



# Saved By the Ex-Military Mechanic

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**Category:** Romance, Adult

**Description:** They say small towns have no secrets, but the intensity in my mechanic's eyes tells me he's keeping plenty.

I'm new to Cedar Falls and have nothing but a cryptic note from my late father about "unfinished business" in this tiny logging town. The last thing I need is car trouble, but that's exactly what I get—along with Riley Carter, an ex-military mechanic whose scars hint at deeper wounds he carries from his service.

Riley isn't exactly the welcoming committee type. His powerful shoulders tense whenever anyone gets too close, and he keeps the town at arm's length just as he tries to keep me at a distance.

As I discover our families share a complicated history stretching back to the town's founding, I can't help but wonder... Is my connection with this solitary man a coincidence, or is fate drawing us together?

Saved by the Ex-Military Mechanic is a short, sweet, and steamy small town instalove romance with a happy-ever-after. It can be read as a standalone or together with the rest of the books in the Curvy Wives of Cedar Falls series.

**Total Pages (Source):** 30

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:25 am*

## Chapter 1 - Lucy

The sound starts as a faint ticking at first—barely audible over my road trip playlist blasting through the speakers. I ignore it, tapping my fingers against the steering wheel and singing along to the radio, pretending I'm not driving my entire life to a town where I know absolutely no one.

But then the ticking becomes a clunking, and the clunking morphs into a concerning rattle. The car coasts to a stop with a pathetic shudder right beneath the "Welcome to Cedar Falls" sign.

"No, no, no," I mutter, turning the key frantically in the ignition. The engine coughs, sputters, then gives up. "Not now. Please not now."

I bang my forehead against the steering wheel, which proves to be a mistake when the horn blares, startling me upright. Great. Now I look like an idiot in addition to being stranded.

The late afternoon sun slants through my windshield, highlighting the dust on my dashboard and the empty coffee cups littering my passenger seat. I've been driving for six hours straight, the final leg of my three-day journey from Phoenix to this tiny town. My new home, though I haven't even technically made it into the town limits.

I pull out my phone, relieved to see I have service. Small miracles. The GPS indicates I'm only about a mile from the town center. I could walk, but that would mean abandoning my car—packed with everything I own—on the side of the road. Not exactly an option.

My Toyota Corolla might be twelve years old with peeling paint and a missing hubcap, but it's carried me through college, through Dad's funeral, through my hasty exit from the city when everything fell apart.

I open my glove compartment, fishing for the AAA card I know expired last month. I meant to renew it before the move, but between packing up my apartment and dodging my mother's guilt-laden calls, it slipped my mind. Like so many things lately.

Scrolling through my contacts, I realize with a hollow feeling that there's no one to call. Not anymore. I've cut ties with most of my friends back home—if you could even call them friends. My sister hasn't spoken to me since the reading of Dad's will. And Mom... well, calling her would defeat the whole purpose of moving three states away.

I need to find a mechanic, and I need to find one now. The sun will set in a couple of hours, and the thought of being stranded here in the dark makes my stomach clench.

A quick search brings up "Carter's Auto Shop" as the only mechanic in Cedar Falls. The reviews are sparse but positive. "Riley fixed my truck when no one else could," reads one. "Doesn't talk much but does honest work," says another. At this point, I'll take what I can get.

I dial the number, drumming my fingers nervously on the steering wheel as it rings. Once. Twice. Three times. I'm beginning to think no one will answer when a gruff voice barks, "Carter's."

"Hi," I say, my voice embarrassingly breathy. "My car broke down just outside of town. The engine made this weird noise and then just... died. I was wondering if—"

"Address?" the voice interrupts.

"Um, I don't really have one. I'm right by the 'Welcome to Cedar Falls' sign on Route 16."

There's a sigh on the other end. "Town limit. Got it. Tow truck's out on another call. Be about forty-five minutes."

"Oh." I glance at my watch. It's already after five. "Do you close soon? I can try to find someone else if—"

"We close at seven. But I'll wait." His tone suggests this is not a small concession.

"Thank you," I say, relief washing over me. "I really appreciate it. I'm Lucy, by the way. Lucy Mitchell."

There's a pause, as if my attempt at friendliness has confused him. "Riley," he finally says. "Forty-five minutes." Then the line goes dead.

Well, that was... abrupt. But at least help is coming. I settle back in my seat, trying to calm the anxiety that's been my constant companion since I decided to move here.

Cedar Falls wasn't a random choice. I'd seen pictures of the town in my father's old albums. He grew up here, left as a teenager, and never came back. He rarely spoke about it, but when he did, his eyes would get this faraway look—not nostalgic exactly, more like he was trying to solve a puzzle.

After he died, I found a small journal hidden in his desk drawer. Most of it was mundane—fishing records, expenses—but on the last page, he'd written: "Cedar Falls. Unfinished business." That was it. No explanation.

With nothing keeping me in Phoenix except painful memories and my mother's increasing resentment, Cedar Falls seemed like a sign. A fresh start. A mystery to

solve. Something that was just mine.

Now, as I look at the town stretched out before me—glimpses of buildings nestled among towering pines—I wonder if I've made a terrible mistake. I don't know anyone here. I have no job lined up, just a small rental cottage I found online and enough savings to last a few months. What was I thinking?

I check my reflection in the rearview mirror, grimacing at what I see. My dark hair is a frizzy mess from the drive, my mascara smudged beneath my eyes. I try to fix what I can, then give up. The mechanic—Riley—probably won't care what I look like anyway.

The minutes crawl by. I flip through radio stations, finding mostly static until I land on what sounds like local community radio. A woman with a gentle voice is reading announcements about a farmers market and an upcoming town festival.

Cedar Falls is celebrating its 150th anniversary this weekend, she says. There will be a parade, a bake-off, historical reenactments. The whole town is getting involved. The excitement in her voice makes me feel even more like an outsider. By the time she finishes, I've sunken low in my seat, overwhelmed by the smallness of this town and my conspicuous arrival.

The sound of an approaching vehicle jerks me from my thoughts. A tow truck comes into view, navy blue with "Carter's Auto Shop" painted on the side in bold white letters. It pulls up behind my car, and I watch in the rearview mirror as a tall figure emerges.

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In my mind, I'd pictured someone older, maybe with a beer belly and grease-stained overalls—the small-town mechanic stereotype. But this man...

He's tall, at least six-foot-two, with broad shoulders that taper to a trim waist. He's wearing a simple black t-shirt that stretches across his chest and faded jeans. His face is all angles—sharp cheekbones, a strong jaw dusted with a rugged beard. But it's his eyes that catch me off guard when he approaches my window. They're amber, almost golden in the late afternoon light, startling against his tanned skin.

He doesn't smile as he gestures for me to roll down my window. I comply, feeling suddenly self-conscious about my appearance, my broken-down car, my entire existence.

"Lucy Mitchell?" he asks, his voice deep and resonant, just as abrupt in person as it was on the phone.

"That's me," I say, attempting a smile that feels wobbly. "You must be Carter, right? Thanks for coming to my rescue."

"Yes. Riley Carter." He doesn't acknowledge my gratitude, just looks past me at my car's interior, his gaze cataloging the packed backseat. "Just moved here?" It's not really a question.

"Yeah, today actually. Well, trying to, at least." I laugh nervously. "Not the grand entrance I was hoping for."

His expression doesn't change. "Pop the hood."

I fumble for the lever, feeling like I'm failing some test I didn't know I was taking. The hood releases with a metallic click, and Riley moves to the front of the car without another word.

I exit the car, stretching my cramped legs. Standing, I'm even more aware of how tall he is and how he seems to take up all the available space. I watch as he leans over my engine, the muscles in his forearms flexing as he checks something. I force myself to look away.

"What do you think it is?" I ask, trying to fill the silence. "The car was fine this morning. I had it checked before I left Phoenix, and—"

"Alternator," he interrupts, straightening up. "Dead. You'll need a new one."

"Oh." I bite my lip, my mind immediately going to cost. "Is that... expensive?"

Something flickers across his face—annoyance? Pity? It's gone too quickly to tell. "Parts and labor, around \$500."

I try not to visibly wince. That's a decent chunk of my savings, money I was counting on to get settled. "How long will it take to fix?"

"Depends if I have the part. Need to get it to the shop first." He moves back to the tow truck, all business. "Get what you need for the night. Car won't be ready before tomorrow at the earliest."

I nod, then scramble to gather my overnight bag, purse, and laptop from the passenger seat. Riley works quickly, hooking up my car to the tow truck with ease. I hover awkwardly, not sure if I should offer to help or stay out of his way.

"Um, where exactly is your shop?" I ask. "And is there somewhere nearby I could

stay tonight? I was supposed to pick up my rental cottage key from the landlord, but—"

"Shop's in town. Mile down this road, left at the first light." He secures the final chain, then looks at me directly for the first time. "There's a motel across the street. Nothing fancy, but it's clean."

I nod again, clutching my bag to my chest like a shield. "And I can just... ride with you? To the shop?"

Riley glances at my luggage, then at the packed car now hitched to his truck. Understanding dawns in those amber eyes. "Everything you own in there?"

"Pretty much," I admit, feeling vulnerable under his scrutiny.

He doesn't comment, just opens the passenger door of the tow truck and steps back, waiting. I climb in, my cheeks burning with embarrassment. The cab smells like coffee and motor oil, with a faint hint of something woodsy—cologne or soap, maybe. It's not unpleasant.

Riley slides into the driver's seat. The engine rumbles to life, and we pull onto the road, my car trailing behind us like a reluctant child.

As we cross the town line, I feel a strange mix of dread and anticipation. Welcome to Cedar Falls, I think. So much for fresh starts.

## Chapter 2 - Riley

I don't like surprises. Not since Afghanistan. Not since coming home to find everything changed. And this woman sitting in my truck cab right now? Definitely a surprise.



Lucy Mitchell. Even her name sounds soft. She sits with her hands folded in her lap, staring out the window like she's memorizing every tree we pass. I keep my eyes on the road, but I'm aware of her—the way she smells like vanilla and something citrusy, how she keeps tucking her dark hair behind her ear when it falls forward.

"So..." she starts, clearly uncomfortable with the silence. "Have you lived in Cedar Falls long?"

Small talk. Great.

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"Born here," I answer, keeping it brief. No need to mention leaving at eighteen and only returning when my father was safely in the ground.

"Oh! That's nice. So you know everyone, then?"

I grunt in response. Yeah, I know everyone, and everyone knows me—or thinks they do. The Carter boy who came back all wrong from the war. The surly mechanic who keeps to himself. The man whose brother won't even look him in the eye at the grocery store.

"I've never lived in a small town before," she continues, either missing or ignoring my obvious disinterest. "It seems... peaceful."

I can't help the short laugh that escapes me. "Seems that way."

She turns to look at me fully now, and I feel her gaze piercing through my soul. It makes the skin on the back of my neck prickle.

"Not peaceful?" she asks.

"Small towns have long memories," I say, immediately regretting offering even this much. Something about her wide brown eyes makes me want to explain myself, and that's dangerous territory.

We're approaching town now, Main Street with its old-fashioned lampposts already lit as dusk settles. Cedar Falls tries hard to maintain its picturesque appearance—hanging flower baskets in summer, twinkling lights in winter, and now,

banners celebrating the town's 150th anniversary strung across the street. Like dressing up a corpse.

The town's not dying, exactly. The lumber mill still employs a fair number, and tourism keeps the rest afloat. But it's stuck in time, clinging to traditions and grudges with equal fervor.

Lucy's pressing her face closer to the window now, taking it all in. "It's so charming," she says, sounding genuinely delighted. "Look at that bookstore! And is that a real soda fountain?"

I follow her gaze to Monroe's, where I used to get chocolate malts after school. Before everything went to hell. "Yeah. Been there since the fifties."

"I've only seen places like this in movies," she says, and there's something wistful in her voice that makes me glance at her.

In the soft glow of the streetlights, I notice things I missed before. The dark circles under her eyes. The tension in her shoulders. The way she holds herself, like she's expecting a blow. She's running from something—or someone. I recognize the signs because I've seen them in the mirror.

"You said you're renting a cottage?" I ask, surprising myself. I don't usually care about my customers' living situations.

She blinks, equally surprised by my sudden interest. "Yes. I haven't seen it in person yet, just pictures online. The owner—Mrs. Abernathy?—was supposed to meet me there with the keys at six."

I know the place. Small blue cottage set back from the road, overgrown garden. And I definitely know Edith Abernathy, the nosiest widow in town.

“Yeah. I know her.” I slow as we approach my shop, a converted gas station at the edge of the commercial district.

The 'Carter's Auto Shop' sign glows neon blue against the darkening sky. I pull into the lot and park, then kill the engine. I can hear Lucy's soft breathing beside me in the sudden silence. It makes the cab seem smaller somehow.

"I guess I'll really have to get a motel room then," she says, more to herself than to me. She sounds resigned and tired.

Something tugs at me—a feeling I don't particularly welcome. Sympathy, maybe. Or recognition. I remember what it was like, coming back to Cedar Falls three years ago, a stranger in my hometown.

"I know where she keeps the spare," I hear myself saying. "For the cottage."

Lucy's head snaps toward me, hope brightening her face. It transforms her completely—softens the tension around her mouth, brings a spark to her eyes. Something uncomfortable stirs in my chest.

"Really? You'd show me?"

I shrug, already regretting the offer. "Need to drop your car first. Then I can take you there."

Her smile is immediate and genuine, crinkling the corners of her eyes. "Thank you. Seriously, that would be amazing."

I nod curtly and exit the truck before I can say anything else stupid. The cool evening air clears my head as I move to the back to lower her car. Focus on the job, Carter. That's all this is.

But as I work the hydraulic lift, I can't help glancing through the rear window of her Corolla. The backseat and trunk are packed—boxes labeled in neat handwriting, clothes in vacuum-sealed bags, a small collection of framed photos wrapped carefully in bubble wrap. Her whole life, compressed and categorized.

I recognize the effort it takes to pack like that. The deliberation. This wasn't an impulsive move. She planned her escape.

By the time I've got her car detached and parked in the bay, Lucy has exited the truck and is hovering nearby, clutching her overnight bag. She looks smaller outside the cab, barely reaching my shoulder. Her sweater is too big for her, sleeves pulled down over her hands like she's cold despite the mild evening.

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"I'll need to look at it more thoroughly tomorrow," I tell her, locking up the shop. "But if it is the alternator, I might not have the part for your model. Might need to order it."

Her face falls again, and I notice how expressive she is—every thought and emotion playing across her features like a movie. "How long would that take?"

"Two, three days if I expedite it."

She bites her lower lip, clearly calculating costs in her head. "Okay," she says finally. "I'll figure it out."

There's determination in her voice that wasn't there before. Resilience. It reminds me of the younger mechanics I trained in the Army—the ones who came in soft but developed calluses fast.

"Come on," I say, heading back to my truck. "I'll take you to your cottage."

She follows without hesitation, which strikes me as either very trusting or very naive. Doesn't she know better than to get in vehicles with strange men in strange towns? Especially men who look like me?

I'm aware of how I appear to others. The military cut my hair still adheres to. The scar that bisects my left eyebrow. The perpetual scowl that someone once said makes me look like I'm plotting murder. People in town give me a wide berth, and I prefer it that way.

But Lucy slides back into the passenger seat without apparent concern, buckling her seatbelt and offering me another small smile.

"I really appreciate this," she says as I start the engine. "I was starting to think this whole move was a cosmic mistake."

I pull back onto Main Street, heading toward the residential area. "What brought you to Cedar Falls anyway?" I ask, then immediately wonder why I care.

She's quiet for a moment, staring out at the passing storefronts. "My father grew up here," she finally says. "He never talked about it much, but after he died last year, I found some of his old journals. He wrote about unfinished business in Cedar Falls."

I glance at her, curious despite myself. "What kind of business?"

"That's the thing—I don't know. It was just that one cryptic line." She shrugs, looking embarrassed. "Honestly, I probably read too much into it. But I needed a change, and it felt like... I don't know, a sign or something."

Her voice trails off, and I don't push. I understand having unfinished business with this town better than most.

We turn onto another road, leaving the glow of downtown behind. The houses here are older, set back from the street on larger lots. Many have been in the same families for generations.

"That's the Hendersons'," I say, nodding toward a large Victorian as we pass. "Their son Dave runs the hardware store now. And that's the old Wilson place. Mrs. Wilson teaches piano lessons."

I'm not sure why I'm giving her this impromptu tour. Maybe because she's looking at

everything with such undisguised interest. Or maybe because, for once, I'm talking to someone who doesn't already know all the stories, all the history.

"There," I say, slowing as we approach a small cottage set back from the road. "That's Mrs. Abernathy's rental."

The cottage is just as I remember it—blue clapboard with white trim, a sagging front porch with a porch swing, wildflowers growing along the front walk. It's been vacant since the last tenant got together with a firefighter and moved to his place.

I park in the gravel driveway and kill the engine. Lucy is leaning forward, peering through the windshield at her new home.

"It's perfect," she breathes, and I can hear genuine pleasure in her voice. "It looks just like the pictures."

I don't comment that the pictures probably didn't show the peeling paint on the porch railings or the missing shutter on the upstairs window. If she wants to see it as perfect, who am I to argue?

We get out, and I lead her to the back of the house, where I know Edith keeps a spare key hidden on a fake rock beside the back steps. Sure enough, it's still there.

"Mrs. Abernathy isn't big on security," I explain, handing her the key. "Most people around here aren't."

"Thank you," she says again, clutching the key like it's precious. "For everything. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't answered the phone."

I shrug, uncomfortable with her gratitude. "Just doing my job."



She smiles like she doesn't quite believe me, and for some reason, that makes me even more uncomfortable.

"I'll unlock it for you," I say gruffly, taking the key back and heading up the steps. "Make sure everything's working before I go."

The back door opens into a small kitchen that smells faintly of lemon cleaning products. I flip on the light switch, relieved when the overhead fixture illuminates. At least the electricity's on.

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Lucy follows me inside, her footsteps light on the worn linoleum. "Oh," she says softly, looking around. "It's lovely."

The kitchen is outdated—yellow countertops from the seventies, an ancient gas stove—but it's clean and spacious enough. Through a doorway, I can see a small living room with a stone fireplace.

"Furnace is in the basement," I tell her, moving through the kitchen. "Thermostat's here. Pilot light for the water heater sometimes goes out when it storms."

She follows me as I do a quick check of the major systems. The furnace rumbles to life when I adjust the thermostat, and the faucets in the kitchen and bathroom run clear after a moment of rusty water.

"Looks like everything's working," I say, heading back to the kitchen. "Mrs. Abernathy will probably stop by tomorrow with paperwork and a proper set of keys."

Lucy is standing in the middle of the living room, turning slowly to take it all in. There's something vulnerable about her in this moment—a woman surrounded by empty rooms that aren't yet home.

"It's bigger than I expected," she says. "The listing said one bedroom, but there seem to be two upstairs."

"The smaller one was probably counted as an office." I check my watch. Nearly seven. "You need help bringing in your things?"

The offer surprises me as much as it seems to surprise her. I don't usually go out of my way for customers, especially not after hours.

"Oh, I just have this for now," she says, lifting her overnight bag. "Until my car's fixed."

Right. Her car. The reason we're here in the first place. How could I forget?

"I'll call you tomorrow once I've had a chance to look at it more closely," I say, moving toward the door. "Shop opens at eight."

She nods, following me to the back door. "I'll come by in the morning, if that's okay? I should probably get a rental car if mine's going to be out of commission for a few days."

"Nearest rental place is in Oakridge, twenty miles east," I tell her. "But Lou at the diner might know someone who could lend you something. Town's good about helping newcomers." Sometimes, anyway. When those newcomers aren't named Carter.

"Thanks for the tip." She hesitates, then adds, "And really, thank you for going above and beyond tonight. I know you didn't have to."

There's something in her eyes—a warmth, a directness—that makes me look away. I'm not used to being looked at like that, like I've done something special just by doing the bare minimum of human decency.

"No problem," I mutter, stepping outside. The evening air is cooling rapidly now, carrying the scent of pine and distant woodsmoke. "Lock up behind me. This town's safe, but still."

She nods, one hand on the door. "Goodnight, Riley."

I nod once in acknowledgment, then turn and head back to my truck. As I start the engine, I glance back at the cottage. Lucy stands in the doorway, illuminated from behind, watching me leave. She raises a hand in farewell, and after a moment's hesitation, I return the gesture.

Driving away, I tell myself I'm just doing my job. That's all this is. A broken-down car, a stranded customer. I've handled dozens of similar situations without giving them a second thought.

But as I turn back onto Main Street, I find myself wondering what Lucy Mitchell will make of Cedar Falls—and what Cedar Falls will make of her. This town has a way of either embracing you completely or rejecting you like a transplanted organ.

I wonder which it will be for her. And why, exactly, do I care?

### Chapter 3 - Lucy

I stand in the doorway long after Riley's truck disappears around the bend, the night air cool against my face. Something about him lingers—not just his woodsy scent that somehow made it into the cottage with him, but a presence. Like the air is different where he stood.

With a sigh, I close the door and lock it, testing the handle twice. It's not that I don't believe him about Cedar Falls being safe; it's just habit. Growing up in Phoenix taught me caution.

I turn to face my new home, really taking it in now that I'm alone. The living room is small but cozy, with worn hardwood floors and a stone fireplace that dominates one wall. The furniture is clearly secondhand but clean—a blue sofa with a crocheted

throw, a rocking chair by the window, a coffee table with water rings marking its surface.

It feels lived-in. Like someone else's life that I'm borrowing.

My footsteps echo as I wander from room to room. The kitchen cabinets are stocked with mismatched plates and cups. The bathroom has a clawfoot tub with a shower attachment. Upstairs, the main bedroom has a double bed with a handmade quilt and windows that face east—I'll get morning light.

The second bedroom—or office, according to Riley—is empty except for a desk and chair. Perfect for writing, I think, running my fingers along the desk's edge.

Not that I've written anything in months. Not since Dad died.

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I set my overnight bag on the bed and begin unpacking the essentials—toiletries, pajamas, a change of clothes for tomorrow. It feels strange to have so little with me when the rest of my life sits in boxes inside my broken-down car at a stranger's auto shop.

A stranger with amber eyes and careful hands. A stranger who found me a key when he could have just directed me to a motel.

I need to stop. He's just doing his job.

But it felt like more than that. The way he checked the house and explained everything. The gruff concern when he told me to lock up.

I shake my head, annoyed with myself. I've been in town for less than three hours and I'm already weaving fantasies about the first man I meet? Pathetic. Besides, a guy like that—with his chiseled jawline and those forearms—probably has women lining up around the block.

Not that I'd be his type anyway. Men like Riley go for sleek, confident women. Not soft, uncertain ones with too many curves and too much baggage.

Unpacked, I head back downstairs to investigate the kitchen. The refrigerator is empty except for a box of baking soda. The pantry holds a few staples—salt, pepper, flour, sugar. Mrs. Abernathy has at least provided the basics.

My stomach growls, reminding me I haven't eaten since a sad gas station sandwich at noon. But I have no car, no food, and no idea if anywhere delivers to this address.

As if in answer to my thoughts, I notice a piece of paper on the counter that I missed earlier. It's a welcome note from Mrs. Abernathy, letting me know she's stocked coffee and tea in the cupboard and that my nearest food options are Madeline's Diner (open 24/7) and Gino's Pizza (delivers until 10 PM).

I almost laugh at this small kindness. Maybe small towns do have their advantages. I call in an order for a small pizza, giving my address and adding,

"I just moved in today, so I might need to guide your delivery person."

"You're at Edith's rental?" asks the woman on the phone. "Blue cottage?"

"Yes," I say, surprised.

"No problem, honey. My son's delivering tonight, and he knows exactly where you are. Twenty minutes."

She hangs up before I can respond, leaving me staring at my phone. I guess Riley wasn't exaggerating about everyone knowing everyone here.

While I wait for my food, I continue exploring. The living room bookshelf holds an eclectic mix—gardening guides, murder mysteries, a few romance novels with cracked spines. I run my fingers along them, wondering about the previous tenants. Did they find what they were looking for in Cedar Falls? Did they leave by choice?

The delivery arrives in exactly twenty minutes—a teenage boy with a friendly smile who refuses to take my money.

"Mrs. Abernathy said you might call and already covered it," he explains. "Welcome to Cedar Falls!"

I'm so taken aback that I just thank him and close the door. Standing in my kitchen with a free pizza, courtesy of a woman I haven't even met yet, I feel a strange mix of emotions. Gratitude, certainly. But also a wariness born from experience—kindness often comes with expectations attached.

What will Mrs. Abernathy expect from me? What will this town expect?

I eat at the small kitchen table, flipping through a local information packet I found in a drawer. Cedar Falls was founded in 1873 as a logging community. The waterfall it's named for is three miles north. The annual Founder's Day Festival—apparently what they're celebrating this weekend—features a parade, baking contests, historical reenactments, and a dance.

It all sounds almost unbearably quaint. The kind of thing I would have mocked in my previous life.

But my previous life led me here, didn't it? To this quiet cottage in this tiny town where strangers buy you pizza and grumpy mechanics help you find spare keys.

After eating, I wash up and get ready for bed. The cottage creaks and settles around me, unfamiliar sounds that make me jumpy at first. But the bed is surprisingly comfortable, and exhaustion from the drive and the stress of breaking down quickly pulls me under.

My last conscious thought is of Riley—the way his presence seemed to fill the cottage, how his voice rumbled low when he explained about the furnace. How his eyes never quite met mine for more than a second at a time.

I wonder what his story is. And whether I'll ever get to hear it.

Next Day



I wake to sunlight streaming through the east-facing windows and the disorienting feeling of not knowing where I am. Then it comes back—Cedar Falls, the cottage, my broken-down car.

Riley.

I check my phone: 7:23 AM. If I hurry, I can shower, dress, and walk to his shop by opening time—an easy stroll on a beautiful morning.

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The shower takes some figuring out—the clawfoot tub's fixtures are ancient—but the water pressure is surprisingly good. I wash quickly, then stand before the small closet section of my overnight bag, suddenly conscious of what to wear.

This is ridiculous. I'm just going to check on my car, not attend a job interview. But still, I find myself bypassing my comfortable travel clothes in favor of my nicest jeans (the ones that actually make my hips look proportionate to my waist) and a soft green sweater that brings out the hints of gold in my brown eyes.

I blow dry my hair, apply a touch of mascara and tinted lip balm, then stare at my reflection. Who am I trying to impress? The mechanic has probably already forgotten what I look like.

But I know the answer. I've always been this way—seeking approval, wanting to be liked. It's exhausting, this constant need to present my best self, especially when my "best self" still feels inadequate most of the time.

With a sigh, I grab my purse and head out, locking the cottage behind me. The morning is crisp and clear, with that special quality of light that only seems to exist in early autumn. The street is quiet except for the occasional car passing. People heading to work, I suppose.

Cedar Falls looks different in daylight. What seemed quaint and movie-set perfect last night now reveals its imperfections—peeling paint on some storefronts, a boarded-up building that might once have been a hardware store, faded awnings. But somehow, these flaws make it more real, more appealing.

I pass the diner Riley mentioned—Lou's, according to the sign—and make a mental note to stop in later about possibly borrowing a car. Through the windows, I can see it's busy, booths filled with people talking over coffee and plates piled with breakfast.

The walk to Carter's Auto Shop takes me about twenty minutes at a leisurely pace. By the time I arrive, it's 8:15, and the shop is clearly open. There are two cars in the lot besides my own Corolla, which I can see through the open bay doors, hood up.

I hesitate at the entrance to the office, suddenly nervous. What if Riley's diagnosis is worse than he thought? What if the repairs cost more than my emergency fund can handle? What if—

The door swings open, and a slender man with gray-streaked hair steps out, nearly colliding with me.

"Oh! Sorry," he says, steady himself. "Didn't see you there."

"My fault," I say quickly. "I was just standing here like a statue."

He smiles, "You must be Lucy. The girl whose car broke down yesterday."

I blink in surprise. "Yes, that's me. How did you—"

"Small town," he says. "I'm Lou, by the way. From the diner. Riley mentioned you might need to borrow some wheels while yours is being fixed. Come meet me at the dinner. I might be able to help you."

"He did?" I'm oddly touched that Riley remembered our conversation, "Thank you!"

"Said you were new in town, staying at Edith's place." Lou nods toward the shop. "He's inside, looking at your alternator. Or what's left of it."

That doesn't sound promising. "Thanks," I say again. "I guess I should go in and face the music."

Lou pats my arm. "Don't let his grumpiness fool you. Riley's a softie under all that scowling."

Before I can respond to this surprising assessment, he's off, walking briskly toward town. I take a deep breath and push open the office door.

The space is small but tidy—a counter with a register, a few chairs along one wall, automotive magazines stacked on a small table. The walls are covered with framed certificates and what look like military commendations. A door in the back presumably leads to the garage.

There's no one at the counter, but I can hear the sounds of tools and faint music coming from the garage. I approach the connecting door, peering through its window.

Riley is bent over the engine of my car, his back to me. He's wearing a dark gray t-shirt today, and I can't help noticing how it stretches across his broad shoulders as he works. His movements are precise, focused, like he's speaking some private language with the machine.

I knock lightly on the door frame, not wanting to startle him. He turns, and for a moment, I think I see something like pleasure flicker across his face. But it's quickly replaced by his usual stoic expression.

"Morning," he says, straightening. There's a smudge of grease on his forearm that I have the absurd urge to wipe away.

"Good morning," I reply, hoping my voice sounds normal and not breathless. "I thought I'd come check on the patient."

Riley gestures me into the garage. "Terminal, I'm afraid. Alternator's completely shot, and it took out part of the electrical system with it."

My heart sinks. "That sounds expensive."

"Could be worse." He wipes his hands on a rag. "Parts will run about \$650, plus labor. But your timing belt's also showing wear. If we're going to have everything apart anyway, might be smart to replace that too. Otherwise you'll be back here in a few months with an even bigger problem."

I do some quick mental calculations. With the timing belt, we're probably looking at close to a thousand dollars. A significant chunk of my "starting over" fund.

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Riley seems to read my thoughts. "I can give you a break on the labor," he says, his voice gruff. "Since you're new in town."

I look up, surprised by the offer. "You don't have to do that."

He shrugs, not meeting my eyes. "Up to you. But the parts have to come from Oakridge. Won't be here until Thursday at the earliest."

"I met Lou on my way in," I say. "He told me he might be able to help me with a car."

Riley nods. "His nephew is a doctor and got an old Subaru he's not using because he bought a new car. He said you could use it for a couple of weeks if you need to, just pay for gas."

"That's incredibly generous," I say, genuinely touched by the offer from a complete stranger.

"Like I said, town's good about helping newcomers." Riley turns back to my car, adjusting something I can't identify. "You can pick it up after lunch. I told him I'd let you know."

"Thank you," I say, and I mean it for more than just passing along the message. "For everything."

He glances at me, and I'm struck again by those amber eyes, how they seem to see more than I want them to.

"Just doing my job," he says, but there's something in his tone that suggests otherwise.

A silence falls between us, not entirely uncomfortable. I'm aware of how I must look to him—this overdressed woman in a clean sweater and carefully applied makeup, standing awkwardly in his workspace.

"Well, I should let you work," I say finally. "Is it okay if I leave my things in the car for now? Until I figure out how to get them to the cottage?"

"It's secure here," he assures me. "And I can help you move them later if you want."

The offer is delivered so casually, like it costs him nothing. Maybe it doesn't. But to me, a stranger in a strange town, it means everything.

"That would be amazing," I say, trying not to sound too eager. "Thank you."

He nods again, already turning back to the engine. Our conversation is clearly over.

I head back through the office, pausing at the door. Through the window to the garage, I can see Riley working, completely absorbed in his task. There's something compelling about his focus, his competence.

I know he's just being nice because I'm new and stranded. I must not read anything into it. But as I step outside into the bright morning sunshine, I can't help the small flutter of warmth in my chest. For the first time since arriving in Cedar Falls—maybe for the first time in months—I don't feel quite so alone.

## Chapter 4 - Riley

I watch through the office window as Lucy walks away, her dark hair catching the

morning light. When she's out of sight, I let out a long breath I didn't realize I was holding.

What the hell am I doing?

I turn back to her car, focusing on the task at hand. The alternator is completely fried—an easy diagnosis but a pain to replace on this model. Parts need to be moved, systems disconnected. It's meticulous work, which is exactly what I need right now. Something to occupy my hands and clear my head.

Because my head is anything but clear at the moment.

I offered to help her move her things. I gave her a discount without even thinking about it. Two things I never do. For anyone.

"You're losing it, Carter," I mutter to myself, reaching for a socket wrench.

I've built a life here—not a particularly social one, but a functional one. I have my shop. My cabin in the woods. My routines. I don't do complications, and Lucy Mitchell is definitely a complication.

She's too young, for one thing. Must be at least a decade between us, maybe more. Too young and too... everything. Too pretty, with those big brown eyes. Too earnest, with her grateful smiles. Too soft, with curves that her green sweater did nothing to hide.

Not that I noticed. Not that it matters.

I've been alone since coming back to Cedar Falls three years ago. Alone by choice. The few attempts at dating ended quickly—usually after the first nightmare woke me screaming or the first time a car backfired nearby and I hit the ground. Women want a



man, not a collection of damaged parts barely held together.

Besides, a girl like Lucy would never look twice at a man like me. Not romantically. I'm older, scarred both inside and out, with nothing to offer but a mechanic's salary and a personality that most people charitably describe as "reserved" and more accurately call "antisocial."

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No, she's just being friendly because I'm helping her. Because she's new in town and doesn't know anyone else. Once her car is fixed and she's settled, she'll find her own circle. The young professionals who work at the lumber company offices. The teachers at the elementary school. People her own age without war memories etched into their bones.

It's better this way. My life is uncomplicated. Predictable. Safe.

The way I like it.

I immerse myself in the disassembly, losing track of time as I always do when working on a particularly challenging job. By the time I come up for air, it's past noon and my stomach is growling in protest.

Usually, I'd just ignore it until closing time, but today I find myself locking up the shop and heading to Lou's Diner.

Hours later

The afternoon crawls by. I finish stripping down Lucy's engine to better assess the damage and call in the parts order to my supplier in Oakridge. Dave at the parts warehouse promises to expedite it, but we both know "expedite" in these rural areas still means at least two days.

I don't see Lucy at lunch. Not that I was looking for her. I just happened to stop by Lou's Diner around noon, and she wasn't there. Lou mentioned she'd been by earlier to arrange for his nephew's Subaru, but she'd already left to explore the town on foot.

It shouldn't matter. It doesn't matter. I have work to do.

But as I close up shop at seven, I find myself irritated, checking my watch more often than necessary. I'm annoyed that I didn't see her and even more annoyed at myself for being annoyed about it. This isn't high school. I'm not some kid with a crush.

I'm flipping the sign to "Closed" when headlights sweep across the front of the shop. A faded blue Subaru pulls into the lot—Lou's nephew's car. Lucy steps out, waving when she sees me in the doorway.

"Hey," she calls. "I can come back tomorrow if—"

"It's fine," I say, pushing the door open again. "Just finished up."

She approaches, looking different than she did this morning. Less polished somehow, more relaxed. Her hair is pulled back in a loose ponytail, and she's wearing jeans and a simple t-shirt. There's a smudge of what looks like ice cream on her sleeve.

"I got the car," she says unnecessarily, gesturing to the Subaru. "Lou was incredibly nice about it. Wouldn't even let me leave a deposit."

I nod. "Lou's a good guy. Town wouldn't function without him."

"I stopped by the diner for lunch, but you weren't there." She says this casually, but something in her tone makes me look at her more closely. Was she looking for me?

"Had work to do," I respond, lying and jerking my head toward her Corolla. "Your car's more of a mess than I initially thought."

Her face falls. "Worse than you said this morning?"

"No, same diagnosis. Just time-consuming work." I hesitate, then add, "Still looking at Thursday for the parts, Friday for completion if all goes well."

She nods, accepting this news with a small sigh. "Well, at least I have wheels now. And I spent the day walking around town, getting to know the place. Everyone's been so friendly."

Of course they have. Cedar Falls loves fresh blood—especially when it comes in the form of a pretty young woman with a sunny smile. I can already imagine how the town's single men will be lining up once word gets around.

The thought makes me inexplicably irritated.

"I was hoping to get my things from the car?" Lucy continues, oblivious to my inner thoughts. "If that's okay?"

"Right," I say, shaking off my strange mood. "Let me unlock the bay doors."

I lead her into the garage where her Corolla sits, hood still up, parts spread on a nearby workbench. Lucy approaches her car cautiously, as if it might bite her.

"Wow," she says, peering at the engine. "You weren't kidding about taking things apart."

"Have to, to get to the alternator on this model." I move to the trunk of her car. "Your stuff is all still here."

She joins me, and we survey the packed trunk and backseat together. There's more than I realized last night—boxes, bags, a few small pieces of furniture disassembled and wrapped in moving blankets.

"I can probably do multiple trips," she says doubtfully, eyeing the small Subaru.

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I look at the amount of stuff, then at her, short and curvy but doesn't seem too strong, then at the darkening sky outside. A storm is moving in. I can smell it in the air, that distinctive pre-rain heaviness.

"I told you I'd help. We can load up both cars. Get it done in one trip."

Her eyes widen in surprise. "Both cars?"

"My truck's out back." I nod toward the rear exit. "We can fit the bigger stuff in there."

"Oh, I thought you were just saying it to be nice. I don't want to interrupt your eveni-"  
"

"It's fine," I interrupt, already reaching for a box. "I said I'd help. Besides, you'll need help unloading anyway."

She hesitates, then smiles—that genuine, warm smile that seems to light up her whole face. "Thank you. Again. I feel like I'm constantly thanking you."

I shrug, uncomfortable with her gratitude. "Just being neighborly."

We work in silence, loading the smaller boxes and bags into the Subaru, the bulkier items into my truck. Lucy is more efficient than I expected, moving with purpose and showing no hesitation about lifting heavier items. But I notice she winces slightly when reaching for a box on a higher shelf.

"I got it," I say, easily retrieving the box marked 'Kitchen'.

"Thanks," she says, rubbing her shoulder. "Old injury. Acts up sometimes."

I nod, not asking for details she hasn't offered. Everyone has scars—some just hide them better than others.

Within thirty minutes, we've emptied her car and filled both vehicles. Lucy stands in the garage doorway, keys to the Subaru in hand, looking uncertain.

"You know the way back to the cottage?" I ask.

"I think so. Left at the light, right on Maple, then straight?"

"Close. It's right on Oak, not Maple." I close up the garage, securing the bay doors. "Just follow my truck. It'll be easier."

She nods, looking relieved. "Okay. And... thank you. For doing this."

I grunt in acknowledgment, "Let's go before it rains."

We get into our respective vehicles, and I lead the way through town, keeping an eye on her blue Subaru in my rearview mirror. She follows at a careful distance, signaling properly at every turn, driving exactly at the speed limit. A rule-follower. I'm not surprised.

The cottage appears just as the first heavy raindrops begin to fall. I pull into the gravel driveway, and Lucy parks beside me. By the time we both exit our vehicles, the rain is coming down steadily.

"Perfect timing," Lucy says, hurrying to unlock the cottage door. "Let's get

everything inside before it really starts pouring."

We work quickly, shuttling boxes and bags from the vehicles to the cottage's living room. The rain intensifies, turning from a steady fall to a proper downpour. By our third trip, we're both getting soaked despite the short distance.

On my final trip, carrying a box of books that weighs a ton, the skies truly open up. I'm drenched by the time I make it to the door, where Lucy stands with a towel.

"Here," she says, handing it to me as I set down the box. "You're soaked through."

I take the towel, aware suddenly of how I must look—t-shirt plastered to my chest, hair dripping onto her floor. "Thanks."

Lucy's not much drier, her ponytail hanging in a wet rope down her back, her t-shirt clinging to her curves in a way that makes me avert my eyes. She doesn't seem to notice, busy sorting through boxes.

"That's everything," I say, running the towel over my hair. "You sure have a lot of books."

She looks up with a self-conscious smile. "Occupational hazard. I'm a writer. Or trying to be, anyway."

"What do you write?" I ask, genuinely curious.

"Historical fiction, mostly." She gestures to a box labeled 'Research'. "Hence all the history books."



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I nod, not sure what to say. I haven't read much fiction since before Afghanistan. Haven't had the patience for it.

Thunder cracks overhead, making the cottage windows rattle. The rain is coming down in sheets now, a proper small town deluge.

"Wow," Lucy says, peering out the window. "It's really coming down. Um..." She hesitates, then turns to me with an uncertain expression. "I was going to order pizza, if you wanted to stay? Until the rain lets up?"

The invitation catches me off guard. I should say no. I should get in my truck and drive back to my empty cabin and eat whatever's in my refrigerator. Alone. Like I always do.

But the thought of driving through this storm only to sit by myself in my silent house suddenly seems unbearably bleak.

"Sure," I hear myself say. "Until the rain lets up."

Lucy's smile is worth the momentary lapse in judgment. "Great! Let me find my phone. Ate Gino yesterday and loved it. And did you know Gino's delivers even in weather like this? Lou told me they have a guy with a Jeep specifically for rainy nights."

As she hunts for her phone, I stand awkwardly in the middle of her living room, surrounded by the boxes and bags of her life. I should help her organize, maybe start unpacking the kitchen items. That would be the polite thing to do.

Instead, I find myself studying the titles of her books, stacked where I set them down. History of the Pacific Northwest. Logging Communities of the 1800s. Women's Diaries of the Oregon Trail.

"This is also research for your book?" I ask when she returns, phone in hand.

She nods, looking pleased that I noticed. "I'm working on a novel set in this region during the 1870s."

"You should really talk to Mrs. Abernathy," I suggest. "She runs the historical society. Has archives going back to the town's founding."

Lucy's eyes light up. "Really? That would be amazing. I was planning to introduce myself properly tomorrow, but I had no idea she was involved with the historical society."

"Her family's been here since the beginning. Abernathy Lumber was one of the first businesses in town." I shift, uncomfortable with how much I'm talking and how eager I sound. "What kind of pizza do you like?"

She accepts the change in subject with a smile. "I'm not picky. Pepperoni? Or whatever you prefer."

"Pepperoni's fine."

While Lucy calls in the order, I wander to the living room window, watching the rain lash against the glass. The storm has turned the early evening almost as dark as night, the cottage's lights reflecting back at me in the window.

In the reflection, I can see her moving around behind me, clearing space on the coffee table and straightening cushions on the sofa. Preparing for a guest. For me.

This is dangerous territory, I remind myself. Getting involved, even just as a friendly neighbor, isn't what I do. I keep to myself for a reason. People are complicated. Relationships are complicated. And complications are the last thing I need in my life.

But as Lucy approaches with two glasses of water, I find it hard to remember exactly why I've been so determined to keep everyone at arm's length.

"Pizza will be here in thirty minutes," she says. "Hope you don't mind waiting."

I don't mind at all, and that's exactly the problem.

## Chapter 5 - Lucy

The rain pounds against the cottage windows, creating a cozy soundtrack as Riley and I sit in the living room, waiting for pizza. He looks strange in my space—too large for the small armchair, too rough around the edges for the delicate floral upholstery. Yet somehow, he doesn't seem out of place.

"So," I say, breaking a silence that's stretched just a bit too long, "you've lived here your whole life?"

His amber eyes flick to mine, then away. "Born here. Left at eighteen. Came back three years ago."

Each sentence is like a door closing—brief, final. But I've always been too curious for my own good.

"Where did you go when you left?" I ask, curling my legs beneath me on the sofa.

He takes a sip of water before answering. "Military. Twelve years."

"That explains the commendations in your shop," I say, remembering the framed certificates I noticed this morning. "What made you decide to come back to Cedar Falls?"

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A shadow passes over his face. "Family business."

There's something in his tone that warns me not to push further, so I switch tactics. "And the auto shop? Was that always your plan?"

"Needed a job," he says with a shrug. "Good with engines."

I can't help but smile at his economy of words. Most people I know fill silences with endless chatter. Riley seems content to let silence breathe between sentences, offering only what's necessary.

"Well, I'm glad you're good with engines," I say. "Otherwise I might still be sitting on the side of the road."

A ghost of a smile touches his lips. "Town would've sent someone eventually."

"But then I wouldn't have met you," I say without thinking, then feel heat rise to my cheeks. "I mean, you've been so helpful, and I—"

I'm saved from my rambling by a knock at the door. The pizza has arrived, mercifully early.

Riley rises before I can, moving with surprising grace for such a large man. "I'll get it."

I hear murmured conversation at the door, then Riley returns with a pizza box and a paper bag that smells of garlic.

"I paid," he says, setting our dinner on the coffee table I've hastily cleared of boxes. "You don't need to pay me back."

"That's... incredibly thoughtful," I say, touched and slightly overwhelmed by this continuing kindness. "Does everyone in this town just take care of each other like this?"

Riley's expression darkens slightly. "Most do."

There's a story there, but again, I sense it's not one he's ready to share. Instead, I focus on opening the pizza box and distributing napkins I found in a kitchen drawer earlier.

"Help yourself," I say, gesturing to the food. "I'm starving."

The pizza is surprisingly good—thin crust with just the right amount of cheese and perfectly spiced pepperoni.

"This is delicious," I say between bites. "Even better than yesterday's pizza. I didn't expect to find pizza this good in a small town."

"Gino's from Chicago," Riley says. "Married a local girl twenty years ago. Brought his family recipes with him."

I smile at this unexpected bit of local gossip. "You do know everyone here, don't you?"

He shrugs, but there's no denial. "Hard not to in a town this size."

"That must be nice," I say, trying to imagine it. "In Phoenix, I barely knew my neighbors' names."

"It has its downsides," he replies, his tone neutral but his eyes revealing more. "Everyone knows your business. Your history."

I think about my father's cryptic journal entry. Unfinished business. "I guess that's why my dad never talked much about growing up here. Maybe he had something to hide."

Riley looks at me with sudden interest. "What's his name?"

"James Mitchell. He left when he was eighteen, like you." I reach for another slice of pizza. "Did you know him?"

Riley shakes his head. "Left before my time. Mitchell... I don't really remember any. Did he go to Cedar Fall's high school?"

"I don't know. Dad never talked about his family here."

"Town records are at the historical society," Riley offers. "Newspaper archives, too."

"Let me guess... Mrs. Abernathy again?" I ask with a smile.

He nods. "Building's only open Tuesdays and Thursdays, but she's there most days working on the anniversary exhibit."

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"I'll have to visit tomorrow," I say, making a mental note.

Riley looks at me and chews his pizza. For the first time since I've met him, he seems to be considering whether to say more rather than less.

"What?" I ask when his scrutiny becomes too much.

"I was thinking... The Mitchells were one of the founding families," he says finally. "Along with the Carters, the Abernathy, and a few others. If your father was from that line, you've got deep roots here."

"Really?" This is news to me. Dad never mentioned being from a founding family. "I had no idea."

"There's a section at the historical society dedicated to the founding families. Photographs, ledgers, that sort of thing." He takes a swig of water. "Might find some answers there."

Thunder crashes outside, making me jump slightly. The rain shows no sign of letting up, sheets of water streaming down the windows, turning the world beyond into a dark blur.

"Looks like you might be stuck here a while," I say, glancing at the storm. "I'm sorry about that."

Riley shrugs. "I've been in worse."



I can only imagine what that means—what he's seen and experienced in his twelve years of military service. The shadows under his eyes tell a story of their own.

"I'm glad I'm not alone, though," I admit. "Second night in a new place during a storm like this? I'd be jumping at every creak and groan."

"Old houses talk," Riley says, his voice softening slightly. "This one's got good bones, though. Built in the forties. Original hardwood floors."

"You know a lot about this cottage?"

His eyes meet mine briefly, then slide away. "Helped Mrs. Abernathy with repairs over the years. New roof last summer. Fixed the porch railing before that."

I glance around with new appreciation. "Is there anything in this town you haven't had a hand in fixing?"

The question is meant to be light and teasing, but Riley's expression grows distant.

"Plenty," he says quietly, "The firefighters do most jobs around here. I just give a helping hand when it's needed."

We finish our pizza in silence, but it's not uncomfortable. There's something about Riley that makes silence feel natural, even restful. I'm used to filling quiet moments with chatter, but with him, I don't feel that pressure.

I clear away the box and napkins, bringing back a fresh glass of water for each of us. The storm continues unabated, lightning occasionally illuminating the room in stark white flashes.

"Tell me about your book," Riley says suddenly as I sit back down.

The request surprises me. He doesn't strike me as someone particularly interested in historical fiction—or in making small talk.

"It's set in 1873," I begin, warming to my favorite subject. "Right when Cedar Falls was being established. The main character is a young woman who comes west with her husband, only to lose him in a logging accident. Instead of returning east, she decides to stay and make her own way."

Riley nods, encouraging me to continue.

"It's about resilience, really. How women carved out spaces for themselves in frontier communities. The history books focus on the men who founded these towns, but women were essential to their survival." I pause, suddenly self-conscious. "Sorry, I get carried away talking about it."

"Don't apologize," he says. "It's good, having something you're passionate about."

There's a wistfulness in his tone that makes me wonder what his passions might be, beyond fixing engines.

"What about you?" I ask. "What do you do when you're not rescuing stranded motorists?"

His lips quirk in what might almost be a smile. "Not much to tell. Work. Fish sometimes. House projects."

"Do you live in town?"

He shakes his head. "Got a cabin out past the falls. Ten acres, backs up to national forest."

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I try to picture it—Riley in a cabin in the woods, surrounded by trees and silence. It fits him somehow.

"That sounds peaceful," I say.

"It is." He hesitates, then adds, "My grandfather built it. Only place I've ever felt... at home."

It's the most personal thing he's shared, and I sense the admission cost him something. I want to ask more—about his grandfather, about why his family home didn't feel like home—but I don't want to push my luck.

Instead, I say, "I've never had that. A place that felt completely right. That's why I move around so much, I think. Always searching."

He looks at me then, really looks at me, his amber eyes intent. "And you think you might find it here? In Cedar Falls?"

"I don't know," I answer honestly. "But it feels like a place to start."

The power chooses that moment to flicker, the lights dimming before stabilizing. We both look up at the ceiling fixture, then at each other.

"Happens during bad storms," Riley says. "Got candles?"

I shake my head. "I haven't exactly had time to stock emergency supplies."

He rises from his chair. "I've got some in my truck. Wait here."

Before I can protest, he's heading for the door, stepping out into the downpour without hesitation. I watch through the window as he jogs to his truck, rain plastering his shirt to his back, highlighting the breadth of his shoulders.

A minute later he's back, dripping on my welcome mat but holding a small metal box.

"Emergency kit," he explains, setting it on the coffee table and opening it to reveal candles, matches, a flashlight, and various other supplies.

"You're prepared for everything, aren't you?" I say, oddly touched by his foresight.

"Military habit," he says, distributing candles around the room. "Always have a backup plan."

As if on cue, the lights flicker again and then go out completely, plunging us into darkness. I hear Riley striking a match, and then a warm glow illuminates his face as he lights the first candle.

"Perfect timing," I say with a nervous laugh.

One by one, he lights the candles until the room is bathed in a soft, golden light. Outside, the storm rages on, but in here, it feels like we're in a cocoon of warmth and safety.

Riley returns to his seat, running a hand through his damp hair. In the candlelight, his features seem softer somehow, the hard lines of his face gentled by shadow and flame.

"I should probably get going," he says, but makes no move to stand. "Once the storm

lets up a bit."

"You don't have to," I say quickly, then feel heat rise to my cheeks. "I mean, the roads might be flooded. It could be dangerous."

He studies me for a long moment, and I resist the urge to fidget under his gaze. I'm not sure why I want him to stay. Only that the thought of being alone in this strange house, in the dark, is less appealing than having this gruff, taciturn man for company.

"Could be," he agrees finally. "Roads around here flood easily."

Relief washes through me. "I have coffee. Or there's tea, if you prefer."

"Coffee's good."

I rise, grateful for something to do. "I'll have to make it on the stove if that's okay. I haven't unpacked my electric kettle yet."

"Need help?" he offers, half-rising.

"No, stay. I can manage." I grab a candle and head to the kitchen, where I start opening cupboards by candlelight, searching for the coffee Mrs. Abernathy mentioned in her note.

I find it in the third cupboard—a sealed bag of what looks like locally roasted beans. There's a hand-cranked grinder beside it, and I set to work preparing the coffee, grateful for the small, normal task.

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From the kitchen, I can see Riley in the living room. He's leaning forward in his chair, elbows on his knees, staring into the candle flame with an expression I can't quite read. There's something vulnerable about him in this moment—something almost boyish beneath the hard exterior.

I wonder what he was like before the Army, before whatever brought him back to Cedar Falls. I wonder if he was always this guarded or if life taught him to be.

As I heat water on the gas stove, I find myself wanting to know his story—all of it, not just the carefully edited highlights he's shared so far. It's a dangerous curiosity. I came to Cedar Falls to solve the mystery of my father's past, not to get tangled up in the life of a brooding mechanic, no matter how intriguing he might be.

And yet...

When the coffee is ready, I carry two mugs back to the living room, setting his on the side table next to his chair.

"Black, right?" I ask, having noticed how he drank it at the shop.

He nods, looking surprised that I remembered. "Thanks."

I settle back on the sofa, cradling my own mug. "So, the historical society. You think they might have information about my father?"

"Depends how far back your family goes," he says. "Records aren't complete, especially from before the 1900s. Fire in 1912 destroyed a lot."

"But you said the Mitchells were a founding family?"

He nods, taking a sip of his coffee. "Mitchells, Carters, Abernathys. All came out west together, founded the town in 1873. Started the lumber mill. Built the first church."

"Were they friends? The founding families, I mean."

A shadow crosses Riley's face. "Some were. Others... complicated."

"Complicated how?"

He sets his mug down, considering his words carefully. "Feuds. Business rivalries. The usual small-town politics, but with more at stake because they owned everything."

"And the Carters and Mitchells? Were they friends or rivals?"

Riley's eyes meet mine, and there's something almost challenging in his gaze. "Depends who you ask. The official history says they were business partners. Other stories say they were bitter enemies."

"And what do you believe?"

He shrugs. "Truth's usually somewhere in the middle. Families are... complicated."

The way he says it makes me think he's not just talking about history anymore.

"Do you have family here?" I ask him.

His jaw tightens almost imperceptibly. "A brother. Josh."

The name is offered reluctantly, like something pried loose.

"Are you close?" I press gently, sensing I'm approaching dangerous territory but unable to stop myself.

Riley's laugh is short and without humor. "No."

I should change the subject, back away from whatever painful thing I've stumbled upon. But instead, I find myself saying, "I have a sister. Emma. We haven't spoken in over a year."

His eyes lift to mine, surprised by this offering.

"What happened?" he asks, his voice softer than I've heard it before.

I take a deep breath. "Our father died. Left everything to me, nothing to her. She thinks I manipulated him somehow, turned him against her." I stare into my coffee. "But the truth is, she hadn't bothered to visit him in five years. Barely called. While I was there every weekend, taking him to doctor's appointments, making sure he ate properly."

"And now she blames you."



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"Yeah." I look up at him. "Family is complicated."

Something passes between us in that moment—a recognition, perhaps. Two people who understand what it's like to be cut off from those who should be closest.

"Josh blames me for leaving," Riley says suddenly, the words coming out in a rush. "For not being here when our father was at his worst."

I stay very still, afraid that any movement might stop this unexpected confession.

"He was abusive," Riley continues, his voice low. "Our father. Mean drunk. Josh was fifteen when I enlisted. I thought... I thought I was escaping. Didn't realize I was leaving him behind."

My heart clenches at the pain in his voice. "You were eighteen. Just a kid yourself."

Riley shakes his head. "Old enough to know better. By the time I realized my mistake, it was too late." His hands tighten around his mug. "When I finally returned, he was already back in Cedar Falls and wanted nothing to do with me."

"Have you tried talking to him?" I ask softly.

"Many times. He's made his position clear." Riley's eyes meet mine, "Some breaks can't be mended."

I think of Emma, of the hateful words we hurled at each other after the reading of Dad's will. The silence that has stretched between us since.

"I don't know if that's true," I say, more to myself than to him. "I hope it's not."

Outside, the storm has begun to subside, the thunder now a distant rumble, the rain lessening to a steady patter. The candles have burned lower, casting longer shadows across the room.

Riley seems to notice the change, too. "Storm's passing," he says but makes no move to leave.

"Yes," I agree, equally still. "But the power's still out."

We look at each other across the candlelit room, and I feel something shift between us—a barrier lowering, just slightly. We've both revealed parts of ourselves tonight, shared hurts we usually keep hidden. It's created a connection I wasn't expecting and suspect neither of us was looking for.

"Another coffee?" I offer, not ready for him to go.

He looks at his watch, then back at me. "Sure," he says. "I've got nowhere to be."

As I take his mug and head back to the kitchen, I can't help but smile to myself. It's not much—just coffee and conversation in a power outage. But it feels like the beginning of something. A friendship, at least.

And right now, in this new town where I know almost no one, a friend is exactly what I need.

## Chapter 6 - Riley

I can't believe I just told her about Josh. About our father. I never talk about this—not to anyone. Not even to the VA therapist who tried to get me to "open up" during my

mandatory sessions after discharge.

But something about Lucy—the way she listens, really listens, without judgment—made the words come out before I could stop them.

She's in the kitchen now, making more coffee, and I'm left sitting here with the strange, hollow feeling that comes after revealing something you've kept buried for years. My heart is racing, adrenaline surging through my system like I've just been in a firefight instead of a conversation.

Thunder cracks suddenly—a deafening boom that shakes the windows—and I'm gone.

Just like that. One second I'm in Lucy's cottage, and the next I'm back in Afghanistan, huddled in a transport vehicle as mortars explode around us. The smell of diesel and burning rubber. The taste of dust and fear. The screams of men who won't make it home.

I tilt my head back, gripping the couch cushions so hard my knuckles turn white. My vision tunnels, narrowing to a pinpoint of light in a sea of darkness. I can't breathe. Can't move. Can't—

"Riley? Are you okay?"

The voice comes from far away, as if through water or across a vast distance. Lucy's voice. Not a soldier's. Not a commander's. Lucy.

I blink, struggling to pull myself back to the present. The cottage. The candles. The storm.

"Riley?" Her voice is closer now, concerned. She's standing in front of me, coffee

mugs forgotten, her face a mask of worry.

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I force myself to nod, to loosen my death grip on the couch. "Fine," I manage, though my voice sounds strange even to my own ears. "I'm fine."

She doesn't believe me—I can see it in her eyes. But instead of pressing or, worse, looking at me with pity, she simply sits down beside me on the couch. Not touching, but close enough that I can feel her presence, solid and real.

"Just breathe," she says softly. "In through your nose, out through your mouth."

I follow her instructions, years of military training making me responsive to direct commands even in this state. Slowly, the room comes back into focus. The thunder is just thunder, not mortar fire. The flashes outside are lightning, not muzzle flares.

"Sorry," I mutter when I can trust my voice again. "Happens sometimes."

"PTSD?" she asks, her voice gentle but matter-of-fact.

I nod, not meeting her eyes. "Usually have more warning. Can get somewhere private."

"You don't need to apologize," she says, and there's something in her tone that makes me look at her. No pity, just understanding. "My dad had episodes too, after his time in Desert Storm. Not often, but enough that I learned how to help."

I didn't know her father was in the military. This explains something about her—why she moved several times, why she didn't flinch or panic when I checked out, and how she knew exactly what to say to bring me back.

"Two or three tours, right?" she asks, settling back into the couch cushions, giving me space but staying close.

"Four," I answer, finding it easier to talk about this than my earlier confessions. "Afghanistan mostly. Some time in Iraq at the beginning."

"Four is too much."

I shrug. "It was my job. I was good at it."

"Was it hard? Coming back to civilian life?"

No one's ever asked me that so directly before. Most people dance around it, afraid of the answer or afraid of offending me. Lucy just asks, her brown eyes steady on mine.

"Yes," I admit. "Still is, sometimes. Civilian life is... messy. No clear objectives. No chain of command. And people talk so damn much without saying anything important."

That draws a surprised laugh from her. "I guess I'm guilty of that."

"No," I say quickly. "You're different. You ask real questions. Listen to the answers."

She smiles, and something warm unfurls in my chest. "That's possibly the nicest thing anyone's ever said about my conversational skills."

The tension breaks, and I find myself relaxing slightly, settling back into the armchair. The panic attack has left me drained but also strangely calm, like a storm that's blown itself out.

"Do you regret it?" Lucy asks after a moment. "Joining the military?"

I consider the question carefully. No one's ever asked me that, either.

"No," I say finally. "I learned a lot. Discipline. Purpose. Found people I could trust with my life. But..." I hesitate, then decide to give her the whole truth. "I only went because I had nowhere else to go. No money for college. No skills except fixing engines. And I needed to get away from my father."

"You were escaping," she says, echoing my words from earlier.

"Yeah. And left Josh behind to deal with the fallout." The familiar guilt rises up, but it's duller now, worn smooth by years of carrying it. "Not my finest moment."

Lucy is quiet for a moment, her expression thoughtful. "Why did you come back? After all that time away?"

This is the question I've been dreading, the one that cuts closest to the bone. But having come this far, I find I want to tell her the rest of it.

"I came back to confront him," I say, my voice low. "My father. Twelve years in the military, in war zones—I wasn't afraid of him anymore. Thought it was time to face him, make him answer for what he did to us." I stare into the candle flame, watching it dance. "But he was already dead. Had been for three years."

"Oh," Lucy says softly. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. World's better off without him." The words come out harsher than I intended. "But he left me money. And a letter."

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"What did it say? The letter?"

I give a short, humorless laugh. "No idea. I ripped it up without reading it. Whatever excuses or apologies he wanted to make, it was too late."

She nods, accepting this without judgment. "And the money?"

"Used it to open the shop." I meet her eyes directly. "Felt like blood money. Dirty. Figured the only way to clean it was to use it to help people. Do something he never did in his life."

Understanding dawns in her expression. "That's why you helped me. Why you're always helping people around town."

I shift uncomfortably. "Just doing my job."

"No," she says with a gentle certainty that brooks no argument. "It's more than that. Lou told me how you fixed Mrs. Peterson's furnace in the middle of that snowstorm last winter. How you drove all the way to Portland to pick up medication for Mr. Gunderson when the roads were closed."

I frown. "Lou talks too much."

"He's proud of you," she says. "The whole town is, from what I can tell."

The thought makes me uneasy. I don't help people to be praised or noticed. Just the opposite—I'd prefer to go unrecognized, to blend into the background of Cedar Falls



as much as possible.

"What about you?" I ask, eager to shift the focus away from myself. "You mentioned your father was in the military. Were you close?"

Her face softens at the mention of her father. "Very. He was... steady. Reliable. The complete opposite of my mother, who's all drama and impulse."

"Is that why you're estranged from her too?"

Lucy looks surprised that I remembered. "Not estranged exactly. We talk, occasionally. But we've never understood each other. She thinks I'm too serious, too focused on 'depressing things' like history and writing. She wanted me to be more like Emma—social, outgoing, the life of the party."

"And your father encouraged your interests?"

She nods, a sad smile playing at her lips. "He built me bookshelves when I ran out of space for my history books. Drove me to writing workshops three hours away because they were 'important for my development.' He was my biggest supporter."

The way she talks about him—the warmth, the obvious love—creates a strange ache in my chest. I try to imagine having a father like that, someone who built things for you instead of breaking them, who drove you places instead of driving you away. It's almost impossible to picture.

"I'm sorry you lost him," I say, and I mean it. "Sounds like he was a good man."

"The best," she agrees, her eyes bright with unshed tears. "That's why it's so strange to think of him growing up here and never talking about it. Never mentioning that his family helped found the town. It feels like there's this whole part of him I never

knew."

"Maybe he had his reasons for keeping it private," I suggest. "Small towns can leave deep scars."

"Like they did for you?" she asks gently.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. Yes, like they did for me. Like they did for Josh. Like they apparently did for her father, who left and never looked back.

Outside, the storm has mostly passed. The rain has slowed to a gentle patter, and the thunder is just a distant rumble. Through the window, I can see stars beginning to appear as the clouds break apart.

"Power's still out," Lucy observes, following my gaze. "But at least the worst of the storm is over."

This is my cue to leave. The roads will be clear enough now, and I've already stayed far longer than I intended. Shared far more than I planned. But something keeps me rooted to the spot—the warmth of the candlelit room, the easy way conversation flows between us, the simple fact that for the first time in years, I don't feel alone.

"I should probably go," I say reluctantly, making no move to stand.

"Stay," Lucy says, then quickly adds, "I mean, it's late, and without power, my guest room's going to be just as dark and cold as it would be if you left now."

She's offering me an out—a practical reason to stay that doesn't acknowledge whatever this thing is between us. Friendship? Connection? I'm not sure what to call it, only that it feels important, fragile, worth preserving.

"I wouldn't want to impose," I say, even as part of me hopes she'll insist.

"It's not an imposition," she assures me. "Actually, I'd feel better not being alone during a power outage in a strange house. Every creak and groan has me jumping." She smiles self-deprecatingly. "I've got an overactive imagination. Occupational hazard for a writer."

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I find myself returning her smile. "All right. If you're sure."

"I am. And I promise the guest bed is comfortable."

"Thanks," I say. "I appreciate it."

Lucy stands, picking up a candle. "I'll show you upstairs. And I think there are extra blankets in the hall closet."

I follow her up the narrow staircase, ducking slightly to avoid the low ceiling. The cottage was built in an era when people were shorter, and at six-foot-two, I'm constantly aware of architectural limitations.

The upstairs hallway is small, with three doors leading off it. Lucy points to each in turn.

"Bathroom, my room, and this one's yours." She opens the last door, revealing a small but tidy room with a double bed, a nightstand, and a simple dresser. "Sorry there's not much furniture yet. I'm still planning to get more once I'm settled."

"It's perfect," I say, and mean it. The room is clean and simple, with no clutter or distractions. Just the kind of space I prefer.

"I'll find those extra blankets," she says, moving toward a closet at the end of the hall.

While she rummages, I take a moment to look around. The hallway walls are lined with framed photographs—not Lucy's, I assume, but left by previous tenants or

installed by Mrs. Abernathy. They show Cedar Falls from various eras—the lumber mill in its heyday, Main Street circa 1920, the falls that give the town its name.

One photo catches my eye—a group of men standing in front of a newly constructed building, serious-faced in the way of old photographs. The caption reads: "Founding of Cedar Falls Lumber Co., 1873. L to R: Josiah Abernathy, Elias Mitchell, Harold Carter, Thomas Wilson."

Harold Carter. My great-great-grandfather, if the family stories are to be believed. And beside him, Elias Mitchell. Could that be Lucy's ancestor?

"Found them!" Lucy says triumphantly, emerging from the closet with an armful of blankets. She follows my gaze to the photograph. "Oh, are you looking at the historical photos? Mrs. Abernathy said she put them up to give the place 'a sense of continuity with the past.'" She steps closer to examine the one I'm studying. "Wait, Carter? Is that—"

"My family," I confirm. "And possibly yours too. Mitchell."

She stares at the photo, then at me, her eyes wide. "Our families?"

"Looks that way."

"Our meeting seems... quite a coincidence," she whispers.

But we both know it's more than that. In a town as small as Cedar Falls, with histories as intertwined as ours seem to be, meeting like we did—her car breaking down at the town line, me being the one to help her—feels less like coincidence and more like the continuation of a story that began over a century ago.

"Here," she says, handing me the blankets, breaking the moment. "In case you get

cold."

"Thanks." Our fingers brush as I take them, "For everything. The coffee. The conversation."

She smiles, and in the candlelight, her face is soft, open. "Thank you for staying. For helping with my things. For... sharing."

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. I've shared more with this woman in one evening than I have with anyone in years. It should terrify me, this sudden vulnerability. But strangely, it doesn't.

"Goodnight, Riley," she says, stepping back toward her room.

"Goodnight, Lucy," I reply, watching as she disappears behind her door with a final smile.

Alone in the guest room, I set the candle on the nightstand and sink onto the edge of the bed. The day has been full of surprises, none bigger than finding myself in this cottage with a woman I met less than forty-eight hours ago.

A woman who now knows more about me than people I've known for years.

I should be panicking. Planning my escape. Building back the walls that keep me safe, separate, alone.

Instead, I find myself thinking about that photograph in the hallway. Our ancestors, standing side by side at the founding of this town. Whatever drove Lucy's father away, whatever kept our families apart in the intervening years, there was a time when Carters and Mitchells stood together.

Maybe, just maybe, they could again.

Chapter 7 - Lucy

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:25 am*

Sleep evades me. I've been staring at the ceiling for what feels like hours, listening to the occasional distant rumble of thunder and the steady patter of rain on the roof. The power is still out, my phone says it's 1:17 AM, and my mind refuses to quiet.

I keep thinking about Riley, just down the hall. About the pain in his voice when he spoke of his brother. The way he tensed during the thunder, momentarily transported back to a war zone. The surprise in his eyes when I didn't flinch away.

And that photograph.

Our families, standing together at the beginning of Cedar Falls. Carters and Mitchells. Side by side in a faded black and white image, launching a venture that would become the foundation of this town.

With a sigh, I throw back the covers and reach for the candle on my bedside table. Sleep clearly isn't coming, and I might as well use the time productively. Maybe examining that photograph more closely will provide some clue about my father's "unfinished business."

The hallway is darker than I expected, my single candle creating more shadows than light. I pad quietly to the wall where the historical photos hang, careful not to wake Riley. The house is silent except for the rain and the occasional creak of settling wood.

I find the photograph easily enough—four stern-faced men in formal attire standing before a newly constructed building. Their expressions give little away; the serious demeanor typical of 19th-century photography disguises any hint of their



personalities or relationships.

I lean closer, studying Elias Mitchell's face for any resemblance to my father or myself. He has a full beard that obscures much of his features, but there's something familiar in the set of his eyes, the angle of his brow.

Next to him stands Harold Carter, taller than the others, with a rigid posture that reminds me instantly of Riley. Same broad shoulders, same stance. Even across generations, the resemblance is striking.

"Couldn't sleep either?"

The voice behind me makes me jump, nearly dropping my candle. I turn to find Riley standing a few feet away, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders, his hair mussed from restless tossing.

"Sorry," he says, his voice low. "Didn't mean to scare you. Heard footsteps."

"It's okay," I whisper back, heart still racing, though whether from the surprise or his presence, I'm not sure. "I was just looking more closely at the photograph."

He moves to stand beside me, close enough that I can feel the warmth radiating from his body in the chilly hallway. "Find anything interesting?"

"Just noticing the family resemblance," I say, gesturing to Harold Carter. "You have the same build. Same way of standing."

Riley studies the image, his profile illuminated by our candles' glow. "My grandfather used to say I got my height from the Carter side. Said we've always been tall enough to 'see trouble coming.'"

"Was he right? About seeing trouble?"

A ghost of a smile touches Riley's lips. "Didn't see my father coming. Or Afghanistan. So maybe not."

I can't help but smile at his dry humor. "Fair enough. I don't think my family's foresight is any better. We seem to stumble into trouble rather than anticipate it. But, well, I wonder what happened between them," I say, gesturing to our ancestors in the photograph. "They're standing together here, but something must have gone wrong later."

"From the little I know, the partnership dissolved in 1889," Riley says. "Abernathy bought out both families' interests in the mill."

"You know a lot about town history," I observe.

"Comes with growing up here. Cedar Falls likes to celebrate its past. It's practically a religion."

"Except the parts that aren't so flattering," I guess. "Like whatever drove our families apart."

Riley nods, his eyes still on the photograph. "Small towns are good at keeping certain stories alive and burying others."

We stand in silence for a moment, both contemplating the mysteries held in the faded image before us. I'm aware of Riley beside me—the scent of him, pine and motor oil and something manly and musky.

"Why can't you sleep?" he asks suddenly, turning those amber eyes on me.

The direct question catches me off guard.

"Too many thoughts," I admit. "New place. The storm. Everything that's happened since I arrived."

"Regrets?" His voice is careful, neutral.

"No," I say firmly. "No regrets. Just... processing. It's been an eventful second day in Cedar Falls."

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"That's one way to put it."

"What about you?" I ask. "Why are you awake?"

He's quiet for so long I think he might not answer. Then, softly, "Dreams. Not the good kind."

The war. Of course. I should have guessed.

"Do they happen often?" I ask gently.

"Less than they used to." He runs a hand through his hair, leaving it even more disheveled. "Talking about Josh, my father... stirred things up."

"I'm sorry," I say, meaning it. "I didn't mean to pry earlier."

"You didn't," he assures me. "I chose to answer."

Another silence falls between us, but it's not uncomfortable. There's an ease to being with Riley that I've rarely experienced with anyone else. No pressure to fill the quiet moments with meaningless chatter.

"It's cold out here," I say finally, aware of the chill seeping through my thin pajamas. "And I don't think this photograph is going to reveal any more secrets tonight."

Riley nods, but neither of us moves to return to our rooms. It's as if we're both reluctant to end this strange midnight encounter, this moment of connection in the

darkness.

"I could make tea," I offer impulsively. "If you're not going back to sleep anyway."

He considers this for a moment, then nods. "Tea sounds good."

We make our way downstairs, our candles creating a small pool of light in the darkness. The living room still holds evidence of our earlier conversation—empty coffee mugs on the side table, cushions indented where we sat. It feels oddly intimate, these traces of our shared evening.

In the kitchen, I fill the kettle and set it on the gas stove, grateful again for the non-electric appliance. Riley leans against the counter, watching me move about the small space. I'm very conscious of my appearance—hair tumbling loose around my shoulders, wearing only flannel pajama pants and a thin tank top beneath a cardigan I hastily grabbed on my way out of my room.

"Mrs. Abernathy left some herbal tea in the pantry," I say, opening cupboards until I find it. "Chamomile and... something else I can't pronounce."

"Sounds adventurous," Riley comments, and I catch a glimpse of that almost-smile again.

"I live on the edge," I reply with mock seriousness. "Mysterious tea blends. Moving to towns where I know no one. Inviting strange men to stay during storms."

"Am I strange?" he asks, amusement coloring his tone.

I look at him over my shoulder, taking in the blanket still wrapped around him, his rumpled t-shirt, the beard darkening his jaw. "In the best possible way," I assure him.

His laugh is soft but genuine, and the sound of it warms me more than any tea could. I've made Riley Carter laugh. It feels like an achievement.

The kettle whistles, and I busy myself with preparing our drinks, dropping tea bags into the mismatched mugs I found earlier

"Let's sit by the window," I suggest, nodding toward a small window seat in the living room. "We might be able to see the stars now that the storm's clearing."

The window seat is just large enough for two if we sit close, which we do, shoulders nearly touching, mugs cradled in our hands. Through the glass, we can see that the clouds have indeed parted, revealing a sky brilliant with stars, more than I ever saw in Phoenix.

"It's beautiful," I breathe, taking in the vast expanse of the night sky.

"One of the few advantages of small-town life," Riley says. "No light pollution. You can actually see the stars."

"What are the other advantages?" I ask, curious about his perspective on Cedar Falls, given his complicated history here.

He considers the question seriously. "People look out for each other, mostly. Like Lou offering his nephew's car. Mrs. Abernathy stocking your kitchen. When there's a real need, the town steps up."

"But not always for everyone," I guess, thinking of his strained relationship with his brother, the shadow that falls over his face when he talks about coming home.

"Not always," he agrees. "Town has a long memory for perceived slights. And some people never quite belong, no matter how long they've been here."

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"People like you?"

His eyes meet mine in the darkness. "People like me," he confirms. "The ones who left and came back changed."

"Is that why you live outside town? At your grandfather's cabin?"

Riley nods, taking a sip of his tea. "Easier. Fewer questions. Fewer expectations."

"Lonelier, though," I say softly.

He doesn't deny it, just looks out at the stars again. "I'm used to it."

"Being used to something doesn't mean it's what you want," I point out. "Or what you deserve."

Riley turns to me then, his expression unreadable in the candlelight. "What about you? What do you deserve, Lucy Mitchell?"

The question catches me off guard. No one has asked me that before—not what I want, which is common enough, but what I deserve. As if he believes I merit something good, something better than what I've had.

"I don't know," I admit honestly. "I've been so focused on surviving—getting through Dad's death, dealing with Emma's anger, escaping my mother's disappointment—that I haven't thought much about what I deserve."

"Maybe you should," he says, his voice low. "Everyone deserves something good in their life."

"Even you?" I ask, searching his face in the flickering light.

A shadow crosses his features. "That's debatable."

"Not to me," I say firmly. "You deserve good things too, Riley. Peace. Connection. Forgiveness—from Josh, yes, but more importantly, from yourself."

He looks startled, as if I've seen too much, understood too clearly the burden of guilt he carries. "You don't know what I've done. What I failed to do."

"I know enough," I counter gently. "I know you were a boy who escaped an abusive home. I know you served your country through four tours of duty. I know you came back to face your demons. And I know you help people, even when there's nothing in it for you."

He looks away, uncomfortable with my assessment. "You've known me for two days. You can't possibly—"

"Sometimes you can learn more about a person in two days than in two years," I interrupt. "Especially when the circumstances strip away the usual social masks."

We fall silent again, sipping our tea and watching as a shooting star streaks across the night sky.

"Make a wish," I say impulsively, nodding toward the fading light trail.

Riley raises an eyebrow. "You believe in that sort of thing?"



"Not really," I admit. "But it can't hurt, right?"

To my surprise, he closes his eyes briefly as if actually making a wish. When he opens them again, his gaze is intense, focused entirely on me.

"What did you wish for?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Can't tell you," he replies, his voice equally soft. "Or it won't come true."

"That's the rule," I agree, suddenly breathless. When did he move closer? Or did I?

We're inches apart now, our empty mugs set aside, the candle between us flickering, casting dancing shadows across his face. I can see every detail of him in this light—the small scar bisecting his left eyebrow, the faint lines at the corners of his eyes, the stubble darkening his jaw.

"Lucy," he says, my name a question in his mouth.

I don't know who moves first—him or me—but suddenly the space between us is closing, his hand coming up to cup my cheek, my eyes drifting shut as his breath mingles with mine.

Chapter 8 - Riley

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:25 am*

I don't usually do this—don't reach for connections, don't allow myself to be vulnerable. I haven't kissed anyone in years, not since a brief, failed relationship after I first returned to Cedar Falls. Intimacy requires trust, and trust has been in short supply in my life.

But Lucy Mitchell is different.

And now, in the starlit darkness of her cottage, with the rain softly tapping against the windows and her face illuminated by candlelight, I can't stop myself from closing the distance between us.

Our lips meet, and any thought of restraint evaporates. This is not the first kiss I might have planned if I had been thinking clearly. This is hunger, passionate and immediate. My hand slides from her cheek to the back of her neck, fingers threading through her soft hair as I pull her closer.

She responds with equal fervor, her lips parting beneath mine, her hands gripping my shoulders. She tastes like chamomile and honey, and something uniquely her—something I instantly crave more of. It's been so long since I've felt this—this rush of desire, this need to be closer, to feel skin against skin.

"Riley," she breathes when we break apart for air, her eyes wide under the candlelight.

I should slow down. Should ask if this is what she wants. Should remember that we've known each other for barely two days. But then she's pulling me back to her, and rational thought gives way to pure lust.

My hands roam her body now, feeling the curves I've been trying not to notice since I first saw her. She's soft and warm beneath my palms, her body fitting against mine in a way that feels dangerously right.

Without breaking the kiss, I stand, lifting her with me. Her legs wrap around my waist, and my hands slide down to support her, gripping the generous curve of her ass. She gasps into my mouth, her arms tightening around my neck.

"The couch," she murmurs against my lips, and I carry her the few steps to the sofa, laying her down with more gentleness than I knew I possessed.

I hover above her, suddenly aware of my size, my weight, my strength compared to hers. The last thing I want is to overwhelm her or make her feel trapped. But Lucy pulls me down to her, clearly unconcerned, her kiss just as eager as before.

We stay like this for what could be minutes or hours, kissing deeply as our hands explore with increasing boldness. Her cardigan has been tossed away, and my blanket long forgotten on the floor. When my hand slips beneath her tank top to caress the warm skin of her stomach, she arches into my touch.

"Lucy," I say, my voice rough with need. "Can I undress you?"

She's breathing hard, her chest rising and falling rapidly, lips swollen from our kisses. She nods, eyes never leaving mine. "Yes," she whispers. "Please."

I move slowly, giving her time to change her mind. I slide down her body until I'm kneeling beside the couch, my hands at the waistband of her flannel pajama pants. She lifts her hips slightly to help as I ease them down her legs, revealing smooth skin and red underwear.

I press a kiss to her hip bone, then to the soft skin of her inner thigh, feeling her

tremble beneath my lips. I trail kisses up her thigh, then across to the other, trying my best to avoid where I know she wants me most.

"Riley," she says again, but this time it's a plea.

I look up. She's propped up on her elbows, watching me, sweat trickling down her forehead, her hair tumbling around her shoulders, her tank top riding up to reveal the underside of her breasts. She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

"Are you sure?" I ask, needing to hear it one more time.

"Yes! Yes! I am sure," she says, and the certainty in her voice dissolves my last hesitation.

I hook my fingers into the waistband of her underwear, drawing them down slowly, revealing her wet pussy in all its splendor. She shivers, but not from cold—from anticipation, from the way I'm looking at her.

I press my lips to her inner thigh again, moving higher with each kiss. Her breathing quickens, and I feel her hand in my hair, gently urging me where she needs me.

When my mouth finally finds her clit, her gasp is the sweetest sound I've ever heard. I lose myself in her sweet taste, in the sounds she makes, and in the way her body responds to every stroke of my tongue. Her thighs tremble on either side of my head, her fingers ruffling my hair.

I look up from between her thighs to see Lucy biting her lower lip, her chest heaving with each breath, her throat working as she gulps dryly. The sight sends a surge of satisfaction through me—knowing I'm the one causing these reactions, that my mouth and tongue are bringing her pleasure.

Her taste is intoxicating, my beard already damp with her arousal. I haven't done this in years, but her responses guide me, telling me exactly what she likes without words. When I slide two slightly curved fingers inside her, her back arches off the couch.

"Oh god," she gasps, her hands fisting in the couch cushions.

I keep my rhythm steady, my fingers curling to find that spot inside her while my tongue continues its attention to her clit. Her thighs begin to tremble even more, and suddenly they clamp around my head, squeezing so tightly I have to use my free hand to gently push them apart before I'm crushed.

"Sorry," she mumbles, her face flushed with embarrassment and desire.

I lift my head just enough to respond, "Don't apologize. Nothing else matters except that you're enjoying this."

Her eyes, heavy-lidded with pleasure, meet mine.

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"I am. I'm loving it." She lets out a breathless laugh. "Whatever this town has to offer, I want more of it. Please... don't stop."

I don't need to be told twice. I return to my task with renewed focus, circling my tongue around her sensitive clit while my fingers maintain their steady rhythm inside her. Her hips move in counterpoint, seeking more friction and pressure.

The sounds she makes drive me wild—little whimpers and moans that grow more desperate by the second. Her hands move from the couch to my hair, fingers tangling in the short strands, not guiding but holding on as if she might float away without this anchor.

I can feel her getting closer, her inner muscles tightening around my fingers, her breathing becoming more erratic. I increase the pressure of my tongue slightly, curling my fingers more to hit that perfect spot.

"Riley," she gasps, her voice strained. "Right there. Don't stop. Please don't stop."

Her words fuel my determination. I keep the exact same pressure, the exact same rhythm, ignoring the ache in my jaw, the strain in my wrist. Nothing matters except bringing her to the edge and pushing her over.

Her thighs begin to shake again, her grip on my hair tightening almost painfully. I feel the moment she tips over—her body going rigid, her back arching sharply off the couch, a high keening sound escaping her throat as her inner muscles clamp down on my fingers.

I ease my movements but don't stop completely, helping her ride out the waves of her orgasm until she tugs gently at my hair, signaling she's too sensitive for more.

I look up to find her staring at me with wonder, her face flushed, hair a wild tangle around her shoulders. She's never looked more beautiful.

"Come here," she says, voice husky as she tugs me upward.

I move up her body, careful not to crush her with my weight, and she pulls me down for a kiss, seemingly unconcerned about tasting herself on my lips.

When we break apart, she's smiling—a slow, satisfied smile that has my cock straining against my pants.

"That was..." she trails off, apparently unable to find adequate words.

"Good?" I supply, suddenly feeling uncharacteristically self-conscious.

"Good doesn't begin to cover it." Her hand traces down my chest, over my stomach, to the obvious bulge in my sweatpants. "I want to thank you properly." Her fingers ghost over me through the fabric, "I want to be on top. Would that be okay?"

## Chapter 9 - Lucy

"I want to be on top. Would that be okay?"

Riley's amber eyes widen. "It would be my pleasure," he says, his voice rough.

I can't help but smile. "A rugged gentleman. I didn't know they still made those."

"Don't tell anyone," he replies with a hint of that rare smile. "I have a reputation to

maintain."

My heart is racing, pounding against my ribs like it might break free. Every nerve ending feels electrified, especially where Riley's hands rest on my hips. Beads of sweat trickle down between my breasts, and I suddenly feel too confined, too hot in what little clothing I have left.

"I need these off," I murmur, pulling my tank top over my head and tossing it aside.

Riley watches, his gaze appreciative rather than judgmental as I bare myself completely to him. I've always been self-conscious about my body—too curvy by modern standards, with hips and thighs that never quite fit into trendy jeans. But the way Riley looks at me like I'm something precious and desirable melts away years of self-doubt.

My eyes drop to the obvious bulge in his sweatpants, visibly throbbing with each beat of his heart. With newfound boldness, I reach for his waistband, tugging at the drawstring.

"May I?" I ask.

He nods, lifting his hips slightly to help as I pull down his sweatpants and briefs. His erection springs free, and I can't help the small gasp that escapes me.

He's... big. Thick and long, with a prominent vein running along the underside. I've never seen anything quite like it, and for a moment, I wonder if I've bitten off more than I can chew—literally.

"Did I do all that?" I ask shyly, gesturing to his impressive arousal.

Riley wraps his hand around himself, giving a slow stroke that makes my mouth go



dry.

"Yes," he says simply. "All you."

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I extend my hand, replacing his with mine. The feel of him is electrifying—hot, smooth skin over steel hardness. He throbs in my palm as I stroke him slowly, watching his reaction. His eyes close, head tilting back slightly, a soft groan escaping his throat.

The power of it—knowing I can affect this strong, controlled man so deeply—is intoxicating.

"Sit on the couch," I direct, surprising myself with my assertiveness.

Riley complies immediately, moving to sit in the center of the sofa. I rise from my position, feeling deliciously exposed as I stand naked before him. His eyes roam my body with lust, lingering on my breasts, my hips, the juncture of my thighs.

I straddle him, knees on either side of his powerful thighs, positioning myself above him. I'm so wet from his earlier attention that when I sink down, he slides in with surprising ease despite his size. Still, the stretch is intense—a delicious burn that has me gasping as I take him inch by inch.

"Fuck, Lucy," he breathes, his hands gripping my hips.

When I'm fully seated, I have to pause, adjusting to the feeling of being so completely filled. Riley waits patiently, though I can feel the tension in his body, the restraint it takes for him to let me set the pace.

I lean forward, placing my hands on his broad shoulders for balance, and begin to move. Slowly at first, lifting up and sinking back down, learning the rhythm that feels

best. Riley places one strong hand on my lower back, the other cupping my ass, supporting me without controlling my movements.

As I pick up speed, my breasts bounce with each motion, drawing Riley's attention. He leans forward, trying to capture one nipple with his mouth. I adjust my position to help him, crying out when his warm mouth closes around my stiff peak.

"That feels amazing," I gasp, my hips moving faster now, driven by increasing need.

Every second since meeting Riley has been unexpected, unprecedented. From the moment my car broke down, to him helping me find the cottage key, to weathering the storm together—each interaction has built upon the last, creating something I can't quite name but know is significant.

This isn't just physical attraction, though there's certainly plenty of that. It's something deeper—a connection I didn't expect to find in this small town, with this guarded man who's shown me more kindness in two days than most people have in years.

And I know, even as pleasure builds within me again, that this can't be a one-time thing. I won't let it be.

Suddenly, Riley's hands move to my thighs, stopping my motion. I look down, questioning, and see something primal in his eyes—a hunger barely leashed.

"Let me," he says, his voice strained.

Before I can respond, he begins thrusting upward, his powerful hips driving into me with no mercy. His arms bulge with effort, veins standing out against tanned skin, hands gripping my thighs hard enough to leave marks.

I'm completely at his mercy, and it's glorious. I've been with men before, but never someone like Riley—never someone who combines such raw strength with careful attention to my pleasure. Each thrust hits perfectly, driving me rapidly toward another climax.

"Riley," I gasp, barely recognizing my own voice. "That's—oh god—"

I'm incoherent now, sensation overwhelming thought. I feel dampness on my chin and realize I'm actually drooling, past caring about anything but the building pressure inside me. My head falls back, eyes half-lidded, staring unseeing at the dark ceiling as waves of pleasure crash through me.

Just as I'm about to shatter, Riley pulls me close against his chest, changing the angle. His thrusts slow but deepen, each one deliberate and devastating. The new position has his pubic bone pressing against my clit with each movement, and that's all it takes.

My second orgasm hits even harder than the first, radiating outward from my core to the tips of my fingers and toes. I cry out, burying my face against Riley's neck as my body convulses around him.

He groans, hands and legs trembling, and then I feel it—the hot pulse of his release inside me. His cock throbs over and over, filling me as his arms tighten around my back, holding me to him like he's afraid I might disappear.

For long moments, we stay like this, connected and breathing heavily. I can feel his heart pounding against mine, our sweat mingling where our bodies press together.

Finally, Riley lifts his head from where it's rested against my shoulder. "I should have stopped," he says, his voice rough. "Before I finished inside. I couldn't—"

I place a finger against his lips, stopping his apology. "It's fine," I assure him. "I would have asked you to, anyway."

Riley pulls me closer, cradling me against his chest as our breathing slowly returns to normal. I adjust my position slightly to avoid crushing him, but he doesn't seem to mind my weight. We're sticky with sweat and other fluids, but neither of us makes a move to separate.

His fingers find my hair, gently working through the tangles, the rhythmic motion soothing. I rest my head against his shoulder, listening to his heartbeat gradually slow beneath my ear.

"I still can't believe your car broke down at the exact town limit," he murmurs, his voice a low rumble I can feel through his chest.

I smile against his skin. "Maybe it was fate."

"I don't usually believe in fate," he says, twirling a strand of my hair around his finger. "But this... us... it's hard to explain otherwise."

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"Us," I repeat, testing the word. "I like the sound of that."

His arms tighten around me slightly. "Me too."

We fall silent again, content in the aftermath of our unexpected connection. I can't quite wrap my mind around everything that's happened since arriving in Cedar Falls.

Less than forty-eight hours ago, I was alone in Phoenix, driving toward an uncertain future. Now I'm in the arms of a man who sees me—really sees me—in a way no one ever has before.

It's not just the sex, though that was undeniably incredible. It's the way Riley listened when I talked about my writing, my father, my hopes. The way he shared parts of himself that I suspect few people have ever been allowed to see. The way he looks at me, not with the polite interest of someone making conversation, but with genuine curiosity and appreciation.

For so long, I've felt this emptiness inside me—a hollow space that grew after my father died, expanded with Emma's rejection, and yawned wider with each failed attempt to please my mother. But here, in this moment, that void seems smaller somehow. Not gone, but filling, like a parched garden finally receiving rain.

I wonder what the future might hold for us. We're such different people, from different worlds, with different scars. Yet somehow, we fit together in a way that defies explanation.

My eyelids grow heavy as exhaustion overtakes me. The last thing I remember before

drifting off is the gentle pressure of Riley's lips against my forehead and the comforting weight of his arms around me.

Next Day

A persistent knocking jolts me awake. Disoriented, I blink against the sunlight streaming through the windows, momentarily confused about where I am. Then I feel Riley's warm body beneath mine, and everything comes rushing back.

"Someone's at the door," he says, his voice rough with sleep.

I lift my head, panic setting in as I realize the implications. "What time is it?"

"After eight, judging by the light," Riley says, already shifting me gently off him so he can stand.

The knocking comes again, more insistent this time.

"What do we do?" I whisper, looking around for my clothes, which are scattered across the living room floor.

Riley is already pulling on his briefs, "I don't know," he admits. "If someone sees me here..."

"The whole town will know by noon," I finish for him, understanding dawning.

In a community as small as Cedar Falls, gossip travels at light speed. While I don't particularly care what people think of my personal life, I sense this matters to Riley—that his privacy is precious to him.

Before we can decide on a course of action, we hear the sound of a key in the lock.

The door swings open, and Riley immediately moves to stand in front of me, shielding my naked body with his own.

A short, silver-haired woman steps into the cottage, carrying a wicker basket. She stops abruptly, eyes widening at the sight of a nearly-naked Riley and me scrambling for cover behind him.

I recognize her immediately from her Facebook profile picture—Mrs. Abernathy, my landlady.

She drops the basket in surprise, bread rolls and fruit spilling across the floor. Riley darts forward to help, his face flushed with embarrassment.

"I'm so sorry," I blurt out, wrapping the throw blanket around myself and rushing to assist. "We didn't expect anyone this early."

Mrs. Abernathy's momentary shock gives way to a surprisingly mischievous smile.

"Clearly," she says, eyeing Riley appreciatively as he bends to retrieve an escaped apple. "I haven't seen such a fine-looking man in his underwear since my Harold passed, God rest his soul."

Riley's blush deepens, but he manages a polite nod as he sets the basket on the coffee table.

"I came to check on you," Mrs. Abernathy explains, seemingly unfazed by the awkward situation. "Even brought breakfast. But I see you found... other nourishment."

I want to sink through the floor, but Mrs. Abernathy's light tone and twinkling eyes contain no judgment—only amusement and perhaps a hint of approval.



"You do well to enjoy yourself, dear," she tells me with a wink. "And besides, it's high time Riley here let go of that stubborn loneliness of his and found someone who appreciates him."

Riley clears his throat, clearly uncomfortable being discussed as if he's not present. "Mrs. Abernathy—"

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"Oh, hush," she says, waving away his embarrassment. "I've known you since you were in diapers, Riley Carter. Can't shock me. Now, why don't you two get dressed while I make some coffee? Then we can have a proper conversation."

Without waiting for a response, she bustles into the kitchen, leaving Riley and me to exchange bewildered glances.

"Is she always like this?" I whisper as we hurriedly collect our scattered clothing.

"Pretty much," Riley confirms, pulling on his t-shirt. "She's... unique."

We dress quickly, and by the time we make it to the kitchen, Mrs. Abernathy has coffee brewing and is arranging bread rolls on a plate.

"So," she says brightly as we enter, "I take it the power outage brought you two together? How romantic! Just like in those novels I read."

"Mrs. Abernathy," Riley begins, but she cuts him off again.

"Edith, please. If you're sleeping with my tenant, we can be on a first-name basis."

I can't help the laugh that escapes me, partly from nervousness and partly from the situation's absurdity. Riley looks at me, and after a moment, the corner of his mouth twitches upward.

"Coffee?" Edith offers, holding out mugs to each of us.

We accept, and for a few minutes, the kitchen is filled with the sounds of breakfast being assembled and consumed. Once we've eaten, however, I decide to seize the opportunity.

"Edith," I say, "since you're here, there's something we want to ask you. About the town's history."

Her eyes light up. "My favorite subject! What would you like to know?"

I glance at Riley, who nods encouragingly. "It's about the founding families. The Mitchells, specifically. My father was James Mitchell, and I recently found out our family was one of the town's founders."

Edith's expression shifts to one of keen interest. "James Mitchell? You're James's daughter?"

"You knew my father?" I ask, surprised.

"Of course! He grew up just two streets over from me. Such a serious boy, always with his nose in a book. Left town right after high school, didn't he?"

I nod, eager for more information. "What can you tell me about the Mitchell family? And..." I hesitate, then press on, "what happened between them and the Carters?"

Edith's gaze moves between Riley and me, understanding dawning in her eyes. "Well now, isn't that something? A Carter and a Mitchell, together after all these years. Your grandfathers would be turning in their graves."

"Why?" Riley asks, leaning forward. "What happened?"

Edith takes a sip of her coffee, clearly relishing having an audience for her historical

knowledge. "It was 1889. The lumber mill had been running successfully for years, a joint venture between the Carters, who owned the timber rights, and the Mitchells, who ran the mill operations. The Abernathys—my husband's family—handled the financial side."

She pauses, making sure she has our full attention. "Then one night, the mill burned down. Completely destroyed. And each family blamed the others."

"Why?" I ask. "Was it not an accident?"

"Some thought it was arson," Edith explains. "The Carters accused Samuel Mitchell—that would be your great-great-grandfather—of setting the fire for the insurance money. The Mitchells claimed Jacob Carter—Riley's ancestor—had done it out of jealousy, as Samuel had recently been named president of the town council over him."

"And the Abernathys?" Riley prompts.

"Stepped in to buy out both families' interests in the rebuilt mill, effectively ending their partnership and their friendship." Edith shakes her head sadly. "From that day forward, Carters and Mitchells didn't socialize, didn't do business together, and certainly didn't marry each other. It was an unwritten rule in Cedar Falls for generations."

"So that's why my father never talked about his family here," I murmur, pieces falling into place. "He was carrying on a century-old grudge."

"Not exactly," Edith says, surprising me. "Your father was different. He questioned the feud openly in his teens, even befriended young William Carter—Riley's uncle—much to both families' dismay."

Riley's head snaps up. "My uncle Will? The one who died in the car accident?"

Edith nods solemnly. "The very same. James and Will were best friends in high school, inseparable despite their families' objections. Until the accident."

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A chill runs through me. "What accident?"

"They were seventeen, out driving on a rainy night like last night. The car went off Crescent Ridge and plunged into the ravine. Will died instantly. James was thrown clear and survived with just a broken arm." Edith's voice softens. "Two weeks later, James left town. Never came back, as far as I know."

"That's what he meant when he wrote about 'unfinished business' here." I say.

"Survivor's guilt," Riley says, his expression grim. "He blamed himself for his friend's death and carried that weight for decades."

"Exactly so," Edith confirms. "The town never blamed him—it was a terrible accident, nothing more. But James couldn't forgive himself. And I suspect he couldn't face the Carter family, especially not after how they treated him at the funeral."

"What happened?" I ask, though I'm not sure I want to know.

"Harold Carter—Riley's grandfather—told James he was no longer welcome in Cedar Falls. That no Mitchell would ever be welcome again." Edith sighs. "It was grief talking, of course. Losing a child... it changes people. But those words must have haunted your father."

"And that's why he wanted to return," I realize. "To make peace somehow, before he died."

"I believe so," Edith says gently. "Though whether he would have found that peace,

only he would know."

We sit in silence for a moment, absorbing this revelation. Finally, Riley speaks, his voice trembling with emotion.

"So, our families have been at odds for over a century because of a fire that may or may not have been arson and then a tragic accident that no one was to blame for."

"That's the way of feuds," Edith says with a shrug. "They take on a life of their own, long after the original grievances are forgotten."

"Like what happened with Josh," I say softly, reaching for Riley's hand under the table.

He nods, fingers tightening around mine. "History repeating itself."

Edith looks between us, a knowing smile on her face. "Or perhaps history being rewritten," she suggests. "A Carter and a Mitchell, together at last. Quite poetic, don't you think?"

After finishing our coffee and helping Edith clean up, we walk her to the door. She pauses on the threshold, turning to face us.

"The historical society is open today, if you want to look through the archives," she tells me. "There are photographs, newspaper clippings, even some personal letters that might help you understand your father's connection to this place."

"Thank you," I say sincerely. "For everything."

"My pleasure, dear." She pats my arm, then looks at Riley. "And you—don't be a stranger. This cottage could use a man's touch from time to time."

Riley's lips twitch. "Yes, ma'am."

With a final knowing smile, Edith departs, leaving Riley and me alone once more.

"Well," I say after a moment, "that was..."

"Illuminating," Riley finishes for me. "In more ways than one."

I move into his arms, needing the reassurance of his touch after all we've learned.

"What do you think? About our families, the feud, all of it?"

He's quiet for a moment, his hand stroking my back in a soothing rhythm. "I think," he says finally, "that we have a chance to break the cycle. To write a different ending to this story."

I look up at him, hope blooming in my chest. "You want that? To continue this—us—whatever we are?"

His amber eyes meet mine, serious but warm. "I do. I know it's fast, maybe crazy, but..." He shakes his head slightly. "I've never felt this way before. Like something that was missing has finally clicked into place."

"I feel it too," I admit, resting my head against his chest. "I came to Cedar Falls looking for answers about my father, but I think I found something I didn't even know I was searching for."

"What happens now?" Riley asks, his voice rumbling beneath my ear.

I smile, feeling more certain than I have in years. "Now we go to the historical society. I want to see those archives and learn more about my father's time here. And then..."



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"And then?" he prompts when I trail off.

"And then we figure out the rest together. Day by day." I look up at him again. "I'm not in a hurry to leave Cedar Falls."

His answering smile is like the sun breaking through clouds. "Good," he says simply. "Because I'm not in a hurry for you to go."

As he leans down to kiss me, I feel a sense of rightness wash over me. Whatever brought me to Cedar Falls—fate, coincidence, or my father's unfinished business—I'm exactly where I'm meant to be.

Epilogue – Riley

Three Years Later

The September sun filters through the pines, casting dappled shadows across the yard where I'm hanging the last of the blue balloons. The cabin looks different than it did three years ago—flower boxes beneath the windows, a swing set in the clearing, and toys scattered across the porch. Signs of a life I never thought I'd have.

"Is everything set up?" Lucy calls from the doorway, our son propped on her hip.

James William Carter, named for her father and my uncle, squirms in her arms, eager to be put down so he can toddle about on sturdy legs. At two years old, he's already showing a Carter's height and a Mitchell's curiosity—a perfect blend of our once-feuding bloodlines.

"Just a few balloons left," I answer, tying off the last string. "Cake ready?"

"Mmhmm. Edith just called. She's bringing extra ice cream and—" Lucy stops mid-sentence, her head tilting. "Is that a car?"

I hear it too—the crunch of tires on gravel, the familiar rumble of a diesel engine. My chest tightens with a mix of anxiety and hope, the same feeling I get every time, even after all these months.

"It's them," I say, checking my watch. "Right on time."

Lucy smiles, bouncing James on her hip.

"Go on. We've got this." She presses a quick kiss to my cheek as I pass, her brown eyes full of understanding. "Breathe, Riley."

I nod, trying to follow her advice as I walk down the path to meet the arriving vehicle. The black pickup pulls to a stop, and for a moment, no one gets out. Then the driver's door opens, and my brother steps onto the gravel.

Josh Carter looks more like our father than I do—same build, same dark hair and eyes. But unlike our father, there's no hardness in his face, no bitterness in his stance. At forty, he's finally found peace, just as I have.

"Riley," he says with a nod.

"Josh," I return, the old awkwardness lingering like a ghost between us.

Then his wife emerges from the passenger side, their two children scrambling out after her.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Elisa says, rolling her eyes at our formal greeting. "It's your nephew's birthday, not a business meeting. Hug your brother, Josh."

Josh's serious expression cracks, and he steps forward to embrace me. It's still not entirely natural, still holds a hint of stiffness, but it's real. After almost twenty years of estrangement, we're family again.

I owe that miracle entirely to Elisa.

When Josh met her, something changed in him. The angry, wounded man who refused to speak to me began to soften. Elisa, a single mom with infinite patience and a no-nonsense attitude, slowly convinced him that holding onto old grievances was poisoning his life.

It took time—nearly a year of small steps. Coffee at Lou's Diner with Elisa as a buffer. Awkward dinners where we struggled to find common ground.

Even now, we will never be as close as we might have been if our lives had taken different paths. Too much time has passed, too many scars have formed. But we're brothers again, and for that, I will be eternally grateful to Elisa.

"Uncle Riley!" My young nephew Mason barrels into me for a hug. His sister Sophie, three and more reserved, hangs back until I extend a hand for a high-five.

"There's my birthday boy!" Elisa exclaims, spotting Lucy and James approaching from the cabin. She hurries forward to coo over my son, leaving Josh and me momentarily alone.

"Good turnout?" he asks, nodding toward the cars already parked along the drive—Lou's sedan and his nephew's new sports car, Mrs. Peterson's ancient station wagon.

"Seems like half the town's coming," I confirm. "Lucy's popular."

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Josh smiles slightly. "Unlike some people I know."

It's a gentle jab, one I can take now without defensiveness. "I'm working on it."

And I am. For James's sake, if not my own. I don't want my son to learn loneliness from me, to inherit my tendency to withdraw from the world. So, I've been making efforts—attending town events, joining the volunteer fire department, even hosting this birthday party instead of letting Lucy arrange it at the community center as she'd initially suggested.

Cedar Falls has slowly begun to feel like home again, in a way it hasn't since I was a child. Not the same home—I'm not the same person—but a place where I belong nonetheless.

"Elisa brought her famous potato salad," Josh says, retrieving a covered dish from the truck bed. "And Mom's recipe for coleslaw."

This is another peace offering. Our mother died when we were young, but Josh has kept her recipes and preserved that part of our history. Sharing it with me, with my family, is his way of bridging the gap between our past and present.

"James will probably just smear it in his hair," I say, "but everyone else will appreciate it."

We walk together toward the cabin, where Lucy is now surrounded by arriving guests. She's in her element, laughing as she introduces James to each new arrival, accepting gifts with genuine thanks and directing people toward the food and drinks.

I still can't believe she chose this life—chose me. After her car was fixed, I expected her to have a sudden revelation and continue her exploration of Cedar Falls without me. Instead, she dove deeper into the town's history and deeper into my life. She moved into the cottage for six months, completing her novel about the town's founding while we carefully navigated our new relationship. Then one evening, as we sat on my porch watching the sunset, she said, "I think I'd like to wake up to this view every day."

She moved in the following weekend.

A year later, we married in a small ceremony by the falls. Two months after that, she told me she was pregnant. Each step seemed both inevitable and miraculous as if we were always meant to find each other, to heal each other's wounds, to build something new from the broken pieces of our past.

She now manages the town's hardware shop three days a week, writes in the mornings before James wakes up, and has somehow become one of the most beloved residents of Cedar Falls. Everyone from the mayor to the high school janitor knows Lucy Carter, with her warm smile and genuine interest in their lives.

"Earth to Riley," Lucy calls, breaking into my thoughts. "Come help with the cake!"

I hand Josh a beer from the cooler and make my way to my wife's side. James reaches for me immediately, his chubby hands grabbing at my shirt.

"Dada," he says decisively, one of the few words in his growing vocabulary.

I take him from Lucy, settling him against my chest where he contentedly plays with the buttons on my shirt. Lucy's hand rests on my arm, a gentle anchor.

"Everything okay?" she asks quietly, her eyes flicking toward Josh.

"Yeah," I say, and mean it. "Everything's good."

Her smile tells me she understands all I'm not saying—that each interaction with my brother gets easier, that the weight I've carried for decades continues to lighten, that the life we've built together exceeds anything I thought possible for myself.

"Time for cake!" she announces to the gathering crowd. "Everyone gather round!"

As our friends and neighbors—my family and hers now intertwined in this small town—cluster around the picnic table, I hold my son and stand beside my wife, watching Josh and Elisa join the circle with their children.

The feud that separated Carters and Mitchells for over a century has ended, not with dramatic confrontation but with quiet healing, with new beginnings, with a child who carries both bloodlines and knows nothing of the bitterness that once divided his family.

Lucy catches my eye over the candles she's lighting on James's cake, and the love I see there still takes my breath away. Three years ago, her car broke down at the Cedar Falls town line, and my life changed forever. Some might call it coincidence. Others might call it fate.

I call it coming home.