



Curvy Girl and the Bad Boy Cowboy

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Description: When I tell Cedar Falls' favorite bad boy he's going to be a father, I expect him to bolt—not promise to change his entire life for us.

Five months pregnant and no longer able to hide it, I finally work up the courage to tell Cedar Falls' most notorious bachelor he's the father of my unborn child. I expect denial, anger, maybe even suggestions I "take care of it." What I don't expect is for wild, commitment-phobic Ethan to declare he's all in—baby, relationship, everything.

Everyone knows the youngest Covington brother doesn't do responsibility—he does late nights at bars and different women every weekend. But when I see the look in his eyes as he hears our baby's heartbeat for the first time, I can't help but wonder...

Could Ethan Covington actually become the father my child deserves, or am I setting myself up for heartbreak all over again?

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Chapter 1 - Ethan

The neon lights of The Rusty Nail cast a blue haze over the bar as I drain my fourth—or maybe fifth—beer of the night. Country music thrums through the speakers, barely audible over the laughter and chatter of the few patrons still hanging around this late.

"And then Vincent had the nerve to tell me I shouldn't be staying out past midnight on weeknights," I say, slamming my empty bottle down harder than intended. "Like I'm supposed to check in with him now."

Max chuckles, his firefighter's badge glinting under the dim lights as he leans against the bar. "That's what happens when you become a dad, I guess."

"He's not my dad," I grumble. "He's my brother who suddenly thinks he's responsible because he's raising a five-year-old."

"Lucy is pretty cute though."

"Not the point." I motion to Darla, the bartender, for another round. "It's like they're all part of some secret club now. Vincent with Charlotte and little Lucy. Aaron with his mail-order bride—"

"Elena," Max corrects. "And you know she hates when you call her that."

"Fine, Elena. Then there's Jackson with Sarah, which—don't get me wrong—I've been rooting for them to get together since high school. And Cole..." I shake my

head. "Cole with Luisa and her kid, who literally just showed up on our doorstep a month ago."

Darla slides two more beers our way. "Last call, boys. We're closing in twenty."

"Thanks." I wink, and she rolls her eyes, immune to my charm after years of the same routine.

Max clinks his bottle against mine. "To being the last single Covington standing."

"It's not even that I mind them being happy," I continue, the beer making my thoughts spill out unfiltered. "It's just suddenly I'm getting lectures about 'ranch responsibility' and 'growing up sometime' and 'maybe not tracking mud through the house at 2 AM.'"

"Tragic," Max deadpans.

"You don't get it because you live alone."

"I get plenty of responsibility lectures from Chief Miller, thank you very much."

A group of girls we know wave from the dance floor, and Max raises his eyebrows "Speaking of staying irresponsible..."

Ten minutes later, we're twirling Missy Jenkins and her friends around the sticky dance floor. I'm not drunk enough to forget these are the same girls we've been dancing with since senior year and not sober enough to care that nothing ever changes in Cedar Falls.

By closing time, we stumble out into the cool Cedar Falls night, the stars stretching endlessly above us. The crisp air hits my lungs, a refreshing change from the beer-

soaked atmosphere inside.

"Look at that sky," Max says, tilting his head back so far he nearly topples over. "God, I love nights like this. And tomorrow I'm sleeping till noon. No alarms, no emergencies, just me and my bed having a beautiful reunion."

I laugh, but there's an edge of envy to it. "Must be nice. Jackson will be banging on my door at 7 AM sharp. 8 if he's feeling generous."

"Tell him to shove it."

"Easy for you to say. You don't live with four brothers who think because they've all found 'the one,' I need to fall in line too."

We walk—more like zigzag—down Main Street, our shadows long under the streetlights. The town is dead quiet except for our boots scuffing against the pavement.

"You know what your problem is?" Max says, throwing an arm around my shoulders.

"Please enlighten me."

"You're jealous."

I shrug him off. "I am not jealous of my brothers being tied down."

"Not of that," Max says. "You're jealous they've found something that makes them want to wake up at 7 AM. You're still sleeping till noon because you've got nothing better to do."

"That's..." I start to argue, but the words die in my throat. "That's ridiculous. I love

my freedom."

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"Sure you do, buddy." Max grins. "But one day, some woman's gonna walk into your life and mess up all those plans of yours. And I'm gonna laugh my ass off when it happens."

"Never," I declare, spreading my arms wide to the empty street. "Ethan Covington is a free spirit. I don't need anyone telling me when to come home or how to live my life."

Max chuckles. "We'll be young forever, right? Nothing else matters."

"Damn straight," I nod, raising an imaginary glass to the universe. "Youth and freedom—the only things worth having."

Max laughs and punches my arm. "Damn, you're poetic when you're drunk."

"I'm just saying," I smirk, "for someone giving me so much crap about ending up tied down, you're talking an awful lot about feelings tonight. Better be careful, or you'll end up in love next."

"Me?" Max snorts. "You're out of your damn mind."

"I've seen it happen to better men than you."

"No way." He shakes his head firmly. "My whole life is the fire department. You know that. Chief Miller was the only one who helped me after everything with my dad. Took a scrawny troublemaker and made something out of me. I'm not trading that for any girl."

"Who says you have to trade anything?" I counter, surprising myself with this sudden defense of relationships. "If you find the right girl, you can do both."

"Look at you defending romance now." Max squints at me suspiciously. "Who are you, and what have you done with Ethan Covington?"

"Just playing devil's advocate," I shrug. "Someone's gotta keep you honest."

Max checks his watch and lets out a low whistle. "It's almost two. I should head home."

"Lightweight."

"Some of us actually care about not feeling like death tomorrow." He gives me a quick, backslapping hug. "Get home safe, idiot."

"Always do."

We part ways at the intersection of Pine and Main, Max heading toward his apartment above the hardware store while I continue straight toward the outskirts of town where the Covington ranch sprawls across five hundred acres of the finest land.

The walk home is about twenty-five minutes, thirty if I'm dragging like tonight. Most people would call a cab or arrange a ride, but I've always loved this solitary journey. The road stretches empty before me, bordered by tall pines on one side and open fields on the other: no cars, no people, just me and the night.

The stars punch through the darkness overhead, impossibly bright away from town lights. The Milky Way streaks across the sky like spilled paint. If I were any good at writing, I'd capture this feeling—the perfect combination of beer buzz, cool night air, and absolute freedom.

Instead, I just drink it in, knowing these are the moments I'll miss if I ever let myself get tied down.

By the time the ranch house comes into view, my buzz has faded to a pleasant warmth. I'm surprised to see a light still on in the living room. Usually, the house is dark by midnight—one of many changes since everyone started pairing off.

I climb the porch steps as quietly as possible, wincing at every creak of the old wood. When I push open the front door, I'm hit with the unexpected tableau of my oldest brother, Jackson, sitting on the couch with—

"Naomi?"

She turns, her short dark hair swinging across her cheekbones. Even in the low lamplight, I can see the familiar curves that I've had my hands all over more than a few times this year already.

"Ethan," she says, and there's something in her voice I can't place.

I look between her and Jackson, confusion mounting.

"What the hell is going on? Why are you here at—" I check my watch, "—two-thirty in the morning?"

Jackson stands up, and I immediately notice the absence of his usual smirk or easy smile. His face is set in hard lines, and he crosses his arms over his chest.

"Jackson?" I prompt, an uneasy feeling settling in my stomach.

Naomi rises too, smoothing down her skirt. She's still in her work clothes, the light blue polo with "Sweet Somethings Bakery" embroidered on the breast.

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My beer-addled brain struggles to make sense of the scene. Naomi had wanted more—relationship, commitment, all the things I'd explicitly told her I couldn't give her. We'd had fun for a while, but when she started dropping hints about meeting my family and making things official, I'd backed away. Fast.

A horrible thought strikes me, and I tap my forehead dramatically.

"Oh god," I blurt out, "are you here to tell me you gave me some kind of sexual disease? Because I've been feeling fine, but if there's something I should know—"

Jackson's expression darkens further, and Naomi's eyes go wide with something between shock and disgust.

"Jesus Christ, Ethan," she whispers.

And somehow, I know whatever she's about to say next is going to change everything.

Chapter 2 - Naomi

The words stick in my throat as I stare at Ethan's face.

He looks younger like this—confused, a little drunk, his dark hair disheveled from the night air. This isn't how I imagined telling him. Not standing in his family's living room at two-thirty in the morning with his intimidating older brother as a witness.

"Jesus Christ, Ethan," I whisper, my fingers automatically moving to fidget with the

hem of my bakery polo.

The shirt feels tighter than it did a few weeks ago. Soon, I won't be able to hide it anymore.

"What?" he asks, his voice edged with defensive humor. "If it's not that, then what's so important that you're at my house in the middle of the night talking to my brother instead of me?"

I take a deep breath. I've rehearsed this moment for weeks, but now that it's here, all my carefully prepared speeches scatter like leaves in the wind.

"I'm pregnant," I say, the words tumbling out. "Four months pregnant."

Ethan's face goes completely blank before his eyes widen, a laugh bubbling up from his throat that dies as quickly as it started.

"That's not—" He shakes his head. "That's not possible."

"It is possible," I counter, my voice steadier than I feel. "And it's happening."

"But we were careful," he insists, running a hand through his hair. "I always pulled out."

Jackson makes a noise somewhere between a groan and a sigh, but I keep my eyes fixed on Ethan.

"That method isn't exactly foolproof, Ethan," I say, heat rising to my cheeks. I hate discussing this in front of his brother, but I didn't have much choice. "It's actually pretty unreliable."

"Are you sure it's..." He trails off, and I can see the accusation forming in his eyes before he even says it.

"Yes," I cut him off, anger flaring hot beneath my ribs. "I'm sure it's yours. I haven't been with anyone else for the past year."

Ethan looks stunned, like someone hit him with a plank. He staggers slightly, finding the arm of a chair and leaning against it.

"Four months?" he repeats. "But we stopped seeing each other almost two months ago."

"I didn't know then," I explain, the familiar guilt washing over me. "I wasn't feeling well, but I thought it was stress from the bakery. By the time I realized and took a test, you'd already made it clear you didn't want anything serious with me."

"So you came to my brother instead of me?" His voice rises, a flush creeping up his neck.

Jackson steps forward then, his presence solid and grounding between us.

"She came to the house looking for you, Ethan. You weren't here—as usual. I answered the door and found her upset on our porch."

"I wasn't going to tell him," I add quickly. "But he could tell something was wrong, and I just—" I gesture helplessly. "I broke down. I've been carrying this alone for weeks."

Ethan's eyes dart between us, looking betrayed.

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"How long have you known?" he asks Jackson.

"Just tonight," his brother answers. "And now we need to talk about what you're going to do."

"Do?" Ethan repeats, like the word is foreign.

"Yes, do," Jackson's voice is firm but not unkind. "This isn't going away, little brother."

I feel a rush of gratitude toward Jackson. When I showed up at the Covington ranch tonight, I'd been a mess of nerves and morning sickness that persisted well into the evening.

Jackson had opened the door, taken one look at me, and ushered me inside without question. There was no judgment in his eyes when I finally explained why I was there—just a quiet determination that made me believe, for the first time, that this might somehow be okay.

"I didn't come here to trap you," I say, meeting Ethan's stunned gaze. "Or to force you into something you don't want. I just... you deserved to know."

Ethan sinks into the chair, elbows on his knees, head in his hands. His whole body radiates disbelief.

"A baby?" he whispers, more to himself than to us. "I can't be a father. I'm not—I don't know how to—"

"Nobody does at first," Jackson says quietly.

I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly feeling like an intruder in this moment between brothers. The reality of my situation crashes over me again: single, pregnant, and in love with a man who runs from commitment like it's on fire.

"Look," I say, my voice shaking slightly. "It's late. You're processing. I get it. I should go."

"Go?" Ethan's head snaps up. "You drop this bomb and then just leave?"

"We can talk tomorrow when you're sober. I'll be at the bakery until three."

"And then what?" he asks, a note of panic in his voice. "What happens after we talk?"

I meet his eyes, seeing the fear there, the same fear I've been carrying.

"I don't know," I answer honestly. "That's what we need to figure out."

Ethan scrunches his hair between his fingers, and his face contorts through several emotions—fear, confusion, and finally, something that looks surprisingly like resolve.

"I know what to do," he says suddenly. "I just don't know how."

Jackson's eyebrows lift. "What do you mean by that?"

Ethan straightens in his chair, squaring his shoulders like he's preparing for a fight.

"I mean, we're obviously having this kid, and I'm going to be a good father to it."

Of all the scenarios I'd imagined—his denial, his anger, his suggestion that I "take care of it"—this wasn't one of them. Ethan Covington, Cedar Falls' most notorious commitment-phobe, volunteering for fatherhood?

"Are you serious?" I finally manage to ask.

"Dead serious." His eyes lock with mine, clearer now despite the alcohol. "This is my responsibility."

A complicated wave of emotion washes over me—relief that he's not running away, but also skepticism that feels almost cruel to acknowledge.

"Ethan," I begin carefully, "being a father isn't just something you decide to be in a moment. It's every day for the rest of your life."

"You think I don't know that?" There's a flash of hurt in his eyes.

"I think you might not realize what you're signing up for," I say gently. "Your whole life would have to change."

Jackson watches our exchange with an unreadable expression, his arms crossed over his chest.

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"My brothers did it," Ethan says stubbornly. "Vincent's been raising Lucy, and Cole's stepped up for Luisa's kid. Hell, even Aaron seems to be handling the idea of starting a family with Elena."

"They're different," I point out. "They're—"

"What? More responsible? More grown-up?" There's an edge to his voice now. "Everyone thinks they know exactly who I am. Party boy Ethan, can't be trusted with anything important. But this is different. This is my child."

The way he says "my child" sends an unexpected warmth through me, even as my logical side remains unconvinced.

"And what would this look like, exactly?" I ask. "Us, co-parenting? You living your life, me living mine, and shuffling a baby back and forth between houses?"

"I don't know," he admits. "I haven't figured out all the details."

"There are a lot of details to figure out," I say softly.

Jackson clears his throat.

"It's late. You both need time to process this." His gaze shifts to me. "Do you have a safe way to get home?"

"I drove here," I tell him. "I'm completely sober."

"Good." He nods. "Ethan, we'll talk more in the morning."

But Ethan's attention is still entirely on me, his expression both terrified and determined. "Tomorrow. The bakery. I'll be there."

"Okay," I agree, gathering my purse from where I'd set it on the couch. "Around two? That's when the lunch rush usually ends."

He nods once, firmly. "I'll be there."

As I walk toward the door, I feel his eyes following me. I turn back one last time before stepping outside.

"Ethan? For what it's worth, I didn't expect this reaction."

A small, sad smile touches his lips. "Maybe no one knows me as well as they think they do."

The night air hits my face as I step onto the porch, cool and grounding. Behind me, I can hear the brothers' voices rising and falling, though I can't make out the words. I place a hand on my still-mostly-flat stomach, wondering if the tiny life inside can feel my uncertainty, my hope, my fear.

For the first time in weeks, I feel like I'm not carrying this burden completely alone. Ethan's declaration might be impulsive—perhaps even unrealistic—but it was genuine. I saw it in his eyes.

As I drive away from the Covington ranch, a strange thought surfaces in my mind: maybe Ethan Covington, the town's most unreliable guy, might surprise us all.

Maybe he'll even surprise himself.

Chapter 3 - Ethan

The door clicks shut behind Naomi, and the silence that follows feels deafening. Jackson watches me with an intensity that makes me want to look away, but I force myself to meet his gaze.

"So," he finally says. "That happened."

"Yeah." My voice comes out hoarse. "That happened."

I sink deeper into the armchair, the reality of the situation crashing over me in waves. Four months pregnant. My child. I'm going to be a father.

"You said you'll be there for the kid," Jackson says carefully. "Did you mean that, or was that just something you said in the moment?"

"I meant it." The answer comes automatically, surprising even me with its certainty. "I'm not going to abandon my own kid."

Jackson sighs, moving to sit on the couch.

"Being a father isn't just about not abandoning them, Ethan. It's about being there. Really being there. Consistent. Reliable."

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The words sting because they're aimed at my weakest points. Consistency and reliability aren't exactly my defining traits.

"I know that," I snap. "I'm not completely clueless."

"No, you're not clueless," Jackson agrees. "You're just—"

"A screwup?" I finish for him.

"I didn't say that."

Before I can respond, the front door opens, and Vincent appears, looking exhausted but alert. His eyes narrow when he sees us both still up.

"What's going on?" he asks, shutting the door behind him. "I saw someone driving away when I pulled in."

Jackson and I exchange glances.

"That was Naomi," I admit. "She came by to tell me something."

Vincent raises an eyebrow, waiting for me to continue.

"She's pregnant," I say, the words still feeling foreign on my tongue. "Four months. It's mine."

To his credit, Vincent doesn't immediately launch into a lecture. Instead, he removes

his jacket, hangs it by the door, and joins us in the living room, taking the second armchair.

"How are you feeling about that?" he asks, his tone surprisingly neutral.

"Terrified," I admit. "But I told her I'll be there for the baby."

Vincent nods slowly. "That's the right first step."

"What were you doing out so late anyway?" Jackson asks him.

"Lucy had a nightmare. Charlotte was up with her, but I went out for some of that special ice cream she likes from the 24-hour place in Millbrook." Vincent shrugs. "It helps."

That simple statement—that mundane detail of fatherhood—hits me with unexpected force. This is what being a parent is: middle-of-the-night ice cream runs and knowing exactly what will comfort your child.

"I don't know how to do any of this," I confess. "How did you do it, Vince? When you suddenly had Lucy to raise?"

Vincent leans forward, elbows on his knees.

"I screwed up a lot at first," he says honestly. "I had no idea what I was doing. Still don't half the time."

"But you make it look so easy."

He lets out a short laugh. "It's not easy. But it's worth it." He pauses, studying my face. "The real question is: what about you and Naomi?"

"What about us?"

"Are you planning to co-parent separately, or is there something more there?"

I stare at my hands. "I don't know. We were never really together-together. Just... seeing each other."

"For how long?" Jackson asks.

"About six months, off and on." I hesitate. "But we ended things a couple months ago."

"Why?" Vincent presses.

"She wanted more. Commitment. A real relationship." I swallow hard. "I wasn't ready for that."

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"And now?" Jackson's voice is gentle but insistent.

"Now I don't have a choice, do I?"

Vincent shakes his head.

"You always have a choice, Ethan. Being there for your child doesn't mean you have to force a relationship with Naomi. Sometimes trying to make something work for the wrong reasons just makes things worse."

I find myself thinking about Naomi in a way I've been avoiding for months. Her laugh, the way she always smells like cinnamon, how she knows exactly how I take my coffee. The way she used to look at me—like she saw someone worth believing in.

"Get some sleep," Jackson finally says, standing up. "Nothing's going to get figured out tonight anyway."

"Your brain's probably halfway to fried between the beer and the news," Vincent adds, rising as well. "Just know we're here, whatever you need."

"Thanks," I mumble, still lost in thought.

They head upstairs, leaving me alone in the dimly lit living room. Eventually, I drag myself up to my bedroom, kicking off my boots and collapsing onto my bed without bothering to change.

The ceiling fan spins lazily above me as my mind races. Will I be a good father? The question loops endlessly, without a clear answer.

My own father was present but distant—all work and discipline, little affection. I don't want to be that kind of dad, but I'm not sure I know how to be any other kind.

And then there's Naomi—beautiful, steady Naomi with her bakery, plans, and unwavering certainty about what she wants. Could I be what she needs? Could we be more than just co-parents?

I never seriously considered it before—or rather, I refused to consider it. There was one night, about six months ago, when we were lying in her bed watching some terrible movie. She'd fallen asleep against my chest, her breathing soft and even, and I remember looking down at her and feeling something shift inside me. For just a moment, I could see a future there—waking up to her every morning, building something real.

I pushed the thought away immediately. Commitment wasn't in my plans. Freedom was my only plan.

Now, staring at my ceiling at three in the morning, I wonder if freedom is just another word for being alone. If maybe what I've been running from isn't commitment but the fear of failing at it.

Tomorrow, I'll go to the bakery. I'll talk to Naomi—really talk to her, beyond just discussing diapers and visitation schedules. If she's willing to give me another chance, maybe we could try being something more.

It's a terrifying thought.

Almost as terrifying as becoming a father in five months.

Next Morning

I must have fallen asleep eventually, because the next thing I know, Jackson is indeed pounding on my door at 7:30. Not quite 7, not quite 8—I guess that's his version of mercy.

"Up and at 'em," he calls through the door. "The fence on the north pasture needs fixing."

I groan, my head pounding with the reminder of last night's beers and life-altering news. For a fleeting moment, I wonder if the whole thing with Naomi was just a bizarre dream. But the knot in my stomach tells me otherwise.

"Taking a personal day," I call back, my voice rough with sleep.

There's a pause, then the sound of the doorknob turning. Jackson pokes his head in, surprise evident on his face.

"You're taking a what now?"

"A day," I say, sitting up and wincing at the sunlight streaming through my window. "I'm meeting Naomi at two."

Understanding dawns on his face.

"Right. Good. That's... responsible of you."

The word 'responsible' coming from Jackson's mouth in reference to me sounds so foreign that we both almost laugh.

"Don't get used to it," I mutter, but there's no real heat behind it.

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"I'll tell Vincent you're handling some personal business," he says, then hesitates. "You want to talk about what you're going to say to her?"

"Not particularly."

He nods, respecting my space for once. "Fair enough. Good luck."

The rest of the morning passes in a blur of shower, coffee, and more coffee. I spend an hour researching pregnancy online, feeling increasingly overwhelmed by terms like "trimesters" and "prenatal vitamins" and "mucus plug" (that last one I immediately try to scrub from my brain).

By 1:50 PM, I'm standing outside Sweet Somethings Bakery, fifteen minutes early and feeling like I might throw up. Through the window, I can see Naomi behind the counter, her dark hair tucked behind her ears as she boxes up pastries for an elderly customer.

She's smiling—that warm, genuine smile that first caught my attention almost a year ago.

The bell above the door chimes as I finally work up the courage to enter. Naomi looks up, and her smile falters slightly before she recovers.

"Ethan," she says. "You're early."

"Yeah, I, uh..." I shove my hands in my pockets. "Thought we could talk when you're free."

She glances at the clock. "Melissa should be here in five to take over the counter. Why don't you grab a seat in the back corner? It's quieter there."

I nod and make my way to the table she indicated, passing display cases filled with cookies, muffins, and elaborate cakes that Naomi decorates herself. The bakery smells like vanilla and cinnamon, comforting and familiar.

True to her word, Naomi joins me five minutes later, bringing two cups of coffee. She sets one in front of me—black with one sugar, exactly how I like it.

"You remembered," I say, oddly touched.

"Of course I did." She slides into the seat across from me. "So..."

"So," I echo, wrapping my hands around the mug. "I want to start by saying I'm sorry about last night. The way I reacted wasn't... it wasn't my best moment."

"You were shocked. I understand that."

I shake my head. "That's no excuse. This affects you way more than it affects me right now, and I made it about myself."

She looks surprised by this admission, and I realize how low her expectations of me must really be.

"I've been thinking all night," I continue, the words I've rehearsed all morning tumbling out. "About the baby, about us, about everything. And I want you to know I'm all in, Naomi. Not just for the baby, but for... for us, if you'll give me another chance."

Her eyebrows shoot up. "What?"

"I know it sounds crazy, maybe even pushy, but I want to try—really try—with you. With us. I want to take you on a proper date. I want to see if we could be a family."

Naomi sets down her coffee cup slowly, her eyes studying my face.

"Ethan," she says carefully, "it's not that I don't want that. I did want that—for months while we were seeing each other."

"I know, and I was an idiot—"

"Let me finish," she says gently. "You sound desperate. Like you're running after something you could have had if you weren't so blinded by every shiny new thing that pops up at the bar."

"That's not—" I start to protest, then stop myself. "Okay, maybe it sounds that way. But this isn't just about the baby."

"Isn't it?" She tilts her head. "Because four days ago, you were at The Rusty Nail with Brianna Mitchell. I saw you two."

I wince. "That was nothing. Just dancing."

"It's always 'just' something with you, Ethan. Just dancing, just drinks, just fun." She sighs. "And now you want me to believe it can be 'just' a committed relationship? 'Just' a family?"

"No," I say firmly. "Not 'just' anything. I want this. For real."

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"Why now? Be honest with me."

I stare down at my coffee, searching for the right words.

"Because I've been running from the things that scare me," I finally admit. "And nothing scares me more than failing at this—failing you, failing our baby. But I realized that not trying at all... that's the biggest failure I could make."

Chapter 4 - Naomi

I stare at him—the shadows under his eyes, the tension in his jaw. He looks like he hasn't slept much, which makes two of us.

"That's a good answer," I admit, wrapping my hands around my coffee. "But I need more than good words, Ethan. I've heard plenty of those before."

He flinches slightly, and I hate that I'm being harsh, but these are the stakes now. This isn't just about my heart anymore.

"I know," he says quietly. "I know I need to prove it to you."

The afternoon sunlight streams through the bakery windows, catching the golden flecks in his hazel eyes—the same eyes our child might have. The thought makes my chest tighten.

"Can I ask you something?" I say.

He nods.

"If I wasn't pregnant, would you be sitting here right now, asking for another chance?"

Ethan doesn't answer immediately, which I appreciate. At least he's thinking about it rather than just saying what he thinks I want to hear.

"I don't know," he finally admits. "I'd like to think eventually I would have realized what I lost, but..." He shrugs, a gesture so characteristically Ethan it makes my heart ache. "I can't honestly say for sure."

"Thank you for not lying."

"I'm done with that," he says. "The lying to you, the lying to myself."

Melissa, my afternoon shift worker, appears beside our table with a plate of lemon bars—my latest craving.

"Thought you might want these," she says with a knowing smile. "You've only eaten about twelve of them today."

I feel myself blush. "Thanks, Mel."

She disappears back behind the counter, leaving us alone again. I push the plate toward Ethan.

"Try one. They're really good."

He takes a lemon bar, biting into it with appreciation. "You made these?"

I nod. "New recipe. The pregnancy has me craving citrus like crazy."

His expression shifts at the mention of the pregnancy, becoming more serious, more present.

"What else has changed?" he asks. "With the pregnancy, I mean."

The question surprises me. It's thoughtful, something I wouldn't have expected from him.

"Well, I'm tired all the time," I begin, finding it oddly easy to talk about this with him. "The morning sickness was awful for a while, but it's better now. I can't stand the smell of coffee even though I work in a place that serves it all day."

"That sounds brutal."

"It's not all bad," I admit. "There's something... I don't know, miraculous about it too. Knowing there's this little person growing inside me."

Ethan's eyes drift to my belly, which is just beginning to show a slight curve beneath my bakery apron.

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"Can you feel it? The baby, I mean."

"Not yet. That comes later, usually around five months, they say."

He nods, absorbing this information. "I spent the morning reading pregnancy websites. I had no idea there was so much to know."

The image of Ethan hunched over his phone, researching pregnancy, brings an unexpected smile to my face.

"There is a lot," I agree. "I've been reading everything I can get my hands on."

This was always how it was with Ethan—when it was good, it was so easy. That's what made the hard parts so much harder.

"So, what now?" he finally asks.

"Now..." I take a deep breath. "We figure out how to co-parent. How to build a relationship that works for our child."

"And us?" His voice is tentative. "Is there any chance for us?"

I meet his gaze directly. "I can't jump back into something with you just because of the baby, Ethan. That would be a mistake for everyone involved."

He nods, trying to hide his disappointment.

"But," I continue, surprising myself, "I'm not saying never. I'm saying you need to show me—not tell me, show me—that you're serious about changing. About being someone I can count on."

Hope flickers across his face. "I can do that."

"It won't be easy."

"I know," he says. "But nothing worth having ever is, right?"

I can't help the small laugh that escapes me. "That's such a greeting card line."

"Doesn't make it less true," he counters with a hint of his usual grin.

I shake my head, trying not to let my guard down too quickly, even as something warm unfurls in my chest.

"You've got a long way to go before I trust you again."

"I know. But I'm going to try, Naomi. Really try."

The sincerity in his voice makes me want to believe him. But I've been here before—captivated by Ethan Covington's charm and promises.

"Start with the basics," I suggest. "Be consistent. Show up when you say you will. Follow through on your commitments."

"I can start right now," he says, sitting up straighter. "What do you need? Doctor's appointments? Help with anything?"

I consider his offer. "I have an ultrasound next Thursday at 2 PM. You can come, if

you want."

"I'll be there," he says immediately. "What else?"

"Honestly? I could use some help with deliveries. The doctor said I shouldn't be lifting heavy flour bags anymore, but I haven't found anyone reliable to help on delivery days."

"Consider it done. When's the next one?"

"Monday morning, 6 AM."

His eyes widen slightly—Ethan Covington is not known for his early rising habits—but he nods firmly. "I'll be here."

A customer calls out to me from the counter, and I realize I've been on my break longer than intended.

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"I should get back," I say, standing up.

Ethan rises too. "Thank you for talking to me. For being honest."

"Always," I respond. Then, feeling brave, I add, "That's one thing you can count on from me, Ethan. Even when it's hard, I'll always tell you the truth."

"I'm going to earn back your trust," he says, and for one wild moment, I think he might try to kiss me.

Instead, he extends his hand like we're sealing a deal. I take it, my smaller hand hugged by his rough palm.

"Thursday at 2," he confirms. "I'll meet you at the doctor's office."

"And Monday at 6."

"I'll be here." He hesitates, then adds, "Can I text you? Just to check in?"

The request is so modest, so unlike his usual confidence.

"Yes," I say. "That's fine."

"Thank you. Can I..." he gestures vaguely toward my belly.

I understand what he's asking and nod, lifting my bakery apron slightly. There's just the faintest curve to my belly, barely noticeable if you don't know to look for it.

Ethan's hand hovers for a moment before gently resting against the small swell. His eyes widen, like he's finally comprehending the reality of our situation.

"There's really a baby in there," he whispers. "Our baby."

"Yeah," I say softly. "There is."

When he looks up at me, his eyes are bright with an emotion I can't quite name.

"Thank you," he says.

"For what?"

"For not giving up on me completely."

After he leaves, I watch through the window as he walks to his truck. He pauses before getting in, looking back at the bakery with an almost determined expression.

I place my hand where his was moments ago, feeling the slight roundness that will soon become impossible to hide.

"Your dad's trying," I whisper to my unborn child. "I guess we'll see where this goes."

Melissa slides up beside me, eyebrows raised.

"So that's the father, huh? One of the Covington brothers?"

"Ethan," I confirm. "The youngest."

"The wild one," she nods. "Think he'll step up?"

I turn away from the window as Ethan's truck pulls out of the parking lot.

"I don't know," I answer honestly. "But he's surprised me already."

And maybe that's enough for now—this fragile beginning, this tentative hope. Not promises of forever or happily-ever-after, but simply the next right step.

One date.

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One ultrasound appointment.

One day at a time.

Thursday

Thursday arrives with the crisp edge of early autumn, leaves just beginning to turn on the maples outside the medical center.

I stand near the clinic door, checking my phone for the third time in as many minutes. 1:58 PM. My appointment is at 2:00, and Ethan is nowhere to be seen.

A flutter of anxiety rises in my chest. I've been here before—waiting for Ethan Covington, telling myself he's just running late, that he'll show up any minute now. I spent six months making these same excuses, each time believing them a little less.

"We have to check you in," the receptionist calls to me from behind her desk. "Dr. Mason doesn't like to get behind schedule."

"Just one more minute," I reply, peering through the glass doors that lead to the parking lot. No sign of his truck.

Since Monday, Ethan has been surprisingly... consistent. He showed up at 5:55 AM to help with deliveries, bleary-eyed but ready to work. He texted me each evening to ask how I was feeling. Yesterday, he even dropped off a pregnancy book that he said Jackson's girlfriend Sarah recommended.

I'd started to hope—dangerous as that feels—that maybe he really was changing.

Now it's 2:01, and that hope feels as fragile as spun sugar.

"Ms. Harper?" The receptionist's voice holds a note of impatience. "Dr. Mason needs to—"

The doors swing open, and Ethan rushes in, his hair windblown, his flannel shirt half-tucked. He's clutching something in his hand and breathing hard like he's been running.

"I'm here," he announces to the entire waiting room. "I'm here, I'm not late—" He glances at the clock on the wall. "Okay, I'm two minutes late, but there was a tractor accident on Route 16, and I had to detour past the old Simmons place, and there's a cow in the road—"

He stops abruptly, seeming to register the amused looks from the other patients.

"Hi," he says, softer now, turning to me. "I made it."

Relief washes over me so intensely it's almost embarrassing. "You made it."

"Ms. Harper?" the receptionist calls again. "We really need to—"

"Yes, coming," I say, moving toward the desk. Ethan follows, still catching his breath.

"I thought..." I murmur so only he can hear.

"That I wouldn't show?" He looks genuinely hurt by the suggestion. "I said I would be here."

Before I can respond, the receptionist slides a clipboard across the desk.

"Fill this out, please. Both parents, if you're both staying for the appointment."

Ethan takes the clipboard, studying the form with newfound seriousness.

"Both parents," he repeats, like he's trying the words on for size.

We sit side by side in uncomfortable waiting room chairs, and I watch as he carefully fills out his medical history. When he gets to "Family medical conditions," he pauses.

"My mom had high blood pressure," he says quietly. "And my grandfather had diabetes. Should I put that down?"

"Yes," I nod. "That's exactly what they need to know."

He continues writing, his handwriting neater than I expected. When he finishes, he hands me the clipboard, then suddenly remembers whatever he was clutching when he arrived.

"Here," he says, opening his palm to reveal a small paper bag. "I got you something."

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Inside the bag is a lemon bar, slightly squished but carefully wrapped in wax paper.

"I stopped by Sweet Somethings," he explains. "Melissa said you've been craving these, but you ran out this morning. That's partly why I was late—I wanted to surprise you."

The gesture is so unexpectedly thoughtful that I don't know what to say. It's just a lemon bar, but it's also so much more—it's evidence that he was listening, that he remembered something important to me, that he went out of his way.

"Thank you," I finally manage, my voice softer than intended.

"Naomi Harper?" A nurse appears at the door to the exam rooms.

Together, we stand and follow her down a hallway lined with posters about fetal development and breastfeeding. Ethan's eyes dart everywhere, taking it all in.

"First ultrasound?" the nurse asks him kindly, noticing his nervous energy.

"Is it that obvious?" he asks with a self-deprecating smile.

"Only to someone who sees it every day," she assures him, showing us into a dimly lit room with an exam table and a monitor. "Naomi, you can change into this gown. Dad, you can have a seat right there."

Dad. The word seems to catch Ethan off guard. He sinks into the chair she indicated, looking suddenly overwhelmed.

When the nurse leaves, I squeeze his hand briefly. "You okay?"

He nods, not quite meeting my eyes. "Just... real. This makes it real."

"It's been pretty real for me for a while now," I say, attempting humor to lighten his mood.

That gets a small smile from him. "Right. Of course."

"I'm going to change," I tell him, taking the hospital gown behind a small screen in the corner.

As I change, I hear him shifting in his chair, the sound of magazine pages turning.

"Did you know," he says suddenly, "that right now the baby is the size of an avocado?"

I smile, though he can't see me. "I did know that, actually."

"And it can hear us," he continues, clearly reading from something. "It says here the baby can hear voices now."

I emerge from behind the screen in the gown, catching him with a pregnancy magazine open on his lap.

"You've been doing your homework," I observe.

He looks up, a bit sheepish. "Vincent gave me a bunch of books. Said they helped him when he had Lucy."

Before I can respond, the door opens, and Dr. Mason enters—a kind-faced woman in

her fifties with whitish hair.

"Naomi, good to see you again," she greets me warmly before turning to Ethan. "And you must be the father. I'm Dr. Mason."

"Ethan Covington," he says, standing to shake her hand.

"Covington? One of the ranch Covingtons?"

He nods. "Yes, ma'am."

"I delivered two of your brothers," she says with a smile. "Though that was many years ago now."

This connection seems to relax Ethan slightly as I settle onto the exam table.

"Alright, let's see how this little one is doing," Dr. Mason says, squirting cold gel onto my exposed belly. "This is your first ultrasound, correct?"

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"Yes," I confirm. "I had blood work done, but this is the first time we'll be seeing the baby."

She nods, pressing the ultrasound wand against my abdomen. "Let's take a look."

The room fills with a rapid whooshing sound—fast, rhythmic, like galloping horses.

"What's that?" Ethan asks, leaning forward.

"That's your baby's heartbeat," Dr. Mason explains. "Good and strong, exactly what we want to hear."

Ethan's eyes widen, his gaze fixed on the monitor as a grainy black-and-white image appears. I reach for his hand without thinking, and he takes it, squeezing gently.

"There we are," Dr. Mason says, pointing to a shape on the screen. "There's your baby."

Chapter 5 - Ethan

"There's your baby."

The words echo in my mind as I stare at the monitor. I've seen ultrasound pictures before—Jackson showed around photos when Sarah's sister had a baby last year, and Vincent has Lucy's framed in the ranch house.

But this is different. This is my baby. My child.

The shape on the screen doesn't look exactly like a baby to me—more like a strange alien jellybean with what might be arms and legs. But that rapid heartbeat fills the room, and something shifts inside me, like tectonic plates rearranging my entire world.

"Do you see the head here?" Dr. Mason points. "And these are the hands. Sometimes we can see them moving at this stage."

As if on cue, there's a slight motion on the screen—a tiny arm seems to wave. I hear Naomi's sharp intake of breath and realize I'm still holding her hand, probably too tightly now.

"Is everything okay?" I ask, finding my voice. "Is the baby healthy?"

Dr. Mason smiles reassuringly. "Everything looks excellent. Strong heartbeat, good size for sixteen weeks. Would you like to know the sex, or are you waiting to be surprised?"

Naomi and I exchange a quick glance. We haven't discussed this.

"Can we know?" I ask her.

She nods. "I'd like to know."

"Well then," Dr. Mason adjusts the wand slightly, looking at the screen with practiced eyes. "It appears you're having a little girl."

A daughter. A little girl. Images flash through my mind—tiny pink boots, learning to ride a pony, teaching her to fish in the creek behind the ranch house. The intensity of emotion catches me off guard, and I have to blink rapidly to clear my suddenly blurry vision.

"A girl," Naomi whispers, and when I look at her, I see tears in her eyes too.

Dr. Mason prints several copies of the ultrasound images, explaining more about the baby's development as she wipes the gel from Naomi's stomach. I try to absorb everything she's saying about prenatal vitamins and the importance of rest, but my mind keeps returning to that tiny heartbeat, that little wave.

"I'll give you two a minute," the doctor says kindly, handing me one of the ultrasound photos before leaving the room.

In the sudden quiet, I examine the black and white image in my hand. It feels like I'm holding something precious and fragile, though it's just paper.

"That's our daughter," I say, still trying to wrap my head around the concept.

Naomi sits up, adjusting her gown. "Yes, it is."

"She has arms and legs and everything," I say stupidly, causing Naomi to laugh.

"What did you think? That I was growing a tadpole in there?"

I grin, grateful for the break in tension.

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"I don't know. The books show these drawings, but seeing it for real..."

"I know," she says softly. "It's different."

I help her off the exam table, keeping a steady hand on her arm as she steps down. The small gesture feels important somehow—a tiny way to show I can be supportive, dependable.

"I'll let you get dressed," I say, turning toward the door. "I'll wait outside."

Naomi nods, but before I can leave, she says, "Ethan?"

I turn back.

"Thank you for being here today." Her voice is quiet but sincere.

"I told you I would be," I reply, meaning it more than I've meant anything in a long time.

In the waiting room, I sink into a chair, staring at the ultrasound photo. A girl. Vincent will be thrilled—he's been outnumbered with brothers his whole life and dotes on little Lucy like she's made of gold.

Aaron will probably start building a crib immediately—he's been looking for projects since finishing the ranch house renovations to accommodate more people.

Jackson will tease me about having a daughter who'll bring home boyfriends

someday, and Cole...well, Cole will understand better than most, having stepped up for Luisa's kid.

I'm so lost in thought that I don't notice Naomi approaching until she's standing right in front of me.

"Ready?" she asks.

I nod, standing quickly. "How are you feeling?"

"Hungry," she admits.

"We should get some food then," I say decisively. "For her." I gesture vaguely toward Naomi's stomach, then feel embarrassed. "And you, obviously. Mostly you."

Naomi tilts her head, studying me with a small smile. "Are you asking me to lunch, Ethan Covington?"

"Yes," I say, then add quickly, "Just lunch. Not trying to push anything. Just two people who are having a baby together getting some food after an appointment."

"Very smooth," she says, but she's still smiling. "Lunch would be nice."

We walk out to the parking lot together, the autumn air crisp against my face. I notice Naomi pulling her jacket closer around her.

"Are you cold?" I ask. "I can turn up the heat in the truck."

"I'm fine," she assures me. "Just a little chilly. Where should we eat?"

"Anywhere you want. Whatever you're craving."

She considers for a moment. "Madeline's diner has really good grilled cheese. I've been wanting one all week."

"Madeline, it is," I agree, opening the passenger door of my truck for her.

As I walk around to the driver's side, I catch sight of my reflection in the window. I look exactly the same as I did this morning—same flannel shirt, same worn jeans, same Covington Ranch cap—but something feels fundamentally different. Like I'm standing straighter, breathing deeper.

Inside the truck, Naomi is already buckled in, looking at the ultrasound photo again.

"We should probably start thinking about names," she says as I start the engine.

"Names," I repeat, the reality hitting me again. "Right. Any ideas?"

"A few," she admits. "But nothing definite yet."

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As I pull out of the medical center parking lot, I find myself wondering what kind of father I'll be to this little girl. Will I be patient like Vincent or protective like Cole? Or will I find my own way?

"You know," I say, breaking the comfortable silence that's fallen between us, "I've never missed an appointment to pick up Lucy from school when Vincent needs help. Not once in five years."

Naomi looks at me quizzically. "Okay?"

"I'm just saying... I can be reliable. When it matters."

She nods slowly. "I'm starting to see that."

"I want to be reliable for her," I continue, gesturing to the ultrasound photo Naomi is still holding. "For both of you, actually."

"One day at a time, Ethan," she says gently. "That's all I'm asking for."

One day at a time. I can do that. Today, I made it to the appointment. Today, I saw my daughter for the first time. Today, I'm taking Naomi to lunch.

Tomorrow, I'll worry about tomorrow.

For now, I just want to savor this strange new feeling—like I've been given something precious and unexpected. Something worth fighting for.

We pull into Madeline's Diner, a Cedar Falls institution with its chrome exterior and neon sign that's been flickering the same way since I was a kid. The lunch rush is over, so we easily find a booth by the window.

Madeline herself approaches—a stout woman in her sixties who's known every Covington since before we were born.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in," she says, eyeing me with mock suspicion before turning a warm smile to Naomi. "And with such lovely company. How are you doing, sweetheart? The morning pastries you sent over last week were divine."

"Thanks, Madeline," Naomi replies. "We have a bakery-diner trade agreement going," she explains to me. "I send pastries, she sends pie recipes."

"Best deal in town," Madeline nods. "Now, what can I get you two?"

"Grilled cheese for me," Naomi says. "With the tomato soup. And a chocolate milkshake."

"Smart girl, eating for two," Madeline says with a knowing wink that makes both Naomi and me freeze.

"How did you—" Naomi starts.

Madeline laughs. "Honey, I've seen five pregnancies up close and served food to hundreds of pregnant women over the years. You've got the glow, and you just ordered my famous pregnancy combo—grilled cheese, tomato soup, and chocolate shake. Dead giveaway."

She turns to me with raised eyebrows. "And you, Ethan Covington? Finally settling down?"

"Just feeding the mother of my child," I reply, surprising myself with how easily the words come. "I'll have the same as her, minus the shake."

Madeline's eyes widen slightly, but she recovers quickly.

"Well, well. Wonders never cease." She scribbles our order and pats Naomi's shoulder. "Congratulations, you two. Food'll be up in a jiffy."

When she walks away, Naomi gives me a look. "That was... direct."

I shrug. "Cedar Falls. News travels fast, and we might as well own the narrative."

"Is that what we're doing? Owning the narrative?"

"I just don't want you to have to deal with whispers and rumors," I explain. "People are going to find out eventually. You're already showing a little."

She places a protective hand over her stomach. "I guess you're right. I've been hiding it with loose clothes at the bakery, but pretty soon that won't work."

"Are you worried? About what people will say?"

Naomi considers this. "A little. Small towns can be judgmental. Unwed mother and all that."

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"My brothers will shut down any gossip," I assure her. "The Covingtons still carry some weight around here."

"And what about you?" she asks quietly. "Are you worried about what people will think of the wild Covington having a baby?"

The question catches me off guard. I haven't really thought about how this affects my reputation. It's been all about Naomi, the baby, and my family.

"I don't care what people think," I say honestly. "Never have."

"That's not entirely true," she counters gently. "You care a lot about your image as the carefree brother."

Her observation is uncomfortably accurate. I fiddle with my silverware, buying time to respond.

"Maybe I did," I finally admit. "But things change. Priorities change."

"Because of the baby?"

"Because of the baby," I nod. "And because... I don't know. Maybe I was getting tired of that role anyway."

Madeline returns with our food, setting down steaming plates of perfectly golden grilled cheese sandwiches and bowls of rich tomato soup. Naomi's milkshake arrives in an old-fashioned metal mixing cup with a glass on the side.

"Anything else you need, you just holler," Madeline tells us before moving to another table.

Naomi immediately dips her sandwich into the soup and takes a big bite, closing her eyes in apparent bliss.

"Oh my god, this is exactly what I needed."

I follow her lead, surprised by how hungry I am. For a few minutes, we eat in comfortable silence.

"So," Naomi says eventually, stirring her soup. "Names?"

"Right," I nod. "Any favorites?"

"I've always liked Emma," she offers. "And Lily."

"Both nice," I agree, though neither quite feels right for our daughter. Our daughter—the phrase still feels surreal in my mind.

"What about you?" she asks. "Any ideas?"

I hadn't really thought about it until now, but a name immediately comes to mind. "What about Grace?"

"Grace," she repeats, testing it out. "Grace Harper Covington."

"Or just Grace Harper," I say quickly. "I don't want to presume—"

"No, I like it with Covington," she interrupts. "She should have your name too."

I'm about to reply when a heavy hand lands on my shoulder. I turn to find Max standing there, flanked by two other Cedar Falls firefighters in their department hoodies.

"Dude, where have you been?" Max asks. "I've been texting you all afternoon."

"Hey, Max," I say, suddenly aware of the ultrasound photo sitting on the table between Naomi and me. I resist the urge to slide it into my pocket. "Sorry, I had my phone off. Doctor's appointment."

Max's eyebrows shoot up. "You sick or something?"

"No, nothing like that." I glance at Naomi, who gives me a small nod of encouragement.

"We're actually hitting up The Rusty Nail tonight," Max continues, oblivious to the moment happening. "They've got that band from Billings playing. You in?"

I look at Naomi again, and a smile spreads across my face. "Can't tonight, Max. I've got other responsibilities now."

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Max squints at me like I'm speaking a foreign language.

"Other responsibilities? What does that even mean? Since when do you have responsibilities?"

I take a deep breath, meeting my best friend's confused gaze. "Since I found out I'm going to be a father."

Max actually stumbles backward a step, his eyes comically wide. "You're going to be a what now?"

"A father," I repeat, and saying it aloud to someone outside our immediate circle makes it feel even more real. "I'm having a baby. Well, not me personally, but—" I gesture toward Naomi, who offers a small wave.

"You're serious?" Max demands, looking between us. "This isn't some weird joke?"

"Dead serious," I confirm. "It's time for me to be an adult, Max."

For a moment, Max just stares at me, then at Naomi, then back at me. The two firefighters with him exchange glances, clearly entertained by the whole scene.

"Holy shit," Max finally says. "I can't believe this is happening. Ethan Covington, a dad." He shakes his head in disbelief, then breaks into a wide grin. "I'm sad to lose my best wingman, but I couldn't be happier for you, man."

I stand up, and Max pulls me into a bear hug, complete with the hearty back-tapping

that men do when they're having feelings they don't want to talk about.

"Is it a boy or a girl?" he asks against my shoulder.

"Girl," I reply, surprised by the pride that swells in my chest.

"God help us all," Max laughs, releasing me from the hug but keeping a hand on my shoulder. He leans in closer and whispers, "So the girl at the table—she's the mother?"

I nod, glancing back at Naomi, who's watching us with an expression somewhere between amusement and uncertainty.

"Damn," Max murmurs, not quite quietly enough. "Don't let go of a woman that gorgeous, Ethan. And don't fuck this up."

"Working on it," I assure him, then step back. "Max, this is Naomi Harper. She owns Sweet Somethings Bakery. Naomi, this is Max Davidson, Cedar Falls' second-best firefighter."

"Best," Max corrects, extending his hand to Naomi. "Pleasure to meet you officially. I've had your cinnamon rolls, and they're life-changing."

"Thank you," Naomi says, shaking his hand. "I've seen you around town, of course."

"Well, now we're practically family," Max says with his easy charm. "Since I'm this guy's brother in everything but blood."

"We should probably let them finish their lunch," one of the other firefighters suggests, pulling on Max's arm.

"Right, sorry," Max says. "But listen, we need to celebrate! Not tonight, obviously, but soon."

"Sure," I agree, knowing that 'celebrating' with Max will look very different now.

"I'll call you," Max promises, walking backward toward the door. "And congratulations, really. Both of you."

After they leave, I sit back down, feeling strangely lighter. Telling Max makes it more official, more public. There's no backing out now—not that I would want to.

"So that's your best friend," Naomi says, taking a sip of her milkshake. "He seems... enthusiastic."

"That's one word for him," I laugh. "He's a good guy, though. Loyal to a fault."

"And apparently very surprised by your news."

"Yeah, well..." I shrug. "I haven't exactly been father material in the past."

"You could have fooled me today," she says softly.

I meet her eyes across the table, momentarily stunned by the vote of confidence. "Really?"

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"Really." She pushes her half-eaten grilled cheese toward the center of the table.
"Want to split this? I can't finish it."

"Sure," I say, taking half. "Back to names. You really like Grace?"

"I do," she admits. "It's classic. Pretty."

"It was my mother's name," I tell her. "She was the only one who could ever get all five of us boys to behave just by raising an eyebrow."

"Sounds like a useful skill," Naomi laughs. "One I hope to master."

"You'll need it with a Covington daughter," I warn her. "Stubborn blood runs deep."

"Tell me about it. I've already experienced the Covington stubbornness firsthand." She gives me a pointed look that makes me laugh.

"Fair enough," I concede. "But seriously, what do you think? Grace Harper Covington, right? Or do you have other ideas?"

"Grace Elizabeth Harper Covington, maybe? After my mother?"

"Grace Elizabeth Harper Covington," I try it out. "Sounds like someone who could run the world someday."

"Or at least Cedar Falls," Naomi smiles.

As we finish our meal, sharing the last of her chocolate milkshake, I find myself imagining a future I never thought I'd want—playdates and school recitals, teaching a little girl with Naomi's eyes and my stubborn chin how to ride a horse, how to stand up for herself, how to be brave.

For the first time, that future doesn't terrify me. It excites me.

Chapter 6 - Naomi

As Ethan pays the bill—waving away my attempt to split it—I watch him interact with Madeline, who's giving him what appears to be a good-natured lecture judging by his sheepish grin. It's strange seeing him like this, stepping into responsibility so naturally when for months all I saw was his resistance to it.

"Ready?" he asks, returning to our table.

"What was that about?" I nod toward Madeline.

"Oh, just the standard 'you better do right by that girl' speech." He smiles. "I think I'm going to be getting a lot of those in the coming months."

We step outside into the afternoon sunlight. The air has that perfect fall crispness that always makes me want to bake apple pies and cinnamon rolls.

"I should probably get you back to the bakery," Ethan says, jingling his keys.

I check my watch. "Actually, Melissa's got it covered for the rest of the day. I cleared my schedule, thinking I might need to rest after the appointment."

"And do you? Need to rest?" His concern seems genuine.

"Not really," I admit. "I'm feeling pretty good today."

We stand there for a moment, neither of us quite ready to end our time together. The ultrasound image burns in my pocket like a talisman, connecting us in a fragile and unbreakable way.

"Would you like to come over?" I find myself asking. "To my place? I've actually started setting up the nursery, and I thought maybe you'd want to see it."

Surprise flickers across his face, followed by something that looks like pleasure.

"You've already started on a nursery?"

I nod, suddenly feeling self-conscious. "It's nothing fancy. Just some ideas, really. My place is small, so I'm converting the guest room."

"I'd love to see it," he says.

Twenty minutes later, I'm unlocking the door to my small craftsman bungalow on Maple Street. It's tiny compared to the sprawling Covington ranch house, but it's mine—the first property I ever owned, purchased with the down payment I saved from five years of working double shifts at bakeries in Billings before returning to Cedar Falls to open my own place.

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"This is nice," Ethan says, looking around at my living room with its overstuffed couch and walls lined with bookshelves. "Cozy."

"Thanks," I reply, "It's not much, but it works for me."

"It feels like you," he observes, studying the collection of mismatched teacups I display on an open shelf. "Warm. Welcoming."

The compliment catches me off guard. "Kitchen's through there if you want water or anything," I say, deflecting. "The nursery—well, future nursery—is this way."

I lead him down the short hallway, past my bedroom door (firmly closed, thank goodness) to the small room at the back of the house. Taking a deep breath, I push open the door.

The room is still mostly a guest room—there's a daybed against one wall that will eventually have to go—but I've started the transformation. One wall is now a soft sage green, with the others still the original cream. A wooden rocking chair that belonged to my grandmother sits in the corner, and I've hung a simple mobile of felt woodland animals above where the crib will eventually go.

"It's not much yet," I say into the silence as Ethan takes it all in. "But I thought a nature theme might be nice. Gender-neutral, though now that we know she's a girl, I might add some more—"

"It's perfect," Ethan interrupts, his voice thick with emotion. He walks to the rocking chair, running his hand along its smooth arm. "This is beautiful craftsmanship."

"It was my grandmother's," I explain. "My mom rocked me in it, and now I'll rock Grace."

Hearing her name—our daughter's name—spoken aloud between us makes the air feel charged somehow.

"Grace," Ethan repeats softly. He moves to the window, which overlooks my small backyard with its vegetable garden and single apple tree. "Nice view. She'll be able to see the seasons change."

I'd had the same thought myself when choosing this room over the slightly larger one I use as my bedroom.

"I have some other things," I say, crossing to the closet. "Just a few things I've picked up, before I even knew..." I trail off, suddenly embarrassed by my early preparations.

But Ethan looks genuinely interested, so I pull out the small collection I've gathered: a stuffed rabbit with impossibly soft fur, a yellow blanket I couldn't resist, a few gender-neutral onesies with ducks and bears.

"You really have been planning," he says, taking the rabbit when I offer it.

"I guess I wanted to be prepared." I sit on the edge of the daybed. "And shopping for baby things made it feel more real, in a good way."

Ethan nods, still holding the rabbit. "I haven't bought anything yet. I wouldn't even know where to start."

"There's plenty of time," I assure him. "And honestly, babies don't need that much at first. Somewhere to sleep, something to wear, diapers. Love."

"Love they'll definitely have," he says with such conviction that I must blink back sudden tears. Pregnancy hormones are no joke.

Ethan perches beside me on the daybed, careful to leave space between us.

"I want to help with the nursery and everything else. I'm pretty handy—rebuilt half the cabins on the ranch last summer. I could build her a crib, maybe?"

"That would be wonderful, actually. I was looking at cribs online, but they're so expensive, and the reviews are all over the place."

"Consider it done," he says firmly. "And anything else you need. Just say the word."

We sit silently for a moment, both lost in thoughts of the future. I can almost see it—Grace toddling across this very floor, her first steps, her laughter filling this small room.

"Naomi," Ethan says suddenly, his voice serious. "I want you to know I'm in this for the long haul. Whatever that looks like."

I stare at him—the earnest hazel eyes, the slight furrow between his brows that appears when he's being completely sincere.

"I believe you," I say, surprising myself with how much I mean it. "Today helped. Seeing you at the appointment, the way you looked at the ultrasound..."

"I've never felt anything like that before," he admits. "Seeing her, hearing her heart—it changed something in me."

He moves closer on the daybed, shortening the distance between us. His eyes, usually dancing with mischief, are serious and focused entirely on me.

"I know we should take this slow," he says, his voice dropping lower. "I should do things right, be patient, prove myself to you. But I've always been a bit crazy."

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My pulse quickens. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean I'm going to regret it if I don't do this."

"Do what—"

His lips find mine before I can finish the question.

God, he's still such a good kisser. His lips taste like that fantastic grilled cheese, and there's a hint of sweetness from my chocolate shake. If I could, I'd stay like this forever, suspended in this perfect moment where everything feels possible.

He breaks the kiss but doesn't move away, instead leaning his stubbled cheek against mine. His breath is warm against my ear as he whispers, "You look more gorgeous than ever. I want to claim you once again—this time I'll stay after, this time I'll stay forever."

A shiver runs through me at his words. I'm not sure if he means every syllable or if he's fully aware of what he's promising. But I can't bring myself to say no to him either.

I've been waiting—longer than I care to admit—for him to say these things, to wake up to what we could be together.

"Follow me," I whisper back, taking his hand and standing. "To my bedroom. Don't say anything about the mess—I forgot to pick up the clothes I was trying on this morning."

He smirks, that classic Ethan expression that never fails to make my legs tremble. "I won't be looking at the clothes, Naomi."

My bedroom is just across the hall, bathed in afternoon light filtering through the gauzy curtains. As promised, there are clothes scattered across the foot of the bed—evidence of my earlier struggle to find something that still fits comfortably.

None of that matters now as Ethan closes the door behind us and we begin undressing with an urgency that belies the months apart. I'm naked first, suddenly self-conscious of my changing body—the fuller breasts, the small but definite curve of my belly.

But the hunger in Ethan's eyes as he sheds his own clothes banishes any insecurity. When he stands before me, gloriously naked, I can't help but feel a rush of desire. I've missed his body—lean and muscled from ranch work, and particularly the thick, veined cock that's already hard for me.

He doesn't waste time with more words. Instead, he guides me to the bed, his fingertips trailing fire across my skin. When his hand moves between my thighs, I gasp at the contact.

"Always so wet for me," he murmurs, his fingers curled, going back and forth inside me. "I've always loved that about you."

I arch into his touch, my body remembering his even after these months apart. There's no awkwardness, no fumbling—just the perfect pressure that makes me writhe beneath him.

"I've missed you," I confess, the words tumbling out unchecked. "Missed this."

"I'm not going anywhere this time," he promises, his free hand cradling my face, making me look into his eyes. "I need you to believe that."

His sincerity is almost as arousing as his touch. I pull him down for another kiss, deeper and more desperate than before. His body covers mine, careful to keep his weight off my belly, and the feeling of skin against skin is electric.

"I want you inside me," I whisper against his lips. "Please, Ethan."

He positions himself between my thighs, the tip of his cock teasing my entrance.

"You're sure?" he asks, ever so serious now. "With the baby, it's okay?"

The question—his concern—makes me fall for him a little more. "It's perfectly safe," I assure him. "Dr. Mason already told me."

With a groan of relief, he pushes forward slowly, filling me entirely. We both gasp at the sensation, familiar yet somehow entirely new.

"God, Naomi," he breathes, holding still once he's fully in. "You feel like coming home."

The words bring unexpected tears to my eyes. Home. Yes, that's exactly what this feels like—finding home in each other's arms. He begins to move, setting a gentle pace that gradually builds in intensity.

This isn't like the urgent, passionate encounters we shared before. This is something different—something deeper and more meaningful. In every stroke, every kiss, every murmured endearment, I feel his promise. This time is different. This time, he's truly with me.

He kisses my face—my forehead, my cheeks, the corner of my mouth—as his pace quickens. His grip on my hands tightens, our fingers interlaced against the sheets.

"I'm never going to let you go," he breathes against my neck. "I was too dumb the first time to realize what we could have had. But not now." His eyes lock with mine, intense and certain. "Now I see it—my future, our future together with our daughter."

I want to tell him that I want all that too, but that we can't rush it, that we need to be sure. Yet the words die in my throat. How can I speak of caution now, with him looking so heartbreakingly handsome above me?

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Sweat trickles down his forehead and across his toned chest, catching the golden afternoon light. My breasts jiggle with each thrust, sensitive and fuller than they've ever been.

A moan escapes me, louder than I intended. He's hitting that perfect spot inside me, over and over, and I can't help but smile up at him, wrapping my arms around his broad shoulders to pull him closer.

"Ethan," I whisper into his ear, overcome with sensation and emotion. "Finish inside me. At least now you're safe to do it."

His eyes widen at my words, and something primal flashes across his face. He thrusts forward with renewed purpose, his strong arms flexing on either side of me like pillars, holding himself just high enough to keep pressure off my belly.

The familiar tightening begins deep inside me, waves of pleasure building until I can't hold back any longer. I arch beneath him, crying out his name as I reach my peak, my body pulsing around him.

He follows seconds later, his rhythm faltering as he groans and fills me with his seed. When he eventually pulls out, I feel a trickle of white liquid on the sheets, but I can't bring myself to care about the mess. He rolls to my side, immediately placing a reverent hand on my belly, massaging gentle circles over the small swell where our daughter grows.

"That was..." he trails off, his breathing still ragged.

"Yeah," I agree, unable to find better words myself.

"I meant every word, Naomi," he says after a moment, propping himself up on one elbow to look at me properly. "I want this. I want you. And we can go at your pace—I'm fine with however slow you need to take it."

I ruffle his sweat-dampened hair, my heart so full it feels like it might burst. "I never thought you'd grow up so fast."

He grins, that familiar Ethan smile that's always been my weakness.

"Some news have that effect," he shrugs. "Having a daughter is one of them." His expression softens as his hand continues its gentle caress of my belly. "I want to be the type of man she idolizes, you know?"

I pull him closer, resting my head against his chest where I can hear the steady rhythm of his heart.

"You're starting to be," I tell him honestly. "And I love that for us. For her." I trace patterns on his skin, marveling at how right this feels. "Our future looks brighter than I ever imagined."

We lie there in comfortable silence as the afternoon light shifts across my bedroom walls. Outside, a bird calls, and somewhere down the street, a child laughs—ordinary sounds that now seem like promises of what's to come.

I know we still have challenges ahead. Ethan has growth to do, patterns to break. I have fears to overcome, trust to rebuild. We have a thousand practical matters to sort out—living arrangements, schedules, finances. A nursery to finish, a birth plan to create, a life to rearrange.

But for now, in this perfect stolen moment, I let myself believe in the possibility of us. The three of us. A family I never expected but now can't imagine living without.

Ethan's breathing has deepened, and I realize he's fallen asleep, his arm protectively curved around me, his hand still resting on our growing daughter. I place my hand over his, our fingers aligned over the small swell of new life.

"We're going to be okay, Grace," I whisper, a promise to our daughter, to Ethan, to myself. "Better than okay."

And for the first time since seeing those two pink lines on the pregnancy test four months ago, I truly believe it.

Epilogue - Ethan

Five months later, I'm gripping Naomi's hand as she squeezes mine with a strength I didn't know she possessed. Her face is flushed, hair damp with sweat, her eyes fierce with determination and pain.

"You're doing amazing," I tell her, trying to keep my voice steady. "Everything is gonna be wonderful."

The words sound confident, but inside, I'm dying—terrified by her pain, by the monitors beeping around us, by the enormity of what's happening. I've faced down angry bulls and broken wild horses, but nothing has ever scared me like this moment.

"One more big push, Naomi," Dr. Mason encourages from the foot of the bed. "I can see the head. Your baby is almost here."

Naomi grits her teeth, bearing down with a primal cry that tears through me. I press my forehead against her temple, murmuring encouragement, willing my strength into

her.

Outside in the waiting room, I know my entire family is there. I called them from the car as we raced to the hospital at 3 AM, Naomi's water having broken two weeks earlier than expected.

By the time we arrived, Jackson and Sarah were already there. Within the hour, everyone had shown up—Vincent with Charlotte and Lucy, Aaron and Elena, Cole and Luisa with her son Miguel.

That's what family means, I've learned. Dropping everything when you're needed. Being there, no questions asked. I'm grateful I learned that lesson from my brothers, because now I'm building my own family.

These past five months have been nothing short of a dream. After that day at Naomi's house, things shifted between us. I started staying over—just to sleep at first, holding her through the night. Then more nights than not, until it seemed silly for me to keep clothes at the ranch. Two months ago, I officially moved in, turning the small home office into a space for my things.

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I smile through my fear, remembering the night I formally asked her to be my girlfriend. We were painting the nursery—the sage green wall now joined by a mural of mountains and trees I'd insisted on trying to create myself. I was speckled with paint, she was laughing at my artistic attempts, and I just blurted it out.

"Be my girlfriend?" I'd asked, paintbrush dripping onto the drop cloth.

She'd tilted her head, that smile I love spreading across her face. "Aren't we a bit beyond that, considering I'm carrying your child and you're living in my house?"

"Maybe," I'd admitted. "But I never did this right. Never asked properly."

"Yes," she'd said simply, stepping carefully over paint cans to kiss me. "Yes, I'll be your girlfriend, Ethan Covington."

Now, Naomi lets out another scream, gripping my hand so hard I feel bones about to crack. I don't care. I'd let her break every bone in my body if it would help.

"That's it!" Dr. Mason exclaims. "Keep pushing, Naomi. She's coming!"

Everything seems to blur, time compressing and expanding all at once. One moment, Naomi is crying out; the next, there's a different cry—higher, indignant, perfect.

"Here she is," Dr. Mason announces, holding up a squirming, red-faced miracle. "Your daughter."

I can't speak. Can't breathe. Can only stare as the doctor places this tiny, wailing

human on Naomi's chest.

"Oh my god," Naomi whispers, her voice breaking. "Ethan, look at her. Look at Grace."

Grace Elizabeth Harper Covington. Seven pounds, three ounces of absolute perfection. Dark hair matted to her tiny head, eyes squeezed shut, fists balled as if ready to fight the whole world.

I'm crying. I don't realize it until a tear splashes onto Naomi's arm. I make no move to wipe the others that follow.

"She's beautiful," I manage, gasping. "She's so beautiful."

Naomi looks up at me, her eyes shining despite her exhaustion. "She looks like you," she says. "Same chin."

I laugh through my tears. "Poor kid."

A nurse approaches, showing me how to cut the umbilical cord. My hands shake, but I manage the task, severing the physical connection between mother and child while forging a thousand invisible new ones between all three of us.

They take Grace briefly to clean her up and check her vitals, and I press kisses to Naomi's forehead, her cheeks, her lips.

"You did it," I tell her, awestruck. "You're incredible."

"We did it," she corrects me, squeezing my hand—gentler now.

When they place Grace back in Naomi's arms, swaddled in a hospital blanket with a

tiny pink cap covering her dark hair, I perch carefully on the edge of the bed beside them.

"Want to hold her?" Naomi asks.

My heart hammers. "What if I do it wrong?"

"You won't," she assures me, already shifting our daughter toward me.

And then she's in my arms—this tiny person who is part me, part Naomi, and entirely her own self already. Her eyes flutter open briefly, unfocused but seeming to look right into me. I'm changed instantly, rearranged at a molecular level.

"Hi, Grace," I whisper. "I'm your dad."

Dad. The word feels foreign and completely right all at once.

"I'm going to do everything I can to be worthy of you," I promise her. "To be the kind of father you deserve."

Naomi's hand finds mine where it supports Grace's small body.

"You already are," she says softly.

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A nurse pokes her head in. "There's quite a crowd out there asking about you three. Are you up for visitors? Just family, and just for a few minutes."

Naomi nods, and moments later my brothers file in, their partners and children hanging back to give us space. I see the emotion on each of their faces as they look at Grace—pride, love, welcome.

"Meet your niece," I say, voice still unsteady. "Grace Elizabeth Harper Covington."

Vincent steps forward first, Lucy peering around him with wide eyes.

"She's perfect, little brother," he says, his hand warm on my shoulder. "Lucy's been asking for a female cousin for so long."

Aaron moves in next, his usually stoic expression softened. "She's got the Covington strength already," he observes, noticing Grace's tiny fist gripping my finger.

Jackson's eyes shine suspiciously as he takes his turn, Sarah at his side.

"Look at you," he says, his voice rough with emotion. "The wild one, all grown up with a beautiful daughter." He clears his throat. "Dad and Mom would've been proud, Ethan. Really proud."

Cole is the last to approach, Luisa and Miguel hanging back respectfully.

"Welcome to fatherhood," he says with a knowing smile. "It's terrifying and amazing all at once. But you've got this—and you've got all of us." He glances at his own

stepson. "Miguel's excited to have another cousin. He's already picked out a stuffed horse for her from all of us."

As my family gathers around us, I look at Naomi—tired but radiant, smiling through her own tears—and then at Grace, unaware of how completely she's transformed our world.

Six months ago, I thought freedom meant having no ties and no responsibilities. I never imagined that true freedom would come from this—from loving so fully that everything else falls away, building something lasting with the woman beside me, and holding this small miracle we created together.

"Thank you," I mouth to Naomi over our daughter's head.

She understands what I'm thanking her for—not just for Grace, but for believing in me when I didn't believe in myself. For giving me the chance to become the man I was meant to be.

For showing me that the greatest adventure isn't the one that takes you around the world but the one that brings you home.