



Challenged By the Rugged Lumberjack

Author: Zoey Rose

Category: Romance, New Adult

Description: My plan was to hide from my abusive ex, not fall for a grumpy lumberjack with trust issues.

The goal was simple: escape to a remote cabin in Cedar Falls and start fresh where Jordan can't find us. What I didn't count on was the electricity being out or my rugged lumberjack neighbor with his dark eyes and reluctant kindness.

Josh Carter doesn't like people—that much is clear from the town gossip—but when he finds me struggling with a broken generator and a cold cabin, something changes in his guarded expression.

His hands are calloused from hard work, his words few but meaningful, and the way he looks at my son Mason melts something frozen inside me. I tell myself not to get attached—I've trusted the wrong man before. But as Josh chops firewood for us in the dawn light, I realize I'm already falling for this solitary mountain man with secrets of his own.

Can I risk opening my heart again when I have two children to protect—especially to a man who's spent years building walls to keep everyone out?

Total Pages (Source): 30

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

Chapter 1 - Elisa

The rickety wooden porch creaks under my weight as I adjust Mason on my hip. My free hand trembles as I turn the ancient brass key in the lock. It sticks, because of course it does.

"Come on," I whisper, jiggling the key. "Please."

Mason whimpers and presses his face into my neck, his toddler body still heavy with sleep after our six-hour drive. I kiss the top of his head, breathing in the comforting scent of his baby shampoo, and try the key again.

Cedar Falls was supposed to be our fresh start. This cabin—this supposedly charming mountain retreat—was supposed to be our sanctuary. The online listing had described it as "rustic" and "secluded," which had sounded perfect when I was desperately scrolling through rental sites at 3 AM, one hand pressed against my barely-showing belly, the other clutching my phone with shaking fingers.

The lock finally gives, and the door swings open with a haunted-house creak. I step inside, and my heart sinks like a stone.

"Oh."

The interior is dim, with only patchy sunlight filtering through dirty windows. A musty smell hangs in the air—not the cozy pine scent I'd imagined, but something closer to neglect. The main room is small, with a kitchenette in one corner, a worn sofa pushed against the far wall, and a woodstove that looks like it dates back to the

pioneer days.

"Home sweet home," I murmur, setting Mason down on the wooden floor. He immediately clutches my leg, wide eyes taking in our new surroundings.

"House?" he asks, his voice small.

"Yes, baby. Our new house." I force brightness into my voice, rubbing my lower back where it aches from the drive and the extra weight I'm carrying. "Do you want to help Mommy explore?"

He shakes his head, still clinging to my jeans. I can't blame him. This place is a far cry from our apartment in Portland—the one with the sunny yellow kitchen where Mason's height chart is penciled on the wall, where his favorite park was just a block away. The apartment I fled in the middle of the night three days ago, stuffing whatever I could into my Honda while Mason slept in his car seat, jumping at every sound on the street.

I pick up Mason again and push open the door to what must be the bedroom. A queen-sized bed with a faded quilt occupies most of the space. At least it looks clean. There's a small adjoining bathroom and a closet barely big enough for the clothes I brought.

"Look, Mason. This is where we'll sleep. Isn't it cozy?" I'm talking more to convince myself than him.

I set him down on the bed with his stuffed rabbit, which buys me a few minutes to check out the rest of the cabin. The kitchen cupboards contain a few mismatched plates and cups, a dented pot, and a frying pan. The refrigerator hums loudly when I open it—at least it works. I check the tap, and water sputters out, brown at first, then running clear.

I try the light switch. Nothing happens.

I try again, flicking it up and down. Still nothing.

"You've got to be kidding me," I mutter, placing my hands on the slight swell of my belly in an unconscious gesture of protection. "No electricity?"

The listing had definitely mentioned utilities included. Had I been so desperate to escape that I'd missed some crucial detail? I pull out my phone to check the rental agreement, but there's no signal. Perfect.

Through the kitchen window, I can see the back of another cabin about fifty yards away through the trees. Smoke curls from its chimney, which means someone's home. A neighbor—my only neighbor, from what I can tell.

I swallow hard. Back in Portland, I'd trained myself never to ask for help, never to draw attention. Attention meant questions. Questions meant someone might notice the bruises I worked so hard to hide. Questions meant Jordan finding out I'd spoken to someone, which meant a closed fist and harsh whispers after Mason went to bed.

But this is Cedar Falls. I'm six hours and a mountain range away from Portland. From Jordan. He doesn't know where I am. Nobody does.

I need to be stronger now. For Mason. For the baby growing inside me.

I peek back into the bedroom. Mason has fallen asleep again, curled around his rabbit. I grab my jacket and step outside, closing the door softly behind me. The mountain air is crisp, carrying the scent of pine and something earthy. In any other circumstance, I might find it beautiful—the towering trees, the distant mountain peaks, the absolute quiet broken only by birdsong.

I follow a dirt path that seems to lead toward the neighboring cabin. As I get closer, I can see that it's larger than mine, sturdier-looking, with a wraparound porch and neatly stacked firewood along one side. A battered blue pickup truck sits in front.

My heart thuds in my chest as I approach the steps. I haven't voluntarily spoken to a stranger in... I can't even remember. Jordan always did the talking. Jordan made the decisions. Jordan controlled who I saw, where I went, what I wore.

Not anymore.

I lift my hand to knock, then hesitate. What if the neighbor is unfriendly? What if they're dangerous? What if they're a man?

I take a deep breath, feel the slight roundness of my belly beneath my oversized sweater. Four months along. Sixteen weeks of secret hope, of hidden ultrasound pictures, of silent promises that this child would never know what their father was capable of.

I knock. Three quick raps, then step back, ready to flee if necessary.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

Nothing happens. I wait, counting my heartbeats. One. Two. Three.

Just as I'm about to turn and leave, I hear heavy footsteps inside. The door swings open, and I immediately take another step back.

The man filling the doorway is enormous. At least six-foot-three, with broad shoulders that strain against a flannel shirt rolled up to reveal forearms covered in tattoos. Dark hair, slightly too long, frames a face that hasn't seen a razor in days. His beard is thick but not wild, and beneath heavy brows, eyes the color of strong coffee regard me with suspicion.

"What?" The word comes out like a growl.

All my rehearsed questions evaporate. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. His scowl deepens, and I notice a smudge of what looks like sawdust across his cheek. Behind him, I catch a glimpse of a tidy interior, so at odds with his rough appearance.

"I—" I clear my throat. "I just moved in. Next door." I point vaguely in the direction of my cabin. "The electricity isn't working, and I was wondering if you knew—"

"There isn't any." His voice is deep, the words clipped.

I blink at him. "Excuse me?"

"No electricity. Not in that cabin."

"But the listing said utilities included."

His expression doesn't change. "Utilities means the well and the woodstove. Propane for the fridge and water heater."

I feel like I've been punched in the stomach. No electricity? How am I supposed to—? I must look as devastated as I feel, because something in his face shifts slightly.

"There's a generator," he adds, almost reluctantly. "In the shed behind your place. Probably needs gas."

Relief floods through me. "Oh. Thank you. I don't suppose you know where I could get some? Gas, I mean." I realize I haven't seen a gas station since turning off the main highway, twenty minutes ago.

He sighs, a sound of profound irritation. "I've got a can. Wait here."

Before I can respond, he disappears back into his cabin, leaving the door open. I stand awkwardly on his porch, taking in more details of his home through the doorway. It's sparse but organized. A large wooden table covered with papers. Bookshelves lined with what look like field guides and repair manuals. A pair of heavy boots by the door, neatly placed.

He reappears a moment later, carrying a red gas can. "This should be enough to get you through tonight. Town's fifteen minutes down the mountain. Bell's General has everything you need."

I reach for the gas can, but it's heavier than I expect.

"Thank you," I say. "I'm Elisa, by the way. Elisa Lowell."

He regards me for a long moment, as if debating whether to offer his name in return. Finally, he nods once. "Josh Carter."

"Nice to meet you, Josh." The words come out in a rush.

He doesn't return the sentiment. Instead, he gestures toward the gas can.

"Cap's tight, but don't tip it. Generator's simple. On/off switch and a pull cord, like a lawn mower."

I nod, trying to absorb the instructions. I've never operated a generator in my life.

"Is there... is there anything else I should know? About the cabin, I mean."

I don't know why I'm prolonging this interaction. There's something oddly comforting about this gruff man who seems to want nothing to do with me. No fake smiles, no hidden agendas.

Josh runs a hand through his dark hair, leaving it slightly mussed. "Nights get cold, even in summer. Don't let the woodstove go out completely. Bears sometimes get into the trash, so keep it in the shed until collection day. Thursdays."

"Bears?" My voice comes out as a squeak.

"They're more scared of you than you are of them."

I seriously doubt that.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

"Right. Thanks again. I should get back." I hoist the gas can, which already feels like it's pulling my arm from its socket. "Myson is asleep, and I don't want him to wake up alone in a strange place."

At the mention of Mason, Josh's expression hardens again as if I've confirmed something he suspected. "How old?"

"Two. Almost three." I don't mention the baby. I'm not showing much yet, and something tells me Josh Carter isn't the type to care about my personal circumstances.

He nods once more, then steps back, clearly dismissing me. "Generator shed's behind the cabin. Red door."

And with that, he closes his door, leaving me standing on his porch with a gas can and the distinct impression that my new neighbor would prefer I didn't exist.

As I make my way back to my cabin, I can't help but think that makes two of us. The less we interact with our neighbors, the better. The fewer people who know about us, the safer we'll be.

Because even with six hours and a mountain range between us, I know Jordan. He won't stay in the dark for long. He'll start looking. And when Jordan starts looking for something, he doesn't stop until he finds it.

Chapter 2 - Josh

I slam the door harder than necessary and listen to her footsteps fade down my porch

steps. The silence that follows is familiar. Comfortable. The way I like it.

Except it doesn't feel comfortable right now.

"Damn it," I mutter, stalking to the kitchen and yanking open the refrigerator. I grab a beer, then reconsider and set it back. It's barely noon, and I've got three more hours of work on the Bennet job before I can call it a day.

I can't stop seeing her face. The way she flinched when our fingers brushed. The flash of panic in her eyes when I mentioned bears. The careful way she stood, like someone who's been pushed down too many times and is always braced for the next shove.

I know that stance. I perfected it by the time I was ten.

But it's not my problem. I've spent twelve years in this cabin building walls—not just the physical ones I repair for a living, but the ones that keep people at a distance. The ones that let me sleep at night without jerking awake at phantom sounds, without my father's voice echoing in my head.

I grab my work gloves from the hook by the door and head to the workshop attached to the back of my cabin. The table saw whines as I feed through a length of cedar, the familiar motion soothing my jangled nerves. Sawdust fills the air, coating my forearms, catching in my beard. I lose myself in the rhythm of it—measure, mark, cut, sand. Repeat.

But the image of her keeps intruding. Elisa Lowell. Young—too young, probably mid-twenties. Curves for days. Brown hair pulled back in a messy ponytail like she hadn't had time to brush it properly. Eyes the color of moss in shadow, wary and tired. A two-year-old son waiting for her in that wreck of a cabin.

That goddamn cabin. Hargrove has been trying to rent it out for years, and every time some unsuspecting tenant signs the lease, they're gone within a month. No electricity. Spotty plumbing. Drafty windows that let in every whisper of mountain wind. I should have warned her.

But that would mean getting involved. Getting involved means caring, and caring means leaving yourself open to all the ways people can hurt you.

I finish the last of the trim pieces for the Bennets' sunroom and stack them carefully. Outside, the afternoon light has shifted, lengthening the shadows across my yard. A jay scolds from the pine near my truck, its harsh cry breaking the silence.

I imagine her over there, trying to figure out that ancient generator in the growing darkness. With a child. A small, helpless child who didn't ask to be dragged up a mountain to live in a cabin that barely deserves the name.

"Not your problem, Carter," I say aloud, my voice startling in the empty workshop.

I clean up, sweeping sawdust into neat piles, wiping down my tools, everything in its place. Order. Control. The things I never had growing up in my father's house, where chaos reigned and you never knew what might set him off—a dish left in the sink, a door closed too loudly, a question asked at the wrong moment.

I wash up at the utility sink, scrubbing sawdust from under my nails, from the creases of my palms, from the tattoos that cover my forearms—ink I started collecting at eighteen, marking myself as my own when I finally got away. The running water drowns out all other sounds, which is why I don't hear the first knock.

The second one, though, cuts through the cabin like a rifle shot.

I dry my hands and move to the front door. Probably Bill Bennet wanting to know if

his trim is ready early. The man has no concept of boundaries.

But when I open the door, there's no one there.

I step onto the porch, scanning the treeline, and that's when I hear it—a small, hiccuping sob coming from the direction of Hargrove's cabin. The sound raises the hair on the back of my neck. It's a child crying.

Before I can think about it, I'm off the porch and striding through the trees, following the path that connects our properties. The evening air is cooling rapidly, the way it does in the mountains, even in summer. Another sound joins the crying—a woman's voice, soft and strained, trying to comfort.

Hargrove's cabin comes into view, and I slow my pace. The last thing I want is to frighten her more than she already is. There's no light in the windows. No sound of a generator running.

"Hello?" I call, keeping my distance from the porch. "Elisa?"

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

The crying stops abruptly. A moment later, the door cracks open, and her face appears in the gap. Even in the fading light, I can see the relief that washes over her features, quickly replaced by wariness.

"Josh. Hi." Her voice is carefully neutral. "Did we disturb you? I'm sorry—"

"No." I cut her off, uncomfortable with her apology. "I just... I wanted to check if you got the generator running."

She hesitates, then pushes the door open wider. The little boy—Mason, she'd called him—is balanced on her hip, his face tear-streaked and red. He regards me with solemn eyes, a grubby stuffed rabbit clutched to his chest.

"I tried," she says, and there's frustration in her voice now. "I really did. I found the shed and put in the gas, but it won't start. I've pulled that cord until my arm feels like it's going to fall off."

I nod, unsurprised. "Hargrove never maintains anything. When's the last time a tenant was in here?"

"The listing said it was recently renovated." There's a bitter edge to her laugh.

"Hargrove's idea of renovation is slapping on a coat of paint and calling it good."

The boy whimpers again, burying his face in his mother's neck. I notice she's shivering slightly in the cooling air.

"I can take a look at it," I hear myself say. "The generator."

She blinks, clearly surprised by the offer. "You don't have to do that."

"I know." The words come out harsher than I intend, and I see her withdraw slightly. I try again, aiming for a softer tone. "It's not a problem. Got my tools in the truck."

She steps back, allowing me to enter the cabin. It's even worse than I remembered—musty, with water stains on the ceiling and gaps in the floorboards where cold air seeps in. The kitchenette is decades out of date, and the woodstove sits cold and empty. No wonder the kid is crying. The place is freezing as the sun goes down.

"Show me the generator," I say, avoiding her eyes.

If I look at her too long in this dismal cabin, I might do something stupid like offer her my place instead. She leads me through the back door to the shed. The ancient generator sits like a rusted monument to neglect, exactly as I expected.

"You said you pulled the cord, right?" I ask, kneeling beside it.

She nods, shifting the boy to her other hip. He's watching me now, curiosity replacing some of his distress. "A million times. Nothing happens."

I examine the machine, quickly finding the problem. "Fuel line's cracked. Gas is leaking out before it reaches the engine." I glance up at her. "I've got parts back at my place. Won't take long to fix."

"Really?"

"Yeah." I stand, brushing dirt from my jeans. "But even if we get it running, you need

heat. Woodstove work?"

"I don't know. I haven't tried it."

"Let's check."

Back inside, I examine the woodstove while she sets the boy down on the worn sofa. He immediately slides off and toddles over to me, keeping a cautious distance but watching my every move with wide eyes.

"Chimney's clear," I report, peering up the flue. "Damper works. You got wood?"

She shakes her head. "There's none inside. I saw some stacked against the shed, but..." She trails off, and I get it. She didn't want to leave her son alone to go gathering firewood in a strange place as darkness fell.

"I'll bring some in. And the tools for the generator."

I'm halfway to the door when a small voice stops me.

"Bear?"

I turn to see the little boy pointing at me, his expression serious. His mother looks mortified.

"Mason, no, that's not—"

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

"It's fine," I say, and to my surprise, I mean it. The kid's not wrong. With my beard and size, I probably do look like a bear to him. "Yeah, buddy. Like a bear."

He considers this, then holds up his stuffed rabbit. "Hoppy."

Something long-dormant within me awakes. I nod solemnly. "Nice to meet you, Hoppy."

The boy grins, displaying tiny teeth, and something about that innocent smile makes it suddenly hard to breathe. I nod to Elisa and escape outside, gulping the cool mountain air.

What the hell am I doing? Fixing a generator is one thing, but talking to her kid? Getting involved?

I stride back to my cabin and grab my toolbox from the truck, then collect an armload of split wood from my neatly stacked pile. The physical labor helps calm me, gives my hands something to do besides clench into fists.

By the time I return to Hargrove's cabin, I've almost convinced myself this is just basic human decency. Nothing more. I'd do it for anyone. The fact that she's young and vulnerable and has a child has nothing to do with it. The fact that I recognize the haunted look in her eyes, the way she carries herself like someone expecting a blow—that's irrelevant.

I'm not my father. That's all this is. Proving to myself, for the thousandth time, that I'm nothing like him.

I drop the wood on the porch and knock, more gently this time. When she opens the door, the boy is back on her hip, and I can see she's lit a few candles—not enough for real light, but better than total darkness.

"Let's get you warm first," I say, carrying the wood inside and kneeling at the woodstove. I arrange kindling and smaller pieces, aware of them watching me. The boy has stopped crying, seemingly fascinated by my movements.

"Do you have matches?" I ask.

She rummages in her purse and produces a plastic lighter. I take it, and light the kindling. It catches quickly, and soon the wood is crackling, the first waves of heat beginning to emanate from the stove.

"Oh, thank God," she murmurs, stepping closer to the warmth. In the flickering light, I can see dark circles under her eyes, a smudge of dirt on her cheek. She looks exhausted.

"I'll fix the generator now," I say, standing. "Keep feeding the fire. There's enough wood here for tonight, but you'll need more tomorrow."

"I'll figure it out." There's determination in her voice. "Thank you for this. Really."

I nod, uncomfortable with her gratitude, and head back outside to the generator. The repair is simple enough—I've fixed dozens of these over the years. I replace the cracked fuel line, clean the spark plug, and check the oil. Within twenty minutes, I've got it purring.

When I go back inside to tell her, the cabin already feels different. The fire has taken the damp chill from the air, and she's found an old kettle, which steams on top of the woodstove. The boy sits on a blanket spread on the floor, playing with his rabbit and

what looks like a plastic dinosaur.

"Generator's running," I announce from the doorway. "I hooked it up to the cabin. You've got power for now."

She flips a switch, and a single overhead bulb flickers to life, casting a yellow glow over the room. Her smile is like sunrise breaking over the mountain—sudden and transformative.

"I can't thank you enough," she says, and there's a catch in her voice that makes me look away.

"It's nothing. Won't last forever, though. Generator needs gas every few hours if you're running lights. Less if you just need the refrigerator."

She nods, absorbing this information. "I'll go to town tomorrow. Get supplies."

"Bell's General," I remind her. "Ask for Marge. Tell her what you need."

"I will." She hesitates, then asks, "Do they have a laundromat in town? Or somewhere I could use a computer? I need to look for jobs."

"Laundromat's next to the diner. Library has computers. It's small, but they've got internet." I pause, then add, "Madeline's Diner might be hiring. Saw a sign in the window last week."

Her eyes light up. "Really? That would be perfect. I waitressed all through college."

I nod, oddly relieved that she has marketable skills. Then I catch myself—why should I care if she finds work or not? It's none of my business.

Except I'm standing in her cabin, having fixed her generator and built her fire, so maybe it is my business now, whether I like it or not.

"I should go," I say abruptly. "Generator's got enough gas to last till morning. I'll drop off the can tomorrow so you can refill it in town."

"Okay." She follows me to the door, the boy trailing behind her, still clutching his rabbit. "Josh?"

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

I turn, hand on the doorknob. "Yeah?"

"Why are you helping me?" The question is direct, her gaze steady despite her trembling voice.

I could lie. Say it's what neighbors do. Say it's not a big deal. But something about the candlelight and the crackling fire and the little boy watching me with those solemn eyes makes me tell the truth.

"Because no one helped me when I needed it."

Her expression softens, and for a moment I think she might reach out, might touch my arm or take my hand, and I'm not sure if I'm relieved or disappointed when she doesn't.

"Well, you're helping us now," she says quietly. "And I won't forget it."

I nod once, unable to find words and step out into the night. The air is clean and sharp, stars emerging in the clear mountain sky. From here, I can see my cabin through the trees, the warm light in the windows, the smoke from the chimney. The solitary life I've built for myself.

It's been enough. For twelve years, it's been enough.

But as I walk away from Elisa Lowell and her son, I can't shake the feeling that something has changed, like the first tremor before an avalanche. And for the first time in years, I'm not sure if the walls I've built are keeping others out—or keeping

me in.

Chapter 3 - Elisa

I close the door behind Josh and lean against it, exhaling slowly. The cabin feels different now—warmer, brighter, less intimidating. The generator hums steadily outside, powering the single overhead bulb that transforms the space from foreboding to merely shabby.

Mason tugs at my jeans, holding Hoppy up for inspection. "Bear gone?"

I smile, running my fingers through his soft curls. "Yes, baby. The bear is gone." I scoop him up, grateful for his solid weight in my arms. "But he was a nice bear, wasn't he? He helped us."

Mason considers this, then nods. "Nice bear."

The kettle whistles on the wood stove, and I carry Mason with me to make us both some tea—chamomile for him, heavily diluted and sweetened with the honey packets I'd grabbed from a gas station on our journey.

As I settle Mason on the worn sofa with his sippy cup of tea, I can't stop thinking about Josh's parting words.

"Because no one helped me when I needed it." There was history in that statement, pain layered so deep I could hear it in every syllable. I recognize it because I carry the same kind of pain—wounds that aren't visible but shape every move you make, every decision, every interaction.

"What do you think, Mason?" I ask, sitting beside him and letting him curl against me. "Think we can make it work here?"

He looks up at me with Jordan's eyes—the only good thing his father gave him—and smiles around the spout of his cup.

"Nice bear," he says again, and I laugh despite everything.

"Yes, he is. A very grumpy, helpful bear." I kiss the top of his head. "Let's get you ready for bed, okay? It's been a big day."

The bedroom is still chilly, so I make a nest of blankets on the sofa instead, close to the woodstove's warmth. I change Mason into his pajamas and brush his teeth using bottled water, singing our usual bedtime song as I work. By the time I tuck him in, his eyelids are drooping.

"Love you to the moon," I whisper, our nightly ritual.

"An' back," he murmurs, already half-asleep.

I sit beside him until his breathing deepens, then carefully extract myself. The fire needs tending, and I should sort through our belongings—the hasty packing means everything is jumbled together in duffel bags and boxes.

Instead, I find myself at the cabin's front window, looking toward the trees that separate our property from Josh's. His cabin glows warmly in the darkness, a sturdy, well-maintained counterpoint to the ramshackle structure sheltering us.

I rest my hand on the slight swell of my belly, a gesture that's become automatic over the past few months. "We're going to be okay," I whisper, to the baby, to Mason, to myself. "We're going to make this work."

Even if I have no idea how.

The Next Day

Morning comes with birdsong and golden light filtering through curtainless windows. I blink awake, briefly disoriented by the unfamiliar ceiling, the woodsy smell, the hard cushions beneath me. I'd given Mason the makeshift bed and taken the armchair, which seemed like a good idea at midnight but has left my neck stiff and my back aching.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

Mason still sleeps, one arm flung above his head, the other clutching Hoppy. I ease myself upright, wincing as my ribs protest. The fire has died down to embers, and the cabin is cool again, though not as damp as yesterday. Outside, the generator has gone silent—must have run out of gas sometime during the night.

A rhythmic sound drifts through the open window—a solid, repetitive thunk followed by a crack. It stops, then starts again.

Thunk. Crack. Thunk. Crack.

I move to the window, curious. Through the trees, I can see movement near Josh's cabin, but can't make out details. After checking on Mason one more time—still deeply asleep, as he always is in the morning—I slip on my shoes and cardigan. I bend down to kiss his forehead, his skin warm and soft under my lips.

"Stay here, baby," I whisper, though I know he won't wake for at least another hour. "Don't leave unless Mommy calls you, okay?"

He mumbles something in his sleep, rolling over to press his face into Hoppy's well-loved fur. I smile, then quietly let myself out of the cabin.

The morning air is crisp and sweet, the kind of pure mountain oxygen that makes you realize how stale city air really is. Dew sparkles on every surface, and somewhere nearby, a woodpecker rattles against a tree. I follow the chopping sound, carefully picking my way along the path connecting our properties.

As I round a cluster of pines, I stop dead in my tracks.

Josh stands in a clearing beside his cabin, his back to me. He's shirtless, wearing only jeans and boots, and the morning sun gilds his skin with amber light. His shoulders—broad and muscular—flex as he raises an axe above his head, then brings it down in a perfect arc. The log on the chopping block splits with a satisfying crack, and he kicks the pieces aside before positioning another.

I should turn around. I should go back to my cabin and wait for Mason to wake up. I should not be standing here watching my grumpy neighbor chop wood like some wilderness fantasy come to life.

But I can't seem to make my feet move.

Sweat trickles down his back, following the contours of his muscles. A tattoo covers his left shoulder blade—something intricate and dark that I can't make out from this distance. His hair is damp at the nape of his neck, curling slightly with moisture.

He positions another log, adjusts his stance, and swings. The axe bites deep, and the wood surrenders with a splintering crack. There's something mesmerizing about the power of his movements, the absolute certainty in every swing.

I must make some sound—a twig snapping underfoot, perhaps, or just an indrawn breath—because he suddenly stiffens and turns.

For a moment, we just stare at each other. His chest rises and falls with exertion, a sheen of sweat making his skin gleam in the sunlight. Up close, I can see that the tattoo on his shoulder is a stylized tree, its roots extending down his ribs, its branches reaching toward his neck. Another tattoo circles his right bicep—what looks like a big clock or a bunch of clocks.

"Morning," he says finally, his voice rough. He leans the axe against the chopping block and reaches for a flannel shirt draped over a nearby stump.

"I'm sorry," I blurt out. "I heard the chopping and wanted to see—I mean, I didn't mean to interrupt—"

He shrugs into the shirt but doesn't button it. "You didn't. Just finishing up."

I nod, absurdly disappointed as the fabric covers his torso. "I, um, wanted to thank you again. For last night. The generator, the fire..."

"How'd it hold up?" he asks, wiping his forearm across his brow. "Generator, I mean."

"It ran out of gas sometime in the night, but it was fine until then. Kept the lights on while we got settled."

He nods, seemingly satisfied with this report. "I was going to bring you that gas can. For town." He gestures toward his cabin. "It's on the porch."

"Thank you. I really appreciate it." I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, suddenly aware that I'm in yesterday's clothes, sleep-rumpled and unwashed. "I'll head into town as soon as Mason wakes up."

Josh's eyes flick over me, a quick assessment that doesn't feel intrusive but still makes me want to smooth my hair, straighten my cardigan. "You sleep okay? That place gets cold at night."

The question surprises me—it's more personal than anything he said yesterday. "We managed. The woodstove helped a lot."

He picks up the axe again, and for a moment I think he's going to resume chopping, dismissing me. Instead, he nods toward the pile of split logs. "This is for you. Was going to bring it over later."

I stare at the stack of firewood—there must be enough for several days. "You... you chopped all that for us?"

He shrugs, the movement making his open shirt gape slightly, revealing a strip of tattooed skin. "Needed doing."

"But that must have taken hours." I can't wrap my mind around it—this stranger, this gruff, taciturn man, waking up early to chop wood for us.

"Not much else to do up here." He shifts, looking uncomfortable with my attention. "Your boy still sleeping?"

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

I nod. "He'll be up soon, though. I should get back."

"Right." Josh sets the axe down again and moves toward the woodpile. "I'll load some in my truck and drop it by your place."

"You don't have to do that. I can carry some—"

He gives me a look that clearly says he doesn't believe I can haul armloads of split logs back to my cabin. He's probably right, but something in me bristles at the assumption.

"I'm stronger than I look," I say, lifting my chin slightly.

"Never said you weren't." He selects a log from the pile and holds it out to me. "But it's a quarter mile to your place, and this is pine. Heavy when you're carrying a stack."

I take the log, the bark rough against my palms. It is heavier than it looks. "Fine. But I'm helping you load the truck."

One corner of his mouth twitches—not quite a smile, but close. "Suit yourself."

We work in silence, me carrying logs to his truck bed, him stacking them. This feels good after yesterday's emotional marathon. My hands will be dirty, my arms will ache, but there's satisfaction in the simple task.

"Why'd you pick Cedar Falls?" he asks suddenly, as we're nearly finished.

I almost drop the log I'm holding. It's the first personal question he's asked, and it catches me off guard. "I... it seemed peaceful. Away from everything."

He stares at me for a moment, like he knows I'm not telling the whole truth. "It's that, all right."

"And the rent was cheap," I add, which is true enough. "I needed to stretch my savings until I find work."

He nods, accepting this explanation. "Town's small, but there's usually jobs if you're not picky. Diner, like I said. Maybe the school needs help now that summer's ending."

"You've lived here long?" I ask, seizing the opportunity to learn more about him.

"Twelve years this cabin. Grew up about twenty miles down the mountain." His tone changes slightly—cooler, more distant—and I sense we've strayed into territory he'd rather avoid.

"I grew up in Seattle," I offer, not sure why I'm telling him this. "Never lived anywhere this rural before."

"Takes adjusting," he says, loading the last log. "Bears, generators, woodstoves. Different way of life."

"I'm a quick learner." I dust my hands on my jeans, leaving smudges of bark and dirt.

He closes the tailgate with a solid thunk. "Your boy's probably up by now."

It's a clear dismissal, but not an unkind one. "Right. I should go." I take a step back, toward the path to my cabin. "Thank you. For the wood."

Josh nods, then hesitates, like he's debating whether to say something more. Finally, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a slip of paper.

"My number," he says, holding it out to me. "In case the generator acts up again. Or if you..." He trails off, seeming uncomfortable with whatever he was about to say.

"Thank you."

He clears his throat. "Town's straight down the mountain road. Can't miss it. Just one main street."

"Got it." I tuck the paper into my pocket, oddly touched by this small gesture of connection. "I'll see you around, I guess."

"Yeah." He runs a hand through his damp hair, making it stand up slightly. "See you around."

As I walk back to my cabin, I can sense his eyes following my progress until the trees obscure his view. The piece of paper in my pocket feels significant, though I can't articulate why. It's just a phone number. Just a neighborly gesture.

But as I approach my cabin and see my son's face peering through the window, his expression brightening when he spots me, I find myself smiling. For the first time since I fled Portland with nothing but a car full of hastily packed belongings and desperate hope, I feel like maybe—just maybe—we might be okay here.

Even if "here" is a rundown cabin with no electricity, in a town where I know no one, with only a grumpy lumberjack neighbor for support.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

It's still better than where we came from. And right now, that's enough.

Chapter 4 - Josh

I watch her disappear into the trees, the piece of paper with my number probably already floating to the bottom of her pocket, forgotten. I'm not sure why I gave it to her. A momentary lapse in judgment, clearly. Something about the way she looked in the morning light, hair mussed from sleep, eyes soft but determined, dirt smudged on her cheek.

"Idiot," I mutter to myself, climbing into the truck. The engine roars to life, and I back up, then head down the narrow drive toward her cabin.

What the hell am I doing? Two days ago, my life was exactly how I wanted it. Quiet. Predictable. Empty of complications like single mothers with wary eyes and toddlers who call me "bear." Now I'm chopping extra firewood, fixing generators, offering my phone number like some eager teenager.

I pull up beside her cabin and cut the engine. Through the window, I can see the boy—Mason—standing on the sofa, face pressed against the glass. When he spots me, his small hand lifts in a wobbly wave. Without thinking, I wave back.

I'm definitely an idiot.

I unload the wood quickly, stacking it neatly against the side of the cabin where it'll stay relatively dry. As I work, I hear the door open and small footsteps approach.

"Bear!" Mason announces, sounding delighted.

I straighten, wiping my hands on my jeans. The kid stands a few feet away, still in pajamas, his stuffed rabbit dangling from one hand. His mother appears in the doorway behind him, looking slightly panicked.

"Mason! I told you to stay inside while I got dressed."

"It's fine," I say, though it's not. Nothing about this situation is fine. I don't know how to talk to children. I don't know how to be around people who look at me without the weight of history and rumor coloring their perception. "Almost done here."

She scoops up her son, balancing him on her hip. "Thank you for bringing the wood. You really didn't have to."

"Like I said. Needed doing." I load the last few logs onto the pile. "This should last you a few days. Nights are still getting cold, even in August."

She nods, shifting the boy's weight. He's watching me with full curiosity, none of the wariness his mother carries like a second skin.

"We're heading into town soon. Anything you need while we're there?" She asks me.

The question catches me off guard. When was the last time someone offered to pick something up for me? "No. I'm good."

"Okay." She smiles, "Well, thanks again."

I nod and head back to my truck, feeling her eyes on me as I drive away. In my rearview mirror, I see the boy wave again, his mother's hand gently guiding his in the motion.

Back at my cabin, I slam the door behind me as if I can physically shut out the strange feelings churning in my gut. I strip off my flannel shirt, still damp with sweat from the wood-chopping, and toss it in the laundry basket. In the bathroom, I splash cold water on my face, then look at myself in the mirror.

Same face I've had for the past 10 years. Same dark eyes, same stubbled jaw, same grim set to my mouth. But something feels different, unsettled. Like ground shifting beneath my feet.

"Get it together, Carter," I tell my reflection. "You're not a helper. You're not a friend. You're just being a decent neighbor."

That's all this is. Basic human decency. Nothing more. I helped her because anyone would have. Because she has a kid. Because Hargrove's cabin is a disaster, and it was the right thing to do.

Not because something in her eyes reminds me of myself twenty years ago—lost, scared, trying to be brave. Not because the boy's innocent trust makes my chest ache in places I thought had gone numb long ago.

I have a system here. A routine. Wake up, work, come home, sleep. Repeat. Minimal interaction with the town below, just enough to get jobs and supplies. No friendships, no relationships, no complications. It's clean. Simple. Safe.

There's a reason no one from Cedar Falls ventures up the mountain to visit the Carter property. There's a reason I've cultivated my reputation as the grumpy lumberjack who's best left alone. Solitude is a choice I made long ago, and it has served me well.

So why did I give her my number?

I shake my head and grab a fresh shirt from the drawer. I've got work to do. The

Bennet job needs finishing, and I've got three more bids to prepare before the end of the week. No time to be distracted by neighbors who'll probably be gone within the month anyway. Hargrove's cabin claims another victim every season—they never last.

She won't call. And that's exactly how I want it.

A few hours later...

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

Sunset paints the mountains in shades of gold and purple, light spilling through my windows as I review the Bennet invoice. The final figures look good—better than I expected. Enough to get me through the next few months easily, especially with the Johnsons' roof repair coming up in September.

A movement outside catches my eye. I glance up, then freeze, pencil still poised over the paper.

Elisa is walking up my driveway, Mason balanced on her hip. Her hair is pulled back in a neat ponytail, and she's wearing different clothes than this morning—a simple blue dress that catches the last rays of sunlight. Even from here, I can see she's cleaned up, a far cry from the sleep-rumpled woman who watched me chop wood.

"What the hell?" I mutter, setting down the pencil.

Did something happen? The generator broken down again? But why bring the kid if it was just a mechanical issue?

I stand, oddly conscious of my own appearance—worn jeans, faded t-shirt with a tear near the collar, three-day beard. I run a hand through my hair, which does nothing but mess it up more, then abandon the effort. What do I care how I look?

A soft knock sounds on my door. For a split second, I consider not answering. I could pretend I'm not home. But my truck is parked outside, and smoke rises from my chimney. She knows I'm here.

I open the door, keeping my expression neutral. "Problem with the generator?"

Elisa blinks, looking momentarily thrown by my greeting. "No, it's running fine. Thanks to you."

I wait, saying nothing. Mason peers at me from the shelter of his mother's arms, then holds up his rabbit in greeting.

"We, um..." Elisa shifts her weight from one foot to the other. "We brought you dinner. As a thank you. For everything."

That's when I notice she's holding a covered dish in her free hand. The scent of something savory wafts from beneath the foil.

"You didn't have to do that," I say, the words coming out more gruffly than intended.

"I know. But I wanted to." She holds out the dish. "It's just a casserole. Nothing fancy. But it's hot, and there's plenty."

I stare at the offering, unsure how to respond. When was the last time someone cooked for me? My mother, maybe, before everything fell apart. Thirty years ago? More?

"Unless you've already eaten," she adds hurriedly, misinterpreting my hesitation. "Which, of course you probably have. It's dinner time. I should have thought—"

"I haven't," I interrupt. "Eaten, I mean."

Relief crosses her face. "Oh. Good."

We stand there in awkward silence for a moment, the casserole between us like some strange peace offering. Mason breaks the tension by pointing at my cabin.

"Bear house?"

Despite myself, I feel one corner of my mouth twitch upward. "Yeah, kid. Bear house."

Elisa smiles, a real one this time, reaching her eyes. "We won't stay. I know you probably value your privacy. I just wanted to say thank you properly."

I should take the dish, thank her, and close the door. That would be the sensible thing to do. The safe thing.

Instead, I find myself stepping back, opening the door wider. "You want to come in? It's getting cold out there."

Surprise flickers across her face, followed by something that might be pleasure. "Are you sure? We don't want to impose."

No, I'm not sure. This is a terrible idea. But the sun has dipped below the mountains, casting long shadows across my porch. The temperature is dropping rapidly, as it always does up here after sunset. And the boy is watching me with those trusting eyes, his tiny body shivering slightly in the evening chill.

"I'm sure," I say, though I'm anything but. "Come in."

She hesitates only a moment before stepping inside. Mason's eyes go wide as he takes in my cabin—so different from Hargrove's ramshackle rental. My place is solid. Built to last. Every piece of furniture handcrafted, every surface well-maintained.

"Your home is beautiful," Elisa says, looking around with genuine appreciation. "Did you build it yourself?"

I take the casserole from her, "Most of it. The original structure was here, but I gutted it, rebuilt from the inside out."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

"That's amazing." She sets Mason down, keeping a close eye on him as he toddles toward the stone fireplace where flames crackle behind a sturdy screen. "You must be very skilled."

I shrug, always uncomfortable with the praise. "Just work. I'll get plates."

In the kitchen, I set down the casserole and take a moment to breathe. What am I doing? I don't invite people into my home. I don't share meals. I don't make small talk with young mothers and their curious children.

But when I return to the living room with plates and cutlery, something shifts in my chest at the sight of them. Elisa kneels beside Mason near the fireplace, pointing out the carved animals on the mantel—small wooden figures I whittled during long winter evenings when the silence grew too heavy.

"Look, Mason. A bear, just like Mr. Carter."

The boy reaches toward one of the carvings and then looks back at his mother, asking permission. She nods, and he picks up the wooden bear, turning it over in his small hands with a look of wonder.

"You can call me Josh," I say, setting the plates on the coffee table. "Mr. Carter was my father."

I don't know why I offer this. I don't invite familiarity. But something about the formality of "Mr. Carter" in her mouth feels wrong.

She looks up, a strand of hair falling across her face. "Josh, then." She stands, smoothing her dress. "And please, call me Elisa."

Mason toddles over to me, holding up the wooden bear. "Josh bear," he declares, looking immensely pleased with himself.

And despite everything—despite all my towering walls and practiced distance—I find myself smiling at this small person who sees the world in such simple, clear terms.

"That's right, buddy," I say, my voice rougher than usual. "Josh bear."

Elisa watches this exchange with an expression I half-recognize, half don't—something soft and surprised and maybe a little sad. Then she clears her throat.

"The casserole will get cold. Shall we eat?"

I nod, and as I serve the simple meal onto plates, Mason climbs onto his mother's lap at my rarely-used dining table. And, as the last light fades from the sky outside my windows, I realize with startling clarity that this is the first time in twelve years I haven't eaten dinner alone.

And even more startling—I don't hate it.

Chapter 5 - Elisa

The casserole isn't anything special—just a simple pasta bake I threw together from supplies bought at Bell's General Store—but Josh is on his second helping. I watch him eat, the way he cuts each bite to the same size, the precision in his movements. He's a man of rituals, I think. Someone who finds comfort in order and routine.

Which makes it all the more surprising that he invited us in.

Mason squirms on my lap, more interested in playing with his rabbit than finishing his dinner. I've already eaten more than I should have, my stomach uncomfortably full. Morning sickness has mostly passed, replaced by a constant, low-grade heartburn that flares when I overeat. I press a hand discreetly to my belly, trying to ease the pressure.

"S'good," Josh says, nodding toward my now-empty plate. "Been a while since I had a home-cooked meal."

"Do you usually cook for yourself?" I ask, genuinely curious about his life up here, so isolated from everything.

He shrugs one powerful shoulder. "Simple stuff. Nothing like this."

"It's just a casserole," I demur, but I'm pleased by the compliment. "Mason helped, didn't you, baby?"

Mason looks up at the sound of his name, then grins and nods enthusiastically, though his "help" consisted mainly of dropping pasta into the boiling water one piece at a time while I hovered nervously to prevent burns.

Josh's mouth quirks in his classic almost-smile. "Good job, buddy."

The praise makes Mason beam and something inside me aches at how easily he responds to male attention. Jordan was never interested in Mason, viewing him as an inconvenience at best, a competitor for my attention at worst. The closest thing to fatherly interaction Mason ever got was being ignored rather than yelled at.

"You're very patient with him," I observe, watching Josh carefully wipe his plate

clean with a piece of bread. "Not everyone is."

He looks up, those dark eyes suddenly unreadable. "Kids are easy. They say what they mean. Do what they feel." He pauses, then adds, "Adults are the complicated ones."

There's a weight to his words, a history I can sense but can't decipher. I wonder, not for the first time, what drove this man to such solitude. What made him build walls so high that even the townspeople seem to keep their distance?

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

Mason breaks the silence by yawning hugely, then rubbing his eyes with balled fists.

"Someone's getting tired," I murmur, brushing his curls back from his forehead. "We should probably head back soon."

Josh nods but makes no move to clear the table or usher us out. Instead, he asks, "How was town?"

"Good." I shift Mason to a more comfortable position. "I talked to Marge at the store—she's quite a character."

"That's one word for her."

"She was helpful, though. Told me who to talk to about jobs, where to find things we need." I hesitate, then add, "And warned me to steer clear of the 'mountain hermit' who doesn't like visitors."

Josh's eyebrow raises slightly. "That right?"

"She seemed surprised when I mentioned you'd helped us." I can't resist adding, "Said something about Carter men being trouble, but you didn't seem like trouble to me."

His expression shutters immediately, and I regret bringing it up. "Marge has a long memory," he says after a moment.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry—"

"You didn't." He stands, gathering our plates. "Small towns. Everyone knows everyone's business. Or thinks they do."

I nod, understanding all too well. "That's partly why I chose Cedar Falls, actually. I wanted somewhere small, somewhere I could... disappear, I guess. Become someone new." The admission slips out before I can stop it.

Josh pauses, plates in hand, staring at me with those piercing eyes. "Running from something?"

The question is direct, but his tone isn't accusatory. Still, I feel myself tense, old defenses rising.

"Isn't everyone?" I counter.

He holds my gaze for a long moment, then nods once, a gesture of acknowledgment—or perhaps recognition. He takes the dishes to the kitchen, and I hear water running in the sink.

"You don't have to wash up," I call. "You provided the venue, I'll clean."

"Already done," he replies, returning to the living room. He seems at a loss now that the meal is over, like he's not sure what the protocol is for having guests in a home that never sees them.

Mason has gone limp against me, his breathing deepening toward sleep. The fireplace's warmth and his heavy weight are making me drowsy too, the constant vigilance I've maintained for months now suspended in this cozy cabin with its taciturn owner.

"He likes you," I say, nodding toward my sleeping son. "He doesn't usually warm up

to people so quickly."

Josh's expression softens as he looks at Mason. "He's a good kid."

"The best," I agree, kissing the top of his head. "I worry sometimes, though..." I trail off, not sure why I'm about to confide in this near-stranger.

Josh settles back into his chair, surprisingly at ease with the silence. He doesn't prompt me to continue, doesn't fill the gap with meaningless words. He just waits, patient as the mountain itself.

And maybe that's why I find myself speaking again. "I worry about him not having siblings close to his age. I always wanted a big family, kids close enough to be friends growing up."

It's a careful approach to the subject that's been weighing on me all day—the secret I've been carrying for sixteen weeks, the reason I finally found the courage to leave Jordan.

Josh's brow furrows slightly. "He's young. Plenty of time for that."

I take a deep breath, my heart hammering against my ribs. "Not as much time as you might think."

His eyes narrow, and he arches his eyebrows.

"I'm pregnant," I whisper, the words feeling strange in my mouth. I've never said them aloud before, not even to myself. "About four months along."

Josh goes very still, his gaze dropping briefly to my belly, then back to my face. I can't read his expression—surprise, certainly, but beyond that, I have no idea what

he's thinking.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

"The father..." he begins, then stops, as if uncertain whether he has the right to ask.

"Doesn't know," I finish for him. "And I plan to keep it that way."

Understanding dawns in his eyes, along with something darker—anger, perhaps, though I don't think it's directed at me. "That's why you left. Why you came here."

It's not a question, but I nod anyway. "I found out I was pregnant, and I just... I couldn't do it anymore. Couldn't let another child grow up in that environment." I swallow hard, memories threatening to surface. "Mason deserves better. They both do."

Josh is quiet for a long moment, processing this information. Then he says, simply, "Yes. They do."

There's such conviction in those three words that my eyes sting suddenly with unshed tears. I blink them back, focusing on the steady rise and fall of Mason's chest against mine.

"I don't even know if it's a boy or girl yet," I continue, needing to fill the silence. "Part of me hopes for a girl—someone different, a new experience. But then I worry they won't be as close as two brothers might be."

"Brothers aren't always close," Josh says, a rough edge to his voice I haven't heard before.

I look up, surprised by his tone. "Do you... do you have siblings?"

He stares into the fire, the flames reflecting in his dark eyes. For a moment, I think he won't answer. Then, "A brother. Riley. Five years older."

"And you're not close?" I venture.

Josh's jaw tightens. "Haven't spoken in twenty years."

The finality in his voice should discourage further questions, but something makes me press on. "May I ask why?"

He glances at me, then back at the fire. "He left. When I was fourteen, he turned eighteen and joined the military. Got out of our father's house the first chance he had." His hands, resting on the arms of his chair, curl into fists. "Left me behind."

The pain in those three words is so raw, so familiar, that I feel them deep in my bones.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

Josh shrugs, a deliberate loosening of his shoulders. "Ancient history."

But we both know it isn't. Some wounds never fully heal, just scab over, ready to bleed fresh at the slightest touch.

"Is he still in the military?" I ask, sensing there's more to the story.

Josh makes a sound that might be a laugh, but there's no humor in it. "No. Ironically enough, he lives right here in Cedar Falls. Has a garage in town. Fixes cars, motorcycles."

This surprises me. "You live in the same town and don't speak?"

"Cedar Falls isn't that small. And I stay up here, he stays down there. Works out fine."

"Don't you ever want to... I don't know, clear the air? Make peace?"

"Some things can't be forgiven."

I nod, not pushing further. Who am I to question his grudges when I'm running from my own past? We all have our reasons for the walls we build.

"Anyway," he says, clearly wanting to change the subject, "your kids'll be fine. Close in age, they'll bond. Brothers, sisters—doesn't matter much."

"I hope so." I stroke Mason's cheek gently. "I want him to have what I never did—someone who's always in his corner. I was an only child, and after my parents died, there was just... no one."

"When?" he asks.

"I was nineteen. Car accident." I try to keep my voice steady. "I dropped out of college and took whatever jobs I could find. That's when I met Mason's father. He seemed so stable, so sure of himself. Exactly what I needed." My mouth twists in a bitter smile. "Until he wasn't."

Josh nods, requiring no further explanation. We sit in silence for a while, the fire crackling, Mason's soft breathing the only other sound. There's something oddly comforting about Josh's presence—his lack of platitudes, his acceptance of hard truths without trying to soften them.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

"It's getting late," I say finally, reluctant to break the spell but aware of how long we've imposed on his solitude. "We should go back to our cabin."

Josh looks at his watch, then out the window where full darkness has fallen. "It's after nine. Path's not lit between here and your place."

"Oh." I hadn't realized how much time had passed. "I have my phone. The flashlight—"

"It's steep in parts. Tricky even in daylight with a kid." He hesitates, then adds, "You could stay. If you want."

The offer catches me completely off guard. "Stay? Here?"

He nods toward Mason. "He's already out. The guest room has a double bed. Clean sheets."

"You have a guest room?" I can't keep the surprise from my voice.

One corner of his mouth lifts in that almost-smile. "Irony, I know. Never used it."

I should say no. Should gather Mason up and make the short trek back to our cabin, where the generator hums and the woodstove needs feeding. I barely know this man, this mountain hermit with his gruff manner and guarded eyes.

But Mason is heavy with sleep, and the thought of disturbing him, of navigating the dark path while carrying him, suddenly seems exhausting. And beneath that is

something else—a strange reluctance to leave this moment, this connection, however tenuous.

"If you're sure it's not an imposition," I finally tell him.

"Wouldn't have offered if it was."

I nod, accepting both his logic and his hospitality. "Thank you, then. We'll head back first thing in the morning."

"No rush," he says, rising from his chair. "I'll show you the room."

I stand, adjusting Mason in my arms. Josh moves as if to help, then seems to think better of it, his hands dropping back to his sides. He leads me down a short hallway to a room at the back of the cabin.

The guest room is simple but beautiful—a handcrafted bed with a patchwork quilt, a small dresser, and a rocking chair by the window. Like everything in Josh's home, it speaks of craftsmanship and care.

"Bathroom's across the hall," he says, hovering in the doorway. "Towels in the cabinet. If you need anything..." He trails off, awkward again now that we're standing in what is essentially a bedroom.

"We'll be fine," I assure him. "And really, thank you. For dinner, for letting us stay."

He nods once. "Night, then."

"Goodnight, Josh."

He turns to go, then pauses, looking back at me over his shoulder. "Elisa?"

"Yes?"

"Your secret's safe. The baby, I mean. And whatever else you're running from." His eyes meet mine, steady and certain. "No one will hear it from me."

"Thank you," I whisper.

He nods again, then disappears down the hallway, his footsteps fading toward the other end of the cabin.

I lay Mason gently on the bed, removing his shoes and tucking him under the quilt. He sighs in his sleep, curling around Hoppy, entirely at peace. I watch him for a moment, overwhelmed by love and fear in equal measure. Then I slip off my shoes and lie beside him, on top of the covers.

In this stranger's home, surrounded by evidence of his solitary life, I should feel out of place. Anxious. Ready to flee at the first sign of danger, as I've trained myself to be.

Instead, I feel my muscles relaxing, tension draining from my body like water. Perhaps it's exhaustion from the move, constant vigilance, and carrying not just one life but two. Perhaps it's the simple security of solid walls and a locked door, of being somewhere Jordan could never find us.

Or perhaps it's knowing that across the hallway, in another room, is a man who looked at my broken pieces and didn't try to fix them or use them against me—just acknowledged them and offered what he could. His help. A safe place to sleep. A promise of silence.

It's more than I expected to find in Cedar Falls. More than I dared hope for.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

As sleep claims me, my hand rests over the small swell of my belly. And for the first time in months, I don't dream of running.

Chapter 6 - Josh

I can't sleep. The ceiling above my bed has a knot in the pine that looks like an eye, staring down at me. I've stared back at it for twelve years, counting its rings when sleep won't come. Tonight, I get to twenty-seven before I give up and throw off the covers.

My cabin has never felt smaller than it does right now, knowing she's just down the hall. Her and her boy. And the unborn child she's carrying. Three lives under my roof when for years there's barely been one.

I move silently to the window, parting the curtain to look out at the night. The moon is nearly full, casting silver light across the clearing, making the pines look like sentinels standing watch. Riley and I used to sneak out on nights like this, when we were kids. Before everything went to hell. Before he left.

"He left. When I was fourteen, he turned eighteen and joined the military. Got out of our father's house the first chance he had. Left me behind."

My own words echo in my head. Twenty years and the betrayal still tastes like copper in my mouth. But tonight, for the first time, another thought slides in alongside the familiar anger. Would I have done the same?

If I'd been the older brother, if I'd turned eighteen first, would I have taken the first

ticket out and never looked back?

I press my forehead against the cool glass, letting the truth I've never wanted to face rise to the surface. Maybe. Maybe I would have. Because living in that house was like drowning an inch at a time, day after day. My father's rage was a storm that never passed, just gathered strength in the eerie calms between downpours.

And Riley—he took the worst of it, for years. Stood between me and our father more times than I can count. Until one day, he just... couldn't anymore.

I'd never considered it that way before. Never allowed myself to see his leaving as anything but abandonment. But now, with this woman and her son sleeping under my roof, having fled their own storm, I'm forced to look at it differently.

Running isn't always cowardice. Sometimes it's survival.

Still. He could have taken me with him. Could have found a way. Could have at least stayed in touch, made sure I was okay. Four years until I could follow him out the door—four years that stretched like decades, where each day was a gamble on which version of my father would come home.

But she wants her sons to be close. To have each other's backs. She fled to give them that chance, to break the cycle before it claimed another generation.

I move away from the window and sit on the edge of my bed, elbows on knees, head in hands. Twenty years of silence between brothers. Twenty years of pretending Riley Carter doesn't exist, even as his garage sits on Main Street, even as I hear snippets of his life from reluctant townsfolk who know better than to mention him to my face.

I wonder if he ever looks up at the mountain and thinks of me. If he regrets how things ended. If he ever drove halfway up the road to my cabin before turning back.

Eventually, I must drift off, because I wake to pale dawn light filtering through the curtains. For a moment, I'm disoriented—I never oversleep, never miss the first light. Then I remember: guests. Elisa. Mason. The conversation that dredged up decades of buried history.

The house is silent, but when I step into the hallway, I can sense their presence—a subtle shift in the air, a warmth that wasn't there before. The guest room door is still closed. They're still sleeping.

In the kitchen, I move on autopilot, starting coffee, pulling out ingredients for breakfast. I'm not much of a cook, but I can manage eggs and bacon, toast and jam. It seems important, suddenly, to offer them a proper meal before they head back to Hargrove's cabin with its temperamental appliances and drafty windows.

As I crack eggs into a bowl, I find myself planning improvements for that place. A proper weather strip for the door. Insulation for the gaps in the floorboards. Maybe a new fitting for the woodstove to make it more efficient. Small things that would make a big difference when winter comes.

Winter. Which means they're planning to stay that long. The thought settles strangely in my chest—not unwelcome, but unfamiliar. Like a bird landing on an outstretched hand when you've only ever known the weight of tools and lumber.

I hear a door open and soft footsteps in the hallway. I straighten, spatula in hand, and turn to find Elisa standing in the kitchen doorway. Her hair is mussed from sleep, her dress wrinkled.

"Morning," I say, my voice rough from disuse.

"Good morning." She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, "I thought I smelled coffee."

I nod toward the pot. "Help yourself. Cups in the cabinet above."

She moves to the coffee pot. "Mason's still asleep. He had a restless night—new place, I guess."

"Understandable." I turn back to the stove, flipping bacon in the cast iron pan. "Breakfast'll be ready soon."

"You didn't have to cook for us."

I shrug. "Already making it for myself. Just added more."

"Still. Thank you." She pours coffee into a mug, then stands uncertainly in the middle of the kitchen as if unsure where she's allowed to be. "About last night..."

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

I tense, waiting.

"I'm sorry if I pushed too much. About your brother, your past. It wasn't my place to pry."

I keep my eyes on the bacon, watching it curl and crisp. "You didn't pry. I offered the information."

"Still." She sets her coffee down and steps closer into my peripheral vision. "I know what it's like to have parts of your history you don't want to discuss. I shouldn't have pressed."

I turn to look at her. In the morning light, with sleep still clinging to her edges, she seems both stronger and more fragile than she did last night. Like a sword that's been tempered by fire but could still shatter if struck the wrong way.

"It's fine," I say, meaning it. "Sometimes it's good to... put it out there. Makes it less powerful."

She nods, understanding in her eyes. "Yes. Exactly."

I transfer the bacon to a paper towel and start on the eggs, needing the motion, the focus of cooking.

"My father was a mean drunk," I hear myself say, the words coming easier now. "Not all the time—that was the trick of it. Sometimes, he was charming. Funny, even. But when he drank, which was most nights, he'd turn. Like a switch flipped."

Elisa is very still, listening.

"Riley protected me when he could. Took the hits sometimes. But he was just a kid himself." The eggs sizzle as they hit the hotpan. "When he turned eighteen, he enlisted. Left the same day. No warning, no goodbye. Just a note saying he'd send for me when he could."

"But he never did," she says softly.

I shake my head. "He wrote a few times. Called once. But he never came back, not while our father was alive. And by the time the old man died, I was long gone too." I push the eggs around the pan. "Spent years moving from town to town, working construction, learning the trade. Never stayed anywhere long enough to put down roots."

"Until you came back."

"Yes." I scoop eggs onto plates and lay bacon beside them. "Came back twelve years ago, bought this place, fixed it up. Riley moved back a few years later. Opened his garage in town."

"Have you ever... tried to talk to him?" she asks, taking the plates from me and carrying them to the table.

I grab toast from the toaster and butter it. "He showed up here once, about two years ago. Wanted to 'clear the air,' he said."

"And?"

"I told him to get off my property." The memory is sharp—Riley standing on my porch, older, hair graying at the temples, the same eyes as our father. The rage that

had surged through me, white-hot and blinding. "He left. Hasn't tried again."

She's quiet for a moment, processing this. Then, "Do you think you could ever forgive him?"

The question hangs in the air between us. In the silence, I hear small feet padding down the hallway. A moment later, Mason appears in the doorway, rubbing his eyes with balled fists, Hoppy dangling from one hand.

"Mama?" he says, spotting Elisa.

"Good morning, baby." She moves to him, scooping him up. "Did you sleep well in Josh's house?"

He nods, then spots me and offers a shy smile. "Josh bear."

"Morning, buddy," I say, surprised at how naturally the greeting comes. "Hungry?"

Another nod, more enthusiastic this time.

"I'll get him settled," Elisa says, carrying him to the table. To my surprise, he squirms to be put down, then climbs into a chair by himself, proudly displaying his independence.

I bring the last of the food to the table—jam, a pitcher of orange juice I found in the back of the refrigerator—and sit across from them. For a moment, no one speaks. Then Mason picks up a piece of bacon and takes a bite, his face lighting up with delight.

"Good!" he declares.

Elisa laughs, the sound bright in the morning quiet. "Yes, it is. What do we say to Josh?"

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

"Thank you," Mason says around his mouthful of bacon.

"You're welcome," I reply, and I'm struck by how normal this feels. How right, somehow, to have them at my table, in my space.

I watch Elisa help Mason with his eggs, cutting them into manageable pieces, wiping his chin when juice dribbles. Her earlier question still hovers between us, unanswered.

"Do you think you could ever forgive him?"

"I don't know," I say finally, meeting her eyes over Mason's head. "About Riley. Forgiveness. I don't know if I can."

She nods, not pushing, just accepting. "It's not a simple thing. Forgiveness."

"No." I take a sip of coffee. "But I've been thinking. About what you said, about your boys."

Her hand moves to her belly.

"Family's complicated," I continue, taking my time to choose my words. "But it matters. Having someone who shares your history, who knows where you came from. Even when it's... difficult."

"Yes," she says softly. "It does."

"I wouldn't want your sons to end up like Riley and me. Twenty years of silence." I set down my coffee cup. "Whatever happens between them—fights, disagreements—they should always find their way back to each other."

Elisa's eyes shine bright. "That's what I want for them. To know they always have each other, no matter what."

I nod, unable to articulate the rest of what I'm feeling—the regret for years wasted in anger, the hollow space where a brother should be. Instead, I offer more toast, refill her coffee cup.

"Will you go back to your cabin today?" I ask, changing the subject.

She hesitates, then nods. "We should. I've taken advantage of your hospitality enough."

"It's not—" I stop, unsure how to explain that their presence doesn't feel like an imposition. That in some strange way, it feels like the opposite. "You're welcome to stay longer. If you want."

Surprise flickers across her face. "That's very kind, but—"

"The generator needs constant refueling," I continue, practical reasons being easier to voice than the inexplicable emptiness I feel at the thought of them leaving. "And that woodstove is temperamental. At least here there's reliable heat, electricity."

"Are you sure? We'd be in your way."

"I'm gone most days, working. Cabin's empty anyway."

Mason, finished with his breakfast, slides from his chair and toddles over to the

window, pressing his nose against the glass to look out at the forest.

"It would be easier," she admits finally. "At least until I can find work, save up for a better place." She meets my eyes. "But I'd insist on contributing—cooking, cleaning, whatever you need."

"Don't need anything," I say.

She smiles, "Everyone needs something, Josh. Even mountain hermits."

I can't argue with that, though I'm not sure I could name what I need. I haven't allowed myself to consider it for a very long time.

"So," she says, "is it settled? We'll stay? Just until I get on my feet, find a job, a better place."

I nod, relief washing through me. "It's settled."

Mason turns from the window, apparently having made his own decision. He marches over to me, Hoppy clutched in one hand, and raises his arms in the universal child's gesture for "pick me up."

I freeze, looking to Elisa for guidance. She seems as surprised as I am but nods encouragingly.

Slowly, as if handling something infinitely precious and breakable, I lift Mason onto my lap. He immediately settles against my chest, a warm, solid weight, and holds up his rabbit for my inspection.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

"Hoppy hungry," he announces.

"Is he?" I ask, my voice oddly rough. "What does Hoppy like to eat?"

"Carrots," Mason says definitively. "And ice cream."

"Quite a combination," I observe, earning a giggle.

Across the table, Elisa watches us, and there's something in her tender look. Something that might be hope or fear, or both intertwined so tightly they've become the same emotion.

"This will work," she says softly, as much to herself as to me. "For all of us."

And despite every instinct honed over years of solitude, despite all the walls I've built and maintained, I find myself believing her.

For the first time in a very long time, I want to believe.

Chapter 7 - Elisa

After breakfast, I insist on washing the dishes while Josh clears the table. We move around each other in the kitchen with an ease that feels strangely familiar for people who met just two days ago. Mason sits on the floor nearby, arranging wooden coasters in careful patterns and chatting to Hoppy about his architectural masterpiece.

"I should get our things from the other cabin," I say, rinsing soap from a plate. "If

we're staying here."

Josh nods, wiping down the table with methodical strokes. "I'll drive you over. No sense in carrying everything."

"You don't have to—"

"It'll take ten minutes with the truck," he interrupts, his tone matter-of-fact. "An hour on foot."

I can't argue with his logic. "Thank you."

He nods again, accepting my gratitude without comment. I'm beginning to understand this about him—his tendency toward practical solutions, his discomfort with praise or thanks. It's as if he believes helping is simply what one does, not something that requires acknowledgment.

How different from Jordan, who kept a mental ledger of every favor, every kind act, tallying them up for later collection with interest.

"I need to stop in town later," Josh says, breaking into my thoughts. "Supplies for a job."

"I need it, too. I have to find a job as quickly as possible. Can you take me?"

"Yes. You need work. Mason might also like the park next to the library."

The thought that he's considered what might please my son is new. I'm not used to it. "That would be wonderful. Thank you."

Josh disappears into another room, leaving me to finish the dishes and wonder at the

strange turn my life has taken. Two days ago, I was driving a packed Honda through unfamiliar mountain roads, my stomach knotted with fear and uncertainty. Now I'm standing in a stranger's kitchen—no, not a stranger anymore—planning a day trip to town with him.

Is this reckless? Trusting him so quickly, accepting his help, moving into his home? Jordan would say so. Jordan would call me naive, foolish, setting myself up for disappointment or worse.

But Jordan also told me I was worthless, stupid, lucky to have him. And those were lies.

I press a hand to my growing belly, feeling the slight firmness beneath my palm. "What do you think, little one?" I whisper. "Are we making the right choice?"

No answer comes, of course, but I feel steadier nonetheless. My instincts got us out of Portland, away from Jordan. I have to trust they'll guide me now.

Josh returns wearing a different flannel shirt, this one a deep forest green that brings out flecks of amber in his dark eyes. He's combed his hair, I notice—a small concession to the trip to town, perhaps.

"Ready when you are," he says.

I nod, drying my hands on a dish towel. "Mason, honey, we're going to get our things from the other cabin. Can you put on your shoes?"

Mason looks up from his coaster construction, his expression serious. "Hoppy too?"

"Of course. Hoppy too."

This settled, Mason scrambles to his feet and runs to the guest room where his shoes wait. I follow, helping him with the Velcro straps, smoothing his wild curls into some semblance of order. My own reflection in the small mirror above the dresser gives me pause—I look different somehow. Less haunted around the eyes, though it's only been forty-eight hours since we arrived in Cedar Falls.

When we emerge, Josh is waiting by the door, keys in hand. He holds it open for us, a courtesy so automatic it speaks of ingrained manners rather than conscious effort. Mason marches out proudly ahead of me, Hoppy clutched in one hand, and I follow, smiling at his confidence.

The morning is glorious—clear blue sky, air scented with pine and wildflowers, birdsong filling the spaces between trees. Josh's truck sits in the driveway, sunlight glinting off its blue paint. It's older but meticulously maintained, like everything else in his life.

"Do you have a car seat?" he asks, suddenly hesitant.

"In my car, at the other cabin," I assure him. "We can transfer it."

He nods, relieved and we climb into the truck. The interior smells of pine and leather and something indefinably masculine—sawdust, maybe, or the soap I've noticed on Josh's skin. Mason sits between us on the bench seat, seemingly delighted by this new adventure.

The drive to Hargrove's cabin takes less than five minutes. Josh parks beside my Honda, which looks small and vulnerable next to his sturdy truck.

"I'll get the car seat," he says, climbing out. "You grab what you need from inside."

I nod, lifting Mason from the seat and setting him on the ground. He immediately runs toward the cabin. I follow more slowly, taking in the shabby structure with new eyes. After less than two days, it already feels like a distant memory—a way station rather than a destination.

Inside, I gather our belongings, which thankfully we'd barely unpacked. Clothes, toiletries, Mason's toys and books, my meager collection of kitchen supplies. The few groceries I'd purchased in town. It all fits into two duffel bags and a box, our lives distilled to their portable essence.

Josh appears in the doorway, watching as I zip the last bag closed. "That everything?"

"Yes." I straighten, pushing hair from my face. "Not much to show for twenty-four years of life, is it?"

"Sometimes carrying less weight makes it easier to move forward."

The simple wisdom of this statement catches me off guard. I nod, unexpectedly touched. "I suppose that's true."

He steps forward and picks up both duffel bags before I can protest. "I've got these. You take the box."

Outside, he loads our belongings into the truck bed while I settle Mason in his newly installed car seat. The generator sits silent beside the cabin, a reminder of our first interaction—was it really only two days ago?

"Should I leave a note for Mr. Hargrove?" I ask as Josh closes the tailgate. "About breaking the lease?"

He shakes his head. "I'll talk to him. He owes me for work on his house in town anyway. We can settle up."

"I don't want to cost you—"

"You won't." His tone leaves no room for argument. "Hargrove's been renting that deathtrap for years knowing full well it's barely habitable. Consider it a public service, taking it off the market."

I laugh despite myself. "When you put it that way."

The drive to town takes about fifteen minutes, winding down the mountain road with its spectacular views of the valley below. Cedar Falls reveals itself gradually—first a church steeple, then rooftops, finally the full panorama of the small town nestled between mountains and river. It's picture-postcard perfect, the kind of place that appears unchanged by time.

"Pretty," I say, gazing out the window.

Josh grunts in agreement, his eyes on the road as we descend the final curve. "Different from Portland."

"In every possible way."

"Town's small. Everyone knows everyone's business. But they're good people, mostly. Will leave you alone if that's what you want."

"Is that what you want?" The question slips out before I can stop it. "To be left

alone?"

His hands tighten slightly on the steering wheel. For a moment, I think he won't answer. Then, "It was. For a long time."

Was. Past tense. The implication has my heart racing, beads of sweat trickling down the curve of my breasts.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

We pull onto Main Street, which is exactly as a small-town main street should be—storefronts with striped awnings, hanging flower baskets, benches placed at strategic intervals. A hardware store, a bookshop, the flower shop with a cheerful display of sunflowers in the window.

And directly across from it, a garage with a sign that reads "Riley's Auto Repair." The letters are bold against the red brick building, impossible to miss.

Josh's jaw tightens as we pass, his eyes fixed deliberately forward. His knuckles go white on the steering wheel, the only visible sign of his inner turmoil.

"Is that...?" I begin hesitantly.

"Riley's place," he confirms, voice flat.

I study his profile—the hard set of his jaw, the slight muscle ticking in his cheek. Twenty years of silence between brothers. Twenty years of avoiding, pretending, maintaining a wound that never heals.

"Josh," I say carefully, "have you ever thought about just... talking to him? Clearing the air?"

He shoots me a sharp glance. "Told you. I tried that."

"No," I correct gently. "You said he tried that. Two years ago. And you told him to get off your property."

He says nothing, eyes back on the road, but I can tell he's listening.

"I know it's not my place," I continue. "I've known you for all of forty-eight hours. But..." I take a deep breath. "Life's too short for twenty-year grudges. Especially with family."

"It was harder than you might think," he says, but there's less edge to his voice than I expected.

"I know." I look back at the garage, now receding behind us. "And I know he left you when you needed him. And that was wrong. But I also know what it's like to be trapped somewhere, to feel like the only way to survive is to escape."

Josh pulls into a parking space and cuts the engine but makes no move to exit the truck. We stay still for a moment, the only sound Mason's soft humming from the back seat.

"What if it was Mason?" I ask quietly. "What if, twenty years from now, something had come between him and this baby?" I rest my hand on my belly. "I already know you'd want them to find their way back to each other."

Josh stares straight ahead, his profile carved in stone. Then, almost imperceptibly, his shoulders slump. "You fight dirty," he mutters.

I smile slightly. "I'm a mother. We do what works."

He sighs, a sound that seems to come from deep within him. "I'm not saying I'll talk to him. Just... I'll think about it."

"That's all I'm asking." I reach over and squeeze his hand briefly before drawing back. "Thank you."

He nods once, jaw still tight, then opens his door. "Flower shop's down the block. Want me to take Mason to the park while you check it out?"

The offer surprises me. "Are you sure?"

"Wouldn't have offered if I wasn't." He glances at my son in the rearview mirror. "Kid should run around a bit. Been cooped up in cabins and cars."

I nod, touched by his consideration. "If you don't mind, that would be wonderful. The flower shop is called..."

"Blooming Wonders," he supplies. "Christine's place. Next to the bookstore."

"You know the owner?"

"Small town," he reminds me. "Park's two blocks that way. Meet us when you're done?"

"Perfect." I climb out and help Mason from his car seat. "Baby, you're going to the park with Josh while Mommy checks out a job. Is that okay?"

Mason considers this, looking up at Josh with solemn eyes. Then he nods and holds up his arms in the universal child's gesture for "carry me." To my surprise, Josh complies without hesitation, lifting Mason onto his shoulders.

"We'll be fine," he assures me, one large hand steadying Mason's leg. "Take your time."

I watch them walk away, my son perched high on this mountain of a man's shoulders, chattering happily about the birds overhead. The sight makes something warm unfurl in my chest—something I'm not ready to name but can't deny feeling.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

Blooming Wonders is exactly as charming as its name suggests—a small shop bursting with color and fragrance. Buckets of fresh flowers line the walls, arrangements in various stages of completion cover the work tables, and the air is sweet with the scent of roses and lilies.

A bell jingles as I enter, and a young woman looks up from behind the counter. She's about my age, with curly red hair piled in a messy bun and freckles scattered across her nose. Her green apron is dotted with water spots and bits of greenery.

"Hi there!" she calls cheerfully. "Just browsing, or can I help you with something specific?"

"Actually," I begin, approaching the counter, "I spoke with Marge Bell yesterday, and she mentioned you might be looking for help."

The woman's face lights up. "Oh! Are you Elisa? Marge called this morning to say you might stop by." She wipes her hands on her apron and extends one to me. "I'm Christine. This is my shop."

"Nice to meet you." We shake hands, and I'm immediately struck by her enthusiasm. "Yes, I'm Elisa Lowell. I just moved to Cedar Falls, and I'm looking for work."

"Perfect timing!" Christine gestures around the shop. "I've been running this place solo for two years, and I'm absolutely swamped. Wedding season is ramping up, plus regular orders, plus I'm trying to expand into houseplants." She leans forward. "Between us, I haven't had a day off in three months."

I laugh, warming to her immediately. "That sounds exhausting."

"It is! But I love it. Marge mentioned you have a little one?"

"Yes, my son Mason. He's almost three."

Christine's expression softens. "Oh, I love that age. They're so curious about everything." She arranges some flowers in a nearby vase, then adds casually, "I've always wanted kids. Just haven't found the right person to have them with, you know?"

I nod, unsure how to respond to this personal admission from someone I've just met.

"Sorry," she says, catching my expression. "I tend to overshare. Small-town life—you forget how to have normal boundaries." She laughs self-deprecatingly. "Anyway, the job! It's part-time to start, maybe full-time eventually if things keep growing. Basic retail stuff, plus I'd train you on arrangements. Do you have any experience with flowers?"

"Not professionally," I admit. "But I've always loved gardening. My mother had the most beautiful rose garden when I was growing up."

Christine nods encouragingly. "That's a start! Honestly, the most important thing is reliability and being good with people. The flower skills I can teach."

"I'm definitely reliable," I assure her. "And I'm a quick learner."

"Perfect!" She claps her hands together. "When can you start?"

The question catches me off guard. "You're offering me the job? Just like that?"

"Trust me, I've been desperate for help," Christine says with a laugh. "And Marge spoke highly of you. That counts for a lot in Cedar Falls."

"Wow. That's... thank you." I feel a weight lift from my shoulders—one worry addressed, at least. "I could start tomorrow, if that works?"

"Tomorrow's perfect." Christine begins writing on a notepad. "Let's say nine to two to start? We can adjust the schedule as needed. And of course, if you ever need to bring your little boy in an emergency, that's fine. I love kids."

Her eyes take on a wistful quality. "My sister just had her second. I swear, every time I visit them, my biological clock ticks louder." She catches herself and laughs again. "And I'm oversharing again! Sorry. It's just nice to see a new face around here, especially someone close to my age."

"Don't apologize," I say, genuinely touched by her openness. "It's refreshing, actually. And thank you for being so understanding about Mason."

"Of course!" She hands me the paper with my schedule. "So, tomorrow at nine? I'll show you the ropes and introduce you to our regular customers."

"I'll be here." I tuck the paper into my pocket, still slightly dazed by how easily this fell into place.

"Great!" Christine comes around the counter and walks me to the door. "And welcome to Cedar Falls, Elisa. I think you're going to like it here."

As I step back onto the sunlit sidewalk, I'm inclined to agree with her. The mountain air is fresh and clean, the town is picture-perfect, and in less than forty-eight hours, I've found both housing and employment. It feels almost too good to be true—like the universe is finally balancing the scales after years of hardship.

I start toward the park, eager to share my good news with Josh and Mason. As I walk, I pass Riley's Auto Repair again. Through the open bay doors, I can see a man bent over the engine of a truck. Even from a distance, the resemblance to Josh is striking—the same broad shoulders, the same dark hair, though Riley's is cut shorter and flecked with gray.

I pause, thinking of the twenty years of silence between them. Of Josh's pain, still raw after all this time. Of the walls he's built around himself, walls that somehow, miraculously, he's beginning to lower for Mason and me.

Some wounds can only heal when they're exposed to air, I think. Some bridges can only be rebuilt if someone takes the first step.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

But that's a revelation for another day. Right now, I have a job, a place to stay, and somewhere ahead, a man and a little boy waiting for me in the park. My new life is taking shape, piece by piece, in ways I never could have imagined when I fled Portland two days ago.

And for the first time in longer than I can remember, I'm looking forward to tomorrow.

Chapter 8 - Josh

"Higher, Josh bear! Higher!"

Mason's laughter rings out across the small park as I push him on the swing, his little body soaring through the air with each push. The nickname no longer bothers me—if anything, it's become a strange point of pride, this small person's unwavering trust in me after just two days.

"Not too high," I caution, moderating my pushes despite his pleas. "Your mama would kill me if you fell off."

"No kill," Mason says seriously, twisting to look at me over his shoulder. "Mama nice."

I can't help the chuckle that escapes me. "Yeah, buddy. Your mama is nice."

Nice doesn't begin to cover it. Elisa Lowell walked into my life forty-eight hours ago with nothing but determination and hope, fleeing something dark enough to make her

eyes go distant whenever it's mentioned. And somehow, in that brief time, she's managed to crack open parts of me I thought were permanently sealed.

Like this—playing in a public park, in full view of curious townspeople, pushing a toddler on a swing and not minding the stares. Two days ago, I would have rather cut off my own arm than be so visible, so... vulnerable.

"Again!" Mason demands as the swing slows. "More push!"

"Say please," I remind him, surprising myself with this automatic parenting instinct I didn't know I possessed.

"Peeeeease," he draws out dramatically, and I comply, sending him skyward again.

Over by the sandbox, a cluster of mothers watch us, whispering behind their hands. I can imagine what they're saying. Josh Carter, the mountain hermit, playing babysitter to some woman's kid. The gossip will be all over town by dinnertime.

Strangely, I find I don't care. Let them talk. Let them wonder. None of it matters compares to the sound of Mason's uninhibited joy as he swings beneath the clear blue sky.

"Look! Mama!" Mason suddenly shouts, pointing past me.

I turn to see Elisa approaching across the grass. She's smiling—not the careful, guarded smile I've seen before, but something radiant and bright. The sunlight catches in her hair, turning the brown strands to gold at the edges, and for a moment I can't look away.

She's beautiful. Not just pretty or attractive, but beautiful in a way that makes everything around her seem more vibrant, more alive.

"Hi there!" she calls, waving as she draws nearer. "Looks like you two are having fun."

"Swing, Mama!" Mason announces proudly. "Josh bear push high!"

"I see that," she says, giving me a mock-stern look that melts into a genuine smile. "Not too high, I hope."

"Within safety parameters," I assure her, slowing the swing to a stop. Mason immediately scrambles off and runs to his mother, wrapping his arms around her legs.

"How did it go?" I ask, suddenly awkward now that she's here, unsure what to do with my hands. "At the flower shop."

Her smile widens. "I got the job! I start tomorrow, nine to two."

"That's great," I say, meaning it. There's something infectious about her happiness, something that makes me want to preserve it, protect it. "Christine's good people."

"She seems wonderful. A little... talkative, but sweet." Elisa laughs, the sound light and melodic. "She's already told me her entire life story and her views on child-rearing, despite not having any children yet."

"Sounds like Christine," I agree. "Shop's been doing well. Good place to work."

"I think so too." She looks down at Mason, stroking his curls affectionately. "And she's fine with me bringing this little guy in emergencies, which is a huge relief."

I nod, watching the easy affection between them, the natural way she touches her son, the absolute trust in his upturned face. Something shifts in my chest—a warming, an opening.

"Things are finally looking up," she continues, that radiance still emanating from her. "A job, a place to stay... it's more than I dared hope for when we drove into Cedar Falls."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

"I'm glad," I say, and I realize I mean that too, deeply and completely. I want things to work out for her, for Mason, for the baby she's carrying. I want them to be safe, to be happy.

To stay.

The thought blindsides me with its clarity, its certainty. I want them to stay. In Cedar Falls. In my cabin. In my life.

Mason tugs at my jeans, pulling me from this revelation. "Hungry, Josh bear."

"Are you now?" I ask, grateful for the distraction. "What do you think, Elisa? Lunch once we get to the cabin?"

"That sounds perfect." She hoists Mason onto her. "I'm starving, actually. Apparently job interviews make me hungry."

We walk toward Main Street, Mason now riding on my shoulders again at his insistence. The position gives me a legitimate reason to keep my distance from Elisa—a good thing, because I can't help but notice the swing of her hair, her rosy cheeks, the way her dress moves around her calves as she walks.

As we approach the truck, we have to pass Riley's garage again. I feel the familiar tightening in my gut, the instinctive tensing of muscles. But this time, I also feel something else—a weariness with this decades-old grudge, this weight I've been carrying for longer than Elisa has been alive.

I look at her, at the gentle swell of her belly where her second child grows, at Mason perched trustingly on my shoulders. Brothers who will grow up together, who will fight and make up and have each other's backs. Brothers who might drift apart as adults, who might hurt each other in ways that seem unforgivable.

Brothers who should always find their way back to each other.

"I'm going to talk to him," I say abruptly, stopping on the sidewalk.

Elisa halts beside me, clearly caught off guard. "What?"

"Riley. My brother." I nod toward the garage across the street. "I'm going to talk to him. Today."

Her eyes widen with surprise, then fill with something warmer—pride, maybe, or hope. "Are you sure?"

I'm not sure at all. The thought of facing Riley after all these years makes my palms sweat and my heart race. But I nod anyway. "Yeah. It's time."

She stares at me, searching for something—hesitation, perhaps, or insincerity. Whatever she sees must satisfy her, because she smiles "I think that's a wonderful decision," she says. "Do you want us to come with you, or...?"

"No." The answer comes quickly, instinctively. "This is something I need to do alone." I lift Mason from my shoulders and set him gently on the ground. "Would you mind taking the truck and heading back to the cabin? I'll probably need to walk afterward, clear my head."

"Of course." She takes the keys I offer. "We'll be there when you're ready."

"Don't wait up," I warn. "This might take a while. Or it might end in about thirty seconds with him telling me to go to hell."

She shakes her head. "I don't think it will. But either way, we'll be there."

The simple promise—_we'll be there_—hits me harder than I expect. When was the last time anyone was waiting for me? Anywhere? When was the last time my return mattered to anyone but myself?

"Thank you," I say.

She reaches up and, to my surprise, places her palm against my cheek. Her hand is small and warm, and I find myself leaning into the touch without meaning to.

"You're doing the right thing," she says softly. "No matter how it turns out."

I nod, unable to form words around the sudden tightness in my throat. Then I step back, breaking the contact before it can overwhelm me further.

"I'll see you later," I manage. "Save me some dinner."

"We will." She takes Mason's hand. "Say goodbye to Josh, baby."

"Bye, Josh bear!" Mason waves enthusiastically. "See soon!"

"See you soon, buddy," I echo.

I watch them walk to my truck, help Mason into his car seat, settle themselves inside. Elisa waves once more before pulling away from the curb, and I raise my hand in response, feeling strangely untethered as they drive out of sight.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

Then I turn toward Riley's garage, my heart pounding like I'm about to march into battle.

In some ways, I am.

The garage is busy—two cars up on lifts, another with its hood open, and the sound of metal on metal, of pneumatic tools, of a radio playing classic rock. I step through the open bay doors, the familiar smells of oil and gasoline and hot metal washing over me. So different from the scents of my work—sawdust, varnish, and fresh-cut lumber—yet familiar in their own way, a callback to childhood days spent watching our father work on engines before the drinking got bad.

A mechanic in blue coveralls glances up as I enter, then does a double-take.

"Can I help you?" he asks, though his tone suggests he already knows who I am.

"Looking for Riley," I say, my voice steadier than I feel.

The mechanic nods toward the back office, his eyes curious but not hostile. "In there. Doing paperwork."

I nod my thanks and move between the cars, aware of the other mechanics watching me, of the sudden drop in conversation level. Everyone in this garage knows who I am, knows the history—or thinks they do. Small towns have long memories and loose lips.

The office door is ajar. Through the gap, I can see Riley bent over a desk, a pen in

hand, his brow furrowed in concentration. He looks older than when I last saw him—more gray in his hair, deeper lines around his eyes. But the resemblance to our father is still there, in the set of his jaw, the shape of his nose.

I knock once on the doorframe. Riley looks up, and for a moment, he just stares, as if he can't quite believe what he's seeing.

"Josh," he says finally, his voice holding the same gravel-rough quality as mine. "This is... unexpected."

"Yeah." I step into the office but leave the door open, a tactical decision—harder to start shouting with an audience nearby. "Got a minute?"

Riley sets down his pen and leans back in his chair, his posture deliberately casual though I can see the tension on his shoulders. "For you? I've got as many as you need."

The sincerity in his tone catches me off guard. I'd expected wariness, defensiveness, maybe even anger. Not this careful hope.

"Won't take long," I say, still standing. "Just thought it was time we talked."

"I've thought that for about twenty years now," Riley replies, a hint of bitterness creeping in. "What changed your mind?"

I consider lying, saying something vague about time and perspective. But I find I want to be honest, even if it makes me vulnerable. "A woman. And her kid."

Riley's eyebrows rise in surprise. "You've met someone?"

"Not like that," I say quickly, though even as I deny it, I wonder if that's entirely true.

"New in town. Needed help. Got me thinking about family, brothers. The past."

Understanding dawns in Riley's eyes—eyes that are, I suddenly realize, exactly like mine. "Must be some woman."

"She is." The admission comes easily, naturally. "Anyway, I'm not here to talk about her. I'm here about us. About what happened."

Riley nods, his expression turning serious. "I've wanted to apologize for a long time, Josh. For leaving the way I did. For not coming back sooner. For... all of it."

"You left me with him," I say, the words coming out flatter than I feel them. "You knew what he was like, and you just... left."

Riley flinches as if I've struck him. "I know. I've lived with that every day since." He runs a hand through his hair—another gesture we share. "I told myself I was going to save up, get established, bring you to live with me. But then there was always another reason to delay—another deployment, not enough money, not enough space."

"You could have called. Written. Something." The old anger rises, familiar and hot. "Four years, Riley. Four fucking years with him getting worse every day."

"I know." He doesn't try to defend himself, which somehow makes it harder to stay angry. "I was a coward. I told myself you were probably fine, that it wasn't as bad as I remembered. That Dad was getting better." He shakes his head. "I lied to myself because the truth was too hard to face—that I abandoned my little brother when he needed me most."

The raw honesty in his voice takes the wind out of my sails. I'd expected excuses, justifications. Not this straightforward admission of guilt.

"Why didn't you come looking for me after?" I ask. "Years later."

"I did." Riley leans forward, elbows on his desk. "I asked around, tried to find you. But you were gone—moved from town to town, never staying long enough to put down roots. By the time I heard you were back in Cedar Falls, buying that cabin on the mountain, it felt like it was too late.."

"I was angry," I admit. "For a long time."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

"You had every right to be." Riley stands, moving around the desk but stopping short of approaching me. "What Dad did—what I let him do by leaving—it's unforgivable. I know that."

"But?" I sense there's more he wants to say.

"But I'm asking anyway." His voice roughens with emotion. "For forgiveness. Not because I deserve it, but because you deserve peace. Because we're brothers, and life's too damn short for twenty-year grudges."

"I don't know if I can," I say honestly. "Forgive you. Not all at once."

Riley nods, disappointment evident on his face but also understanding. "I get that. But maybe... maybe we could start somewhere else. A beer sometime. Dinner. Just talk."

I consider this, the possibility of building something new from the ashes of what was lost. It would be easier to walk away, to maintain the walls I've built over time. But then I think of Elisa's sons, of the future she wants for them, of the chance to break cycles instead of perpetuating them.

"Yeah," I say finally. "We could do that."

The relief on Riley's face is palpable. "That's... thank you, Josh. Seriously."

An awkward silence falls between us—twenty years of unspoken words, of separate lives lived in parallel, of shared blood but divided hearts. Too much for one

conversation to bridge.

"I should go," I say, already feeling the need for space, for air, for time to process.

Riley nods, not pushing. "My number's still the same. When you're ready."

"I'll call," I promise, and I'm surprised to find I mean it. "Soon."

As I turn to leave, Riley speaks again. "Josh? This woman and her kid... they must be pretty special."

I pause in the doorway, considering this. "They are," I say finally. "More than I expected."

"I'm glad," Riley says softly. "You deserve that. Always have."

I nod once, not trusting myself to speak further and walk out of the garage into the bright afternoon sunlight. My chest feels strange—lighter, as if something heavy has been set down, but also raw, like skin exposed after a bandage is removed.

The walk back to my cabin is long, the uphill climb steeper than usual. But with each step, each breath of pine-scented air, I feel something settling within me. Not resolution—that will take more time, more conversations, more healing—but perhaps the beginning of it. A willingness to try.

As I near my property, the sun is beginning to set, painting the mountains in shades of gold and purple. Through the trees, I can see lights glowing in my cabin windows—warm, welcoming, alive in a way they've never been before.

For twenty years, I've defined myself by what I lost, by who left me, by the walls I built in response. But standing here now, watching this woman and her son in my

home, waiting for me as promised, I'm confronted with the possibility of defining myself by what I might gain instead.

By who might stay, if I let them.

Chapter 9 - Elisa

The shadows lengthen across Josh's cabin as afternoon slides into evening. I've made dinner—a simple pasta with vegetables—but covered it when six o'clock came and went with no sign of him. Now it's past eight and worry gnaws at me despite my best efforts to suppress it.

I tell myself there are countless innocent explanations for his absence. The conversation with his brother went well, and they're catching up over beers. Or it went terribly, and he's walking it off somewhere in the mountains. Either way, he's a grown man who lived alone until two days ago. He doesn't owe me his whereabouts.

Still, I find myself moving restlessly through the cabin, straightening things that don't need straightening, peering out windows at the darkening forest. Mason fell asleep an hour ago, worn out from our day in town and the excitement of the park. He barely made it through dinner before his eyelids drooped, and I carried him to the guest room—our room now, I suppose—and tucked him in with Hoppy.

I've been alone with my thoughts ever since, and they're spinning in directions I'm not sure I'm ready to follow.

Because the truth is, I'm not just worried about Josh. I'm missing him. Missing someone I've known for all of forty-eight hours, someone who was a complete stranger the day before yesterday. It doesn't make sense. It doesn't follow any of the strict rules I've set for myself since escaping Jordan.

And yet, here I am, watching the clock, listening for footsteps on the porch.

I press a hand to my belly, feeling the slight roundness there. "What are we doing, little one?" I whisper. "Is this crazy? Too fast? Too risky?"

The baby offers no answers, of course, but the question remains. In two days, I've gone from fleeing one man to moving in with another. On the surface, it sounds like exactly the kind of reckless behavior Jordan always accused me of—impulsive, naive, asking for trouble.

But this doesn't feel reckless. It feels... right. Like finding a path I didn't know I was looking for.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

Josh is nothing like Jordan. Where Jordan was charming and smooth, Josh is gruff and direct. Where Jordan demanded attention, Josh shuns it. Where Jordan took and took until there was nothing left, Josh gives without seeming to expect anything in return.

And the way he is with Mason... I can't even imagine Jordan getting down on the floor to play, or hoisting a toddler onto his shoulders, or patiently answering the same question for the fifth time. Jordan saw Mason as competition. Josh sees him as a person, small but complete, worthy of respect.

The sound of footsteps on the porch pulls me from my thoughts. I turn toward the door, my heart suddenly racing, and then he's there, silhouetted against the porch light, opening the door and stepping inside.

He looks tired but not defeated. There's a new openness to his expression, a loosening around his eyes and mouth, as if some tightly-held tension has finally been released.

"Hi," I say, the word coming out softer than intended.

"Hi." His dark eyes find mine across the room. "Sorry I'm late."

"It's okay. How did it go? With Riley?"

He sets his keys on the table by the door. "Better than I expected. Worse than I hoped. But we talked. Really talked, for the first time in twenty years."

"That's huge," I say, genuinely pleased for him. "Are you... okay?"

He considers this, head tilted slightly. "Yeah. I think I am." He glances around the cabin. "Where's Mason?"

"Asleep. He was exhausted from our adventure in town. I barely got dinner into him before he was out."

"Good," Josh says, and there's something in his tone that makes my pulse quicken.

"Good?" I echo, taking an unconscious step toward him.

And then he's moving, crossing the room in three long strides until he's standing right in front of me, so close I can smell the pine and soap scent of him, can see the amber flecks in his dark eyes.

"Elisa," he says, my name a rough caress in his deep voice.

"Yes?" I breathe, barely a whisper.

And then his mouth is on mine, one hand cupping the back of my neck, the other at my waist, pulling me gently against him. The kiss is shy at first, a question asked with lips and breath, but when I make a small sound of surprise and welcome, it deepens into something hungrier, more certain.

For a moment, I'm too stunned to respond. And then I'm kissing him back, my hands finding his shoulders, feeling him beneath my palms. He tastes faintly of coffee and mint, and his beard is softer than I expected against my skin. There's a restrained power in the way he holds me like he's afraid of crushing me if he gives in completely to what he's feeling.

When he finally pulls back, we're both gasping. He rests his forehead against mine, eyes closed, as if gathering himself.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs. "I shouldn't have—"

"Don't." I place my fingers against his lips. "Don't apologize. Not for that."

He opens his eyes, searching mine. "I needed to do that. Been thinking about it all day. Hell, since I saw you watching me chop wood yesterday morning." A hint of a smile touches his lips. "Saw you looking."

Heat rises to my cheeks, but I don't deny it. "You're worth looking at."

His smile widens—a real smile this time, transforming his face. "Forty-eight hours," he says, shaking his head slightly. "That's all it took. Forty-eight hours, and I made peace with my brother. Invited a woman and her son to live with me. Rethought everything I thought I wanted."

"Is that a bad thing?" I ask, suddenly unsure.

"No." His answer is immediate, certain. "It's the most right thing I've felt in twenty years." He brushes a strand of hair from my face, his touch gentle. "I want you here, Elisa. You and Mason. I want to see where this goes—us, together."

My heart swells with emotions too complex, too new to name. "I want that too," I admit. "But Josh, there are things you should know. About why I left Portland, about Mason's father."

"You're running from someone," he says, not a question but a statement. "I figured that much. The way you flinch sometimes, the way you check exits, how you're always listening for sounds that aren't there."

I nod, not surprised he's noticed these things. "His name is Jordan. He doesn't know where we are, but... he might look for us. For Mason, especially. He's not a good

man, Josh."

"He won't find you here. And if he does, he'll have to go through me to get to you or Mason." His hand cups my cheek, thumb stroking gently over my skin. "You're safe here, Elisa. Not just with me but with the whole town if need be. Cedar Falls protects its own."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

"Its own," I repeat, tears threatening at the simple inclusion. Two days ago, I was a stranger here. Now I'm being claimed, protected, welcomed.

"And you're mine now," he adds, voice dropping to a register that sends heat spiraling through me. "If you want to be."

In answer, I rise onto my toes and press my mouth to his. This kiss is different—not a question or a revelation, but a promise. His arms come around me, lifting me slightly as he deepens the kiss. I wrap my arms around his neck, pressing as close as my slightly rounded belly allows, wanting to feel every inch of him against me.

We move together, stumbling slightly, until my back meets the wall. Josh braces one hand beside my head, the other still at my waist, his body a wall of heat and strength before me. He kisses like a man starved, with an intensity that makes my knees weak and my pulse thunder in my ears.

"I've never met anyone like you," I gasp when we break for air. "Never felt this way."

"Me neither," he murmurs against my throat, his beard a delicious friction against sensitive skin. "Never wanted anyone before. Not like this."

The admission stuns me momentarily. "Never? You're a virgin?"

He shakes his head, "I am. Never had a relationship. Never wanted one, either. Not until you walked up to my door."

This knowledge—that I'm his first, that this powerful, beautiful man has waited

thirty-eight years for this connection—has my pussy throbbing and begging for his touch. I kiss him again, hungrier now, more demanding, and feel his response in the groan that rumbles through his chest.

We move away from the wall, still kissing, hands exploring with increasing urgency. I tug at his flannel shirt, and he helps me push it from his shoulders, revealing the t-shirt beneath and the tattooed arms I've been admiring since yesterday morning. My cardigan follows, then his t-shirt, revealing the broad expanse of his chest with its light dusting of dark hair, the continuation of the tattoos I glimpsed earlier.

"You're gorgeous," I breathe, running my hands over the defined muscles of his chest and abdomen. "So beautiful."

A flush darkens his cheeks—embarrassment at the praise, perhaps, or simply the heat of arousal.

"Look who's talking," he murmurs, his hands spanning my waist, thumbs brushing the underside of my breasts through my dress. "Wanted to touch you since I first saw you. Couldn't stop thinking about it."

We stumble down the hallway toward his bedroom, kisses growing more desperate with each step. At his door, he pauses, looking down at me with a question in his eyes—one last chance to change my mind, to slow down, to reconsider.

In answer, I take his hand and pull him into the darkness beyond.

The bedroom is bathed in silver moonlight filtering through half-drawn curtains, casting Josh's body in dramatic shadows as he closes the door behind us. My heart pounds against my ribs, desire and tenderness tangling together in my chest. We stand facing each other, breathless from kissing, our lips swollen, cheeks flushed.

"Is this okay?" he asks, his deep voice roughened with want but still careful, still considerate.

"More than okay," I assure him, reaching for the hem of my dress and pulling it over my head.

His sharp intake of breath is audible in the quiet room as I stand before him in just my bra and panties. His eyes travel over me with such reverence that I feel beautiful despite the stretch marks on my hips from my pregnancy with Mason, despite the slight roundness of my belly where our second child grows.

"Your turn," I whisper, nodding toward his jeans.

He hesitates only a moment before unbuttoning them and pushing them down his muscular legs. Now he stands in just black boxer briefs that do little to hide his arousal, his broad chest rising and falling with each deep breath. The moonlight traces the contours of his tattoos—the tree that spreads across his shoulder and ribs, the timepiece circling his bicep, and others I couldn't see before.

I step closer, place my palm against his chest, feeling his heart thundering beneath my hand.

"You're nervous," I observe softly.

He nods, swallowing hard. "I'll probably suck at this."

"We'll go slow," I promise, pressing a gentle kiss to his chest. "And if you want to stop at any point—"

"I won't," he interrupts, his hands finding my waist, fingers splaying across my skin. "Just... afraid."

I smile up at him, touched by his vulnerability. "Let me lead, then."

I guide him to sit on the edge of the bed, his knees parting to make space for me as I stand between them. Like this, even seated, he's nearly at eye level with me—a powerful reminder of his size, his strength. I run my fingers through his dark hair, tilting his face up to mine for a slow, deep kiss that has him gripping my hips tighter, pulling me closer.

When I break the kiss, I hold his gaze as I sink to my knees before him. His eyes widen, pupils dilating until only a thin ring of brown remains.

"Elisa, you don't have to—"

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

"I want to," I assure him, hooking my fingers into the waistband of his boxer briefs. "I want to make you feel good. Will you let me?"

He nods, lifting his hips slightly so I can slide the fabric down his thighs. His erection springs free, thick and hard, larger than I expected. I wrap my hand around him, feeling him pulse against my palm, hearing his ragged inhale at the contact.

"Tell me what feels good," I murmur, stroking him slowly.

"Everything," he gasps. "Just... everything you're doing."

I smile, then lower my head to take him into my mouth. The sound he makes—a deep, guttural groan that seems torn from the very core of him—sends heat pooling low in my belly. His thighs tremble beneath my free hand as I move, taking him deeper, establishing a rhythm that has his breathing turning harsh and irregular.

"Elisa," he warns after several minutes, his voice strained. "I'm going to... you should stop..."

I pull back, looking up at him through my lashes. His face is transformed with pleasure—eyes half-closed, lips parted, cheeks flushed. I've never seen anything more beautiful.

"This is just the beginning," I promise, rising to my feet.

I try to push him back onto the bed, but it's like trying to move a mountain. He barely budes, his solid frame immovable under my hands. Then understanding dawns in his

eyes, and he smiles—a flash of white teeth in the moonlight—before lying back on the mattress, his hands settling on my hips to steady me.

I reach behind me to unhook my bra, letting it fall away. His eyes darken further as he takes in my breasts, fuller now with pregnancy.

"Can I touch you?" he asks, his voice trembling.

"Please," I breathe.

His large hands cup my breasts, thumbs brushing over my nipples until I arch into his touch, a soft moan escaping me. I reach down to slide my panties off, then straddle his hips, his erection pressing hot and hard against my inner thigh.

"Am I too heavy?" I ask, suddenly conscious of my weight on his frame.

"You're perfect," he assures me, his hands stroking down my sides to rest on my thighs. Then his brow furrows slightly. "Is this... is it okay? With the baby?"

The concern in his voice makes my heart swell. "It's fine," I tell him, leaning down to kiss him softly. "Completely safe."

I rise up on my knees, positioning him at my entrance, then slowly lower myself onto him. The stretch of him filling me draws a gasp from my lips, echoed by his deep groan as I take him fully inside.

"Oh god," he breathes, his fingers digging into my hips. "Elisa, you feel... I can't even..."

"I know," I whisper, adjusting to the feeling of him inside me. "Just breathe. Feel everything."

I begin to move, rolling my hips in a slow, sensual rhythm that has both of us panting. Josh watches me with awe, his hands moving over my body—cupping my breasts, caressing my belly, gripping my ass as I increase the pace.

"You're so beautiful," he murmurs, the words sounding like they've been pulled from somewhere deep inside him. "So perfect."

I arch my back, taking him deeper, feeling the tension building inside me with each movement. Josh's breathing grows more ragged, his thighs tensing beneath me, his grip on my hips tightening in a way that will likely leave marks—marks I'll welcome, evidence of this night, this connection.

Suddenly, he sits up, arms wrapping around me as he claims my mouth in a desperate kiss. The change in angle has me crying out against his lips, pleasure spiraling through me in dizzying waves. Then, in a display of strength that leaves me breathless, he flips us over so that I'm beneath him, my back against the cool sheets, his powerful body covering mine.

He braces himself on his forearms, careful not to crush me, creating a space between us where moonlight and shadow play across our joined bodies.

"Is this okay?" he asks, always checking, always making sure.

"Yes," I gasp, wrapping my legs around his waist, urging him deeper. "Please, Josh. Don't stop."

He begins to move, finding his rhythm, each thrust sending sparks of pleasure through my body. I run my hands over the broad expanse of his back, feeling the muscles flex and release beneath my fingertips, marveling at the controlled power in every movement.

"Elisa," he groans, his pace increasing. "I can't... I'm going to..."

"It's okay," I whisper, cradling his face in my hands. "Let go. I've got you."

"I can't hold back anymore," he warns, voice trembling with the effort of restraint.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

"Don't," I urge, tightening around him. "Let go inside me. I want to feel you."

With a deep, broken sound that might be my name, he drives into me one final time. I feel him pulsing inside me, the throbbing of his release triggering my own climax. I cling to him as pleasure washes over me in relentless waves, my body arching beneath his, my cries mingling with his ragged breathing.

For several moments afterward, we remain joined, our heartbeats gradually slowing, our breathing evening out. Josh presses his forehead to mine, his eyes closed, an expression of such profound peace on his face that it brings tears to my eyes.

"Was that okay?" he asks finally, his voice a hushed rumble in the quiet room.

I laugh softly, cupping his cheek. "That was perfect. You're perfect."

He moves to the side, careful not to crush me, keeping one arm draped over my waist. I turn to face him, our bodies still pressed close, legs tangled together.

"I've never felt anything like that," he admits, brushing a strand of hair from my face. "Never knew it could be like that."

"Like what?" I ask, curious about how he experienced this moment.

He considers this, his thumb tracing the curve of my cheek. "Like... coming home. Like finding something I didn't know was missing." He shakes his head slightly. "That sounds ridiculous."

"No," I assure him, pressing a kiss to his palm. "It doesn't. I felt it too."

We lie together in comfortable silence, the moonlight painting silver stripes across the bed, our breathing synchronizing without conscious effort. His hand rests over my belly, a gesture so natural it seems he's been doing it forever, not just for the first time tonight.

"I feel safe with you," I whisper, the admission slipping out unbidden. "I haven't felt safe in... I can't remember how long."

His arm tightens around me, pulling me closer. "You are safe. You and Mason and the baby. I promise."

I believe him. Despite knowing him for only forty-eight hours, despite all logic and caution, I believe him with a certainty that should frighten me but somehow doesn't. Perhaps because I've seen the man he is—with Mason, with me. A man of principles and unexpected gentleness, of steady strength and careful consideration.

"Stay," he murmurs against my hair, the word somewhere between a request and a prayer. "Not just for now. Stay for good."

"Yes," I answer, the simplest and most honest word I can offer. "Yes."

As sleep begins to claim me, cradled in the warmth and safety of his embrace, I realize something with startling clarity: This cabin on a mountainside in a town I barely know has become more of a home in forty-eight hours than anywhere else has been in years.

Because home isn't just a place. It's a feeling. A certainty. A knowledge that you belong somewhere, with someone, in a way that defies explanation but feels irrefutably right.

And here, with Josh, I belong.

Epilogue - Josh

Eighteen months later

I adjust my tie for the fifth time, frowning at my reflection. The black suit feels strange after a lifetime of flannels and work clothes but today isn't an ordinary day. Today, I'm marrying Elisa.

"You're going to strangle yourself if you keep messing with that," Riley says, stepping up behind me in the small room at the back of Cedar Falls Community Church. "Here, let me."

I drop my hands, allowing my brother to straighten the tie I've managed to mangle. It's still a wonder how easily we've fallen back into brotherhood after so many years apart. Not that it's been perfect—we've had our arguments, our setbacks, moments when old wounds reopened and needed tending. But we've done the work, both of us. And standing here now, with Riley as my best man, feels right in a way I couldn't have imagined eighteen months ago.

"There," Riley says, stepping back to admire his handiwork. "Now you look like a proper groom instead of a lumberjack playing dress-up."

I roll my eyes, but there's no heat in it. "Lumberjack is still more comfortable."

"Yeah, but Elisa deserves at least one day where you don't smell like sawdust." He grins, the expression so similar to mine it's like looking in a mirror that shows a slightly older version of myself. "You clean up good, little brother. She's a lucky woman."

"I'm the lucky one," I counter, and we both know it's true.

The past eighteen months have been a whirlwind—Elisa giving birth to Sophie five months after she arrived in Cedar Falls, the cabin expanding with a new nursery and playroom, Mason starting preschool, the four of us becoming a family without anyone quite noticing the moment it happened. All I know is that one day, I woke up and couldn't remember what it felt like to live alone, couldn't imagine a life without Elisa's laughter, Mason's endless questions, Sophie's determined crawling across the floor.

"I never thought I'd see this day," Riley admits, his voice softening. "You, settled down. A father. A husband."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 7:34 am

"That makes two of us." I look at my brother, taking in the gray at his temples, the laugh lines around his eyes that weren't there twenty years ago. "Speaking of husbands, when are you and Ellie going to make it official?"

Riley's relationship with Ellie has been the talk of the town. Second only, perhaps, to the mountain hermit who suddenly became a family man overnight.

"Soon, I think," Riley says, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Got the ring already. Just waiting for the right moment."

"Well, when it happens," I tell him, "I'll be there. Just like you're here for me today."

Riley's eyes, so like our father's but warm, shine with emotion. "Damn right, you will be." He pulls me into a strong and brief hug. "I'm proud of you, Josh. And I know Mom would be, too."

I return the embrace. Our mother has been gone for years, but in moments like this, her absence still aches. "Think she'd be surprised? Me with a ready-made family?"

"Surprised? Hell no." Riley laughs. "She always said you had the biggest heart of anyone she knew. You just needed the right people to share it with."

A knock at the door interrupts us, and Mason's head pops in, his curls tamed for once under what I suspect was a considerable effort from his mother.

"Josh bear! It's time!" he announces. At four and a half, he takes his role as ring bearer very seriously, though he still can't quite pronounce it right, calling himself the

"ring bear" instead, which seems fitting.

"Thanks, buddy," I say, ruffling his hair despite knowing Elisa will scold me for it later. "You ready?"

He nods solemnly, holding up the small pillow with our rings.

"Don't drop them," he recites, clearly repeating instructions he's been given multiple times.

"That's right," I agree, fighting a smile. "Very important job."

Mason beams, then disappears back into the hallway, his footsteps pattering away importantly.

Riley claps me on the shoulder. "Let's go get you married, little brother."

The sanctuary of Cedar Falls Community Church has been transformed with wildflowers and greenery—Christine's handiwork, no doubt, with help from Elisa. Simple arrangements of white roses and pine branches line the aisle, a perfect blend of elegance and rustic charm, just like the woman I'm about to marry.

The small church is full—fuller than I would have expected a year and a half ago, when I barely spoke to anyone in town. But that was before. Before Elisa. Before family. Before I learned that walls aren't just for keeping people out, but for creating spaces where the right people can gather.

The Covington brothers sit in one row, all five of them with their respective partners—a formidable group that's somehow become part of our extended circle through various connections and friendships. Behind them, the men from Cedar Falls Fire Department with their families, who I've come to know through Riley's volunteer work with them. Lou from Lou's Diner, his nephew, his girlfriend and their kid.

Madeline from the diner, who saves Mason's favorite blueberry pancakes for our Sunday breakfasts in town. Marge Bell, town gossip and reluctant fairy godmother, who's taken a special interest in Sophie. And Christine from the flower shop, Elisa's boss turned close friend, who insisted on offering us her help for free.

They all rise as the music begins—not the traditional wedding march, but a gentle acoustic guitar rendition of "Shelter from the Storm," played by one of Riley's friends from the garage. I take my place at the altar, Riley beside me, Pastor Jim offering an encouraging nod.

Mason comes down the aisle first, concentrating so hard on the rings that his tongue sticks out slightly between his teeth. A ripple of affectionate laughter follows him as he carefully makes his way to stand beside me, his chest puffing with pride at a job well done.

Next comes Sophie, carried by Christine since she's only just learning to walk. At a year old, she's a perfect blend of Elisa and her biological father—though in my heart, in every way that matters, she's mine. She wears a tiny white dress with a flower crown nestled in her dark curls, and she waves chubby hands at the congregation, drawing more smiles and soft laughter.

The music shifts slightly, and everyone turns toward the back of the church. My breath catches in my throat as Elisa appears in the doorway, radiant in a simple white gown that flows around her like water. Her hair is partially up, with loose curls framing her face and white flowers woven through the strands. She carries a bouquet of wildflowers and pine, and her smile—God, her smile could light up the darkest night.

Riley leans in, murmuring, "Breathe, Josh."

I exhale, not even realizing I'd been holding my breath. Elisa begins her walk down the aisle, escorted by no one—her choice, a symbol of the strength and independence

that brought her to Cedar Falls, to me. Her eyes never leave mine, and in them I see everything—the past we've shared, the future we're building, the love that found us when neither of us was looking for it.

When she reaches me, I take her hand, feeling the slight tremor in her fingers that matches my own.

"Hi," she whispers, just for me.

"Hi," I reply, my voice rough with emotion. "You're beautiful."

Her smile deepens, eyes shining. "So are you."

Pastor Jim begins the ceremony, but I barely hear the words. I'm lost in Elisa—in the woman who walked up my mountain road eighteen months ago and changed everything. Who brought light and noise and life into my solitude. Who gave me a family I never knew I wanted until they were mine to protect and cherish.

We exchange vows—simple promises of love, respect, and commitment—and rings, with Mason proudly presenting them without dropping either. And then Pastor Jim is pronouncing us husband and wife, and I'm kissing Elisa to the sound of applause and cheers, Mason hugging our legs, Sophie babbling happily from Christine's arms.

"I love you," Elisa murmurs against my lips. "My mountain man. My Josh bear."

I laugh, pressing my forehead to hers. "I love you. All of you. More than I have words for."

And as we turn to face our friends and family—our community, our people—I think of the solitary man I was eighteen months ago. How he would never have believed this moment possible. How he thought he'd built the life he wanted, never realizing it was just the foundation for something infinitely better.

A man. A woman. Two children. A cabin on a mountain.

A family, built not from obligation or blood alone, but from choice. From love. From the simple, profound decision to open a door when someone knocks, to offer help when it's needed, to risk the heart that's been protected for so long.

To begin again, together.