, but it was a damn monumental task.

"Mac, Miss Harris is on the line again. Do you want to take it? She's called every hour since early this morning. She says it's imperative that she speak with you," Dottie Hayes intoned through the intercom system.

As his secretary and right hand, she was a formidable figure. Even at sixty, the only consolation she made to her age was what she called her sensible shoes. She referred to her gray hair, age spots and wrinkles as proof that she had lived in this life, not just existed in it. She was a lot like his barn, sturdy and dependable. That's why Mac relied so heavily on her.

"Tell her I've left for the day. With any luck, she'll believe you," Mac answered wearily.

"Coward," Dottie replied before she ended the conversation. Of course, she had heard all about the fight at the police station last night. The town may look a little worse for wear but the gossip lines were up and running as usual.

Mac scowled as he picked up his pen and checked the partial list of supplies needed to repair the damage to the most recent vandalization on the house near Otter Creek, but his thoughts once again turned to Dixie Harris.

He remembered how angry and embarrassed she had looked when their eyes had met as she left the building. After he had calmed down, he realized that her speech had been sincere. But although she felt badly about the vandalization, she was equally determined to see her brother's name cleared. He couldn't blame her. It was hard enough being young and new in a small town without adding scandal to your name.

He could see the headlines of the local paper already – NEW TEACHER'S BROTHER LINKED TO VANDALISM OF LOCAL CONSTRUCTION COMPANY HOMES. He also knew the gossips over at Kate's Café would have a field day. The incident last night was already being picked apart and embellished until very little of the real truth remained.

He grimaced as he took a swallow of the cold coffee sitting nearby. "Just put her and her petite but perfect body in the back of your mind," he mumbled under his breath. But how in hell was he supposed to do that when she kept calling him every hour? *No doubt trying to plead on her brother's behalf.* Well, no amount of begging or pleading was going to change his mind. No matter how appealing the thought - and Mac acknowledged that the thought, indeed, held definite appeal.

He could just see her standing in his office, her lovely shape poured into some short, tight, red dress that was silhouetted against the setting sun outside his windows; her blue eyes awash with tears as she begged him not to press charges against her brother. Her shiny blonde hair would be down around her shoulders with a lock curved invitingly on the tops of her breasts. She would glide around the desk, thrusting her breasts out as she

sidled closer to him, all the while stating she would do anything, ANYTHING, he asked if would let her brother go. She would go down on her knees between his legs, moistening her lips with her tongue as she glided her hands up his thighs to his....

The thundering of a lumber truck pulling out of the lot broke through Mac's dream, causing him to splash the rest of his coffee down the front of his shirt. "Enough!" He slapped a palm on his desk. *You don't need to complicate the situation with thoughts of sex. At thirty five, you don't need the frigging daydreams. There are plenty of women around here just waiting for you to point your finger and they'd come running. You don't need Dixie, spitting fire, Harris. She hates you for trying to nail her brother for the vandalism. She wouldn't give you the time of day, much less anything else!*

And with that lecture firmly in mind and his raging hormones once again under control, he adjusted himself, and turned all thoughts of Dixie Harris and office seductions from his brain. Picking up the supplies list, he got down to work as the sun began its slow descent toward dusk.

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Dixie tapped her fingers against the wheel. All day wasted trying to talk to that obstinate man and she was no closer to communicating with him than she had been this morning. "Well, Grandpa Harris always said that if the mountain won't go to Mohammed, Mohammed can go to the mountain," she mumbled to herself as she pulled her white Jeep into the parking lot of the Coalson Construction Company. Gazing at the fresh brick-red paint on the barn, she contemplated the man she was determined to see sometime today. After all, her family's good name and her brother's reputation depended on it.

Well, the man was definitely a mountain. All of six feet and then some, she surmised. 'Course being only five foot nothin' herself, almost everyone seemed large. Still, he was a handsome man with all that black wavy hair and shining eyes. She'd be lying to herself if she didn't admit that. Too bad he didn't smile more often, but it was highly unlikely the Devil smiled unless he had garnered another soul.

It was the gall of the man that made her gnash her teeth in frustration. She knew a brush off when she heard one. "Refuses to take my call, eh? Too busy to be bothered? In a meeting?" she mimicked the litany of excuses that his secretary had given to try and appease her. Hopping out of the Jeep onto the pavement, she brushed a wisp of silver blonde hair away from her eyes with an impatient gesture. She hardly noticed the cold wind

biting into her cheeks. She was so fired up with temper she'd forgotten her coat.

Dixie managed to content herself with waiting until the last excuse had come. Totally infuriated, she had grabbed her car keys and raced to the construction company office. She intended to prove that Mac Coalson was a liar and a coward, and the proof was sitting directly in front of her as she crossed the parking lot. The large black GMC truck with the Coalson Construction Company logo and address sat there. The license plate proudly proclaimed that this particular truck belonged to the "CCC BOSS". Mac Coalson was not "gone for the day" as his secretary, who Dixie nicknamed "the old dragon" in one of her more furious moments, had claimed. "Well, just look out Mr. Mackenzie Coalson because whether you like it or not, here I come!"

With that promise reinforcing her determination, she stuck out her chin, took a fortifying breath and marched across the sidewalk, squinting against the late afternoon sun. She yanked at the heavy oak door, and the force of the cold March wind combined with the weight of the door nearly knocked her off her feet, but she was on a mission and hardly gave pause as she stormed through the office lobby and down the hall toward the door marked "*MAC COALSON-PRESIDENT*". She quickly sidestepped a startled employee, sailed right past the "old dragon" before she could grab her, opened the door and slammed straight into the "mountain" himself!

Mac had just stepped up to the door with some revisions for Dottie when it was flung open and a sweet-smelling bundle of femininity launched herself right into his arms. He instinctively dropped his papers and wrapped his arms around an impossibly small waist. Closing his eyes, he inhaled her fragrance, willing his mind to memorize the feel of the woman in his arms. He knew immediately who he held, and his entire body reacted to her softness.

After a few seconds, he tightened his grip and opened his eyes, knowing who he would see. She was already struggling against him which only intensified his arousal. Dixie Harris was staring at him like he was the big, bad wolf. Maybe he was. He certainly felt like ravishing her. One minute he was fantasizing about the seduction of this particular woman, and the next thing he knew, she was wrapped around him like she belonged there. The moment was worthy of an episode of "*Twilight Zone*".

He couldn't help but grin as his eyes traveled over her expressive face. Her sweet mouth was opening and closing like a fish out of water, and her pretty face was beet red. He could feel her chest heaving against him

through her simple sweater dress as she frantically tried to break his hold and pull out of his embrace. He looked down and sure enough, he could see the rounded beauty of her breasts with just a hint of pale pink lace from her bra. He hardened even more. Reluctantly, he loosened his grip and allowed her to step away from him.

“Oh, m’gosh. I’m so sorry.” Dixie was totally flustered. All her righteous indignation flew out the window to be replaced by complete mortification. How on earth was she supposed to continue now? She stepped back, to give herself some room to breathe; the man seemed to suck all the oxygen from the room, but quickly stepped back to brush the few wrinkles she had made from his gray suit jacket. Good manners came before righteous indignation in her mind.

She looked up suddenly and caught his grin. Her nervousness increased along with her anger, and, much to her annoyance, she began to babble. “I, um, I just wanted desperately to talk to you and since you wouldn’t answer my calls, well, I’m afraid my temper got the best of me, and I, well, I just reacted, that’s all. Grandpa Harris always did say I had the Devil’s own temper and I guess he got the right of it. Oh dear, let me help you with these papers.”

She bent to gather the notes, talking all the while, “You see none of this would have happened if you had just answered my phone calls like a polite person would have done, but I guess that can’t be helped now, can it? Still, I think you should at least allow me to explain why I’m here, and then we can put all this unpleasantness behind us.” She flashed him a weak smile that faded as she noticed that his eyes were focused on her bottom while she was trying to talk some sense into him. Anger warred with her embarrassment, and with shaking hands, she thrust the papers at him, almost dropping them again in her effort not to make contact. “Here”.

Mac made a quick grab at them, accidentally brushing his knuckles across her right breast. She gasped and jumped back, only to stumble on her high heels. Mac managed to save her further injury by grabbing her arm to steady her.

“Let me go!” She wrestled from his grasp, embarrassment making her voice sharp.

“Honey, you should be thanking me instead of yelling at me. I saved you from falling on your delightful little fanny.” His silver eyes twinkled as he pinned her with his gaze.

Dixie’s anger returned full force. “Just what century are you from, Mr. Coalson? Or are the women around her so shallow and lacking in self-esteem that they feel your particularly insulting brand of charm is cute? I



assure you I don't. Now I would like to get down to business if you don't mind."

She secured her purse around her like a shield as she finished her tirade. There, that should put the chauvinistic pig in his place. Just because his picture was in the dictionary under tall, dark and handsome was no reason for his insulting behavior. Feeling rather smug, she was surprised to notice that Mac Coalson's broad shoulders were shaking and his head was in his hands. Was he crying? Good grief! What next?

"Look," she sighed, "I didn't mean to upset you ..."

Dixie's apology was abruptly cut off as booming laughter echoed off the walls and Mac raised his head. He was laughing at her!

Mac hadn't understood half of what she had been saying, she was talking too fast, sometimes mumbling under her breath, but he loved the sound of her voice. That soft southern drawl of hers had quite a twang when she got going, and he thought it was charming. Hell, he thought she was charming as she tried to dust him off, pick up his papers, and reprimand him on his lack of manners all at the same time. But the coup de grace was that she sincerely believed he had been wounded by her little feminist speech. Miss Harris was turning out to be quite a surprise.

*Whack!* "How dare you laugh at me!" Her voice sounded hoarse but the stinging in his cheek was what left him speechless. The little hellcat had hit him!

Dixie felt like a fool. Her and her damn temper. She had actually hit the man; hauled off and smacked him in the face. And now she didn't know what to do. She knew she was staring, but she couldn't stop. He was looking at her with those fabulous eyes widened in shock. They suddenly narrowed, and he reminded her of a panther at watch over its prey, content that there would be no escape.

Her common sense - or maybe her instinct for survival - kicked in and told her to get out while the getting was good. The door was still open. She took a step toward it. Even as that thought occurred, he slammed it shut, cutting off her only escape. She continued to stare at him, frantically thinking of something to calm him down.

Mac took a step toward her and she backed away. She hated that she showed her fear, but retreat was best, her mind told her. "I'm sorry," she stammered as she continued to walk backwards, and he continued to match her step for step. "But you shouldn't be lookin' where you ain't got any business lookin'. And I was trying to be nice, and then you laughed at me. And I only did what any self-respecting woman would do, and ...WOULD YOU PLEASE STOP?" she shouted as she backed up to a

chair and tried to ward him off with her hands. He was within inches of her and coming closer. She knew he wasn't stopping. "Okay, fine! I'm not sorry, so there!" she shouted defiantly, crossing her arms like a ten year old in a fit.

Mac threw back his head and laughed, the sound once again booming off the walls. "You remind me of a kitten I once had. Always spitting fire and clawing at me when I tried to pick her up, but after a few soft strokes, she began to purr."

Was that a sexual innuendo? Dixie wasn't sure. She'd had limited, as in *no* experience with men. He rattled her brain that was for sure. He started walking around the desk, still chuckling, motioning for her to sit in the chair with one hand while he wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes with the other. This man confused the living daylights out of her. He laughed when he should be angry and growled when offered compassion.

"Now, Dixie, perhaps we can start over. I'm sorry I didn't get back to you, but I'm extremely busy, and I assumed you were just going to try to get the charges against your brother dropped. It's not happening."

Dixie heard his harsh words but refused to be intimidated. She had seen him laugh just a second ago. Granted, he was laughing at her, but she knew the hard man before her had some redeeming qualities. He was trying to save his town, after all.

She took a deep breath. "If you will just listen to me, this mess can be cleared up." She swallowed hard as his mouth tightened and he rolled his eyes, but he motioned for her to continue.

"Jamie was telling the truth about the man. He explained to me that this guy came up to them at the gas station and asked if they would like to make a few bucks playing a joke on a friend. He told them he just wanted them to go on the property and leave this envelope for his friend to find. He had bet his friend that he could get past the security measures because his friend was bragging about how tight security was now with the vandals and all. Jamie didn't want any part of it at first, but then, well, the other boys insinuated that he was chicken. You know how young men are, very proud of their manliness, or whatever." She rolled her eyes and flipped her hand in the air to show just what she thought of such idiocy.

"Anyway, they accepted the job, and the man gave them directions on how to get to the houses. They were just supposed to climb the fences and leave these envelopes taped to the doors. Then they were to meet the guy back near the old church on Baker Road, and he would pay them. The boys had just arrived at the first house when the police grabbed them and took them to jail. Sheriff Yates has the envelopes; he said there was

nothing in them. By the time Jamie was released and we went to look for the man, he was gone.”

Mac leaned forward in his chair and pinned her with his angry gaze. His deep voice took on a deadly edge. “You’re telling me you went out on Baker Road in the middle of the night to find some sleazy man who tried to get your brother to take the rap for his mischief?” His voice boomed across the desk as he stood and walked toward her.

“All the homes on Baker Road have been condemned by the government because of the flood. If you had gotten into trouble, there would have been no one there to save you.” He came to rest directly in front of her. Grabbing her by the arms, he hauled her to her feet and gave her a little shake. “Good God woman, you need a keeper!”

“Well, you don’t own the world and I’m not your possession, so you don’t have to worry about me!” she snapped crossly as she swatted at his hands. “And if you don’t let go of me, I’m going to show you how resourceful I can be.” Her first impression had been correct. He was incredibly chauvinistic!

His eyes darkened ominously. “While that might prove interesting, perhaps another time. Besides, you’re absolutely right. If you want to meet total strangers in the middle of the night on a deserted road, that’s entirely your business. Please accept my apology,” he drawled mercilessly as he let her go. She slid back down into the chair, wondering what she had said to set him off this time. And how could he make her actions seemed so tawdry?

She knew as soon as she had pulled up to the abandoned house that night it was a mistake, and she was profoundly grateful that no one had been there. But still, it rankled that this man made her feel so incompetent and naïve. Not to mention small. Very, very small.

Dixie watched as he took off his jacket and threw it on a nearby sofa. He leaned his gorgeous body against the desk and folded his arms across his chest regarding her silently. He was one large man! She stared at the muscular tanned forearms visible from the rolled up the sleeves of his blue Oxford shirt. Her eyes traveled across the broad chest noting the crisp dark hair barely visible near his throat.

He moved his hand and she started, aware that she was staring. Quickly, she lowered her eyes down to her lap, but not before noting the muscular thighs so close to her chair. She chanced to peek at him to see if he had noticed her rudeness, her mouth going dry as he passed his hand across his face in a weary gesture. Those hands! They were the hands of a lover. Long, tanned fingers, callused palms, rough yet gentle in their

exploration of her body. *Good gracious, where had that thought come from?*

“Well?”

Dixie felt heat crawl up her face. “Well, what?”

“Are you going to continue in your defense of your brother or not? I’ve got work to do,” he growled.

Dixie frowned at his curt tone. “Oh yes.” She wracked her brain trying to remember where she left off, thankful that he had obviously not noticed her preoccupation with his body.

“As I was saying, I understand your need for answers, but Jamie isn’t guilty. He knows what he did was wrong, and he’s more than willing to make amends, if you would give him a chance. He’s a hard worker, and I promise he would be on time. And you do need someone to clean up the mess the real vandals have done, and you can’t take your employees off their jobs, so it would be an ideal situation for everyone concerned, don’t you think?” She stopped to let her suggestion sink in.

“YOU WANT ME TO GIVE YOUR BROTHER A JOB?!” Mac shouted, disbelief tightening his face.

Dixie jumped at the volume in his voice. He looked as mad as a hornet. She sighed. This was not going at all well. “You don’t have to sound like I asked for your soul, Mr. Coalson. I’m offering you a solution. Listen, from the information I have gathered, it could very well be someone inside your company. Jamie and his friends are the only people to at least get a glimpse of the man responsible for all this mess. If Jamie was working for you, he might be able to pinpoint your man.”

“That only applies if your brother and his friends are innocent. You still haven’t convinced me that they aren’t the ones behind the vandalism,” Mac growled.

Dixie controlled the urge to throttle the stubborn man. He didn’t appear to be listening to a word she said. He knew she couldn’t prove her brother’s innocence; if she could have, she would have finished this by now. And the fact that her heart was beating as fast as a hummingbird’s wings wasn’t helping her to concentrate on the matter at hand. He was too sexy, looking at her with those bedroom eyes. And why did he keep staring at her dress? It was downright distracting.

Dixie decided he’d had enough time to get used to the idea. She opened her mouth to plead her case but he forestalled her by walking over to his window and staring at the view below. “Your idea does have some merit. Your brother may have been prepared to do the actual vandalism, but someone had to have access to the model homes without drawing notice.

They've been locked up since the vandalism started. And the most logical conclusion is that it is someone here at my company." He turned back to her.

Dixie hurried to lower her eyes, afraid he had caught her looking at his magnificent butt. Really, it was just perfect. With a small sigh, she acknowledged his grim look with understanding. After meeting him last night, she understood his need for answers. And to think the vandal was someone he employed, someone that he trusted, was a hard pill to swallow.

"Although letting your brother near my company is probably ludicrous, I'm willing to take that chance. To be perfectly frank, if your brother's not the culprit, I'm grasping at straws," he mumbled as he gave her a shuttered look that sent shivers up her spine.

Here, at last was the noble man she'd heard so much about. "I know," she said quietly. "And I'm sorry I got so angry with you at the police station last night. It was just my nature to protect my brother. But after I had a chance to calm down, I tried to look at it from your point of view. It must be terribly frustrating to keep hitting a dead-end."

"I can think of a lot of things more frustrating at the moment."

Oh boy! He was back to looking at her with those bedroom eyes. "Uhm, well, thank you for reconsidering. I know you won't be disappointed." She stood up.

"I'm sure I won't," he murmured, then smiled slightly as she stuck out her hand to close the deal.

Dixie stared at him. This man was lethal to a woman's equilibrium. His dazzling smile, coupled with those silver eyes threatened to melt her bones. It was so disconcerting, having his attention completely focused on her, looking at her as if he wanted to memorize every feature of her face.

Dixie smiled back, but her smile slowly faltered as Mac grabbed her hand, and drew her into his arms. Dixie didn't know what to do. She was pretty sure this was not proper business protocol. Alarm bells were going off in her head, but heaven help her, she didn't want to move. Since meeting this man last night, her mind had conjured up all sorts of ideas about his hands; fantasizing about how it would feel to be held in his strong arms-absolutely wonderful. To have his fingers lightly touched her cheek... With a jolt of awareness, Dixie realized she was almost purring. His lips were coming closer. He was most definitely going to kiss her. Her knees began to shake at the mere thought of it. The phrase "Devil's playmate" floated across her jumbled mind as he bent his head, blocking out the light.

At the first touch of her sweet lips, Mac's mind and body rocked with desire. Never before had such an innocent kiss robbed him of his self-control. But she was so warm and sweet; she even tasted like bubblegum. He almost laughed out loud, but it would've meant breaking the exquisite contact. He wasn't about to do that. Not when he had her exactly where he wanted her. *Well, not exactly*, he amended in his mind. He wanted her naked and writhing underneath him, but this was neither the time nor the place. *Although the door did have a lock....*

Dixie reluctantly pulled away and touched her lips. "Why did you do that?"

"Because I felt like it," Mac smiled softly as he traced her swollen lips with his finger. He'd bet she was a virgin, given the inexperience in her kiss, and the thought made him even harder.

"Do you always do what you feel like doing?" she retorted as she stepped away, looking at him with wary eyes.

Mac studied her as she fussed with the strand of hair that had come loose from her bun. It was disturbing to know that less than twenty minutes ago, he had been infuriated with her, and her callous disregard for her safety. Now he wanted her back in his arms, kissing her senseless again...*and maybe even more*. He wanted her badly. But he wanted her warm and willing; not frightened or offended.

Of course, she was a beautiful woman, and that excused his behavior. It was a perfectly normal reaction to a beautiful woman.

*Liar.*

He drew her within his embrace once more. "Most of the time I do."

He watched the blush suffuse her face then her dimples appeared. "You're teasing me, aren't you?"

"No, baby. I think you're teasing me." His mouth quickly descended once more. Mac forced himself to move slowly, gently trying to coax her response. It was futile. He needed more. He lifted her up against his body for more intimate contact, because she was simply too scrumptious to resist. His tongue swept inside for another taste of her sweetness. He judged the few steps to his desk, sitting her down on the hard surface without breaking contact.

Mac groaned when Dixie grabbed his shoulders, another rush of desire making him even harder. He forced himself between her legs. Her limbs wrapped around him like it was the most natural response in the world.

His hands slowly moved down to cup her bottom. He felt her tense. She grabbed his hand and returned it to her waist, never breaking the kiss. Mac smiled against her mouth at her attempt to keep things from getting out of

hand. Yes, indeed, his Dixie was full of surprises. *His? Had he really just thought that?*

Dixie started trying to get closer as she tangled her hands in his hair. Mac lost his control. Rubbing against her, he deepened the kiss, his tongue mimicking their love play. All the while, he kept chanting in his head that she was just a woman. A sexy as hellfire, woman. But just a woman.

*Liar, liar, pants on fire...*

A discreet knock on the door had them breaking apart. The door opened to admit Mac's younger brother, Chance. Mac frowned at the look of astonishment on Chance's face. While it was true his mind was on business most of the time and his use for women was quick and mutually satisfying, he wasn't so uptight that he wouldn't take a woman on his desk if the mood struck him. What the hell was Chance's problem?

Chance walked in, sitting the nearest chair. He brushed an imaginary piece of lint from his shirt and grinned. "Aren't you gonna introduce me?"

"Chance this is Dixie. Dixie, Chance. Now get out."

Chance laughed but didn't budge an inch. Dixie, however, blushed furiously and scrambled to extricate herself from Mac's embrace. Mac eased her down his body to the floor. She acknowledged the introduction with an embarrassed smile.

"You're the new school teacher?" Chance inquired with a lifted brow.

"Uhm, yes," Dixie mumbled. If it was possible, Mac thought she would've gone up in flames of embarrassment. "Excuse me." She grabbed her purse and headed for the door.

"Don't leave on my account, sugar," Chance sang out.

"You know, y'all really should stop that bad habit of calling women derogatory names. You never know when a woman is gonna take offense." She threw that comment over her shoulder as she opened the door.

"Dixie?" Mac's deep voice stopped her in the doorway. She wasn't getting away that easily.

"Yes?" She inquired with the tilted eyebrow and a touch of icy politeness. Mac could tell she was trying desperately to salvage some dignity.

"Your bra is showing."

Dixie groaned and tugged her bodice back in place.

"I'll be in touch," Mac's voice rumbled as she headed down the hallway. Mac watched her sashay down the hall. Yes, indeed, Miss Harris had a very nice butt. He had to adjust himself. She could tempt a saint into sinning, and she had just proven that he was no saint.

Taking deep breaths, Dixie tried to calm her racing heart. She jumped into her Jeep and turned toward home to tell Jamie about the new job. She hoped he would be relieved about the charges, of course, but she wasn't so sure how he would take working for Mac Coalson. Perhaps the prospect of clearing his name by finding the real vandal would help. He always did love a good mystery.

And if she were honest, the prospect of seeing Mac on a daily basis wasn't altogether unpleasant either. But even if he inspired a roller coaster of emotions in her by simply looking in her direction with those sexy silver eyes, she would act with propriety and decorum from now on.

So what if the mere thought of his kisses had her head spinning and a blush spreading from the top of her head to the tips of her toes? "I intend to keep my feet firmly on the ground," she stated out loud with determination.

And the path to Hell was paved with good intentions, her conscience was quick to remind her.



## CHAPTER THREE

“Now remember-keep your eyes open and your mouth shut and you’ll avoid the trouble,” Dixie reminded Jamie as they sped along the highway toward Grafton on Monday morning.

“Easy for you to say. You were never accused of sabotage by your new boss,” Jamie grumbled next to her.

“Even more reason for you to keep my words, James Henry, and knock off that attitude,” she commanded.

When Dixie returned home on Friday to tell Jamie the news, he was less than delighted, but after arguing, pleading, and just plain demanding that he take the job, he finally agreed. Unfortunately, asking for a happy face was a little more than he could manage right now, and Dixie knew it. She sent a small prayer up to heaven that Jamie would behave himself.

*Which is exactly what I should have told Mac Coalson. Should’ve told him to behave himself and demanded that he release her immediately. Woulda, shoulda, coulda, but didn’t.*

Mac had managed to turn their confrontation into the most sensual experience she had ever encountered. The idea that he had wormed his way from being the enemy to a sexual partner didn’t sit well with her. But the concept of avoiding him entirely sent an ache to her heart. So as usual, she was arguing with herself as she drove up to his offices.

*You got it bad, girl. One kiss and you’re hearing wedding bells and the patter of little feet. Get a grip.*

*Yes, but what a kiss! Stars and bells and fireworks! If his brother hadn’t walked in, who knows how that would’ve ended?*

*My point exactly. One kiss that curls your toes and you’re ready to throw all your principles out the window. You don’t even know him that well. He’s probably got women throwing themselves at him all the time and you’re no different, what with the way you practically devoured him.*

*I did not. I was just surprised at the depth of feeling in his kiss.*

*You and I both know what he was feeling, sugar; you just won’t admit that you were ready to become another notch on the bedpost. Slow down. Check him out. There’s probably plenty of people willing to talk about him in this town.*

*Well what if he doesn’t want to slow down? I’m not sure I want to know the answer to that. I think I’ll know when the time is right; my heart will tell me so.*

*That’s not your heart, that’s your libido, stupid.*

Dixie put an end to chat with herself when she pulled in the parking lot of the construction company. Reminding her brother to behave himself once again, she hopped out of the Jeep.

“Dixie?”

She turned to Jamie and raised her brow. “I know all the trouble you went through to do this for me. But don’t be surprised if nothing turns up. If the Coalsons can’t find this guy, I’m pretty sure my help isn’t going to be needed very long.”

“Just do your best, Jamie. If nothing else comes of this, at least the Coalsons get to know you. They’ll realize they were mistaken in assuming that you had anything to do with any of this.”

“Yeah, and if not, you’ve just made it really easy for the lynch mob to find me. And I’m betting that they’ve got some pretty thick rope around here somewhere.” He waved his hand to encompass the yard, but there was a smile on his face.

“And if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were scared,” Dixie retorted as they walked toward the old barn.

“I can get over being scared, but you’ll always be short.”

Jamie and Dixie stopped their teasing as Mac walked out of the building. He was wearing a red flannel shirt and faded jeans that hugged his powerful size. Dixie smiled at his arrogant stride as he walked across the parking lot. He certainly had that sexy walk down pat.

Unconsciously, Dixie began hurrying toward him, her heels clicking loudly on the pavement. The noise echoed the pounding of her heart, and the sound brought her out of her trance. She glanced around to find Jamie several feet behind her wearing a frown. She realized then just how silly she must’ve looked, practically running to meet Mac, so she visibly forced herself to slow down.

Someone let out a whistle and she stopped halfway across the parking lot. Turning toward the sound, she saw Mac’s brother, Chance, standing in the bed of a truck a few feet away. She blushed furiously as she remembered the circumstances of their first meeting.

“Hi, gorgeous! What’s a beautiful girl like you doing in a place like this?” Chance shouted as a truck full of trusses rolled between them on the asphalt surface.

Dixie shook her head and laughed at Chance. He resembled Mac in quite a few ways – same tall lean build, same hair color, but his eyes were clear blue not steel gray. And looking at him didn’t give her a shiver of sexual awareness. Characteristically though, they were complete opposites. Mac was tough, almost stern, except when it came to kissing,

she added dreamily. Chance, on the other hand, had a carefree attitude that indicated he was rarely serious, whether at work or play. His teasing banter helped put her a bit more ease. "Hi, Chance. How are you?"

"Doing fine now that you're here, sunshine. You brightened my day. Care to light up my nights?" He accompanied the ridiculous remark with a lecherous grin as he looked her over from head to toe taking in all of her curves in her simple suit.

She laughed at his silliness. He was truly outrageous, but in a totally irresistible way. She could understand why he was labeled the "Casanova of the County" as one teacher had told her. Still, as long as a girl didn't take him too seriously, he was probably a lot of fun. She would do well to keep that in mind when dealing with his oldest brother, too.

"Get to work," Mac barked as he reached her side. Chance jumped off the truck and with a wave, headed for the offices whistling "*You Are My Sunshine*" very loudly and very off key.

Mac turned his gaze on Dixie and she felt her blush intensify. "Hi," she said softly, wishing her voice didn't sound so breathless. She wanted to look into his eyes, to gauge what he was feeling, but they were hidden behind the sunglasses, and all she saw was her reflection. He looked tough and hard and incredibly sexy this morning. She wondered what he would look like after making love, then reddened even more at these thoughts because he was looking at her as if he could read her mind.

"Hello," Mac replied, then grimaced. His voice sounded like he was gargling with broken glass. He couldn't think of anything else to say. Damn. Couldn't even think when she looked up at him like that. He had stood at the office window waiting for a sign of her. When the Jeep pulled into the parking lot, he had bounded across the room and out the door, suddenly feeling as nervous as a kid on his first date.

He was glad he had put on his glasses. He didn't know if it was the glare of the sun or the woman walking toward him that blinded him. He noticed that she had put her hair up again. He longed to pullout the pins and run his fingers through that silky mass of gold. She was wearing a suit, this one in navy blue. It had some sort of pale pink lace shirt under it. It looked as if it would rip into pieces with little effort, leaving her naked and vulnerable to his gaze. It was the color of cotton candy. He loved cotton candy, and there was no doubt he was hungry.

Jamie's cough broke the awkward silence. "I should let you get to work." Dixie smiled nervously. "I'll pick Jamie up around five o'clock, if that's okay?" She glanced at Jamie just long enough to give him a

murderous glare. He ignored her and turned to watch the men loading a lumber truck.

“Yes, that’s fine.” Mac cleared his throat. He wanted to ask her to have dinner with him tonight, but it was a bit awkward with her brother standing there hanging on their every word.

“Well then, goodbye.” She fiddled with the strap of her handbag.

“Bye.” Mac cursed himself for missing the opportunity to get to know her as he looked at her lips and remembered just how soft they were.

Dixie finally turned away and Mac watched her walk to the car, his eyes taking in the gently swaying hips, legs ensconced in pale pink stockings and high heels. He sighed with genuine regret as he turned to Jamie and motioned him to follow Mac into the office.

He motioned for Jamie to take the chair while he took his seat behind the desk. Mac spent a few moments studying the boy that slouched in the chair across from him. Although his eyes were brown, he did resemble Dixie. The blonde hair was a little long with bangs that he kept from getting in his eyes with a quick flick of his head. He had a lanky frame, but Mac could tell he was strong. He could also tell he was nervous but trying to hide the fact by appearing bored.

If Jamie was telling the truth about this mystery man, and from discussions with the other boys involved, Mac tended to believe that he was, he might be an asset to the company. Mac contemplated a way to put the kid at ease. Maybe a little background information would help to loosen them up. “Why don’t you tell me a little bit about yourself? How did you and your sister come to settle here in Grafton?”

“Just cut the crap. You don’t really want to know about me, you just want to find out more about my sister. I saw the way you were looking at her. The sunglasses weren’t hiding anything,” Jamie snapped belligerently. “Dixie said that you had seen reason, but I personally think saw my sister and decided you wanted her. Well, I’m going to set you straight on that level. It’s not happening.”

Mac held onto his temper, but the urge to throttle the boy for his insolence was almost overwhelming. “Actually, yes, I would like to know more about your sister, but I’ll wait to ask her the questions. I think that would only be proper, given the circumstances, don’t you?”

“Maybe you think having me under your thumb will set you in good stead with Dixie. Well, I’m the baggage Dixie’s dragging around, so you mess with her, you mess with me.”

Mac stared at him, willing to wait him out until he answered.

“Fine,” Jamie huffed. “Dix and I lived with Grandpa Harris near Clover Creek, Tennessee. It’s a small town a few miles into the Cherokee National Forest. Actually we lived about ten miles from town in a log cabin my grandfather had built after my grandmother had passed. We lived in a small valley with the Appalachian Mountains surrounding us. It was a pretty great place to grow up.”

“Dixie and I left Clover Creek when Grandpa died. We sold the farm because that’s what Grandpa wanted us to do. The town had grown around us, and it just wasn’t the same without Grandpa anyway. But we came here to look up one of Grandpa’s old friends, C. J. Callahan. Grandpa wanted him to have a few things from the war. They were in the same regiment in Korea. And Grandpa considered him a good friend. They stayed in touch for years.”

Mac leaned back in his chair. “I knew Mr. Callahan. He was a good man and a darn good fisherman. Taught me a lot about the sport. We would go fishing in the river almost every Sunday after church. When we cleaned them, my mom had them fried up and then after supper, C. J. and Dad played chess for a couple of hours. Now that you mention it, I remember C. J. talking about a friend named Harry that lived in Tennessee.” Mac smiled of the memory and a companionable silence was found as each man lost himself in the memories of past days spent fishing and lazing in the sun.

Jamie relaxed a bit. “When we arrived, we found out Mr. Callahan had died around the same time as Grandpa. Since we were here and we didn’t have anywhere to go, we just decided to stay and help out with rebuilding the town.”

Something Jamie had said didn’t add up. Mac leaned forward and prepared to catch the kid in the lie. “According to the police report, you’re only sixteen. Can’t believe your sister, as a teacher, allowed you to quit school to wander the country.”

Jamie grinned. “Yeah, you got that right. Grandpa taught me and Dixie at home. She finished homeschooling and passed all the exams when she was sixteen. Then she went on to get her degree last year. I’m finishing my senior year here with Dixie homeschooling me, but I plan to enroll in college in the fall. I’m going to major in veterinary medicine.”

Mac frowned as he did a few quick mental calculations. “You’re saying Dixie is only twenty-one?”

Jamie grinned at the quick change in subject. “Yes sir. She’s always been smart and she just dug in her heels and finished college in under four years. She turned twenty-one in February. It was a streak of luck that y’all

needed a new kindergarten teacher this January, and Dixie was here to fill the spot... Is something wrong?" Jamie noticed Mac's sudden frown.

"No," Mac cleared his throat. "I was just remembering the argument your sister and I had about you coming to work for me. If I'd known how intelligent she was, I would've prepared better. I would've bet no one could change my mind about you boys, but she did."

Jamie laughed and nodded. "She does that to me all the time. Just when I think I might win an argument, she sticks out her chin and gets stubborn as a mule. Before I know it, I'm doing what she wants anyway. She's an immovable object when she knows she's right."

On a more even footing, the two men went out to the yard, and Mac introduced Jamie to his younger brother, Brandon, who was in charge of the cleanup of the vandalized houses. He also was responsible for the architectural aspects of the company. They found him crosschecking a load of materials from the local lumber company.

Mac grinned in satisfaction as he looked over his dream. For a small construction business, the yard was large and well stocked. Stacks of lumber surrounded the perimeter of the yard and two large flatbed trucks were filled with trusses. Several other trucks were equipped with utility bodies to transport the tools and small materials needed for each particular job. In one corner, backhoes sat idle alongside a dump truck. Upon closer inspection, Jamie realized that all the service trucks were black and bore the Coalson Construction Company emblem of three vertical "C's" in blazing gold lettering. The trucks were clean and well organized. The ladder racks were completely filled and ready at a moment's notice. The company obviously knew its business and went about it in the most efficient manner.

Jamie asked informative questions and, Brandon answered cautiously. But after a few moments, he relaxed his guard and began to give detailed answers as Jamie appeared even more intrigued with the construction business. As they passed a group of men filling one truckload of sod and the attached trailer with small bushes and decorative gravel for landscaping, Brandon was waxing on about his favorite subject, architecture. Mac knew Jamie was in good hands.

"Hey, Mac, who is the new kid?" a coarse voice shouted.

Mac groaned in frustration. Jeb Hawkins, the resident bigmouth was coming over to them. Mac wouldn't have kept the man on, but he had married Jessie Janzen, the girl Mac had first kissed beneath the oak tree near the cemetery when he was twelve. She had been a sweet shy girl and she was still a sweet shy woman. She had seven kids and worked two jobs

just to make ends meet because Jeb, more often than not, drank his paycheck away. If Mac could, he would sign over the checks to Jessie but knowing her, she'd just give Jeb the money he wanted anyway.

"Jeb, this is Jamie Harris. I've hired him to help clean up the mess at the Stoney Creek Subdivision."

"Harris, huh? Ain't that the name of the boy Ben Yates picked up for trespassing over there?" He grinned evilly. "Kind of like asking a kid to guard a candy store ain't it?"

"Or giving a drunk the keys to the liquor cabinet," Jamie mumbled under his breath.

Mac grimaced, but Jamie had a point. The man reeked of beer and sweat.

"What did you say, boy?" Jeb stepped up threateningly.

"He said, he's had it," Brandon walked forward. "And I don't blame him. It's probably real tiring having to explain himself all the time. Come on, Jeb, go see Chance about that fencing," Brandon nodded to Chance and he led the man off.

"Just a word of advice, kid," Mac leaned in. "Don't get riled over every little thing people say around here. You won't last a day without a fight if you do," Mac turned to his brother. "Why don't you get Jamie started?" Brandon nodded and led Jamie away.

Mac headed back to the office contemplating everything he learned about the Harris family this morning and how their small family had affected his peace of mind. Before he had been content with his life devoted to business; his life had been simple. But did he really want simple? A flash of Dixie's soft mouth under his made his groin tighten. Well, he knew one particular part of him wanted some complications.

He sighed as he entered his office and encountered Dottie wearing a severe frown and looking at her watch. "Are we going to work today or have we decided to take the day off and play with our trucks?"

Mac set back his teeth. Sometimes he wondered just who was running this place. His name was on the door, but Dottie kept things in line. He acknowledged her rebuke and grabbed the messages out of her hand. He derived a small amount of satisfaction by slamming the door in her face, but she just snorted loudly and asked if he was prepared to make coffee for the next month. He couldn't even win an argument with an old lady on his payroll, how on earth was he gonna resist Dixie?

"It's not even noon and I need a drink," he mumbled.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The sun was setting as Dixie pulled up to the construction yard. She got out of the car, breathing in the cool night air as she listened to the sounds of the men at work. The wind felt good against her skin, although it was a chilly night. She needed the coolness as thoughts of Mac's kisses had made her blush all day.

Dixie was about to return to her car when one of the workers approached her. "Evening, darlin'." He gave her what he must've considered his devilish smile. Two rotten front teeth and a line of dried tobacco spittle had Dixie cringing back. His fetid breath assailed her as he stepped even closer.

"Hello," Dixie returned politely as she tried to figure out how to get around him and into the car without appearing rude. It was quite obvious that getting out of the car was a bad idea.

"Rumor has it you're the new school teacher?" He made it sound highly doubtful.

"Yes, I am."

"Well, then, I guess that makes you the older sister of that boy that vandalized our homes. I wondered what Mac was up to, hiring him to clean up, but looking at you, I could see how he could be persuaded." He smiled and sidled even closer. Dixie could smell beer on his clothes, but nothing disguised the stench of his unwashed body.

"If y'all would excuse me, I'm a bit chilled. I think I'll return to my car," Dixie said as calmly as she could. The urge to gag in the man's face was becoming more and more pronounced as he advanced on her.

"Well, now, I'm sure we could figure out a way to keep you warm," he returned as he grabbed for her hand.

"I said, no thank you." Dixie shook her head negatively. She tried to tug out of the man's grasp. "Please let me go."

"Not so fast darlin'. Seeing as you're new in town maybe I could show you some of the sights."

"No way. Now give me back my hand or else." She yanked harder.

He simply laughed at her efforts. "Or else *what*, little darling?"

With a flick of her wrist, she unbalanced him, using her knee to deliver a punch to his stomach, which sent him doubling over. She added a kick of her other foot to his backside, flipping him head over heels to land with a thud on his back in the dirt.

"That." She nodded with satisfaction as she dusted off her hands.

"Well, hell." Mac came up behind her with a scowl on his face. "That was supposed to be my job."



“Sorry.” She grinned in relief at the sight of him. “If it happens again, I’ll try to wait until you show up.”

He smiled as he looked at the man still sprawled on the ground clutching his stomach and groaning. “Get your gear and get out. You’re fired.”

“What? You can’t fire me on account of this woman.” He squinted at Mac.

“This is just the last in a long line of grievances and you know it.”

“I got a family to feed,” the portly man whined as he gained his feet and tried to look contrite.

“Not anymore. Your wife left you I heard,” Mac stated.

Jeb glared at his former boss. “I ain’t done here. Not by a long shot!” He thundered as he grabbed his lunchbox and headed for the exit.

Mac turned to Dixie. “Don’t feel too sorry for him. You know firsthand what a jerk he is. His wife is the only reason I ever hired him in the first place.”

“Oh?” Dixie raised an eyebrow.

“She was a friend.” Mac looked around at the sizable crowd that gathered to witness the earlier scene.

“I see,” Dixie murmured. “One of your old girlfriends?”

“Actually, she was the first girl I ever kissed. I was twelve,” Mac clarified gruffly as he kicked his boot, the dust sending a fine cloud to drift over his feet. *Now why in the hell did he tell her that?*

“I understand,” Dixie smiled softly. God, he was so perfect! “Perhaps she could take her husband’s old job?”

Mac laughed. “No way in hell.”

Timber! The perfect man just crashed to the ground, *hard*. “Why not? Don’t you think a woman can work as hard as a man?”

Mac chuckled. “It has nothing to do with whether she can do the job or not. It has to do with the nature of man. No woman is going to be working with my men, side-by-side, on a daily basis. No work would get done. The men would be staring if she bent over to pick something up; flirtations, seductions, you name it. I run a business, not a bordello.”

“A bordello is a business, so there,” Dixie retorted. She was ready to hop on her soapbox and give Mac a lesson in feminism.

Jamie came around the corner with Chance and another man. She waved at him. “If that’s the problem, hire all women; we know how to get the job done.” *No way could he be this much of a chauvinist. He must be teasing me.*

Mac barked with laughter. "Are you deliberately trying to drive me to the nut house? There would be so much noise from their cackling, I couldn't keep a thought in my head." He smiled with satisfaction.

"I could say something about that, but I'm a lady."

"Are you two butting heads again?" Jamie asked as he swept his bangs away from his eyes. "Dixie, stop arguing with my boss and meet Brandon, Mac's younger brother."

Dixie acknowledged the introduction with a tight smile. Brandon was a slighter, shorter version of Mac with light blue eyes and blonde hair. It seemed every time she met a member of Mac's family, it was in an embarrassing situation. She glanced at Chance standing a few feet away. He winked at her. Dammit, he was probably thinking the same thing.

Mac interrupted her thoughts. "Listen up, Jamie. I'm going to be picking you up in the mornings and dropping you off in the evenings."

"You don't have to, Mac. This incident was a silly mistake. Next time I'll stay in the car, I promise." Dixie sighed.

"Why? What happened?" Jamie asked with a frown.

Dixie filled him in on the earlier scene. In typical male fashion, he sided with Mac. "I think Mac's right, Dixie. You don't need to be here. "

"Great. You've only been here one day and already you picked up on his chauvinistic attitudes-no offense." She glanced at Mac.

"None taken, I'm sure," he chuckled, "but I insist on bringing him in."

"That's silly."

"Nonetheless, I will be there tomorrow morning."

"It's out of your way. You're being ridiculous."

"I'm being the boss," he returned with a frown.

Dixie bit her lip in vexation. One minute she thought him God's gift to womankind and the next she wanted to dump a pile of horse manure on his head. With ill grace, she gave in. After all, he was the boss. "Oh, all right." She stomped her foot.

"All right."

"Okay." She glared back at him.

"Okay," he returned it with the glare of his own.

"Fine!" she yelled as she hopped into the car.

"Fine!" Mac barked as he stomped off for the office.

With a hand over his heart, Chance laughed. "Oh ain't love grand."

Brandon snorted.

"You guys are sick," Jamie grumbled as he flung himself into the Jeep barely in time to close the door before Dixie squealed out of the parking lot.

Chance followed Mac back into his office. "What in the world is wrong with you? You just fired an employee for no reason. The Union's gonna have a field day."

"He accosted her. I saw him," Mac snarled.

Mac had been checking out the yard from his office window when a glimpse of blonde hair had materialized to the left of his vision. Dixie was getting out of her car. She came into full view as she moved forward to lean against the grill. Mac had stood transfixed at the sight of her.

She'd let her hair down from the tight little bun she'd wore this morning. The wind was blowing little wisps across her cheek. She had brushed a finger to dislodge the wayward locks and Mac stifled a groan. She didn't even realize what a seductive pose she made. He noted she wasn't wearing her coat as the wind whipped up again. Her blouse and tight skirt molded to her figure. She leaned back against the Jeep front, stretching, completely oblivious to him. Mac had uttered a curse and turned away before he completely lost what little self-control he had.

As Mac had turned away from the window, he had seen one of the crew approaching her. He recognized Jeb Hawkins. Jeb said something to Dixie and she had shaken her head. Jeb made a grab for her hand. Mac had seen red.

"According to at least ten eyewitnesses, all he did was grab her hand and if that's illegal, then 90% of the boys over twelve are guilty. Now tell me what this is really all about," Chance inquired.

"Nothing. I'm fine," Mac growled as he threw papers into his briefcase. It seemed that the very walls were crowding in on him. Damn, he didn't need this now. He needed to be concentrating on rebuilding the town and luring new businesses along the riverfront.

"Sure and I'm celibate," Chance returned sarcastically.

Mac slumped down in the chair near his desk. "Look, the girl and her brother are new in town. I'm just being nice, warning off the lechers. She's a good kid and she doesn't need that kind of trouble."

"Seems to me she can take care of herself. And since when do you care if some lecherous old man tries a line on a pretty girl? I'd be tempted to try one on her myself if you hadn't staked first claim."

Chance's reference to the lecherous old man made Mac wince. It was too close to the truth for his peace of mind. "She's too young for you." Mac scowled and ran his hand through his hair in frustration. "Hell, she's too young for me."

After Jamie's revelation, he'd spent the day feeling like an old man panting after a young girl. Well, at least he had found out before he made a complete fool of himself.

"Is that your problem? Geez, I thought it was something important. If she's an adult and you're an adult, what difference does a few years make?"

"Try fourteen years. She's only twenty-one. I got that straight from her brother."

"But I thought she was a teacher here in town? That doesn't add up."

"Her grandfather taught her and Jamie at home. She graduated at sixteen, went to college and received her degree by the time she was twenty. That's why she's working as a kindergarten teacher here in town."

"I still don't see the problem. She's smart, funny, downright beautiful, and with the way you two were going at it here in the office, I'd say she's more than attracted to you. Why are you stalling?"

"She's young and she's been sheltered. I'm probably her first taste of passion; it's just a phase. I'm sure once she gets more experience, she'll see it was just chemistry." But as he envisioned someone else touching her, kissing those sweet pink lips, feeling her tremble with desire, Mac frowned and turned toward the window.

"If she lacks experience, I'm sure you could teach her a few things."

Mac turned around in an instant and scowled at his brother. "She's not that kind and you know it. She's the marrying kind. Even you can see that. I'm not going there right now, so let's just drop the subject and go get a beer."

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That evening as she prepared dinner, Dixie tried to turn her thoughts away from Mac by asking Jamie about his day, but that proved to be the wrong tactic. All he could talk about was Mac. "It was great," he enthused. "I met Mac's brothers. There are six of them, all younger than Mac."

"Brandon's number four and in charge of most of the architectural operations. He took me on a tour of the place. They really know what they are doing. It's a shame someone's trying to sabotage their hard work." Jamie had the grace to blush, no doubt remembering that was how he had met the Coalson brothers in the first place. "We talked about what's been going on with the houses. I'm almost finished with one cleanup job. Mac says if I prove to be a hard worker, I can continue working with them this summer before college."

“Great. College is expensive, especially if you plan to go away,” Dixie said softly as she dished up their supper. The thought of her brother leaving made her a bit teary-eyed, but she knew when the time came, she would let him go just as Grandpa Harris had let her go. But no doubt about it, she was going to be lonely.

“Ugh, what is that stuff?” Jamie grimaced as she laid a plate of steaming vegetable goo on the table.

“It’s Polish sausage garbanzo bean casserole. It was on Pinterest. It has plenty of carbohydrates and it’s supposed to be good for you.”

“No one in their right mind would eat this stuff,” Jamie retorted as he spit into a napkin.

Dixie had to agree that this wasn’t the best tasting casserole she’d ever made. “It’s probably an acquired taste.”

“So is monkey brains, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to eat it.” Jamie took a big swallow of iced tea.

“Well we shouldn’t waste food,” Dixie murmured although the casserole seemed to be multiplying in her mouth.

“If it’s this or nothing, I think I’ll starve,” Jamie declared as he pushed his plate to the middle of the table.

Dixie gave in. It was really awful. “There’s a frozen pizza in the freezer.”

Jamie pushed back his chair and grabbed both plates. “Great! You get it out and I’ll feed the rest of this to the dog.”

“Jamie, we don’t have a dog,” Dixie laughed at him

“It’s just as well. He probably wouldn’t eat this stuff either.”

As they finished their pizza, Jamie waxed on about the Coalson brothers and Dixie realized how much he missed having a male role model. She learned as much about Mac in the things Jamie didn’t say as in the parts he did. She knew he had a deep pride in this community. Jamie told her about Mac’s plans to rebuild the marina area and bring back the businesses. She knew instinctively that he wanted to rebuild the hopes and dreams of his community as well. It was a Herculean task, but Mac could do it.

She knew just from gossip alone that he was a very busy man, but he had taken the time to help Jamie get acquainted with the others he would be working with. He helped to calm the awkwardness that stemmed from the unusual circumstances of Jamie’s first day. But most importantly, he had given her brother a job based only on her word.

Her initial impression of his character hadn’t been wrong. Dixie knew it in her heart. He was a good man, even if he was a bit of a chauvinist.

She was beginning to think that it was just a front to get her riled up. She hadn't missed the twinkle in his eye. He valued the same things as Grandpa Harris had; family, friends and hard work. And pride in his community.

Dixie definitely wanted to get to know Mac better. And not just because he had a kiss that could curl her hair, although that was a good enough reason in itself. She hoped she would get the chance to see where a relationship with Mac could lead. But was it really smart to get involved with her brother's boss? Just because he kissed her, didn't mean he wasn't just testing the waters. She breathed a heavy sigh. She'd just have to wait and see.

"Even if he has a temper to rival mine," she grumbled to herself.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Later on, Chance and Mac decided to grab some sandwiches with their beers while they talked business, so they walked down the hill to Montana Mac's saloon, a local bar that served dinner. They found an empty table by the bar and placed their order. Mac looked around the old place as they waited to eat.

The decor of the place left a lot to be desired, consisting mostly of mismatched chairs and scarred tables. The dark paneling that covered the walls was decorated with old beer signs and various pictures of local sports teams that the owner had sponsored over the years. A dilapidated jukebox leaned in a corner, broken over ten years ago and never fixed. But the crotchety old man who owned the place made a truly fabulous cheeseburger and the beers were only a buck.

Their food arrived and they began to discuss the various problems they had run into at the company today as they consumed the burgers and homemade onion rings. Chance took a sip of beer and asked what everyone wanted to know. "Care to tell me how the kid that allegedly broke into our houses is now working for us?"

"He didn't do it. He said some guy approached him. His sister confirmed the story, so I gave them a break." Mac reached for the ketchup sitting in the middle of the table.

"Was that what she was doing wrapped around you the other day... confirming his story?" Chance chuckled.

Mac shot him a fulminating glance that he hoped told Chance he didn't care for his joke. "Don't be stupid. Think about it. Kids who vandalize usually do so randomly. Why just us? And why only the houses that are ready to go on the market? Something more is going on here."

"Got any ideas? Somebody we outbid, maybe? With all the damage the flood did to this area, there's enough work here for everyone for years."

Mac nodded in agreement. "I don't know what's going on yet, but I'm going to find out." Mac drained the last of his beer and motioned to the bartender to fix another round.

Chance looked at him, then shrugged and accepted the proffered beverage. "It's not like you to drink more than one beer with supper, but the way things are going around here lately, I can certainly understand why you need to unwind a bit. Personally, I think you take too much on your shoulders. You've always possessed an ingrained sense of responsibility, usually above and beyond the call of duty." Chance took a sip of beer. "But I'm thinking this sudden interest in alcoholic beverages has to do with a sexy blonde."

Mac flipped him the bird. “We aren’t talking about this. It was a mistake. One I don’t plan on making again.”

“Well, that’s a real shame. Of course, she will need a shoulder to cry on, since she looked to be quite taken with you.” He looked to his left. “Well, lookee here. I seem to have an open shoulder right here.”

“Touch her and you’re a dead man,” Mac growled.

Chance laughed and slapped him on the back. “Oh my! Big brother’s got it bad!” Chance smiled, then sobered. “Good for you. You deserve some happiness-more than most.”

Mac grunted. He knew what Chance was saying. He loved Chance, too.

They finished their meal and Chance threw some money on the table as he got to his feet. “Sorry I can’t stay, but I’ve got a hot date.”

“Do you have any other kind?” Mac asked dryly, tipping back his beer bottle.

“Not if I can help it,” Chance grinned. “Speaking of a hot date, maybe you should check on the kid’s sister. She seemed pretty upset when she left. I know why you rile her up. She’s fuckin’ gorgeous when she’s mad. All that passion could be put to better use if you ask me. Maybe you should go over and apologize... or something.” Chance wiggled his eyebrows and grinned.

Mac lifted his finger once again. Chance laughed and walked out the door.

Mac finished his beer and deliberated on the sensibility of yet another one. Perhaps he should just go home-to an empty house and a lonely bed. He could seek out any number of old girlfriends, but he didn’t want just any woman. He wanted one with bright blue eyes and golden hair. The woman with the face to rival an angel and a body to tempt the devil himself.

*Hell.*

Chance had said she’d been upset. Boy, was that an understatement. She’d been ready to blow. But he had been right. She had been fuckin’ gorgeous glaring at him with fire in her eyes and that magnificent chest heaving in indignation.

She just didn’t know her own appeal. It wasn’t her fault that Jeb Hawkins had tried his lines on her, but she needed to be more cautious. Perhaps Chance was right, Mac decided as he signaled for the bill. Perhaps he should go over and apologize... or something.

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Dixie was just getting out of the shower when the doorbell rang. She glanced at the clock with a frown. She wasn’t expecting company and it



was after nine o'clock. As the doorbell continued to peal, she came to the conclusion that Jamie had forgotten his keys again when he'd gone night fishing. She made a mental note to hide one outside for future use.

"I'm coming," Dixie shouted as she tightened the sash on her pale pink bathrobe and adjusted the towel on her head. She reached for the bolt and unlocked the door. "Did you forget your... Oh!" She stared dumbstruck as Mac filled the open doorway.

"Do you always answer the door half naked?" he growled.

Obviously, she had just gotten out of the shower. He could tell her blonde hair was wet hidden under a towel, and the bathrobe was haphazardly knotted at her waist. "Only on Mondays," she snapped.

Dixie regained her senses after the shock of seeing him standing on her porch. She remembered she was mad at him for his earlier obnoxious attitude.

"Cute," Mac said wryly as he stepped into the cottage, forcing Dixie to back up or be trampled.

She noted his perusal of her home as she closed the door. New leather furniture mixed with antique pieces. Built-in shelves on either side of a stone fireplace were lined with books and knickknacks, pictures and candles. A large floral wreath was centered on the chimney. The latest bestseller in romantic fiction sat on the coffee table next to a bowl of potpourri and an empty iced tea glass. It was a cozy room, filled with warmth and wholesomeness – at least that's the way she hoped it appeared.

"Please come in," she snapped as she walked behind him.

Mac raised an eyebrow and pinned her with his silver gaze. "Do I sense hostility, little girl? I came by to check on you and your brother. Where is he by the way? I need to talk to him about our carpool situation."

"Don't call me little girl, I hate that," she snarled as she stepped even closer, tempting fate so near his body.

"I know. Jamie told me. Why do you think I did it?" Mac smirked in his slow sexy fashion.

Dixie's frown deepened. She was almost sure he was laughing at her. "Jamie isn't here. He went fishing. I can take a message if you like." She tried to sound as cold as possible. It wouldn't do to have him know the effect he was having on her senses. She could feel the blush steal right into her cheeks. When he just continued to stare at her, she lifted her chin and stared right back. He was not going to intimidate her in her own home.

Dixie noticed the subtle change in tension the minute Mac straightened his posture. He raked her from head to toe with a slow gaze. He was no

longer content to lounge around and indulge in conversation. He was a man with a purpose. He wanted something. As his steely gray eyes deepened into the color of shiny pewter, Dixie realized with a start what it was. *He wanted her.* She could see the flames of desire leaping in his eyes. For an awful second she felt she'd been stripped naked and he had stolen her soul. He was definitely the Devil.

Much as she wanted to, Dixie just couldn't hold his stare. It was time to cut and run. She suddenly felt uncomfortable with him so close. His size filled the room. The thought that she was alone, here, with this man, suddenly sprang to mind and she got scared. She wasn't prepared for this. She could feel the heat building between her thighs as she remembered that she only had on a bathrobe. She was naked underneath. Pointing to the door, she silently pleaded for him to leave. She wasn't scared of him personally, she was scared of what she really wanted him to do.

Mac shook his head in the negative in response to her demand. "I think I'll wait. I like the view."

His voice was smooth as molasses, dark, deep, and sweet. To the casual observer he appeared totally relaxed, but Dixie knew better. The fire in his eyes belied the relaxed stance. He was definitely a predator. And she was so very afraid she was his prey and he was ready to pounce. A shiver of sexual awareness coursed through her and she turned to walk down the hallway on shaky legs, determined to end this bizarre conversation before her body betrayed her.

*Good God, girl! Get it together! You act like you've never had a handsome man in your home before.* Well, she hadn't.

Dixie glanced over her shoulder to see if he would take the hint and leave, then flushed as she noticed his gaze had centered on her butt. This was a side of Mac she wasn't sure she was ready for. She had smelled the beers on his breath, but his footsteps were sure and his speech wasn't slurred. He didn't seem to be drunk, just bent on seduction.

She tried to remain calm, but her heartbeat accelerated alarmingly as he continued to stare at her. She was penned by the twin fires radiating from his gaze. When it became obvious that he wasn't leaving, she tried for a neutral tone. She would show him that she didn't care whether he left or stayed. Then she would run like mad to her bedroom, hoping he wouldn't follow.

"Please, sit down then. I'm not sure when Jamie will be back. Can I get you anything?"

Mac smiled the Devil's own smile of satisfaction. "Now that's a loaded question." He gave her a slow, sexy wink.

Flushing now with anger, she turned to him and stammered. "You, oh, I meant anything to drink." She advanced on him, her uneasiness forgotten. "Just because you caught me off guard with that kiss in your office is no reason to go think I'm easy 'cause I'm not." Her accent returned with a vengeance.

Mac grinned at her display of temper. Her eyes were flashing blue fire again, and she was so worked up, she wasn't even aware that the knot on her robe had loosened. But Mac had definitely noticed. Desire slammed into his gut, taking his breath away. She was no longer cautious around him, and he was thankful for that. He wanted her to want him with the same intensity that was running through his body right now.

He wanted her so badly, he was practically shaking with it. And she still didn't have a clue. Or if she did, she was choosing to ignore it.

*To hell with that.*

"Easy?! Honey, the only thing easy about you is your looks. Did anyone ever tell you how pretty you are when you're spitting mad?" He straightened from the wall and took a step towards her.

"Then I must be blooming beautiful right now," she raged. "Just where in blue blazes do you think you're going?"

Mac just smiled and kept walking.

"Stop! What is it with you and the whole stalking like an animal thing?" She ran around the coffee table.

Mac smiled at the thoughts that flitted across her face. She was so easy to read. "Maybe you bring out the animal in me, baby."

She started to laugh. "Really? That's the line you're going with?" She snorted then clapped her hand over her mouth.

Mac smiled. *Yeah, where the hell did that cheesy line come from?* "Hey, you put me on the spot. I can't think straight when you're standing there all sweet and naked."

Dixie blushed. "Much better, but I think you should leave."

Mac wasn't going anywhere. "Come here." He crooked his finger at her as he took another step.

*Heavens, she almost did what he commanded,* Dixie thought. The sensual web he was weaving around her was pulling her closer to him, closer to the fire. A few more feet and they would be toe to toe. She needed to take a stand. She wasn't going to make this too easy on him. "No," she squeaked.

He nodded his head. "Yes."

Dixie turned to run. Too late. He grabbed her around the waist and turned her around to him, hauling her up against his chest. She gasped at

the intimate contact of her breasts against his chest. *Oh God, she was naked against him!* She pushed at his chest.

“Stop wriggling, you little hellion.” he mumbled as he wrapped his much longer leg around both of hers enveloping her completely with his body. “I came here to apologize for yelling at you today.”

Dixie looked into those twinkling gray eyes, searching for some clue of his feelings for her. She knew he wanted her, but she didn’t want to be just another woman. She needed to matter. But, on the other hand, these feelings he so easily aroused in her with his simple touch defied anything she had been brought up to think about. Boy and girl meet, fall in love, get married, have babies. No one had bothered to tell her about the feelings of wanting, the physical need consuming her without benefit of vows or even a declaration of love. Was it all just physical? Was there something more? It was all very confusing. She knew one thing for certain though, she didn’t want these feelings to end until she explored a little more. Dixie was lost and she knew it. She didn’t care. His scent, his taste, feeling his desire for her had turned her shyness into wanton abandon. She wanted him.

*Well, you wanted an opportunity to get to know him better. I’d say this is a pretty good one. Just remember to take it slow.* Dixie wasn’t listening to her inner voice. She was too busy feeling, exploring all the wonderful sensations that rocked her naked body when she was being held in Mac’s arms. This was just like the last time, only better. *Slower. More intense, more exciting.* His hard body pressed so closely to her was making her breathless. And hot. He was so warm all over, all hard muscle and tender lips. *Surely he was hot, too? Maybe he needed to take off his shirt,* she thought with a smile.

She pulled at the buttons on his shirt, eager to feel his skin. She whimpered as the shirt refused to budge when she tugged it out of his jeans. Mac was doing incredibly wonderful things to her breasts, cupping one in his big hand and pulling on the turgid peak. He repeated the process with the other breast and she felt the pull in her very core.

“Please, Mac.” Dixie didn’t know what she was desperate for. She just knew it was there. *Just out of reach.* She ground her hips against his jeans, loving the roughness against her.

His mouth hovered over hers, his steel eyes gazed at her questioningly, alight with passion’s promise, but willing to call a halt to what he wanted if she just said the word. “Dixie?” He breathed against her mouth.

Dixie melted and smiled as she met his gaze. *Oh Yes!*

When she silently acknowledged her agreement by shifting closer to him and the flames of desire flicked through his body, Mac knew he was in heaven. He slid his hand around her neck, pulling her up to meet his hungry mouth. His tongue danced with hers as he devoured her.

He realized Dixie must feel his arousal through his jeans and the friction of cloth against her wiggling belly made him realize that her deepest desire was now simply to get *him* naked. She gyrated against him, hands fisting in his hair. He tightened his grip on her waist, telling her that the time for reconsidering had past.

His free arm reached up to discard the towel that hid her damp tresses from his probing eyes. Threading his fingers through her golden curls, he followed a winding path with his hands down the small of her back. Lifting one curl, he brought it to his lips then placed it with reverence on her bared breasts, smiling slightly, remembering his fantasy dream of just a few days ago. As he gazed at her beauty, he silently acknowledged that reality, in this instance, was a thousand times better.

His gaze returned to her face after a moment. He inhaled her scent. She smelled of lavender and vanilla. Sweet. She licked her lips in anticipation, her tongue darting out to skim across her upper lip. His hands moved to her face, cupping her cheek. He groaned and lowered his lips to hers, crushing her against him, securing her in place.

He plundered her tender mouth. This was no gentle kiss like before. This was full of pent-up passion and promise; his lips crushing, demanding entrance which she willingly supplied. She had every right to be frightened at his intensity, but he made sure she was being inundated with so many other, more exciting feelings that required her attention.

She opened her mouth wider and his tongue swept in again. He crushed her to him, his tongue mimicking the love play he hoped they would soon be sharing. Her hands crept up from his shoulders to wind around his neck, pressing even closer to him, yet it wasn't close enough. He rained kisses along her cheek and jaw line, down her throat, and across her collarbone as she drew in a ragged breath. Dixie threw back her head and moaned when he plucked at her silk clad nipples. Mac pulled the robe completely off her. She gasped when he let his whiskers scratch her soft skin. He nuzzled the creamy breasts his hands had freed. When his cheek lightly grazed across one taut peak, Dixie cried out softly and pulled slightly away from him, arching her back over his braced arms and lifting her breast for more of his caress.

"Did you like that, baby?" He smiled and repeated the tender gesture. When he took the sensitive bud into his mouth, she flinched. Mac gasped

her butt and lifted her higher, pushing her more firmly against his hardened manhood. She wrapped her legs around his waist, nestling herself against him, opening to his touch. The scent of her arousal propelled Mac's need out of control.

Mac knew he couldn't stand much more of her sweet, uninhibited response. He began walking toward the back of the house, breaking their kisses only when he had to gauge the direction of her bedroom. He toe-opened the first door with his foot, noting the masculine design. *Dammit! Jamie's room.*

Dixie pointed to the door at the end of the hall. "There."

Mac made it in two strides, pushing open the door, and once again taking her mouth in fierce possession. He tore his mouth away to look over his shoulder and find the bed. A single lamp was aglow on the nightstand beside the huge four poster bed that dominated the room. The soft pale sheets were turned down, and the drapes closed against the noises of the street outside.

Mac settled Dixie gently on the down comforter, taking a moment to view her completely. He drew in his breath sharply as he gazed at her innocent beauty. Her eyes were half closed, and her blonde hair was spread across the pillows in wanton disarray. Her lips were swollen from his kisses, her breasts blushing pink from his whiskers, her nipples erect and begging for his mouth. Her hands were grasping fistfuls of the sheet as her hips undulated rhythmically searching for his touch.

Mac stared at her uninhibited display of passion. She was lost in a haze of desire. *He had made her feel this way.* She was beautiful. She instinctively lifted her arms to welcome him, wanting more. God, he was the luckiest man in the world.

He leaned down to trace her aureole, so pink and perfect, with one finger. Dixie grabbed his finger, sliding it down her torso. Mac smiled and slid his finger down to her clit, circling the swollen bud, but never touching. His finger slipped lower.

"God, baby, you are so wet," His voice was a low growl, his control quickly deteriorating.

"That's good, right?" she whispered, suddenly shy.

"Oh, yeah, baby. It's perfect." His finger invaded her again, his breath harsh and hot as he leaned over her. He removed his finger and brought it to his lips. "And you taste so sweet. I knew you would be sweet."

Mac returned to her saturated folds, opening her gently with one finger, then two. She was so damn tight. He began to pump his fingers within her,

stretching her for his cock. He laved and nipped at her breasts, tiny bites of pleasurable pain while his thumb touched her clit, pressing down.

“Oh, God, yes. Yes!” Dixie screamed. Her pussy clenched around his fingers, milking them with her climax. “Mac!” she keened as tremors shook her body, leaving her helpless in the aftermath of his mastery.

Mac’s last vestige of control slipped at the sound of her sexy scream. He withdrew his fingers, once again sucking on her sweet cream and began to undress quickly. He pulled his shirt over his head, heedless of the popping buttons and began unfastening his jeans. Perspiration dotted his forehead as he lowered them over his hips, his cock so hard he knew he wouldn’t last long inside her. He prayed he had enough control to take it slow, to ease the pain he knew she would experience. She was a virgin. He had felt her hymen when she was in the throes of her passion. *He would be her first. God, he loved that.*

He reached for the condom he carried in his pocket.

He heard the slamming of the kitchen door and flinched.

Jamie was home.

Mac swore under his breath and glanced at Dixie, who was completely unaware of the change of events. He was unable to stop himself from running a light caress down the center of her body. She moaned in ecstasy as he grappled to get his own aching need under control.

Dixie was in a state of rapture. She knew she was on the brink of the most exhilarating experience of her life. Her first climax was so erotic, she couldn’t imagine it could be better with Mac inside her. But she wanted to find out. *Oh, God, how she wanted to find out.* She continued to writhe as aftershocks of her orgasm tore through her body. Yes, she wanted more. *More.*

She never wanted it to end, but she became vaguely aware that Mac was no longer touching her lovingly. She wanted to cry. She craved his touches like the flowers crave the rain. She needed it to survive. But Mac wasn’t trying to make love to her. In fact, he was busy stuffing her back into her robe.

She became aware of the chill in the room. Oh God! What had she done? Why was Mac acting this way? Then she heard her brother’s voice in the kitchen and reality intruded with a vengeance. Dixie sat bolt upright in the bed and turned a shocked face to Mac.

“Hey, where are you, Dixie? Is that Mac’s truck out there? Where is he?” Jamie’s voice rang out like a shotgun blast to her height senses.

“Go into the bathroom and repair yourself,” Mac whispered. “I’ll catch him before he hits the hallway.” After a furtive glance at the still

unoccupied hallway, Dixie did as Mac ordered, grabbing yoga pants and a t-shirt from a nearby chair and leaving Mac to deal with Jamie.

While Dixie beat a hasty retreat into the bathroom, Mac retrieved his shirt and tried to make himself as presentable as possible. He zipped up his jeans and fastened his shirt as well as he could considering he had lost three buttons, then ran a hand through his wayward hair. He exited the bedroom just as Jamie came from the kitchen.

"I'm right here, Jamie," Mac called out as he came to the living room. "I'm afraid I got your sister out of the shower. She's finishing up. I'm just looking around. I hope you don't mind."

"It's awfully late to come calling. Has something happened with another home?" Jamie asked suspiciously. He tried to peer over Mac's shoulder in search of Dixie, but Mac clapped a hand on him and steered them into the center of the living room.

"Well nothing tonight, but I wanted to apologize to you and your sister for that scene earlier. I overreacted, but Jeb is a leech and I didn't want your sister near him. I'm sure you'd do the same thing. I still believe it's best if I picked you up and brought you home. It's no trouble and it will save your sister any embarrassment in the future."

"Gee, Mac, that's awfully nice of you, going out of your way just to pick me up." Jamie offered the older man a saccharine smile. Mac knew his little speech hadn't fooled the young man.

Dixie came up behind him. "That's exactly what I thought, too." She had donned her clothes and haphazardly braided her wet hair. She couldn't do anything about her swollen lips though.

Jamie smirked.

"You want something to drink, Mac?" Jamie headed back toward the kitchen.

"No thanks. As you said, it's late. I better go. I'll pick you up tomorrow morning around seven thirty." Mac started for the door.

"I'll walk you out," Dixie said quickly as she closed the door and followed him outside. The night air was cool and she shivered as she walked to his truck. "You think he realized what we were doing in there?"

Mac quirked an eyebrow at her question. "A blind man would've known what was going on in there." He pulled her into his embrace. She laid her head on his chest as he began rubbing her back to keep her warm. "I'd say I'm sorry about what happened, but I'd be lying. I'm just frustrated that it ended so soon."

Dixie smiled into his chest. She felt the same way. She snuggled against him. She could hear his heartbeat, sturdy and comforting. Just like



Mac. She'd come very close to giving herself completely to this man tonight. A man she hardly knew. Yet she knew he would keep her safe as she discovered the passion within herself. What about after their lovemaking? Did he want her now and forever, or was she just a temporary affair? And did it matter?

After a moment's contemplation, Dixie came to the conclusion that what would be, would be. She wanted Mac Coalson on any terms. She desired him with her whole heart and soul, not to mention her body, and she would have him, forever, if possible. If not, she knew she wouldn't find a more tender lover for her first time. She may cry when their affair ended, but she wasn't about to pass up the time spent loving him. It was definitely worth the risk.

She longed to tell him all that was in her heart and more, but her shyness was returning. So she hugged him closer and kissed his chest through his shirt, willing him to understand what she couldn't bring herself to say just yet.

Mac inhaled the fragrance of her golden hair. He smiled to himself as he absently rubbed his hands up and down her back, wrestling with the fact that he had been on the brink of initiating this young woman into the ultimate act of love. Unless he wanted to make a lifelong commitment to her, he should do the honorable thing and bow out now before the relationship became more involved. But even as he thought this, he tightened his arms around her. He knew he could never leave now. He sighed with little regret because his heart had already accepted what his mind had tried to reason through.

*To hell with being a gentleman.*

He remembered her uninhibited response to his lovemaking. She'd driven him to the very brink of control with her sweet mouth and gentle caress. She had been on fire for him and only for him. Her climax had stolen his breath away. She was beautiful in her passion. No other woman had ever responded to him like she had. He knew she wasn't experienced; her timid touch told him that much. So the very fact that she would have given herself to him so willingly and with such sweet surrender, was enough for him to know just how deeply her affections ran. It rivaled the intensity of his feelings for her. And they hadn't even had their first official date yet.

"Will you go out to dinner with me on Friday?" he whispered.

She lifted her head and stared at his handsome face. "I think asking me for a date after what we've been doing is a lot like putting the cart before

the horse.” She smiled and then took herself on tiptoe, trying to reach his lips to give her answer.

Mac was more than happy to meet her half way, and their kiss was slow and sweet and nowhere near as satisfying as what they both wanted. As he lifted his head, the porch light blinked off and on several times. “Very funny, Jamie.”

Dixie laughed softly then pulled on his shirt to bring his head down yet again. Minutes later, Mac reluctantly loosened his hold. “Go on in, little girl.” He turned her loose and gave her a swat on her bottom just to be silly.

“Don’t, you *little girl* me. If you hadn’t noticed, I am a woman,” Dixie said with feigned haughtiness.

“Oh I noticed alright. I can promise you, I am going to be remembering throughout the night, cold shower or not,” Mac rumbled as he opened the truck door.

Dixie laughed as she walked up the front porch steps and turned back. “Good night.” She blew him a kiss.

“I’ll see you in the morning.” With a long last look, Mac turned and climbed into his truck. As soon as she was safely inside, he drove off into the night.

Dixie leaned against the front door, closed her eyes and sighed. This was what falling in love was like. Grandpa Harris was right. It was unlike anything you had ever felt before and better than anything you could ever imagine. When she opened her eyes and drew away from the door, she spotted the damp towel and hurried to pick it up as her brother came out in the kitchen.

“Any luck fishing tonight?” she asked politely, trying to gauge what he saw.

“Nope. Fish weren’t biting.” He stared pointedly at her swollen lips. “Something was, but not the fish.” He plopped on the sofa with a bowl of ice cream. “At least one of us got lucky.”

Dixie threw the towel at him. “Beast.”

## CHAPTER SIX

Both Mac and Dixie were busy the rest of the week, with little time for communication except for telephone calls late at night and early morning kisses when he showed up to take Jamie to work. It was driving him crazy. No more than a kiss or two was allowed thanks to Jamie and his obvious bad timing. He never failed to show up just as things were getting interesting, leaving Mac frustrated. He could hardly wait until Friday night.

Adding to Mac's frustration, another break-in had occurred at one of the model homes in a new subdivision Chance was supervising across town. In his inimitable flair for the dramatic, Chance had committed himself to putting a stop to this travesty of justice as he loudly and drunkenly proclaimed at Montana Max's saloon one evening. He'd magnanimously offered a reward for anyone with information leading to an arrest, and declared that he and his brothers would be personally overseeing the security of each new home. Unfortunately, he forgot to mention that fact to his brothers until later that week. Mac was ready to strangle him.

"I can't believe you announced to the world that we would be providing night watch for these homes." Mac stormed into the weekly staff meeting held in the office conference room on Friday afternoon. Brandon, Chance, as well as two other brothers, Nick and Lucky, were consuming coffee and cookies provided by Dottie.

"Well, look at it this way. Business is bound to pick up when people know we're providing security," Chance boasted.

"You have any idea what that will cost?" Mac fumed. He didn't want to listen to this shit. He wanted to be getting ready for tonight. Once this problem was resolved, he'd head home to a soothing shower and a much-anticipated evening with Dixie. He could hardly wait. *Wine? Check. Roses? Check. Condoms? Double Check.*

"It will cost next to nothing. We'll do it. We will take shifts. Right now, we've committed ourselves to building only a few houses at a time, so there's really no problem. And there's five of us, plus Jamie. We can handle it," Chance predicted smugly.

"And just how do we handle this tremendous influx of housing contracts that are going to be flooding our "in" boxes? Staying up all night is guaranteed to make us a bit too tired to take on additional projects," Lucky grumbled.

"And what about Jamie? He seems a good kid, but there is no proof that he wasn't in on at least a part of the sabotage," Nick stated.

At the mention of Jamie, Mac pulled himself together. “He’s not. Just look elsewhere,” His dark voice left little room for argument.

“Mac, there’s a Ms. Trumbull here to see you. She doesn’t have an appointment, but apparently she’s connected to Trumbull Investment Properties,” Dottie said at the doorway of the conference room. She peered at Mac over her bifocals sending him a severe frown. Very few people breached Mac’s inner sanctum without Dottie’s approval and an appointment. Mac noted she was not a happy camper.

Apparently, Ms. Trumbull must be quite determined. Mac wished he could place the name. It was always better to know who you were talking to in any particular situation. “Show her into my office. I’ll be there in a few minutes and find out anything you can because I don’t remember who the hell she is.”

“No need. Ms. Flashy Pants is already ensconced there. She said she never waits in a lobby,” Dottie said sarcastically.

Mac groaned. *Just what he didn’t need.* He finally remembered the name. Christina Trumbull was a spoiled brat who liked to pretend she ran her father’s company. Unfortunately, *Daddy* did listen to her on occasion, so it would probably be best not to ruffle her feathers. Her father was an extremely rich and powerful man in the state of Illinois. The only reason she could be here was because of the marina project proposal.

Mac excused himself and headed down the hall to his office. Closing the door quietly, he took a moment to remember the woman waiting by his desk. *One day of marina proposal meetings with her father; one night of totally forgettable sex with her.* It had been over two years ago. He didn’t even remember what she looked like until she turned around. “How can I help you, Christina?”

“Hello, Mac. It’s been a long time.” She glided over to him on high red heels, her tall slim body encased in an all-white suit. Perfectly manicured red nails grazed over his face. Her tawny tresses were artfully styled to complement her amber eyes, which smoldered with desire. The silent invitation in her delicate pose was designed to bring a man to his knees. But Mac felt absolutely nothing but irritation.

“Again, how can I help you, Christina?” he asked impatiently as he sauntered around his desk. He immediately felt better as soon as there was a desk space between them.

Christina frowned. “Father heard about your plan for a new winery near the marina. He wanted to find out a bit more before he makes a decision whether to back your proposal.” Christina sauntered over to the brown

leather couch and sat down, as she crossed her legs and leaned back provocatively.

“Proposal was six months ago. What’s taken him so long? I may have already found all the financing I need,” Mac stated dryly. He hadn’t found all the financing, but he was angry enough to let her think so. She was taking up valuable time he could be spending with Dixie, and her attempts at seduction left him cold. Dixie left her in the dust at every level.

“My father’s a very busy man. Someone as hard-working as you can appreciate that, I’m sure.” She stood up, crossing to the large window, letting the sun silhouette her figure to perfection. “Nevertheless, he has instructed me to act on his behalf. If I find the property worthy of consideration, my father would like to contribute the amount specified in the original proposal in exchange for a seat on the board. I am assuming the proposal still stands?”

Christina leaned over Mac’s shoulder, offering him a glimpse of her breasts beneath the jacket of her suit. “Why don’t we go to dinner and discuss it? That is, if there is somewhere to eat around here.” She touched his arm in an intimate gesture making sure he understood she would be more than willing to dine in, preferably in his bedroom.

*Damn!* Mac cursed. Dixie was looking forward to dinner tonight and so was he. This woman was so artificial and lacking compared to Dixie’s natural beauty and vivaciousness. He felt nothing but revulsion when she touched him.

On the other hand, business was business. And if he could get her old man to put his share into the marina project, it would guarantee success. The other investors would fall in line, and the town would have a new marina to attract tourists and businesses. It could very well mean the start of something big for his small town. Surely Dixie would understand that.

He sighed in resignation. “Just let me make some adjustments to my schedule. I’ll be right back.” A few minutes later, everything was taken care of, but as he escorted Christina to his truck, he couldn’t help but think of a smaller, sweeter woman who would fit in his arms perfectly.

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As Dixie walked up her front porch, she heard the phone ringing in her purse. Fumbling with the groceries, her purse, and her messenger bag, she tried desperately to get to the phone. The teachers’ meeting had run over and subsequently, she was running late for her date with Mac. If she hurried, she could just manage to get a shower and dress before he came to get her. *Not that he seemed to mind finding me in my bathrobe.* She

smiled, and her body trembled as she remembered the outcome of that encounter.

Perhaps tonight.

“You’ve become a wanton witch, Dixie Harris,” she murmured under her breath as she finally located the phone. She dropped her purse on the porch swing and the contents came tumbling out, rolling in every direction. Dixie scrambled to retrieve the mess as she swiped open her phone. She hit the voicemail and Mac’s deep timbre filled the silent room. “Dixie, I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news. I’m going to have to break our date tonight. I’m sorry, but something very important to Grafton has come up at the office, and I’m not going to be able to get away. I hope you understand. I’ll have Chance bring Jamie home. I really hate doing this. I’ll call you soon as I can, and we can schedule something then.”

As the voicemail ended, Dixie shut off her phone. Disappointment welled up inside her as she opened the door to the house and flopped down on the sofa. She felt totally deflated. “Stop acting so pathetic,” she scolded herself. She sighed, thinking of Mac and his flirty smile. His gruff exterior harbored a tender side that melted her heart. He wanted to bring this town back from devastation so badly. She couldn’t fault him for his noble nature.

Even if she was dying to feel his touch again.

“I wonder if cold showers work for women, too?” she mumbled.

She gave her herself a mental shake for her pitiful attitude, and with a heavy sigh she picked up the groceries she left on the porch and trudged into the kitchen to fix something to drink. What was so important that would keep Mac away from their date? Maybe they had finally gotten a lead in the vandalism case!

When Jamie came home two hours later, he couldn’t give her any clues as to what was happening. He had been out at the recently vandalized homes most of the day, and he hadn’t seen Mac since early morning. “I guess this means your free this evening, Dixie. Why don’t we catch that new movie playing at the Starlight?”

“No, let’s just have a quiet evening here. I’ll order some pizza and pick up a video. What do you want to watch?” Dixie really didn’t care about eating or the movies, but spending the evening with Jamie was better than just sitting here pining away and waiting for the phone to ring. Dixie ordered the food from a restaurant in Grafton and went to pick it up along with the movie as Jamie got a shower.

Pulling into the parking lot of the restaurant, Dixie noted the streetlights were just beginning to turn on. The days were getting longer

and the nights shorter, but she was ready for spring. What was that saying? *When all God's creatures turn to thoughts of....love.* She smiled to herself as she noticed a couple locked in an amorous embrace by a car. She sighed, thinking of Mac and wondering again what might've happened tonight. She had never felt the passionate intensity she knew in Mac's arms. He could make her fall apart with passion, shattering any objections or fears she might have just with his kisses.

Dixie got out of her car quietly so as not to disturb the loving couple and made her way across the parking lot. As she neared them, the man raised his head and the illumination from the streetlights cast his features in perfect profile. Silver eyes gleamed at her then narrowed fractionally in recognition. Dixie drew to a halt and took a fortifying breath. *It's not Mac. It's Chance. He's a hit with the ladies and he resembles Mac. It's not Mac; don't let it be Mac.*

"Dixie?"

Pain sliced through her heart when he called out her name. It was Mac. She would know that deep voice anywhere. Dixie stood numb with shock. Mac was seeing someone else. She couldn't believe it, but she had seen him with her own eyes. The woman's hands were rubbing against Mac's shirt. She tilted her head up and brought her hand to his face, placing a kiss on his lips.

Dixie had seen enough. She began walking briskly back to her car, ignoring the man calling her name, anger quickly replacing the numbness.

"He's not married to you. You haven't even been on a real date yet. You have no right to be angry. He never said he was dating you exclusively," she muttered as she reached her car. *I have every right to be madder than hell. He lied to me. He stood me up for some other woman. He hoped I wouldn't find out. He thought he could have me and still keep this other woman. Well, now I know the truth and soon Mr. Mackenzie Coalson is going to learn a few things. I don't play second fiddle to anyone. So she can have him. She's welcome to the low-down dirty creep.*

Her anger drained away at the end of her tirade leaving only the pain of loss and abject humiliation. Despite all she had seen, she couldn't help but wish she was the one Mac was holding right now.

She made it to the car and started the engine before the tears began to fall. *I thought after the other night, that he felt the same way I did, that what we shared was special. He deliberately led me to believe that. I was such a fool. Oh God, it hurts!*

“I suppose I should just be glad my brother walked in when he did or I’d have even more to cry about now,” she mumbled to herself, swiping at her tears with the back of her hand. It didn’t help.

She began crying in earnest as she backed out of the parking lot. A few passionate kisses from the first man she was attracted to and she melted like butter before fire. Well, there was no sense beating herself up about it. She had learned her lesson the hard way. She wasn’t going to play the fool again. Not even if he came begging her to take him back.

*Stupid, gullible, virgin fool.*

She dared a hasty glance at her rearview mirror. It showed Mac, with his arm around the other woman, helping her into his truck. *He couldn’t even be bothered to try and chase her down.* Dixie gunned the engine and headed home.

Mac swore as the taillights of Dixie’s Jeep faded in the distance. He tossed a rather inebriated Christina Trumbull into his truck. She moaned softly, and he looked at her in disgust. If it wasn’t for her, he and Dixie would be enjoying a pleasant evening together. Now he doubted he would even get a chance to explain the situation. He had seen the expression on Dixie’s face. She had drawn her own conclusions. He couldn’t blame her. He knew it looked bad.

Mac came around the driver side and got in. The sooner he got rid of Miss Flashy Pants, the better. He had felt like a deer being stalked by a wolf all evening, but short of being downright rude and possibly losing a chance at funding the marina project, there wasn’t much he could do about it. He managed to fend off her hands, and her less than subtle propositions. When it became clear that he wasn’t interested in what she was offering, she had the gall to try and use the project as leverage. When that only produced an expression of disbelief from him, she had subsided into her fit of sulks, drinking steadily throughout their dinner and continuing to pass him slight innuendos.

And the clincher of it all was he still didn’t know whether her father was going to fund the project. *Contract or no contract, I should have let Chance handle this one. No doubt about it.* Mac glanced at his now sleeping client. Her red lips were open slightly. He wiped his own with the back of his hand in an attempt to rid himself of her lipstick.

*Talk about bad timing.* He had almost made it to the car when Christina had turned in his arms and pressed her greedy lips to his. He’d endured the sloppy kiss while at the same time trying to extricate himself from an



embarrassing situation. He had pulled back as soon as possible. But it had been too late.

He had spotted the diminutive woman as he lifted his head. Peering over Christina's shoulder, his blood ran cold as he noticed the light blonde hair visible under a street lamp. The woman's face had been in shadow for only a second, then with a slight movement forward, the streetlight had bathed her features in perfect light. Dread washed over him as he murmured her name. Her wounded expression had made him wince. Dixie had obviously seen everything and drawn her own conclusions. He had started to follow her to explain, then Christina had groaned, and he had been forced to help her into his truck.

"As soon as I get rid of you, woman, Dixie and I are gonna talk. She is going to believe me," he murmured as he gunned the engine and roared into the night, heading for Christina's hotel.

Jamie said Dixie had a volatile temper and he remembered vividly her explosion in his office. It had led to their first passionate embrace. Well, her anger was worth the effort if the outcome would be another example of the recently released passion she had found his arms. Mac smiled to himself. They would fight, but then they would make up and everything would be just fine. He could hardly wait to get started.

Jamie looked up from the book he was reading as Dixie walked into the house. One look at her face and he was taking her in his arms. "What happened? Are you hurt? Was there an accident?" While he was questioning her, he was running his hands up and down her arms checking for broken bones.

Dixie pushed out of his arms. "No, nothing like that. I just want to lie down. I'm sorry about dinner. There's leftovers in the fridge. Fix yourself something, okay?"

She walked through the house like a zombie, closing her door softly in his face.

Once inside her bedroom, the tears spilled over once again as she flung herself on the bed and cried her heart out.

Moments later, she heard a pounding on the front door. "Dixie, open up. I know you're in there. Let me explain," Mac said forcefully as he continued to knock.

"Dammit, Dixie, open up. I'm not leaving here until you talk to me. I'll make so much noise the neighbors will call the police. Do you hear me Dixie?" he roared.

She heard Jamie open the door. "I don't know what you did, but you better fix it. She's in her room crying her eyes out," he groused.

“Not that it’s any of your business, Jamie, but your sister misunderstood a situation she found me in tonight, and I’m here to clarify it. Now get out of the way.”

“You gave me the benefit of the doubt, so I’ll do the same for you. I suggest you both calm down a little. My sister has a horrible temper and between the two of you, I feel like the house is gonna explode. Take some advice from a person who knows. Let her rant and rave until it’s out of her system, and then explain things to her. Otherwise, you’ll just be wasting your breath.”

Dixie heard Mac on the other side of the bedroom door. She wanted to run and hide. She needed to lick her wounds and come to grips with what a fool she had been to trust Mac and his kisses. She didn’t want to listen to reason. She was hurting too badly and nothing he could say or do would erase the picture indelibly printed on her mind of him in the arms of another woman.

So when Mac knocked softly on the door minutes later, she turned a deaf ear to his plea. “Dixie, please let me in. I want to explain what you saw,” Mac whispered.

*Oh my God! Did he think she was blind? Or just plain stupid? Or so deeply enamored of him that she was gonna let this stand?*

“I saw what I saw. I took biology. I know all about sexual reproduction. Please leave.” She was privately amazed she was able to carry on any kind of conversation with the two timing jerk. She congratulated herself on how collected she’d been, considering her temper was threatening to erupt again.

Knocking again a little more forcefully, he pleaded. “Dixie baby, please open up. You didn’t see what you thought you saw. Please. Just let me explain.”

“I may be young, but I’m not stupid. And I am most certainly not blind,” she snapped at him from the other side of the door. *The man was unbelievable.*

“You are the most infuriating bit of baggage I have ever encountered. If I didn’t care for you so much, I’d leave right now and never look back.”

“You call that caring?! I call it a line of crap! The only thing you cared about begins with an “F” and ends with me losing my virginity!” *Oh, God! Had she really just shouted that?*

Pounding on the door with his fist, he shouted, “Dixie Harris, you open the door this minute, or I’ll break it down!”

“Then I’ll just have you arrested for breaking and entering. Sort of ironic, don’t you think?” she countered sweetly. She felt like crying the

Mississippi River because he broke her heart, but she was not going to let that arrogant pain-in-the-ass know just how much she was hurting. She had her pride!

“Fine. Just fine. I should’ve known better than to get involved with a little girl, anyhow. Maybe, in a few years, when you grow up and if you have apologized nicely, I might just take you back! And bring a damn soapbox to stand on. My neck’s getting sore from looking down at you!” he snarled. After giving the closed-door another good pounding, he stomped out of the house, slamming the front door.

“Ooooooh!” Dixie’s eyes narrowed to mere slits and her hands balled into fists as Mac’s last remark registered with the banging of the screen door. It was like pouring gasoline on a bonfire. She was out of her bedroom and on the front porch in seconds. Heedless of the people walking down the street, she advanced like a mad woman across the yard, screaming. “Apologize to you? When pigs fly, you Mississippi River rat. I wasn’t the one caught fornicating in the parking lot of the local pizza parlor. Hell will freeze over before I apologize.”

Mac saw her coming out on the front porch, and he started toward her, but the smugness left his face, however, with each shouted word. By the time she was finished with her tirade, Mac’s eyes were tempered steel and his face was set granite. “Well, the Devil better get ready for a heat wave, baby, because I feel the same way.”

He hopped in his truck and with a squeal of tires, he was gone.

“On the whole, I think that went pretty well,” Jamie commented as he walked up behind her to watch the disappearing headlights.

“Oh shut up,” she snarled and fled back to her room, weeping once again.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Weeks went by and days grew warmer. Mac did as he promised and picked Jamie up in the mornings and dropped him off in the evenings, but Dixie made sure she wasn't around. She knew she was being stubborn, but every time she thought about calling Mac, the picture of him in the arms of another woman intruded, and she felt the pain of betrayal as a fierce fire in her heart.

Her curiosity about the mysterious vandal who continued to plague the construction company was a good excuse to pump Jamie for information about Mac, though. He was more than happy to discuss anything about the Coalsons, including their concerns that the vandal would increase his mischief by targeting not only Coalson Construction, but also the Coalson farm and orchard. People came from all around the area and across the river to pick apples, strawberries and peaches, to sample the hometown recipes and play the many old-fashioned games that made the Coalson family orchard one of the best in the area. The family thought it would also be the perfect place for a vandal to strike.

"Hey, Dix," Jamie enthused. "Did I tell you Mac's mother, Ginny, hit upon the idea to open a general store on the premises. Last year, the men converted an old apple barn into a store. It has knickknacks, specialty candies, and country crafts with the antiques common to the pioneer period. She's even got handmade quilts decorating the walls alongside the antique farming machinery. An old-fashioned soda fountain and dessert bar is going to be located upstairs in the hayloft. But right now, it's housing the offices for a security team. We should go sometime."

She murmured in the affirmative but silently wished he would change the subject.

Dixie got up the nerve to visit the orchard after school the next day, hoping to catch a glimpse of Mac, or maybe even talk to his family. Unfortunately, the orchard was closed for the season as the professional looking gentleman in the Security T-shirt informed her. Peering at the upstairs windows of the old farm house, she pictured Mac as a teen climbing down the nearby trees and out of the house. *No doubt meeting some girl as he kept another patiently waiting for his call.* And that made her think she was fooling herself if she believed Mac would be patiently waiting for her. He wouldn't have any problem replacing her; hell, they were probably lined up and panting. Cursing her hot temper yet again, she turned the car around and headed home.

As she headed down the drive, she noticed Hank Coalson in the far field, his arm around his wife, giving her shoulders a gentle squeeze. Her

eyes misted. They were such a loving couple, and great parents, too. They had brought up seven boys, teaching them by example to be responsible adults. Although all the brothers dated frequently, according to the town gossip, none of them had a special woman in his life. And a few still lived at home, although technically, they lived in the bunkhouse.

Memories of her grandfather and their happy little family came to mind, and tears fell as she recalled his loving guidance. She was homesick. That was all. Maybe it was time to think about moving back.

As she headed home, her cell phone rang, and she took note of the number, reminding herself to return the call once she got home. Her heart had done a little leap, just a tiny skip, in the hopes that maybe it was Mac calling her. *Surely to goodness all of this heartache would end soon.* She walked in the house, dumped her purse on the recliner and poured herself a glass of white wine. That's when she spotted the note Jamie had left.

*Hey Sis,*

*Decided to catch a movie with some of the guys in town. Don't wait up.*

Looking around the empty house, Dixie decided she needed to get out. Sitting here pining for Mac wasn't going to ease her heartache any time soon. She remembered the phone call from earlier and hit the voicemail.

"Hey Dixie, it's Jane. I was wondering if you'd be interested in attending an aerobics class with me tonight. I don't want to go by myself." Jane Hartley was the first person to welcome Dixie into town and had given her the idea about applying for the kindergarten teaching position. She was a friend. But still...

"Yuck! The last thing I want to do is run around to ear shattering music while a maniacal Barbie doll tells me to work it harder, work it faster," she mumbled back to the phone as she hit Jane's number. "Hey Jane! I'm not so sure I'm ready for the whole leotard thing. Can't I just meet you after for a drink?"

"Please come! I've promised one of the mothers that I would attend her sessions and I can't back down. I'll look like a total wimp. It won't be so bad," Jane wheedled.

Dixie sighed. "Oh all right, even though the last thing I want to do is exercise. Well, maybe the second to last. The last thing I want to do is stay home and think about Mac."

"Absolutely! It's time to get up and get moving! On to bigger and better men!" Jane cheered.

"I won't leave this house until you promise not to go all crazy cheerleader on me," Dixie threatened.

Jane laughed. "I promise for tonight. But anything goes starting tomorrow!"

Dixie groaned then hung up. An hour later, she was wiping sweat off her brow and thinking about Mac anyway.

Panting to the count of eight as she struggled with a seemingly unending series of stomach crunches, she mumbled to Jane. "The only reason we count to eight is because she probably can't count any higher." She was in a bad mood and this definitely wasn't helping. The instructor continued to count effortlessly. The beautiful, long-legged brunette wasn't even out of breath and barely sweating. *Of course, Barbie dolls don't sweat. She was probably exactly Mac's type.*

"I hate to break it to you, Dix, but not only can she count, she's a professor at Principia College. An economics professor." Jane groaned as she got to her feet for cool down. "And worse than that, before you came on the scene, she had been dating Mac."

*Oh, that's just peachy.* Dixie frowned at her friend. "You couldn't tell me that sooner?"

Tall, thin, graceful and smart. *How do I compete with that? Not that I'm trying. She can have him. Was she the one with him that night?* Dixie reached for her toes as tears blurred her eyes. She wasn't going to think about it, but she couldn't help studying the instructor with new eyes.

*You are a masochist, Dixie Harris. You like pain. Otherwise, you would have left as soon as you found out who she was. Better yet, you should have never come here in the first place. Shoulda, woulda, coulda, but didn't. It's the story of your life!*

After class, Dixie hurried to gather her things and leave, hoping the instructor wouldn't notice, but no hope there. She detached herself from the group and walked over to Dixie. "Hello," she held out her hand. "I'm glad you could join us tonight. I'm Clarisse Van Dorn."

Dixie took the proffered hand, noting the long, perfectly manicured fingers and soft skin. Nothing at all like her short fingers and blunt, polish-free nails. "I'm Dixie Harris."

Clarisse smiled. "I know. You're the woman who has Mac jumping through hoops."

Dixie turned red. "I'm sure you're mistaken. Mac and I are merely acquaintances. Now, if you'll excuse me." Dixie made to go, but Clarisse blocked her path.

"Don't worry. Mac and I were nothing more than a casual relationship at best. I think it's great he's found someone he truly cares for."

"He hasn't, I mean, I'm not," Dixie stammered.

Clarisse chuckled. "Don't give up now, girl. Mac's a hard headed man. He needs someone to stand up to him when he gets out of line. He also needs someone to teach him to laugh. And I bet you're just the gal to do it."

"Well thanks for the advice, but I am afraid you're barking up the wrong tree. We've never even been on a date," Dixie admitted with a shrug.

"So? My husband ran over my dog. That's how we met. We married three weeks later." A shadow passed over her eyes. "I still miss him every day and it's been five years."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. What happened?" Dixie murmured in sympathy. She couldn't help but touch the woman's hand in comfort.

"He was killed in a plane crash in San Diego." Clarisse shook her head and changed the subject with a smile. "Anyway, I want to see you at the next session."

Dixie groaned. "I don't know. I'm not sure my, er, ego can take it."

"You're a lot stronger than you look. Not many people, man or woman, would have the guts to stand up to Mac Coalson and call him a fornicating Mississippi River rat."

Dixie turned beet red and Clarice gave her a small nod. "Honey, it's a small community and you weren't exactly whispering. Now don't get all upset. You've given this place something to talk about besides the flood damage. Rumor has it there's even a wager going on down at Montana Max's saloon as to who's going to give in and apologize first. I think I'll bet on Mac. And when he does, honey, you make him grovel. It'll keep them in line for years." With a wink and a wave, she was gone.

Dixie sat down hard on a nearby bench. People were wagering on her love life. Was nothing private in this town?

The next evening Dixie was clearing away the dinner dishes when Jamie suggested a drive along the bluffs. "There's this neat house that Mac and his brothers built. It's just a few miles from his place. The people backed out of the deal when the vandalism started. Mac's kinda worried about it since it's still unoccupied. It's got to be a prime target for the vandal. Anyway, I thought if you are serious about settling down here, maybe we could look into it."

*Buy a house near Mac?* Just the other day she was wondering if it was really the smart thing to do, to even stay in this town. She wasn't sure she could even stand the emotional pain of being in the same place with him. *But to live near him, too?* That would be insane. Nevertheless, she allowed Jamie to drive her up the bluffs into the woods beyond.

As they crested a hill, she could just make out a roofline in the distance. Wildflowers graced the sides of the gravel driveway leading up to the most beautiful log home Dixie had ever seen. Sensing her enthusiasm, Jamie stopped the car and they hopped out.

The house itself was a two-story log structure situated on a beautiful lot. In the distance you could catch glimpses of the river below. But unlike large city subdivisions, the lots in this wooded area were sold on ten acre tracts, so each home had lots of privacy.

The spectacular flora and fauna of the woods provided a beautiful backdrop to the home. The large front porch spanned the entire front of the house with small tables and rockers scattered about, perfect for relaxing on a warm summer evening. As she rounded the back of the house, she noticed the back wall was made entirely of windows with the deck separating the two stories.

The house reminded her of Grandpa Harris's cabin, and she felt the pang of homesickness wash over her once again. How she wished he was here to hold her and help her through this horrible problem. "This is beautiful, Jamie. I can't believe no one wants to buy this. Let's talk to the bank in the morning. I want this house." She turned to Jamie with a smile on her face and the most enthusiasm she had felt in weeks.

Jamie reddened at his faux pas and hastened to explain. "Um, this isn't the house for sale, Dixie. This is Mac's house. I just wanted to stop in here first to show you how cool it was. I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to mislead you," he finished softly.

Dixie closed her eyes and hung her head. It just wasn't fair. Not only did another woman have the man of her dreams, he lived in the house of her dreams. Slowly, she made her way back to the car, and Jamie silently drove back into town, the vacant house forgotten.

That night she dreamed of Mac in his house and his children with laughing gray eyes and coal black hair. She tossed and turned until she admitted to herself that she was, indeed, in love with that house and the dreams that it offered. *Almost as fast as I fell in love with the owner.* No matter what he had done, she was still in love with Mac. Love had sneaked up on her, just like Grandpa Harris had said it would - only it wasn't the most wonderful feeling in the world. Grandpa had lied.

It hurt.

She glanced at the phone, willing it to ring, wondering how she could have fallen in love so quickly, especially with a man who obviously didn't feel the same way about her. He hadn't even cared enough to call and admit he was wrong.



*Well at least he hadn't cared enough to continue calling after I hung up on him the first five times. Apparently a man of Mac's character can only take so much rejection.*

*Whose side are you on, anyway?*

*I'm for whichever side will allow me a decent night's sleep. Now, pick up that phone and call him. Let him explain. Apologize and be happy. You get your man, your house, and your dreams and I get some sleep!*

*What if he doesn't want me anymore? I'm a lot to take. I've got a horrible temper. What if I've pushed him into another woman's arms?*

*What if you didn't? What if he's just as miserable as you are? Would you rather spend the rest of your life crying yourself to sleep over what might have been?*

Dixie cringed at that statement. Did she want an endless life of pain because she was scared of being rejected? Or was it better to cry at night and cling to a bit of hope - or to face it head on and deal with the consequences?

*All right. I'll call him in the morning.*

*Why don't you call him now?*

*It's three o'clock in the morning! I'm not going to wake him up.*

*Afraid a woman will answer?*

*Yes!*

Dixie punched her pillow. The last thing she remembered as sleep finally overtook her was that tiny voice in her head taunting her.

*Chicken.*

The next afternoon, Dixie found a note taped to her car door as she was leaving the school parking lot. Peeling it off, her eyes widened as she read:

*Dear Ms. Dixie, we don't want you to be sad no more so we aksed our fokes how to fall in love. They gave us these ideas. Be nice. u r so u can skip that one. Look perdy all the time. U can skip this one to. Sleep in the same bed. Kiss and stuff. Cook good food. My dad says pies r bestis. Love, your class. PS. Gonna send this letter to mstr colsun so u can be happy. p.p.s. my big bruvr helpt us. he can rit.*

Dixie leaned her head against the car door. "Good grief. Now even the kids in town are matchmaking." Something had to be done about this. Even if she and Mac couldn't resolve their differences, at least they could patch things up enough to be friends. No, she clarified - she knew she could never be just friends with Mac. He was the love of her life and she had to acknowledge that and find a way to fix this mess. She glanced at the letter on the seat next to her. Well, at least she had an excuse to call him.

As soon as she arrived home, she tried to contact Mac at the company office, only to be told by Dottie that he was out on the job site. She hated to leave a message on such a personal matter. Then, too, maybe Mac had instructed Dottie to deflect her calls. That depressed her. He had done that before.

Suddenly, it became imperative that she talk to Mac today to settle this matter between them. She grabbed her keys and drove to the company offices, where Chance told her that Mac had, indeed, gone out on a job, and he wasn't expected back before late that night. With a tearful sigh, she turned away from Chance's assessing gaze. "You can try him on his cell. Do you have the number?"

Dixie offered a bland smile but shook her head. This was too important for a phone call. It needed to be face to face. One more night and this would all be over. She would definitely see him after school tomorrow. She would apologize for jumping to conclusions and calmly ask for an explanation of what she had witnessed. Then they could air out their differences once and for all.

Hopefully, everyone in town would go back to minding their own business.

Once she decided on her course of action, Dixie felt better. Maybe Jamie was right and this was all just a silly misunderstanding. If that was the case, she knew she'd have to swallow her pride. She was tired of this silly waiting game. She wanted Mac. She wanted him back in her life, and she wanted him back in her bed. Hell, she just wanted to see him.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“Well, Ben, you got any news for me about the vandalism?” Mac inquired as they walked along the bluffs near the construction company offices. He had spent the last few weeks thinking about ways to trap this guy, but nothing was working. Nothing new came to mind. Well, nothing except Dixie. She was on his mind constantly. He couldn’t eat. He couldn’t sleep. He couldn’t think. And he didn’t really know what the hell to do about it.

“Nope, no new leads - I’m sorry Mac. But I did come to talk to you about something.” Ben hitched up his pants and took a deep breath as he looked out toward the Mississippi River sparkling in the midday sun. “The way I see it, son, Dixie’s a lot like this here old river. Usually, she’s calm as you please.”

Mac looked at him in astonishment. “Are we talking about Dixie Harris?”

“Hush up and let me finish. Now where was I? Oh yes. She’s as calm as you please, but underneath, there’s a strong current of passions. Suddenly a storm whips up, and she unleashes her fury, only to subside, leaving devastation in her wake. But once the river’s in your blood, boy, you can’t live without her.”

Mac stared open mouthed at Ben, trying to judge if he was serious. By the earnest expression on the old man’s face, he apparently was. Mac didn’t know how to respond. He wasn’t sure he even understood it correctly. “That’s, um, very profound, Ben.” Mac tried to keep a straight face.

To his surprise, the old man actually blushed. Adjusting his glasses, Ben stammered, “Well, me and the missus are taking one of them creative writing courses. She thinks I should get in touch with my feminine side.” He harrumphed and winked at Mac. “Of course I told her that seeing she’s my better half, she *was* my feminine side and if she wanted me to touch her, then just give a holler.” He smiled and his eyes twinkled.

Mac grinned and shook his head. The old guy was giving him advice on his love life. Well, he *had* been married for over forty years. “You are truly a Renaissance man, Ben.”

Ben grinned and slapped Mac on the back. “Ain’t it the truth, son. Ain’t it the truth.”

Two days later, Mac was sitting at his mother’s table, tasting pies and trying not to think about Dixie. The kitchen was laden with dirty dishes, as Ginny was trying out different recipes and variations of recipes for the

cookbook she wanted to feature in the general store. Tonight was Mac's night to play guinea pig.

"This was sent by special messenger for you today, dear," Ginny Coalson handed Mac the folded sheet of paper with a gleam in her eyes.

He threw his mother a puzzled look and sat down at the kitchen table to read it as she placed a piece of strawberry pie in front of him.

*Dear Mstr Colsun, you say sorry to Miz Dixie for hurtn her feellands...*

Mac read the note again to make sure he had understood it. Then he looked up at his mother, standing at the kitchen stove with a smug look on her face. "Who delivered this?"

"A young man, about seven years old. Now, aren't you ashamed of yourself? You've got the entire school worried about her. It's bad enough she just lost her grandfather, now you've broken her heart. I'm very disappointed in you, Mackenzie Coalson." She set a cup of coffee next to the pie. "You march right over there, and you fix it. It's obvious she's a good girl. She wouldn't have their support if she wasn't. Children are inherently honest."

"Now wait just a damn minute! I was ready to explain to her that night, but she wouldn't listen. And then she called me everything but a man in front of a street full of people. And how do you even know she's sad because of our argument? Maybe her goldfish died or something." Mac tucked into his strawberry pie with a vengeance, then took a swallow of scalding hot coffee. "And another thing, how the hell do you know she's a good girl? She'd be the first to tell you, she's not a girl, she's a woman. Besides, you've never met her. And her grandfather passing, how'd you even know about that?"

He wiped his mouth and held up his hand. "No, don't tell me. I've got a pretty damn good idea. The local grapevine has been working overtime, hasn't it? Well, you can tell all those old biddies down at the parlor to mind their own damn business." He stood up and sat his dishes in the sink. "That pie was the best one so far. Put it in your book," he growled. He started to walk out the door.

"Now you hold on one minute, buddy. Number one, you do not curse in this house. Number two, this letter was not written by some old biddies, it was written by innocent children and you owe them an explanation. And number three, I love you, but as your mother I'm gonna tell you that you are acting like a horse's ass." She rounded on him. "You say Dixie's got a temper, well, so do you. But if you love that girl or even like her a lot,

you've got to figure out a way for the two of you to live together without tearing each other apart."

"And just how do I do that, Mom? Just let her walk all over me?" Mac argued.

"You start by making her listen. And then you tell her what your feelings are and ask if she feels the same. And then if she does, set down some rules about honesty and about jumping to conclusions. And then you get married and have babies," Ginny Coalson finished softly as she walked over to hug her oldest son.

"And what if she says no?" He pushed the question past the lump in his throat as he returned her embrace.

"She won't," Ginny promised as she kissed him on the cheek then pointed to the letter still lying on the table. "That letter proves she's just as miserable without you as you are without her."

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Mac hit the intercom on his desk to ask Dottie for some coffee, but heard Jamie's voice instead.

"Dottie? I need an appointment," Jamie fiddled with the collar of his shirt.

Mac's secretary looked up from her typing. Since she'd been the recipient of her fair share of Mac's foul moods, she was more than happy to oblige. "You talking business or Dixie?"

"I'm sick and tired of watching Dixie mope around the house. She's lost weight. She's moody. She is, generally speaking, a total pain in the ass. And I'm sick and tired of hearing Mac snap at everyone. The whole place is walking on eggshells around him. Not to mention the fact that Mac looks like death and it isn't because of the long hours he's putting in." Jamie took a breath then continued, "But most of all, I'm sick and tired of answering all the questions about the two of them, and then asking the questions the two of them ask about each other while trying to act as if they don't care. It's making me crazy."

"You know he would never act this way unless he was deeply hurt... or deeply in love. And since he's too stubborn to admit either one, I'm going to help him. You are going to make sure this little meeting between the two of you clears the air and helps the romance along, you understand?" She ran her fingers down her scheduling book. "Let's see... how about right now?" She smiled up at Jamie.

"Now?" He squeaked. "I thought I'd have a little more time to prepare, to think things through..."

“To talk yourself out of it?” Dottie smiled. “No time like the present, I always say.”

Mac heard her chair squeak and released the intercom button. *Aww, hell.*

Dottie poked her head in. “You have a visitor.”

Mac didn’t even look up. “It’s not on my calendar,” he rumbled.

“Then I guess I forgot to write it in. Sorry,” she said sweetly as she ushered Jamie in. “Good luck,” she whispered as she closed the door.

Mac groaned inwardly and gestured for Jamie to take a seat. He knew what was coming. Since the fight, Mac had been interrogated by the entire town. Everyone had an opinion on how to rectify the situation and bring them back together. Apparently, this was yet another person intent on putting in his two cents worth.

“Mac, er.” Jamie cleared his throat, then began speaking rapidly as he stared at the carpet. “We need to talk. I want to know just what went on between you and my sister. Although I know it’s not my business, I’m making it my business. I’m tired of coming home and listening to Dixie cry herself to sleep and to be truthful, we’re all getting a little tired of tiptoeing around your temper. I don’t know all the details, but I do know that you’re both miserable and I think you should talk about it.” He finished his little speech, and then dared to peek at Mac to gauge his reaction.

“Talk about it? I’ve tried talking about it to the only other person that’s directly involved in this debacle, but she’s not talking to me. I tried sending flowers, but she apparently overturned the vase and dumped the contents on the florist’s shoes, which I felt obliged to reimburse him for, by the way.” He took a deep breath and continued. “I could confront her at the grade school, but making any kind of declaration in front of thirty children wasn’t exactly what I had in mind. And I don’t think they’d like to see her temper at the school. I can’t think of any other solutions. So unless you’ve got some grand ideas, just get the hell out of my office.”

Mac needed to get Dixie alone, somewhere private, where he could explain the situation to her calmly. Where he could take her in his arms and declare his love. *Where he could spank the living daylights out of her for giving him so much grief over the past three weeks.*

“Yeah, I heard about the flowers,” Jamie grinned. “You could always sneak up behind her and truss her up. Then she’d have to sit and listen to you.”

Mac cracked a smile for the first time in weeks at the mental picture of Dixie bound and gagged and furious, blue fire flashing from her eyes. “It’s

a tempting thought, but I hope it doesn't come down to that. Any other suggestions?" He didn't want to fight. He just wanted to have her back in his life, *because he was definitely in love with that hot tempered woman*. It was as simple as that. "Have a seat, Jamie. I need an idea, preferably one that doesn't involve ropes and gags. Well, at least not right now."

"I don't need to hear that, okay?" Jamie groaned. "You know this means I'm going to be disqualified from the bet at Montana Max's saloon."

Mac's eyes narrowed. "And what bet is that?"

"The one about who's going to apologize first, you or Dixie." Jamie's eyes twinkled. "The whole town's in on it, you know."

"And just who started the bet, if I may ask?"

"Chance did, I think. Or maybe it was Nick or could've been Lucky. I'm not sure." Jamie paused.

Mac buried his head in his hands and groaned. "Good Lord, what next?"

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Across town, Dixie was finishing up with the kindergarten "Show and Tell". Jason Cranston was last to bring up his object. "Okay Jason, what do you have for us today?" She smiled up at him.

He was a handsome boy with chestnut hair and green eyes. He was also very shy because he tended to stutter if he got excited. Her patience with this issue had been amply paid off in her mind. Jason's stutter was less pronounced, and his self-esteem had improved markedly since she had taken her free time to help him with his speech. The closest speech therapist was thirty miles away in Alton, and his parents had no way to get him there.

Slowly, Jason made his way up to the front of the class. He paused with his chin down to his chest, peaking at her from behind his lashes. Dixie noticed that he appeared to be very excited about his objects, but the fear of stuttering was making him wary of showing his possessions. He was such an impressionable child and this was a big moment for him. If the other children laughed or giggled, Dixie knew his self-esteem would receive a stunning blow. However, a victory today could be the impetus needed for Jason to conquer the speech impediment.

"Come on, Jason," Dixie coaxed quietly, "the kids are waiting to see what you brought today. I bet it's something exciting. Is it too heavy? Your arms seem to be straining. Do you want me to help you take it out of the bag so you can show us?" She smiled encouragingly and lifted her hands to help.

Jason shook his head then reached inside the bag to pull out his surprise. He was shuffling his feet in eagerness. It looked like he would definitely overcome his shyness. But as Jason revealed his surprise, the color drained from Dixie's face.

"Oh my God! Jason, honey, be careful. Where did you get that?" Dixie whispered as she stared in horror at the pistol the little boy was holding in front of him. He was pointing it straight at the class and the children began to scream. He flinched at the sound and swung the pistol toward her. He looked confused by the children's reaction, then his eyes began to fill with tears and his lower lip quivered.

"Jason, listen to me. Please lower the gun and sit it gently on the floor." Dixie was trying desperately not to look down the barrel of the gun pointed at her chest. "Children, stop screaming please. You're frightening him."

Dixie couldn't keep the fear out of her voice, and the children's frantic cries increased. Jason was responding to the pandemonium around him. He was crying in earnest and flinging the gun back and forth, back and forth, trying to dislodge it from his hand, but his finger was curved around the trigger.

Dixie continued to try and calm the children even as the gun barrel wavered at various points on her body. The children began running for the door and spilling onto the hall. She was terrified one of them would run into Jason's line of fire. A part of her wanted to help Jason, to remove the gun from his grasp, but she couldn't move. Her legs refused to obey. She just continued to talk to the frightened boy.

Suddenly, the principal arrived in the doorway, having heard the commotion down the hall. Taking in the situation at a glance, he flung himself at the frightened boy. "Jason, stop!"

The child jumped at his words and the gun discharged.

Everything happened in slow motion for her, a horrifying moment she knew she would remember forever. Dixie heard the report of the gun as an invisible hand slammed into her shoulder, knocking her to the floor. A terrible burning ran down her arm and she saw blood spurting everywhere. She turned her head to locate the cause of the blood flow, realizing with dread that someone had been shot.

"Dixie!" She heard the principal scream her name.

Her whole body was trembling as she tried to answer. She moved and a wave of dizziness caught her unaware. She closed her eyes and attempted to refocus. When she opened them again, she noticed Jason weeping next to her. She was on the floor. The children who remained in the room were



sobbing as they stared at her, but their voices were fuzzy and distorted. She again tried to comfort them with words, but her mouth wouldn't work properly. As one child pointed to her, she glanced down, terrifyingly aware that now the blood had come from her.

"Thank God it wasn't one of the children," she murmured as the world began to spin uncontrollably, sending her careening into a black void.

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Mac and Jamie were still in discussion about the best way to manage Dixie, when the door burst open and Dottie, Chance, and Brandon raced in.

"What is it Dottie?" Mac said as he ran around the desk. He could tell she was horrified. "Have the vandals struck again?"

"There's been a shooting at the school," Dottie whispered as she grabbed Mac's arm. "Dixie's been hit. The paramedics are with her now. They want Jamie to meet them at the hospital."

Mac's mind was reeling. Dixie was hurt. She could be dying. *No, don't think like that.* "How bad?" he rasped out as he searched frantically for his keys.

"They won't give me any other information. Jamie, I'm so sorry." She began sobbing quietly into her handkerchief.

Brandon handed Mac his keys. "I'll take care of everything here. Go!" With a curt nod of thanks, Mac and Jamie raced to the truck and jumped in. They were on their way to the Alton Trauma Center within seconds.

Neither man said anything as they drove down the highway, each lost in their own torment. Silent tears coursed down Jamie's face. Mac noticed the boy's grip on the armrest would probably leave dents in the leather.

Mac clinched the steering wheel fiercely and pushed the gas pedal to the floor, willing the truck to go faster, faster. *Please God, don't let her die. Not when I've realized how much I love her, how much I need her in my life. She makes me whole and keeps me alive.*

The two men arrived at the emergency room in record time, only to be greeted by a nurse with a handful of papers for Jamie to sign. She could tell them nothing about Dixie's condition except that the doctor would be in shortly to talk to them.

The doctor arrived a few minutes later. He was a small man with a balding head and large glasses. He walked with a confident stride, and as he drew near, Mac noticed his deep brown eyes. Compassion and intelligence, along with a hefty dose of tiredness, gleamed from their depths. Dixie was in good hands.

Mac stood up as the doctor approached. He would have to take the interview and provide any information the doctor needed. After one glance at Jamie's pale countenance, he knew he wasn't in any condition to offer help or to ask proper questions.

"Relatives of Dixie Harris?" At Mac's nod, he continued. "Your wife is stable, Mr. Harris, but she's lost a lot of blood. The bullet entered into her pectoral muscle in her right shoulder and lodged in her collarbone. It will need to be removed, of course. We're prepping her now, and as soon as the operation is over, I'll contact you." He nodded once then hurried back toward the swinging doors marked *no admittance*. In his overwhelming concern for Dixie, Mac hadn't even bothered to correct the doctor's assumption that he was her husband. So be it. It was just a formality as far as he was concerned.

Mac was intensely relieved that she was still alive, but the idea of surgery scared him all over again. She had lost a lot of blood. That thought made him ill as he imagined her pain. He glanced at Jamie. His fears were echoed on the young man's face.

"What do we do now, Mac? I didn't even know her blood type," Jamie murmured.

"Now, we wait," Mac said softly as he put his arms around the shoulders of the young man he had come to know and like over the past few weeks.

Together they sat in silence and watched the clock. And prayed.

## CHAPTER NINE

The next several hours were the worst of Mac's life. He knew the bullet hadn't hit any major organs. But it had to be removed. People died in surgery. *Oh dear God, please don't let her die.*

By the time he had finished with the doctor, Mac's family were drifting into the hospital. They came for news or to offer comfort. Mac realized that everyone knew how much Dixie meant to him. Everyone knew they were meant to be together. He had just been too stubborn to admit it. He prayed he wasn't too late now.

He scanned the room yet again, silently thanking God for blessing him was such a wonderful family. Brandon and Chance were sitting in the corner watching a talk show. Nick and Lucky, as everyone called his brother Lawrence, were headed for the snack shop to get everyone coffee. Lucky received his nickname after coming face-to-face with one of the deadly copperhead snakes that populated the bluffs near their home and living to tell about it. The only family members missing were his youngest brother Tanner, who was away at college, and his other brother, Sam, who was in the Navy.

Mac remembered the last time the family had been faced with such a personal crisis. Sam had been accused of drug possession. The accusation had been false, trumped up by the father of the girl Sam had been interested in back then. As the richest man in the county, he had made it clear that Sam wasn't good enough for his daughter. Only after the daughter agreed not to see Sam anymore had that "evidence" mysteriously disappeared and all charges dropped. Unfortunately, the gossip surrounding the arrest had developed into a full-blown scandal, and the stigma of a drug pusher had stuck with Sam. He had left town to continue his career in the Navy and to forget the girl who he felt had betrayed him.

Mac glanced over at his parents. They sat on either side of Jamie, offering him words of comfort, holding his hand and just being there for him. They had been together for over forty years. They not only loved each other, they truly liked each other, too. He thought about what he wanted in a relationship. The woman he married would have to understand about the demands of his job, help him when times were rough, and make him feel alive every minute of the day. Dixie did that for him. She made him complete. He no longer simply existed. He felt alive.

He'd thought his life was full until she came into it, throwing his entire world off balance. She made him yearn for her company and her love. A smile from her could make his day. He wanted to wake up with her beside him and tell her everything at the end of the day. He wanted to tease her

and love her and watch her grow big with his children. He made a vow to never take for granted their time together. Time was too precious to waste.

Hours later, the door to the operating room swung open and the doctor emerged. Mac searched his features trying to discern the outcome of the operation, but he could tell nothing from his expression. He steeled himself and stood up as the doctor approached. "Mr. Harris, your wife is doing fine. The surgery to remove the bullet went well. I'm confident she will make a full recovery."

All eyes turned to Mac. He flushed a bit then stammered, "She's not my wife. I'm Mac Coalson. That's Jamie Harris, her brother." He pointed a finger in the younger man's direction.

The doctor looked disconcerted for a minute, then issued an apology. "I'm sorry. Ms. Harris said something to me before she went under anesthetic which led me to believe..." He shook his head and continued. "Anyway, she came through surgery and is down in recovery with just a small scar to remind her of her ordeal. You can see her in a few hours. Until then, I suggest you get something to eat and relax."

He accepted Mac's thanks, then turned to go, but Mac stopped him. "Excuse me, doctor, but what exactly did Dixie say to you?"

The doctor laughed. "She said to tell Mac I love him and to take care of Jamie." The doctor slapped Mac on the back. "Don't look so stunned, son. She loves you." He pushed through the operating doors.

Mac was still reeling from the bombshell the doctor had dropped on him when his family converged on him *en masse*, offering hugs and kisses of joy at Dixie's recovery. Mac disengaged himself, engulfed Jamie in a great bear hug as their tears of relief mingled together. "She's going to be okay. She's going to be okay." He kept repeating that phrase over and over again.

Ginny smiled through her tears. Mac reached for his mother. "She's gonna pull through it," he murmured into her hair.

She held her hands on either side of his face. "Yes, and she loves you." Ginny's eyes brimmed with tears of happiness.

Mac pulled back. "Mom, she thought she was going to die. People say strange things at times like that."

"People who think they're dying say honest things, Mac. They feel they have nothing left to lose," she tried to convince her stubborn son.

"Perhaps," he murmured then released her to shake Brandon's hand.

Ginny wiped her tears with an impatient hand. "Stubborn boy. Why won't you believe?"

Hank answered before Mac could. "He wants it to be true so badly, he's afraid to hope for fear that he's wrong."

"That's foolish" Ginny grumbled.

"That's love," her husband corrected her.

Mac just nodded in agreement. Love.

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Twenty-four hours later, Dixie was ready to explode. If one more person came in to poke, prod, stick, or adjust her, she was going to scream. What idiot thought you could rest in a hospital? *Certainly not in this one.* She'd been rudely awakened from a beautiful dream about Mac by a large woman with bad breath, wanting to take blood. *Again.* After being stuck three times in the past six hours, Dixie had resigned herself to becoming a pin cushion.

Since this morning, one person after another had come through her door, except the one she wanted to see the most. *Where in the world is he? Doesn't he care that I was injured, could have been killed? What kind of a jerk are you anyway, Mac Coalson, to leave the woman who loves you to rot away on a lumpy excuse for a hospital bed?* Sniffing and whimpering, she wallowed in self-pity and just a little bit of pain, alternating between cursing the man she loved and praying he would show up soon.

She vaguely remembered telling the doctor of her love for Mac, but apparently, he hadn't passed on the message. *Maybe Mac wasn't interested anymore. Maybe he was running.*

Now there's a depressing thought. *Perhaps he's just too busy with the other woman. Maybe he doesn't care. Maybe when I'm feeling well enough I'm gonna hunt him down like a dog and give him a piece of my mind.*

She remembered that was how they had met in the first place and started crying all over again.

After another few minutes of whining, complete with a bout of good old-fashioned cursing, Dixie decided to be good and mad at him. He was a jerk, a no-good, two-timing jerk. He couldn't even be bothered to visit her while she lay at death's door. He didn't deserve someone as great as her.

It didn't matter. She loved him anyway. But that didn't mean she couldn't get well and truly ticked at his callous attitude.

By the time Mac arrived later that day, Dixie had worked herself up to quite a state of rage. When he walked in the door, whistling off key, she used her one good arm and threw her bedpan at him. He raised an elegant eyebrow at her display of temper and bent to retrieve it, sitting a vase filled with spring flowers on the counter.

"I suppose I should be grateful it was empty," he drawled.

Dixie took a good long look at him. She was so relieved to see him. He was standing there in a crisp white shirt and faded jeans, with cowboy boots completing the outfit. He looked clean and healthy and incredibly sexy.

Next to him, she felt dirty and horrible and ugly with scars.

*Where had he been? Did he have to look so happy to see her in a hospital?* She began to fume again.

Mac stared at the nondescript blue gown on her slight frame, wondering if it was the kind that opened in the back. *God how he loved this woman!*

Even when she was throwing bedpans at him.

No one but Dixie could make him think about making love to her dressed in a horrible hospital gown.

He had stayed with her since she had been brought up from recovery late last night. When the nurses had finally shooed him out of the room this morning, he had gone straight home to freshen up and catch a small nap. He wanted to be prepared for what he was going to say to her.

"I brought you some flowers." He smiled at her.

Dixie frowned. "Get out. Take your damn flowers and your whistling and just go." She pointed to the door.

*Apparently, the gunshot wound hadn't sweetened her temper.* Mac wanted to laugh at the look on her face. He figured she didn't know or couldn't remember what she'd told the doctor. "Uh, uh, uh, little girl. I can see you're feeling better, so now's a good time to talk. You got nowhere else to go." He rearranged her legs and sat down next to her on the narrow bed.

"Have you gone deaf? I don't want to see you." *Looking all gorgeous and wonderful. It hurts.*

"Liar."

She gasped in outrage. "I said I want you to leave."

Mac chuckled. He was so glad she was going to be fine, and so in love with her that he just wanted to grab her and run and never ever let go.

But first things first.

He had to know if what she had told the doctor was the truth. "Your brother suggested I tie you up and stuff a rag in your mouth to get you to listen to me, but since you're not going anywhere but here, this will do just fine." He patted the blankets near her hand.

"If you don't leave this instant, I'm going to scream." She nodded to him to show she meant business.

He laughed.

Dixie was furious. She was practically an invalid and he was teasing her mercilessly. She wanted to throttle him. She wanted him to hold her. She was definitely going crazy. Either that, or the drugs were making her delirious. She couldn't make up her mind about anything.

"Thanks for the warning, darlin'. I guess I'll take your brother's advice after all." He reached into his back pocket for a handkerchief.

"You wouldn't dare," she growled.

Suddenly Mac leaned closer, putting his arms on either side of her head as he pinned her with his gaze. "I'll dare anything to clear up this mess and have you back in my arms where you belong."

Dixie searched his face in shock, noticing for the first time the dark circles under his eyes and the love radiating from within their depths. *He meant it!* She burst into tears.

Mac gathered her in his arms, and let her cry. She needed an outlet for what she had been through.

Dixie continued to wail, wetting his shirt. When her weeping had subsided down to a few sniffles, she blew her nose and snuggled closer to Mac's warmth, settling her cheek against his chest. The comforting rhythm of his heartbeat did more to ease her pain than all the drugs in the world. Her heart soared. Mac wanted her. She had seen it in his eyes.

"Are you ready to listen?" Mac asked softly. At her nod, he told her about his drunken client and the compromising position Dixie had found them in. When he had finished, she felt foolish and told him so.

"Probably about as foolish as I felt when Hawkins grabbed your hand and I fired him for it," he said softly. "We've both been jumping to conclusions, honey, and that has to stop if we're going to have any sort of relationship."

Dixie felt a sudden chill. She didn't want just any sort of relationship, she wanted love. She wanted Mac forever. Had she again jumped to the conclusion that Mac loved her for what she had seen in his eyes?

"Hey, you still with me?" Mac waved his hand in front of her face.

"What... What? Oh, I'm sorry. What were you saying?" Dixie forced the words past the lump in her throat.

Mac looked at her in concern. "Maybe we should continue this conversation tomorrow. You look pretty pale. I wore you out." He kissed her cheek and got up to leave.

"How dare you!" Dixie roared. "First you tease me, then you tell me I belong in your arms, next you're talking about a general relationship, like,

like,” she stammered in fury, “like a friendship or something, and now I’m just pale and you kiss my cheek.”

She tried to sit up, slapping his hand away when he tried to help her. “Well Mr. Coalson, how the hell am I supposed to look? I’ve been shot at, stitched up, and examined by tons of strangers and now...” she sobbed, “now the man of my dreams is talking in riddles. I love you! And I want a marriage. DO YOU HEAR ME?”

“Everyone heard you, darling. You were shouting,” Mac said drolly.

“Oh, God! You’re making me crazy!” she howled. She reached for a tissue with her injured arm and cried out in pain. “Oh, just go away and leave me alone!”

Mac decided it was time to stop teasing her. She was getting too worked up. “Open your eyes and look at me, Dixie Harris,” he demanded. “You’re jumping to conclusions again. Now I’m only going to do this once, and I want it to be right.” He fluffed her pillows and slowly got down on one knee, one hand touching her injured arm; the other resting on her cheek.

“I love you, and I will spend the rest of my life loving you. I knew before you were injured that I was in love with you, but my stubborn pride wouldn’t let me tell you. When I thought that I might not get the chance to tell you how much I love you, I died a thousand times over, thinking of all the precious time we wasted. I don’t want to waste anymore.” He kissed her cheek. “I want you to be my wife. I know we haven’t known each other long, and you’re so very young. If you need more time, we can wait. But not too long, sweetheart. I need to know you’re mine forever, and I want it to happen soon.” He wiped away her tears and kissed her lightly. “Marry me.”

Dixie lowered her eyes, her fingers plucking at the folds of her blanket. Shyly, she peaked at him from behind her lashes. “I love you so much, Mac. When I thought you didn’t feel the same, I went a little nuts, I guess. I couldn’t stand the thought of someone else with you. I knew I was being foolish because we hadn’t made any sort of commitment to each other. I didn’t want to talk to you when you called because I was so afraid. If I didn’t hear you actually say you wanted someone else, that we were at an end, at least I had some hope of holding onto you. I know that doesn’t make much sense. My only excuse is that I couldn’t believe you could fall in love with me in such a short time, even though I had done just that with you.”

Mac covered her mouth with his lips making all the love and passion he felt for her erupt in his kiss. She returned his kiss with passionate ardor,



regardless of her injuries. After a few minutes of delicious love play, she broke away, smiling tremulously. "I would be honored to be your wife. I can't say my temper won't get the best of me at times, but I know I will always love you."

Mac reached into the front pocket of his jeans and withdrew a small jeweler's box. Opening it, he revealed an emerald and diamond ring so large that Dixie gasped. "This ring has been in my father's family for many years. It has been handed down to the eldest son as a symbol of love and happiness to give to the woman he loves." He slipped it on her finger. "With this ring, I pledge my love to you. Forever and always."

Dixie stared down at her hand, then raised her eyes to Mac. "And I will love you and cherish you. Forever and always," she murmured as joyful tears ran down her cheeks.

Mac gently kissed her tears away, then gathered her in his arms once again. "You know, you were wrong about one thing, little girl," he whispered in her ear. "We made a commitment to each other the first time we kissed. We just didn't recognize it for what it was." His lips captured hers once again.

And that's how the nurse found them when she came in to get Dixie's blood one more time.

## CHAPTER TEN

Ginny Coalson came into the hospital one week later and promptly told Dixie that she would recuperate at the Coalson farm, and Jamie would stay with Mac. The recently reunited couple wasn't too happy about the arrangements, but in view of the way the whole town had tried to get them together, they knew there would be plenty of prying eyes.

"The town's abuzz with the news of the shooting. Television crews have been traipsing back and forth, trying to find anyone who knew anything about it," Hank Coalson stated as he took the vacant rocking chair next to Mac and Dixie.

"The fact that Mac and Dixie are now engaged gives the entire tale a happy twist. The town gossips are busy rehashing and embellishing their turbulent courtship," Ginny added. She handed Hank a glass of lemonade.

Dixie was amazed at the amount of people who were waiting to wish her well when she arrived at the Coalson farm. She knew a few of the faces, but she assumed most were friends of the family since they had lived here for generations. She soon realized she was considered something of a local hero as person after person came up to commend her on her courage at the grade school.

When Mac led one particular family up to see her, Dixie's eyes filled with tears. Jason Cranston stood next to her, his small head bowed. She could feel his trembling from where he sat. Quickly gathering him in her arms, she reassured him that everything was fine, and that she was all right. He began sobbing and stuttering, and even though she couldn't make out half of what he was saying, she knew he just needed to let loose of his guilt and sorrow. When he calmed down, she quietly talked to his parents as she held him against her in a comforting embrace. She received their apologies and reassurances that guns were no longer within reach of their children.

Dottie stopped by to offer her congratulations and to thank Dixie for reconciling with her boss. "He's been a bear to be around these past weeks. Hopefully that will change now." She admired the beautiful engagement ring then glanced over the rim of her glasses at Mac. "The staff is ready to stage a mutiny."

Mac feigned outrage. "You'd be leading the pack, you old dragon. If you weren't practically a member of the family, I'd fire you on the spot for insubordination."

"Hah! You should thank your lucky stars I'm still around, you rotten kid. I'm the only secretary left that will still get coffee *and* put up with all your nonsense." Mac laughed outright and grabbed Dottie for great big

bear hug. She chuckled and hugged him back as Dixie smiled at the pair. "You get this child back to bed, Mac. She's looking a little bit pale to me."

"Well now, Dottie, that's a fine idea," Mac hauled Dixie up in his arms and grinned at her.

"You behave yourself, young man, or you'll answer to me." Dottie waved her finger at him then shooed them out of the living room and into the hall.

The doctor had ordered Dixie to rest quietly for at least one week and Mac insisted on following the doctor's orders to the letter. After a few days, Dixie's inherent enthusiasm and energy overcame her, and she was desperate for something to do to keep from climbing the walls.

Ginny came to the rescue. "As you know, sweetie, I'm putting together a cookbook of the family's favorite recipes. I could certainly use your help to catalog and prepare them for publishing. I'm going to display them in the general store with the proceeds going to help rebuild the town." Dixie loved the idea and threw herself into the task whole heartedly.

Dixie and Ginny began peering through recipe files. After a few hours, Ginny decided they needed a break, but Dixie wanted to finish her box. Near the bottom, she came across one for peanut butter squares. "This says 'Sam's favorite' on it. I'm sure you want to include it."

Ginny reached for the yellowed file card. "Yes. He could make this himself. He was so proud." She smiled wistfully. "He always was so independent. Even as a child."

"Is he going to be able to make it for the wedding?" Dixie inquired.

"Well, as to that," Ginny sighed. "We don't know. He's rather hard to pin down. All we know is he works for the Navy. Or, at least, we think he still works for the Navy. We relay any messages and letters to a special address. He calls us back eventually."

"Wow! That sounds mysterious."

"Yes." A shadow passed across Ginny's face. "I know he takes dangerous risks. He never talks about it in his letters. Sometimes I think he does what he does to try and erase the past." She sighed. "The trouble is, unless he comes home and confronts his past once and for all, he's never going to be able to get some peace."

"Angel Devereaux's the past you're talking about, isn't she?" Dixie asked. She had heard some gossip about the town "bad boy" and the richest girl in the area.

"Yes. As I said, Sam has always been a bit independent. He's highly intelligent but his attitude was something some folks couldn't understand. From a very early age, he lived by his own set of rules-not that he didn't

mind us, but, well, sometimes he took matters into his own hands, and that invariably led him into trouble.”

“So what happened with Angel?”

Ginny stared off into the distance. “He stood up to Angel’s father. You have to understand, Trevor was a horrible man in every way. The fact that a mere boy, with no money and an in-your-face attitude had dared to confront him, sent him over the edge, I guess. He set out to destroy Sam’s reputation all because he happened to want Angel. He succeeded.”

Ginny wiped away a tear. “Trevor planted drugs on Sam, and he nearly went to jail. It was all done to make him an example in case anyone else from around here decided to try and take Trevor’s daughter. He had high hopes for better things for Angel than being some farmer’s wife. Sam could have gone to jail, but he didn’t care. He was terrified of what would happen to Angel at her father’s hands.”

She shook her head sadly. “But at the time, we thought that his faith in her was sadly misplaced. You see, she sided with her father during the preliminary hearing.” Ginny wept into a tissue. “I’ll never forget the look on Sam’s face when she came out of the courthouse holding her father’s hand. She wouldn’t even look at him.”

Dixie was sorry she brought up the incident. “I’ve met Angel. She seemed very nice. Kind of quiet. Did she ever try to explain her actions?”

Ginny composed herself. “Yes. To us. Her father died the night Sam left again for the Navy. She came by to see him to explain what he saw, but he had already gone. She looked like she was in shock that he had left her behind. I don’t really know what she expected, but I’m sure she thought he was so enamored of her that he wouldn’t leave town without her.”

“So she told you what happened?”

Ginny nodded. “It’s a long, sad story, and I think she left out a lot of it. All I know is that it’s not up to us to forgive her for what she did. She had her reasons, but it’s up to Sam. He won’t even look at her.”

Ginny got up from the kitchen table wiping away tears. “How about some tea?”

Dixie nodded absently. It appeared to her that Sam Coalson wasn’t the only one running from the past. Dixie thought Angel Devereaux was haunted by the events of that fateful time herself. Dixie and Mac had learned the hard way that things were not always as they seemed. She hoped Sam would come home for the wedding because Angel was definitely on the guest list.

Plans for the wedding were moving along at a brisk pace. Mac didn't want to wait, but Dixie refused to budge on the issue of a big wedding, so they compromised and decided on the third Saturday in June. That gave the women about a month, and with any luck, Sam would be able to make it home.

While Dixie perused bridal magazines and internet sites for ideas, Mac was busy supervising not only his construction business, but the renovation of the local Catholic Church. Because the church was located on a slightly higher level of ground, the flood hadn't caused any permanent structural damage to the hundred year old building. Unfortunately, the interior of the tiny church had to be completely renovated while services were held in the grade school gymnasium. Mac made this his first priority. He wanted to be married in the family church. He wanted it to be perfect.

Mac couldn't believe Dixie hadn't batted an eye when he told her he wanted to be married in the old church even though the inside was still completely gutted. It hadn't mattered one iota to her what the church looked like. She said that what went on inside was what mattered the most. Mac fell in love with her all over again.

Early one June evening, Mac and Dixie were lying on the family room sofa enjoying a rare moment of peace. Dixie was resting between Mac's legs, her head pillowed on his chest discussing the honeymoon plans. She glanced up and realized he had fallen asleep. Nudging him awake with her elbow she demanded, "Hey, am I boring you here with all this talk about honeymoons and lingerie? This does not bode well for our future sex life if you are going to fall asleep at the mention of my unmentionables."

Mac yawned. "I'm sorry sweetheart. I've been trying to finish the church in time for the wedding."

"When do you find time to do that? The city council didn't pull out of the marina deal, did they?"

"No. Everything is going according to schedule with the company. With any luck, the supplies for the marina job should be here by late August." He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her up for a kiss. "I've been leaving here and working at the church at night. I want everything to be perfect for the ceremony and since I set the deadline, I just can't leave it to my workmen during the day."

"Everything is perfect. I have you. What more could I want?" She snuggled closer, tilting her face for another kiss.

Mac was more than happy to oblige and passion consumed them. Soon she was lying limp in his arms. Mac cursed silently at the inconvenience

of living apart. At this rate, he was going to burst into flames before the month was up.

At a discreet cough, they sprang apart, and Dixie tried to restore some order to her appearance. Mac turned around to growl at the interruption, but his mouth fell open in shock. "Sam? Is it really you? Well, I'll be damned."

Mac chuckled as he sprang off the coach to grab his brother's outstretched hand. He hadn't been sure that the message to Sam would reach him in time. With a laugh, he pulled him close and hugged him, pounding him on the back.

Dixie sat back and watched the reunion. Sam's muscular frame engulfed Mac's slimmer physique, although Mac was the taller of the two. Sam's dark blonde hair and brown eyes contrasted with Mac's twinkling silver eyes. Sam, unlike Mac, looked totally ruthless and unapproachable.

And he was staring straight at her.

Dixie summoned her courage and returned the stare from the dangerous man. She didn't envy Angel having Sam Coalson for an enemy.

*Oh well, best to take the bull by the horns.* She plastered a smile on her face and held out her hand. "Hi, I'm Dixie. Pleased to meet you."

Sam crossed the room and took the proffered hand as he looked her over.

He gifted Dixie with a rare smile and pulled her in for a hug, too. "I'm Sam. Welcome to the family."

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Dixie thought the wedding went off without a hitch. Tanner, Mac's youngest brother, made it home from college in time to change into a suit and rush to the chapel. Jamie gave her away and since Mac couldn't decide which brother to ask to be as best man, he asked his father. Jason Cranston was the ring bearer and Ginny was her matron of honor.

Dixie felt like a princess in Ginny's wedding dress. The candlelight satin with the lace overlay had a low décolletage trimmed with seed pearls, a fitted bodice complemented with hundreds of tiny beads and sequins. The ivory lace continued down to the formal train. When Ginny had shyly offered the heirloom to Dixie, she knew that she was truly going to be part of this wonderful family. The two women hugged and cried while Ginny reminisced about her wedding day so many years ago.

Mac stood solemnly before the altar in a black tuxedo. Dixie's heart skipped when she saw him. His gray eyes were shining with love and admiration as he reached out to take her from Jamie's arm. "I love you Dixie Harris, soon to be Coalson," he whispered.

“And I love you Mackenzie Coalson, forever and always.”

“Forever and always,” he repeated as he squeezed her hands and they turned as one to recite their vows before God and family. Dixie knew the entire congregation that gathered in the small chapel felt the love that radiated from them. It was in their faces, recited by firm voices as they took the traditional vows to become man and wife. It was also reflected in the tears of the Coalson family that stood around the altar celebrating the sacred sacrament as silent witnesses to the beauty before them.

Dixie and Mac agreed it was a beautiful wedding, but the reception following the ceremony was what would be talked about for years to come. They had invited the entire town and everyone came. They held it at the grounds of the state park a few miles down the road. Tables were set up along the walkways and every family brought a dish to sample. One giant picnic prevailed, with music and laughter and dancing throughout the night. Mac knew it had been quite a while since the people of the small community had something wonderful to celebrate, and they embraced it with a vengeance.

Although the party continued into the wee hours, Mac and Dixie excused themselves from the festivities early in the evening. Before they embarked on the much-anticipated honeymoon, Dixie threw her beautiful bouquet of pastel roses directly at Angel Devereaux, who stood to the side of the jostling crowd of single women vying for the blooms. The surprised woman clutched the bundle then hid her face in the fragrant roses. Dixie hoped Angel and Sam could find a way to reconcile their differences.

A grinning Mac walked over to Sam, not even giving the other single men a chance. With a formal bow, he placed the garter on Sam’s wrist, then grabbing Dixie’s hand, the happy couple left in a flurry of white rice. Dixie saw Sam search for Angel’s face amidst the crowd of well-wishers and, when he captured her gaze, he lifted his champagne glass in a silent toast. Dixie prayed they would find the happiness she and Mac shared.

Dixie was astonished when Mac’s parents gifted them with the honeymoon suite at the park lodge. They walked the short distance to the cabin reserved for them. The interior was decorated in soothing blues, and the wall facing the river was made entirely of glass. It reminded Dixie of Mac’s house. Now it was her house, too. The moonlight reflecting off the Mississippi River cast a pale glow over the entire room as Dixie thought about the past few hours and the passionate journey she was about to take in Mac’s loving arms.

Dixie stared down at the ribbon of water that snaked past her gaze as it disappeared into the night. So calm and peaceful, yet the current was

flowing swiftly underneath the placid water, rushing quietly to a preordained destination. If it was possible for the river to have feelings, Dixie knew these emotions were in complete accord with hers. She stood here, with the man she had vowed to love, honor and cherish for the rest of her life, just a few feet behind her. And although she loved him with all her heart and felt that theirs was a true love match that comes so rarely to two people, she couldn't stop the inner trembling. The churning tide of emotions was bubbling just below the surface of her peaceful countenance. She was nervous.

As if sensing her inner turmoil, Mac gave Dixie some time to herself as he perused the rest of the cabin. He noted the fruit basket on the credenza and a bucket of champagne thoughtfully provided by the lodge staff. He walked through the small living room and into the bedroom. The large bed had been turned down invitingly and a single pale rose lay across the plump pillows. He picked up the flower and inhaled the sweet fragrance, touching the tender petals, noting that their softness could not compare with Dixie's skin, nor equal to the bloom in her cheeks when she blushed. His heart began to race as he speculated on the many ways of loving her that would put her to blushing so sweetly.

With that thought in mind, he turned back into the other room. Dixie was still at the window, her expression serene, her slender shoulders relaxed. Her wedding ring sparkled in the moonlight as she unconsciously shredded tissue between her hands. His loving bride was a nervous wreck.

Mac sighed and resigned himself to helping her overcome her fears. "Dixie," he whispered softly, "this has been a very busy day for both of us. Just let me hold you. We have the rest of our lives to love each other." *If I survive the night.*

Dixie was silent for a moment as the importance of Mac's words flowed over her. She had no doubt that Mac wanted her, but the fact that he was once again willing to put his desires aside to wait until she was comfortable, completely drained the last of her silly fears away. This was her husband. The man she had pledged her love to. It was about time she showed him some of that love. The mere sound of her name on his lips sent shivers coursing through her. So what on earth was she waiting for?

With a brilliant smile, she turned around and immediately noticed the dejected droop of Mac's shoulders as he started for the bathroom. She almost laughed at his appearance.

"Mac, darlin'," she whispered, then giggled as Mac turned around so fast he knocked over a lamp. "Aren't you even going to kiss me?"



Mac didn't have to be asked twice. He flew across the room and gathered her in his strong arms, spinning her around as she laughed with exuberant joy and anticipation. He kissed her tenderly, then with increasing passion as she grasped his shoulders and pulled him closer.

Mac kissed her eyelids, her forehead, and her cheek. He tried to clamp down on his growing desire, but he knew he was quickly losing control. Only Dixie could do this to him. Make him hard so quickly with need for her. He had to feel her skin against his or he would go insane. Impatiently, he reached behind her to undo the buttons of her gown, then groaned in frustration when he realized just how many of them he had to unfasten

"Patience is a virtue, Mr. Coalson." Dixie giggled.

"For goodness sake, don't lecture me now, woman. I'm about to die with wanting you." So saying, he ripped the rest of the gown apart, sending the buttons flying in every direction.

Dixie gasped. "Your mother's wedding dress! What am I going to tell her?"

Mac pulled her against him and kissed her hungrily. When she was totally breathless and liquid in his arms, Mac touched his forehead to her. "I'm sure she'll understand. Now would you please stop mentioning my mother?"

Dixie laughed and grabbed the front of his shirt, ripping it open, then reached up to slowly slide the material over his shoulders. He was so tall she had to stand on tiptoe's, even in her high-heeled shoes.

Mac's warm hands caressed her spine, sending tiny shivers of pleasure throughout her body. With a whisper, the wedding gown fell in a pool at her feet, and she felt his gaze devouring her. "I see you made a trip to Merrywidows," he growled as he looked at the white corset and garter set she wore.

Made entirely of two separate strips of white lace with tiny white satin bows tying the material together down the center of her body, it was incredibly sexy, only hinting at the treasure that would be revealed with just a pull of the bows. Tiny bows on the garter belt held sheer stockings in place on her thighs. "I'm going to make you moan. Then I'm going to make you come," he rasped.

Dixie blushed at the fire that sprang in his eyes, and she lowered her gaze to Mac's magnificent body. His large shoulders gave way to muscular arms sprinkled lightly with dark hair. His wide chest was a work of art. Dixie's eyes traveled lower then widened at the evidence of his desire showing through his trousers.

“Yes, you can see what you do to me, my love.” He grasped her hand and pressed it against his hardness.

She lifted her eyes once again and saw the passion smoldering just beneath the surface of Mac’s steely gaze. The silver deepened in his eyes and began to glow within his pupils as her hand caressed him through the thin material of his pants.

Mac’s hands glided along her arm, sending a shiver down her spine. He reached the first bow on the top of her corset, near the swell of her breasts. He adeptly freed the material. All the while, he focused on Dixie’s face. “Keep your hand right there. Touch me”. His knuckles traced the sweet curve of her breast as he slowly pulled the second tiny ribbon and that bow too, gave way under his gentle assault. The shadowed valley between her breasts retreated to expose even more creamy abundance, which began to rise and fall rapidly with shivers of desire. He felt her tremble as his hands reached for the next ribbon, tugging it open and pulling the material aside to reveal her breasts, her nipples growing tighter, hard in anticipation of his touch. He growled and touched one peak with his finger, and she sucked in her breath.

He smiled and repeated the tender caress with the other breast, then leaned down to take each tender bud in his mouth, as he untied the third ribbon. His mouth moved to lavish her breasts, nipping and tugging on her sensitive nipples. He then kissed the underside of her breasts and trailed kisses along her rib cage and down her stomach, delving into her navel with his tongue as he slid the material down and away from her quivering body. Dark, erotic thoughts filled Dixie’s head. She moaned and grabbed his hair none too gently as he kissed her again. *A warm breath, a kiss, a lick; sweet heaven, she couldn’t stand it.*

Dixie was mindless to everything but his caresses and the exquisite sensations pulsing through her body, pooling at the essence of her womanhood. She could feel the ecstasy building and building. She trembled with desire against the onslaught of his lips on her skin, his tongue was liquid fire, and then his breath, whispered against her fevered skin. She was consumed with her need to give him the same exquisite pleasure he was releasing on her. “I want to touch you, please you, as you’re pleasing me.” Tentatively, she reached out and lightly skimmed her hand over his chest all the while rubbing against his hardness.

Mac groaned. “Oh baby, you don’t know what you’re doing to me. I love it, but you have to stop this sweet torture or I’m going to explode.” He lifted her hand off his crotch and brought it to his lips sucking gently on her fingers.

Mac fell to his knees, kissing her body reverently. Dixie shuddered. Her body was no longer her own, only his to command. She shook with desire, as Mac used his tongue to send flames licking along her stomach, then lower.

Mac turned his scorching eyes on her, holding her gaze as he plucked the last ribbon open and the material fell at her feet. He smiled slightly then murmured, "Beautiful."

Mac stood up and held her at arm's length continuing to hold her gaze as his fingers skimmed over her naked mound. His hand slipped between her legs, causing her to moan as he caressed her tender folds. Dixie began to shudder. She wanted his touch, but she wanted more; she needed more. As if sensing her needs, Mac got down on his knees once more, bending low and touching her intimately with his tongue. Dixie cried out at the shock of the warm kiss, which stirred a tempest in her belly. Throwing her head back and shuddering, she uttered a soft cry of ecstasy.

"That's it, sweetheart. Let go. God, you're so sweet," he growled as he opened her further, releasing the tender bud, teasing it with his tongue. Dixie pulled his hair.

"Please." Dixie wasn't sure she wanted him to stop, but he was making her crazy. She needed more.

Mac wasn't finished yet. He wanted her completely wrapped in desire. He parted her thighs a bit more, wedging his shoulders between her and grasped the tiny ribbon holding her stockings and lace garter. He gave it a gentle tug, rubbing his fingers against her inner thigh and causing her to buck against him, silently pleading for more of his tender kisses. He smiled against her legs then turned her around, slowly planting light caresses along the hem of her stockings and her bottom as he unfastened the ribbons at the back of her thigh. All the while, his naughty tongue was rubbing against her most sensitive spots.

His fingers softly rolled the sheer material down her leg, stroking her thighs and calves, lifting her foot and tickling her toes as he slipped off her shoes. He tenderly repeated the procedure with her other leg, never breaking the rhythm with his tongue. When he was finished, he parted her folds, dipping one finger into her tight, wet sheath, stroking in and out of her tight channel in a slow, frustrating rhythm.

Mac gently placed a chaste kiss on the top of her mound as he tested her sweetness with his fingers. She was so wet and ready, but he couldn't help bringing the sensitive bud onto his lips once more and sucking gently.

“Mac please,” Dixie begged. “I want...” She tried to rub against him. Mac smiled as he continued to torture her with his lips and tongue. “Yes, darling, tell me, tell me exactly what you want.”

“You,” she gasped. “I want you.”

Satisfied with her response, and the fact that he couldn’t take anymore or he was going to explode, Mac tenderly lifted her in his strong arms and carried her to the big brass bed where he gently laid her down among the pillows. He quickly discarded the rest of his clothes, heedless of where they landed. His need for her was so intense, he fell on top of her, kissing her greedily, crushing her with his strength. The feel of her soft body against him was incredible. After her initial gasp of surprise, she welcomed him completely, opening her legs to nestle him within the apex of her thighs.

“Oh Mac, you make me burn.” She wiggled against him, against his hardness, the length and breadth of him. Her body still quivered beneath him. “Do I make you burn too?”

Before he could answer, she entwined her fingers in his hair and lifting her hips, began to rub herself along his shaft. She placed hot, wet kisses up and down his chest and over his shoulders, everywhere her lips could reach. Her hands grew bolder as she brushed against him again. Mac groaned and grabbed her hands, placing them high above her head. “Enough. I can’t stand it any longer, babe. You’re making me crazy. I wanted to be gentle, but I need you now.”

Words were beyond Mac. Dixie was touching him so intimately, spreading her legs wider to receive him. She moved her hips and arched against him. His fingers drifted down to her most sensitive spot, beginning to work their magic, rubbing against her as he slowly entered her moist recesses. Her channel gripped his fingers immediately.

“Oh God, baby! You are so tight.”

Dixie’s womanly scent surrounded Mac. Bracing his arms on either side of her, he slowly withdrew his fingers and prepared to enter her, trying to give her as little pain as possible but she was just so tight. *So wonderfully tight and moist.* He poised the tip of his erection at her entrance, gently pushing against her, trying not to hurt her too badly. He gasped at the incredible feelings as he penetrated her opening, and she instinctively raised her legs up to more fully embed him within her.

“Look at me, Dixie,” Mac commanded. He waited until her eyes fluttered open. “You are my other half. You make me whole.” He reached for her mouth, smothering her startled cry of pain as he lunged forward, breaking her barrier and sheathing himself fully within her softness.

“Oh God, it hurts! Stop!” Dixie slapped at his arms. “You’re too big! Now what are we going to do?”

Mac felt her tears and cursed himself for moving too fast, even though he knew she would have to experience a virgin’s pain. Determined to ease her discomfort, he shifted slightly and reached down to touch her, but Dixie grabbed his hand, fear showing in his her beautiful eyes.

“Shh,” he murmured. “It will be fine. Trust me.”

“I love you, Mac. I trust you.”

She relaxed her grip, and Mac’s fingers began to rub seductively against her tiny nub. “You’re so responsive, baby. I want to see you come. I want all of your pleasure.” He knew the moment desire shot through her system. His fingers were coated with her cream. She moaned and undulated her hips to receive him fully.

Mac smiled in triumph at the look of deepening passion on Dixie’s face, and began to move, slowly at first, determined not to hurt her again, even though the control he placed on his body was killing him. After a few strokes, Dixie’s eager passion took him over the edge. She arched against him, opening herself in the ancient rhythm of love. He felt her whole body tighten with anticipation. She grasped his shoulders, her nails digging into his back, as she tried to reach the stars.

Mac reached down and touched her creamy clit. Dixie came apart. He felt her first tremors of release, lifted her hips and embedded himself more deeply into her, wrapping her legs around him and surging into her was swift powerful strokes. Mac felt her nails digging into his back, trusting him to keep her safe as she climaxed.

She screamed his name.

Mac watched in supreme satisfaction as she reached her fulfillment. He had never seen anything so beautiful as her unabashed desire for him. He held her even as the tiny convulsions of her body threatened to push him over the brink. As she slowly began to come down from her sexual high, he began to move in her more forcefully, soon pumping into her furiously, heedless now of anything but the intense release within his grasp, his passion for her once again reigniting hers and sending her spiraling up to heaven.

Only this time she wasn’t alone. Mac was there beside her, pouring his love into her with a shout of release. Together they drifted back to reality, holding onto each other, wrapped in a cloak of happiness.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dixie awoke in the early morning to Mac making slow sweet love to her. When they both were sated, they lay entwined, satisfied for the moment to hold each other and bask in the afterglow of love. Their growling stomachs finally forced them to abandon the bed in search of sustenance. Mac mentioned the gift basket. They feasted on fruit and cheese washed down with champagne and orange juice. Mac sucked on Dixie's sticky fingers and she reciprocated in kind, licking the juice off his chin then returning to taste his lips. The food was quickly forgotten as they once again returned to passion's promise.

It was late afternoon when they emerged from the room for a walk in the sunshine. From their height at the top of the hill, they could see people cleaning up the remains of the party at the park. Assuring the lodge staff that their stay was exceptional, Mac and Dixie headed back down the trail to the lawn to help with cleanup. Confident their assistance wasn't needed, Mac and Dixie decided to drive to his parent's house to open presents and visit with family.

"Since the lease on the house in Elsie is still active, would you mind if I got a roommate to share expenses?" Jamie asked Dixie after the gifts had been opened and exclaimed over. They were sharing dinner in the family's old-fashioned kitchen on the farm.

"I'd have to meet any prospective roommates, but I think you can handle it until you start school this fall. You can decide then to stay here or live on campus." Dixie was secretly relieved Jamie was looking for a roommate. She didn't like to think of him alone with that vandal still on the loose.

"Well, you've met the roommate I have in mind. Sam and I discussed the possibility of sharing expenses last night at the reception."

Everyone's eyes turned to stare at Sam in disbelief. "I thought you planned to make the navy your career, son?" Hank Coalson asked quietly.

"I've decided I've been away from home too long. Seeing all of you again made me realize that it's time I started thinking about a family. I've traveled all over the world, but this is where I want to raise my family someday. Besides," Sam added with a grin at Mac, "something tells me that the owner of Coalson Construction is gonna be taking more time off, and somebody needs to fill in the gap, that is, if the offer still stands?"

"Well, hell yes." Mac laughed and slapped his hand on the table. "Maybe a fresh approach is just what we need to flush out this vandal."

"This wouldn't have anything to do with you following Angel to her car last night, would it?" Ginny asked slyly.

Sam gave his mother a stern look and turned to Jamie. "Let me know when you want to get your stuff from Mac's. I'm ready to go whenever you are."

"Stubborn." Ginny mumbled under breath.

That evening, Mac and Dixie help Sam move his clothing to the house in Elsay. Most of his personal belongings were being shipped from the naval base so there wasn't much stuff to move. The group then grabbed the boxes Dixie had packed earlier and headed for Mac's house. Refusing Dixie's offer of coffee, Sam and Jamie left with a wave.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Coalson, but I believe we have committed a serious marital faux pas," Mac said in mock seriousness. "Please follow me." He grabbed her hand and headed for the door.

Once outside, he lifted her effortlessly in his arms and carried her over the threshold. Kissing her tenderly, he set her down on her feet, turning her around, his chest to her back. "Welcome home, Mrs. Coalson."

Dixie took the time to scan the interior of the beautiful home as if seeing it for the first time, although she had been in and out of it for the past few weeks. Mac's home was a definite reflection of his masculine taste. The foyer opened into a spacious living room done in navy and tan. An oak staircase in one corner led to the bedrooms above, while a stone fireplace flanked the opposite wall. Several French doors led out to a deck which offered a view of the river below the bluffs. The dining area and kitchen were to the left of the enormous room.

"I love this house, and I love you, Mac Coalson," she stated, lifting her face up for his kiss. After a moment, she slipped out of his arms to put her things away.

Mac breathed a small sigh of relief. "You are finally here. Now this house finally feels like a home. And you, my dear, are finally all mine." With a lecherous laugh, he ran after his new wife, chasing her around the house. When she allowed him to catch her, they made love on the beautiful braided rug in front of the fireplace. Dixie melted in his arms when Mac picked her up and headed toward the stairs to the master bedroom. Whispering all the erotic things he would teach her, Dixie proved to be an excellent student. Mac's last thoughts before drifting to sleep were that they were together at last and nothing would separate them again.

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They had their first argument the next day. Mac wanted to take a few days off, but Dixie insisted he spend some time at the company. "The

company needs your expertise now, and I want to settle into my new home.” She kissed him. “Besides, it gives me time to plan new and inventive ways to seduce you every night.”

“Baby, it doesn’t take much. We hardly made it past the foyer last night.”

He gave in because she was so persuasive with her kisses.

As the days of summer grew warmer, the daring escapades of the vandal increased, and Mac grew anxious about worker safety. “The sonofabitch has advanced from spray-painting walls to slicing electrical wiring out of breaker boxes and breaking expensive windows.” Brandon fumed at their weekly meeting.

“One of the backhoes had been tampered with, and two workers were injured when the scaffolding they were standing on mysteriously collapsed. When I checked, I located several loosened bolts on the structure.” Nick scowled.

“Even the simplest of jobs will take twice as long if workers became apprehensive about sabotage.” Mac slapped a sheaf of papers on the table. “The insurance company is getting more than a little upset with the mounting claims, threatening the company with cancellation of the policies. Dottie’s up to her ears in irate phone calls from homeowners wondering why their homes aren’t near completion.”

“Rumors are flying about why the company is the only one being targeted,” Lucky commented with a worried frown.

Mac became even more determined to catch the vandal. This was more than an inconvenience; it was getting damn dangerous to work at Coalson Construction Company. If this continued, workers would leave for safer jobs, contracts wouldn’t be filled. The company’s reputation would be in ruins.

The turmoil was not only costing the company financially, it was taking its toll on the men working there as well. Mac noticed that tensions were running high, and tempers flared as the strain of maintaining the long hours to meet the deadlines was felt. Many nights he and his brothers continued to work after their employees went home, determined to beat the clock-and the vandal-to finish a particular job.

Dixie and Ginny brought supper to the men and did what they could to help. Mac tried to talk them into leaving, his own apprehensions about the accidents making him fearful of their safety.

“I appreciate this, ladies.” He kissed his wife on the cheek. “But I prefer you stay home where it’s safe. We could get food ourselves.”



“Is this the man’s job versus a woman’s job argument again?” Dixie settled her hands on her hips. “Sorry, Mr. Macho, but I don’t know how to embroider and the laundry’s all done. You can’t expect me to wait quietly at home while you’re working like a slave.”

He looked to his mother for help but he should’ve known better. Hell, she’d probably driven them over here. Ginny gave him that “listen to your mother” look. “We’re family. You need help, we’re here. Go assist your father with that drywall.” She grabbed a role of wiring and went to find Sam.

Mac tried to reason with Dixie, but one look at the stubborn set of her chin, and he knew he was talking to a brick wall. With a resigned sigh, he showed her how to load the air powered nail gun.

Luck and good weather was on their side, and they finished the new homes just under the deadline with no other mishaps. Mac set up a professional security night watch until the owners could move in. This was a costly maneuver, but until this mess was cleared up and the man responsible behind bars, he thought it was the only way the company could protect its investment and alleviate the fears of the prospective buyers.

His father told him some concerned citizens had set up a village crime watch to report anything of a suspicious nature in or around the area. “Ben Yates even volunteered to help on his time off. The mayor and the village council are livid over the fact that no one can apprehend this person. Nothing like this had ever happened here. Some residents are afraid the condemned buildings from the flood could be a haven for criminals.”

Mac smiled. “You mean, Miss Juanita and Miss Maisy are armed and dangerous?”

Hank laughed. “Don’t underestimate those two. They aim low.”

Mac covered the front of his pants with his hands in mock horror. “Consider me warned!”

Hank shook his head. “I hope whoever is doing this falls prey to the old gals. I doubt there would be anything left of him to go to trial.”

Mac slapped his father on the back. “You and me both, Dad.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Later that evening, Mac and Dixie were relaxing in their home. One of Dixie's favorite pastimes was a luxurious bubble bath. She was immersed to her neck in the large bathtub. Mac was kneeling beside her clad only in his jeans, idly drawing circles on the patches of skin visible through the foam. He delighted in her giggles.

"Would you like to join me, cowboy?" Dixie pouted her lips and gave him her best May West impression.

"Well ma'am, I sure would but I wouldn't want to deprive you of your pleasure," Mac drawled in a rusty cowboy twang.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure you don't," she purred as her fingers traced circles on his chest. Mac sucked in his breath. He was still amazed at his reaction to her mere touch. They had been married for over two months. They made love several times a day, but she could render him hard and heavy with just a glance. The only thing that saved his sanity was the fact that he could make her feel the same way. He remembered how his shower this morning had turned into wild love play when she had offered to wash his back. He eyed the graceful curve of her spine as she reached to turn off the tap. Perhaps he should return the favor.

He laughed wickedly at the thoughts running through his head. He whispered all the sinfully delicious things he was going to do to her as he stood up to unfasten his jeans. To his delight, Dixie blushed, then tried to brazen it out. Grinning seductively, she sank back in the tub ready to enjoy the view as he stripped out of his jeans. Mac loved the way his wife was looking him, especially when she puckered those sexy lips and blew him a kiss.

"Dance for me, cowboy," she murmured as his aroused state became apparent through his briefs.

"How about the horizontal bop?" he growled as he slid the jeans to the floor.

"You are so wicked," she squealed and blew bubbles at him.

"I know. That's why you love me." He started to step out of his clothing. The phone in the bedroom jangled at the same moment. Frustration and indecision fought for attention in his mind. No one called this late unless it was important. But then again what could be more important to a man than making love to his beautiful new wife?

"Go answer, darlin', but y'all better hurry," Dixie drawled as she stretched languidly in the tub, arching her body so the bubbles trickled away to reveal her nudity. "My bubbles are disappearing."

Mac turned to make a run from the bathroom, completely forgetting his pants down around his ankles. He promptly fell flat on his face. Dixie laughed outright as the phone continued to ring imperiously. Mac hauled himself off the floor, grabbed his pants, and shouted as he headed for the bedroom, "You're a coldhearted woman, Dixie Coalson!" She laughed louder.

"I'm coming!" He shouted at the trilling phone as he made his way into their bedroom. He could hear Dixie's peal of renewed laughter at the double entendre. Mac picked up the receiver. "This had better be good," he growled into the mouthpiece.

"Mac?" Sam's voice was barely heard on the line. "Listen there's a fire at the company offices. I'm here now. I called the fire department. I think Chance and Jamie are trapped inside...Going to try to get into the building. Hasn't spread to the lobby yet. Get here quick."

"Sam, Sam! Don't you dare! You hear me?" Mac roared as the line went dead. Terror unfurled like snakes in his gut as Sam's words registered.

Dixie came running into the room, belting her robe. When she saw his face, she grabbed clothes and they were headed for the door within seconds. Mac explained everything on the way to the offices.

"Why would Sam think Chance and Jamie are in the building?"

"I don't know. I don't even know why Sam was at the office this late in the first place." Mac drove last few miles in grim silence. Mac knew this had something to do with the vandals. He blamed himself for not taking more security precautions to include the main office in the nightly watch.

*Could it be possible that the vandal had lured the men there with the thought of killing them?* Mac's blood ran cold at the thought. Panic began to take hold as the burning question remained. What had he done to incur the wrath of someone powerful enough to destroy his company piece by piece and seek revenge by hurting his family?

Dixie was immersed in her own despair. Jamie was thought to be in the fire. It was now common knowledge that Jamie and his friends could identify the person responsible for the crimes. *Had the saboteur decided to get rid of the main eyewitness in order to scare the rest of the young men into silence? Or was he determined to eliminate all the witnesses and Jamie was his first victim?* She began to pray in earnest as silent tears fell down her cheeks.

They arrived at the offices a few minutes later. It was a scene straight out of a disaster movie. Fire trucks and ambulances from all over the county were there. Firefighters and paramedics raced back and forth

across the parking lot, shouting instructions. The old barn that had been the offices of Coalson Construction Company was now a blazing inferno.

Dixie gasped in shock, cringing as firefighters raced into the flames. Mac knew she had to be thinking no one could survive in there for long. She raised fearful eyes to Mac. He held her tightly as he stared at the building that housed his hopes and dreams for so long. Smoke was billowing out of several broken windows. Part of the south wall was completely ablaze. Flames flickered along the roofline. It would only be a matter of time before the entire structure collapsed. There was still no sign of Sam or the others.

Mac couldn't control the helpless rage. With a snarl, he started toward the building, shaking off Dixie's hands. He didn't hear her pleas or feel the oppressive heat the clawed at him when he stepped nearer. His only thought was how he had failed to protect his family. The increased pressure he exerted to find this maniac had succeeded in putting his loved ones in jeopardy. He had failed in his responsibility, and they were being forced to pay the price.

Mac was grabbed from behind and spun around. Ben Yates, the county sheriff, had a hand on his shirt. "You can't go in there, son. Let the firefighters do their job."

Mac shook off Ben's hands. Pointing to the blaze, he roared above the sound of the inferno. "My brothers may be in there!"

Spitting tobacco, Ben stated sharply, "Explain."

Mac related exactly what Sam had told him on the phone. Ben swore profusely, hurrying to alert the fire chief about the possibility of two more people in the building besides Sam. Dixie ran over to Mac, grabbing him around the waist and hugging him tightly.

As news reached the professionals, efforts were redoubled, but it soon became apparent to Mac that the blaze would not be contained. Ben approached them with an update. "Apparently, the fire started at the door. Some rags and flammable cans were found as soon as they went in. All the windows had been open so the breeze would fan the flames. Everything points to a professional arsonist."

A cheer went up as firefighters appeared in the doorway of what was once the lobby. Each rescuer was supporting a man. Although soot blackened most of their clothing, the blonde hair on each man's head identified them as Sam and Jamie. The paramedics rushed over to administer to the two men, while the brave rescuers returned into the flaming building in search of Chance. Overcome with relief, Dixie ran

over to her brother and Sam, assuming that Mac would be close on her heels.

Dixie hugged the injured men and listened as the paramedics determined the extent of their injuries. Both Sam and Jamie were being treated for smoke inhalation. Sam was also being checked out for a concussion although he assured the paramedics that he had sustained no grievous injuries

“Jamie, do you have any idea where Chance is?” Dixie asked. Her voice trembled as the fear for the other Coalson brother took hold once again.

Sam shook his head in despair. He removed the oxygen mask and rasped, “We couldn’t find Chance. The bastard did his job well. I found Jamie tied up in the supply closet.” He began coughing uncontrollably, and Dixie solicitously held the mask up to his face.

“He’s still in there,” Jamie whispered hoarsely. “Chance and I heard a noise in the file room as we were preparing to leave. He went to investigate. When he didn’t return, I went after him. As I walked to the file room, I saw Chance tied to a chair. The next thing I remember I was in a closet and tied to a chair. Smoke was everywhere, and Sam was trying to untie me when firefighters arrived on the scene. I told them to head to the file room where I had last seen Chance.”

Dixie glanced behind her to judge Mac’s reaction to the news, but he wasn’t there. She peered into the darkness trying to locate him. Had he gone to find the sheriff? No, Ben was talking to the fire chief. She glanced back at the fire scene as a horrible suspicion formed. She firmly squelched the idea as ludicrous. Surely Mac wouldn’t take it upon himself to try to locate Chance in a burning building. He wasn’t a firefighter, and he had no equipment.

*You would do anything to protect your own brother from injury.* She turned back to Jamie. “Where’s Mac? Anyone see Mac?”

She tried to remain calm but the insidious panic she felt lent a tremble to her voice. Dixie realized with a sinking heart that Mac was nowhere to be found. She yelled for Ben frantically, the panic she held at bay now threatening to surround her completely.

Sam shrugged off his blanket and started to rise. Jamie blanched. “You don’t think Mac would...?” He looked over his shoulder at the building that was now completely engulfed in flames. Sam didn’t answer him. That was as good as proof to Dixie. When Sam started toward the fire chief, she was completely certain. She began to shake, terror enveloping her as completely as the flames engulfed the old barn.

She reached out and grabbed Sam's shirt. "Tell me he wouldn't do this, Sam." She shook him feebly, demanding answers to the question. "Tell me that he wouldn't risk his life, too, in that inferno. Tell me!" She screamed as she stared into his sorrowful eyes. What she saw reflected there made the tears begin flowing in earnest. Horrified, she dropped her hand from his sleeve to swipe at the copious flow of tears as she raged at him, "You can't tell me, can you? You would do the same thing if you were in Mac's shoes. You just did, didn't you? You tried to save them all."

Sam grabbed her and gave her a little shake, but she was beside herself with grief. "Dixie, calm down! I have to tell Ben. He needs to know." He hurried to alert the sheriff of Mac's disappearance.

Dixie sank to the ground. "Mac feels responsible for this disaster, but even if he didn't, he would still be in there. If it was a complete stranger, he would still try to help. This is his brother. He's even more determined. He rushed in there," she sobbed pitifully to Jamie, "without any thought of who he's leaving behind. I know it's selfish, but I just found him. He can't leave me now."

"He's not gonna die," Jamie murmured against her hair as he held her tight.

Another blast of fire belched out through the windows. Hysteria consumed Dixie and with the shuddering sob she pulled out of Jamie's embrace, lowering herself once again to her knees, rocking back and forth as she stared at the conflagration before her. She was oblivious to Jamie's efforts to soothe her as the seconds ticked slowly by.

Another explosion erupted, showering glass on everyone in the immediate vicinity. What remained of the windows blew away. With a terrifying groan, the roof collapsed, sending a shower of sparks all around the yard.

The fire chief barked orders. Rescuers raced like ants to double check for life. The Coalsons were led away, but Dixie refused to budge. In the end, Sam carried her kicking and screaming to a safer distance. They now knew there was little to no hope of seeing their loved ones again. With each passing second, the likelihood of Mac and Chance coming out of what was left of that building dwindled dramatically.

Firefighters rushed one by one from the smoke-filled doorway leaving the remains of the barn to the flames. Another belch of smoke and fire burst from the doorway. Three people emerged. A firefighter and another man were carrying a body between them. The three people were covered from head to toe in soot and grime. The black had blanketed them so thoroughly they were almost unrecognizable. As they cleared the fire area,

Dixie and the others rushed to their aid. She could just make out the steely glint in the blackened face of the man supporting the unconscious body of the other.

With intense relief, she started to run into his arms. Mac grinned and she stopped. *Did he have any concept of what he just put her through?* He was standing there grinning like an idiot. Rage overcame her relief at the sight of him.

Mac handed Chance over to the paramedics and ambled over to Dixie. He needed to dispel the terror he'd seen in her eyes when he had come through the blaze with Chance in tow. His heart was close to bursting. His brother was alive! They came through the fiery blaze and dodged burning rafters. They had sidestepped tumbling debris, but they had made it! He wanted to grab Dixie and hold her close. He wanted to take her home and lose himself in her warm and loving body.

Mac reached her side. He started to take her in her arms, but she flinched and stepped back. He stared in shock at her actions, noticing the tear streaked face and the accusatory glare. He was completely baffled. He had seen the overwhelming joy plainly on her face even from a distance. Granted, it'd been a close call, but everyone was out now.

When Dixie continued to stare at him, he turned with a sigh and encountered Jamie's gaze. Grinning sheepishly, he motioned Mac over.

"Maybe it would be best if you gave her some more time to cool off. I've never seen her so upset. She was scared to death. Now that you're alright there's gonna be hell to pay, you know that, don't you?"

Sam shouted and waved them over. Mac and the others hastened to where Chance was receiving medical attention. Everyone's elation at the sight of the men coming out of the blaze turned to concern. It was apparent Chance could be seriously injured. While the firefighter that had rescued him performed resuscitation, a portable oxygen tank was wheeled over. One man was checking his vital signs, yelling instructions to several others. They watched the entire process with bated breath. The firefighter was pumping Chance's chest. One. Two. Three. Four. Quickly changing direction to blow in his mouth. One. Two. Three. Four. The family counted along with the rescue team willing chance to breathe. Breathe!

Mac was the first to notice the slight movement in Chance's chest. His arms slowly crept up the head of the rescuer delivering the resuscitation. With a flick of his wrist, he knocked the cumbersome hat off and grasped a fistful of hair. Mac assumed he was trying to fight the restrictions placed upon him in his semi-conscious state.

Mac started forward to restrain his brother. The firefighter performing mouth-to-mouth was trying unsuccessfully to shake Chance's hand. As Mac watched in growing horror, Chance turned his head slightly and deepened the resuscitating motions into a passionate kiss. The firefighter wrestled with him, trying to break his hold, and suddenly hairpins flew in all directions as masses of long blonde hair tumbled down around Chance's fingers. In that instant, Chance opened his eyes, and his rescuer slapped him hard across the face.

Chance's hero left him to the ministrations of the rest of the medics and stomped over to the fire chief. After a few angry words, the firefighter stripped out of the bulky yellow suit and a very feminine figure emerged. Mac's obvious mortification turned to disbelief as he realized the firefighter who had worked so valiantly to save Mac and Chance was actually a woman.

"Leave it to Chance to try and seduce a woman on his deathbed," Sam observed wryly.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When it became evident that Chance would pull through, Dixie turned away from the fire scene and started toward the car. She needed to get herself under control before she faced Mac, but he ran to catch up with her.

As soon as they were out of sight of the others, Mac grabbed Dixie's arm and held her close, heedless of the grime of his clothing. Dixie heard his comforting heartbeat and tried to calm her own erratic pulse. *He's fine. He wasn't hurt. Nothing happened to him.* She repeated this mantra as she fought for control.

"You're sure you're not hurt? No bruises or burns or anything?" she asked. At the negative shake of his head, she began to tremble anew.

Mac stepped away from her, his arms outstretched as he turned in a slow circle. "Look at me, honey. I'm fine. A little dirty, but I'm not hurt." He gathered her close again and wiped a smudge of dirt off her cheek. She was trembling in the aftermath.

"Are you positive you're unharmed?"

"Positive." Mac grinned.

"Good." She stepped away. Drawing back her fist, she gave him a swift punch to the stomach.

"Oof." Mac doubled over while she continued to punch him wherever she could reach.

"Don't you ever scare me like that again!" she screamed as she kicked him in the shins. He grunted and grabbed his leg. "Don't you realize you could have been killed?" She tried to punch him in the eye.

Mac staggered back as she continued to rain punches down upon him. He frantically grabbed her hands and got enough leverage to wrap his arms and legs around her, effectively pinning her to his side. She struggled, jerking her head in the direction of the firefighters.

"Those people are professionals. They do this for a living. They are well trained and well-equipped, but you just had to find your brother yourself didn't you?"

He put his hand to her mouth, "Let me explain."

She bit him.

"Oww!" he yelled shaking the injured appendage.

She took the opportunity to struggle out of his grasp and rounded on him once again, her hands on her hips. "Did you give one thought to me? How would I have told your parents? They not only lost one child, but two? I love you, you stupid, brave man. My heart went up in flames when

I realized you were in that blaze. You honestly expect me to kiss you and let it go at that? Not very likely, buster.”

She wagged her finger at him. “You’re going to be paying for this escapade for the rest your life. And another thing...” She continued, but suddenly the trees behind him began spinning. Mac’s face became a blur. “Oh God, I don’t feel so good.” And with a sway, Dixie fainted in his arms.

Mac stared dumbly at the prone figure splayed across his outstretched arms. His mind was still staggering from the scolding he had received. *One minute she’s shouting at me and the next she’s fainted. Fainted?!* With a call for help, he carried the unconscious woman back to the paramedics.

Quickly ascertaining that her vital signs were good, the paramedics opened a small pack of smelling salts and waived it under her nose. After a moment, Dixie began to stir. Supported by Mac’s arms, she slowly regained consciousness. She looked around at the concerned circle of faces. Sam was delivering stinging smacks to her hand in an effort to comfort her with little pats. Jamie was frowning at her as if she had fainted on purpose to prove to Mac how upset she was. Chance was staring at her as if she had grown two heads. “I’m sorry. Too much excitement, I guess.”

Shakily, she tried to regain her feet, but Mac pressed her back against his chest. “You are not going anywhere. You’re going to be checked out by a doctor at the hospital. You have any idea how terrified I was when you just pitched into my arms?”

“Somehow I think I know the feeling,” she said dryly. “It probably came close to the feeling I had when I knew you had disappeared in that barn.”

Mac felt a blush crawl up his face. Repentant, he kissed her. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I was so concerned for my brothers, I failed to realize the impact of my actions on you. We’ll talk later. But right now I want you to get checked out at the hospital.”

“I’m sure it was just nerves. We’ve been through so much lately,” she reassured Mac, but her expression proved she didn’t believe her own words.

Dixie, Jamie, Chance, Sam and Mac, at Dixie’s insistence, were taken to a nearby hospital for a more thorough evaluation. Ben notified Mac’s parents of the situation. Mac conferred with the doctor, and it was decided that Chance should stay overnight for observation, but Sam and Jamie were released after receiving a few stitches and their burns were cleaned and bandaged. Sam had suffered a concussion, but the doctor felt it was

okay to release him after giving Mac strict instructions. Mac was all right with this, but he wanted Dixie to stay overnight. Only after the doctor assured him that Dixie was in excellent health, did he relent. They walked down the hall to check on Chance before heading home.

“What in blue blazes is going on around here?” Ginny Coalson demanded from the doorway of Chance’s hospital room. “Ben comes by the house and tells us that the construction company offices have burned down and that most of my children are at the hospital. Did no one think we would want to be informed of this disaster?”

“Well, uh, Mom,” Mac stammered, searching the room for reinforcements, but his other brothers were suddenly intensely interested in the art on the wall, the carpet on the floor, or the tiles on the ceiling. He was on his own.

With a sigh of disgust, he tried to allay her fears. He knew that was the true cause of her anger. She had always yelled at them severely whenever one of them had been injured. It was her way of releasing the tension and fear that she felt. Apparently, Dixie was a lot like his mother, Mac reflected as he massaged his still tender stomach.

Sam took pity on him. “I was sitting at his kitchen table drinking a beer and mulling over the evidence gathered at each of the vandalized houses. It wasn’t much. The vandalism had started right after the first home had been built by Mac. The most logical conclusion was that some of the competition wasn’t too happy about being outbid on the projects, but I checked into that angle with a few discreet inquiries and came up with nothing. This has the feel of something personal. But I knew we were missing something. Maybe there was another angle somewhere and this guy was simply using the homes because he knows it’s our weak point.”

Sam took a drink of water. “I thought maybe this was a personal vendetta against the family. After all, I’m the most hated person in the family so I looked up the personnel files of everyone who had been involved in the fiasco fifteen years ago. The only name to come up on the computer with any sort of grudge against me was Angel, and no matter what we had gone through years ago, I couldn’t believe she would exact revenge by taking it out on the whole family.”

“Of course not!” Chance retorted from his hospital bed.

Sam frowned at the interruption. “I made a quick call to my superiors in Washington, and was reassured that all the criminals I had helped bring down were either still incarcerated, out of the country, or dead. I also knew from personal experiences how easy it was to get certain jobs done even thousands of miles away. I was a specialist in tracking down

individuals that wanted to remain “anonymous”. This had the feel of a professional. He knew just where to hit the hardest, what to hit the hardest, that would hurt the most. He had to be getting inside information. That’s when I realized how much time had passed since Chance had left for the offices.”

“I grabbed my cell phone and dialed the office, but received the answering machine. I tried Chance’s cell phone, then Jamie’s. When they went automatically to voicemail, my intuition screamed. I grabbed my keys and headed out the door.”

“Why didn’t you call me sooner?” Mac huffed.

“Because I’m used to working alone. I didn’t think about it. I spotted Chance’s car parked in the lot. I was preparing to ream them both new assholes for not answering their phones. As I started for the front door, I noted a slight disturbance in the bushes at the back of the building. I crept closer, and shortened the distance between me and the figure there. He was oblivious to my approach, but that’s when the smell of gas hit me.”

“I darted forward, intent upon stopping this guy. I didn’t know where Jamie and Chance were, but it was a sure bet they couldn’t help me. I reached out to grab the man by the collar. I saw Jeb’s face, then my head exploded.”

Mac continued the tale. “When Sam came to, he called me, said the barn was on fire, and he had already called the fire department, but Chance and Jamie were in the offices. He was going to get them out. By the time we got there, the barn was in flames, firefighters were running around, and my brothers were nowhere to be found.”

Dixie interrupted with a scowl. “So you took it upon yourself to enter the blaze to rescue Chance.”

“Well, Sam and Jamie had a pretty good idea where he was and I couldn’t waste time trying to relay that to the firemen. The place was about to blow!”

“YOU WHAT?!” Hank shouted.

“It turned out okay, Dad. We were able to save everyone. Besides, Dixie’s already had her say about it.” Mac threw a frown at his wife.

“Then Chance kissed the firefighter and they lived happily ever after,” Jamie joked, hoping to lighten the mood and downplay Mac’s involvement in Chance’s rescue.

Hank Coalson looked at each of his sons. “Well if you would humor an old man, I would like for all of you to stay at the farm tonight. I feel the need to be close to my children. And maybe I can worm the rest of the story out of you, Mac.”

Mac flushed. He knew a command when he heard one.

Ginny took charge immediately. “That’s an excellent notion, dear. Let’s get all of you home where I can fuss over you for a while. Chance needs to rest. The night nurse has already frowned at us three times from the doorway.” With a promise to return tomorrow, she kissed Chance on the forehead and ushered the rest of the clan out and into the night.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The sheriff came by the Coalson farm the next morning. Mac was sitting on the front porch nursing a cup of coffee. "Well, son, we arrested Jeb Hawkins this morning as the arsonist responsible for the burning of your offices. We'll need Sam to come down and identify him as the man with the gas cans that he saw behind the barn."

Ben spit on the ground. "As to the vandalism, well, we got lucky. Jeb was so afraid of the arson charge that he confessed to the vandalism the first time we mentioned it. Said he made a copy of the keys after he was fired by you." Ben raised a bushy eyebrow at Mac. "Seems like you were a bit too busy to remember to take those keys from him when you gave him his walking papers."

Mac scowled. He remembered well the cause of his preoccupation at the time. She was his wife now.

Ben hid a smile but sobered at the last piece of news. "Jeb said he couldn't put a name to the man who hit Sam from behind. It was too dark. He'd been contacted by phone and paid through a P. O. Box. We checked out the story and it panned out. The box was issued using a fake ID and the sketch we showed the postal clerk identified him as our mystery man. Sam was hit before introductions were made, but Jeb confirmed our description. He's agreed to plead guilty to the charges of accessory to arson in return for a lighter sentence for giving us any information on our real criminal."

"Accessory to arson?" Mac was furious. "Sam saw him pouring gasoline all over and he's given us nothing we didn't know before. What about assault? What about accessory to murder because my brothers could've died in that place?" Mac's voice carried through the open window.

Dixie stepped out onto the front porch to see what all the commotion was about. She turned inquiring eyes to Ben.

"Calm down, Mac and I'll explain. Sam saw him pouring the gas; he didn't see him light the blaze. That makes him an accessory. As for the assault, Sam said he was looking right at Jeb what he was hit from behind. Jeb said he fled the scene as soon as Sam went down. He knew Sam could identify him and he took off. That leaves our mystery man to drag Sam in with the others and light the blaze."

"You're taking Jeb's word for it that he fled the scene?" Mac asked incredulous.

Dixie rubbed Mac's back. "Calm down honey," she murmured "Ben's a friend of the family. I'm sure he did everything he could under the circumstances."

"Thanks, Dixie," Ben murmured. "As a matter of fact, I didn't take Jeb's word alone. He was attached to a polygraph when he was questioned. In addition to that fact, there's also the fact that I've been in law-enforcement thirty years, and you can believe me when I tell you he would've sold out his own mother if he could've gotten a lighter sentence."

"At least we know a bit more about what we're up against regarding this guy. Sam's right. This is more than just sour grapes over competitive contracts. Whoever is doing this is out to destroy me and my family. Apparently, he's going to go to any lengths to do it." Mac rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. "If we could figure out why, we'll have our man. But I'll be damned if I know, Ben. This thing just gets curiouser and curiouser."

He glanced down as Dixie squeezed his hand. She smiled up at him with all the love in her eyes. He smiled back, noting how fresh and pretty she looked in her peach dress, the tension in his chest receding. How had he ever gotten this lucky? Was it fate that had sent her to him just when he needed her love and support the most?

Ben's next statement drove him back to the present. "We'll figure this out yet, Mac. But for now, be thankful that no one was seriously hurt and hopefully these clues will lead us somewhere. I'll step up security around the farm and your homes, but you don't need me to tell you to take any extra precautions you can to keep you and your family safe."

"Do you think he will come after us on a more personal level, Ben?" Dixie asked quietly.

"At this point, we're dealing with a live wire. It's best to be cautious." He gave a tight smile. "A warrant has been issued for his arrest in connection with the fire and attempted murder. I've got copies of Jamie's description of him to post in every store in the area. If he's still around here, we will find him."

He went on to say that the local arson squad was pursuing several leads found at the scene of the fire. Mac offered a reward for any information that could lead to an arrest and Ben agreed to include that on the flyers he would be posting around the area. "You know that doing this may bring out every kook and conman who comes across it," Ben added skeptically.

"Yeah, but maybe one of these kooks has been approached by this guy. Maybe he could lead us right to him," Mac said.

Ben agreed that was a remote possibility. After inquiring about the rest of the family and offering to postpone Chance's statement until he was released from the hospital, Ben took his leave.

Mac went in to explain Ben's conclusions to the rest of the family. Dixie headed for the stables. A few minutes later Mac joined her. Grabbing her hand, he led her for a short walk to a grassy knoll overlooking the farm and orchard. "We need to talk about what happened at the fire, Dix."

"I know," she murmured as she slipped away from him to take a stand against an old oak tree. Every time she thought about how close she came to losing him, she alternated between bone shaking terror and burning rage.

"I realize you were upset and afraid for me, honey, but I could no more have left my brother to die in that place without trying to help them out than you could of let those children defend themselves against that boy with the gun. Our protective instincts are too strong. If we think there's even a remote possibility of success, we have to help the people we care about when they're in need." Mac walked over and pulled her into his arms.

"I know you're right, Mac. But I can't promise not to never get angry. The reason I was so upset when I found you had entered that building was because I felt so helpless. The anger and frustration of being unable to help you, of standing there doing nothing, was too much. I know that was exactly how you were feeling as we waited for Chance to appear. When you made it out alive with Chance, my feelings were just too wound up and intense. I guess they needed an outlet. Unfortunately, you became my target."

"There may be times when we can't do anything but watch and pray for those we love, but if we can help, no matter what, we're going to do that. It's in our blood." Mac smiled. "If that means that I have to be a whipping post for your paltry hits, so be it. Just remember that I need an outlet for my intense emotions, too." He grabbed her for a soul shattering kiss.

Dixie wrapped her arms around him. She kissed him tenderly, telling him that all was forgiven. Mac returned her passion, kiss for kiss, until they were both breathless with longing. With a rueful smile, Dixie pulled her arms from around his neck. In full view of his parents' house was not the proper place to make love.

Mac kissed her forehead. "We are so fortunate. Many people don't even have one person to love them and care for them, while we have so many. I didn't think I could ever find someone to share my life with. You



waltzed into my office and out of my dreams, at a time when I didn't believe I would ever find the loving relationship my parents enjoyed, or that it even existed anymore. Looking at the love in your eyes, I realize that I've found it. You made my every wish come true." He laughed. "And I even got another brother in the bargain. I love you so much, I can't even think about what I would have become without you in my life, but I know I could never be this complete without you by my side."

Dixie wiped away her tears of love. There was so much she needed to say about her love for him, and yet, she couldn't find the words. Everything seemed to pale in comparison to her feelings for this wonderful man. She kissed the dimple in his chin. "Well, not only are you going to have me in your life, in about seven months you're going to have a child. That's why I fainted. I'm pregnant." She waited for Mac's reaction. They had never really discussed when to have children, just the fact that they wanted them.

"A baby? We're going to have... Are you sure? What am I saying, of course you're sure." Mac showered her with kisses as he repeated the good news over and over again.

"I was going to wait a while to broach the subject of a family to you because you're so young," she told him saucily. She touched the bit of gray at his temple, "But I can tell you're just as happy as I am." In answer to her cheekiness, he picked her up and swung her around until she laughingly begged him to stop.

When she finally caught her breath, Dixie looked into Mac's loving eyes. "My grandpa always said life shouldn't be measured in years; it should be measured in happiness. If that's true, I can guarantee a long life of love and joy is in store for us. I love you, Mac Coalson, and I love the fact that our child is growing inside me, a living testimony of our love for each other."

"Speaking of love," Mac grinned wickedly. "There's a hayloft in the barn over there just waiting for a couple of lovers. What do you say, Mrs. Coalson?"

Dixie was running down the hill toward the barn in a flash. She yelled over her shoulder, "I say, last one naked is a rotten egg, Mr. Coalson!"

*Join the Coalson Family in the next installment of the Tempered Steel series, Leather and Lace, as they continue their search for answers to the vandalism while Sam and Angel try to find love again.*

*"Don't tempt me, Angel." Sam's eyes turned dark.*

*“I like tempting you. I love knowing you want me after all these years.”*

### **Sam’s Peanut Butter Squares**

1/3 lb. graham crackers, finely crushed (1 pkg crackers)  
2 sticks melted butter  
1 lb. powdered sugar  
1 cup peanut butter  
1 pkg milk chocolate chips, melted

Mix all ingredients, except chips, together.

Smooth into 13x9 pan.

Melt chips in microwave until smooth.

Spread over graham mixture.

Refrigerate for one hour.

Cut into squares and serve.

## Acknowledgements

It's so hard to make sure everyone that has supported me is acknowledged. I could be writing personal thanks for days! So I'll just say that I love you! I appreciate you! And if you're ever in trouble (and I'm not sitting in jail with you), I've got bail money and a great alibi!

A special acknowledgement to my talented daughter. It was my job as a parent to teach you, but you have taught me so much; not only about daughters and friends, but about who I can aspire to be. I hope you will always be as proud of me as I am of you. I love you!

Another special thanks to my tech savvy son. Without you, I would still be floundering in cyberspace, trying to tweet on Facebook (yes, I know the difference now). Your calm acceptance of my quirkiness and loving support of everything I do lets me know that even if nothing else in my life is good, I still have my greatest accomplishment – my children. I love you!

And, of course, to my husband, Ned, who told me to “just write the damn book already!” So I did.

This series is dedicated to the people in my life who believed in me; Tammy Bugger – my shoulder to cry on and cheerleader; Jenn, and all the wonderful people at the Killion Group, Inc.; My friends and family; thank you for your love and support. You made this book possible with your encouragement, your smiles, and your honest critiques.

It is also dedicated to the people who said I'd never do it – to my face or behind my back. Thank you for bringing out my fighting spirit. As my daughter is fond of saying, “Just watch me!”

## Author Bio



Hi! I'm Maggie Adams. I live near St. Louis, MO with my high school sweetheart, Ned, and my wonderful kids, Katie (m. Kyle) and Ross (gf Valerie). My life is like a walking, talking sitcom from I Love Lucy, but I love it, although people do tend to keep their distance from me! Writing has always been my dream, with reading my favorite hobby. I try to include a little bit of my life in everything I write, so when you read my books, keep your eyes wide open - I'm in there somewhere! Happy reading!

# WHISTLIN' DIXIE

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