



Fake Dating the Next-Door (Curvy Wives of Cedar Falls #6)

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Category: Romance

Description: My grumpy neighbor is the last man on earth I'd date until my parents decide to visit.

I'm a freelance graphic designer with chaotic work hours, loud music, and an optimism that refuses to die. Garrett Stone is my polar opposite—ex-military, organized, and perpetually scowling. We share a fence and little else.

When my parents announce they're visiting and will undoubtedly lecture me about my unstable career and single status, I make the most ridiculous decision of my life: I ask Garrett to pretend to be my boyfriend. Just for one dinner. Just to shock them into silence.

To my surprise, he agrees. But as we practice holding hands and gazing into each other's eyes for authenticity, something changes between us. The wall he's built starts crumbling, and I glimpse the man behind the scowl. The way he looks at me makes me wonder: What if we stopped pretending?

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I'm going to murder my alarm clock.

Oh. Right. The call with that potential new client in Seattle.

I stumble out of bed, my wild curls blocking half my vision as I navigate toward the coffee maker.

My tiny rental house is cute but ancient, with creaky floorboards that announce my every move.

The kitchen is barely big enough for one person, but it's mine, and I've made it colorful with hand-painted cabinets and mismatched vintage dishes displayed on open shelving.

"Good morning, Cedar Falls," I mutter to myself, pouring an obscene amount of coffee into my "Choose Joy" mug. "Another day, another dollar. Hopefully many dollars, actually."

As the caffeine slowly brings me to life, I glance at my phone again and see three missed calls from Mom. Plus a text:

Don't forget we're coming tomorrow! Can't wait to see your place finally! Dad wants to know if you're still single or if there's someone we should meet. Love you!

And just like that, my day implodes before it's even started.

"No, no, no," I groan, letting my forehead thunk against the refrigerator. I'd

completely forgotten they were coming. Tomorrow. To my messy house. To judge my life choices.

I take my coffee to the back porch, needing fresh air to process this crisis. The April morning is cool but sunny, with dew still clinging to my overgrown garden. I should really weed that. Add it to the list of a thousand things I should do but never find time for.

From next door, I hear the sound of sanding. Of course, Garrett Stone is already hard at work in his garage. The man keeps military hours and probably judges me for sleeping past 5 AM.

Unlike my cheerful yellow cottage with its slightly neglected garden, Garrett's place is immaculate. No stray leaves dare accumulate on his lawn. His house is a modest gray Craftsman, but everything from the trim to the garden beds looks like it could pass a white-glove inspection.

I wander to our shared fence, coffee in hand. Despite his perpetual scowl, I've made it my mission to crack Garrett Stone's grumpy exterior. So far, after eight months of being neighbors, I've progressed from getting complete silence to receiving full sentences, albeit gruff ones.

"Morning, Garrett!" I call, spotting him through the open garage door. He's bent over what appears to be an antique dresser.

He straightens, and I can't help but notice how his gray t-shirt stretches across his broad shoulders.

For a man in his forties, my neighbor is unfairly attractive, even with that permanent scowl.

His dark hair is peppered with gray at the temples, and those steel-blue eyes could cut glass when he's annoyed.

Which is pretty much always when I'm around.

"Sunny," he acknowledges with a curt nod, barely pausing in his work. "You're up early."

I lean against the fence. "Big client call. Also, apparently my parents are coming tomorrow, which I completely forgot about, and now I'm in full panic mode."

He grunts something that might be sympathy but continues working.

"They think my job isn't real because I work from home," I continue, knowing he's probably not interested but needing to vent anyway. "And they're obsessed with me finding 'a nice man to settle down with.' Like it's 1952 or something."

"Parents usually want what they think is best."

"Yeah, well, what they think is best is me in an accounting job with a husband, a minivan, and 2.5 kids." I take a big gulp of coffee. "I'm twenty-five, not forty-five."

His eyebrow raises slightly at this, and I immediately regret my word choice.

"Not that there's anything wrong with forty-five!" I backpedal. "Or forty. Or whatever you are. Age is just a number, right? My point is, they treat me like I'm running out of time when I'm barely getting started."

Garrett sets down his sandpaper. "I'm forty," he says flatly, "And you're babbling."

"Sorry." I bite my lip. "I'm just stressed. They always make me feel like such a

failure."

He stares at me for a moment, those intense blue eyes making me feel uncomfortably seen. "Then stop seeking their approval."

Easy for him to say. Garrett Stone probably hasn't sought anyone's approval since kindergarten.

Suddenly, a wild, completely inappropriate idea pops into my head. Before I can think better of it, the words tumble out: "What if you pretended to be my boyfriend?"

The sandpaper drops from his hand. "Excuse me?"

"Just for dinner tomorrow night!" I rush on, the idea taking shape as I speak. "It would be perfect. You're successful, responsible, mature. Everything they want for me. They'd be so shocked I'm dating someone older that they might actually stop nagging me about finding a man!"

Garrett stares at me like I've suggested we rob a bank together. "Absolutely not."

"Please?" I give him my best pleading look. "I'll bake those chocolate chip cookies you pretend not to like but always eat."

"I don't eat your cookies," he lies. I've seen the empty plates returned to my porch.

"I'll keep my music down for a month."

His jaw tightens. "Two months."

Wait, is he actually considering it? I press my advantage. "Two months of silence, plus I'll weed that strip between our properties that you're always glaring at."

He crosses his arms. "Your parents would never believe we're together."

"Why not?" I challenge.

"Because I'm—" he gestures vaguely at himself, "—me. And you're..." his hand waves in my direction, "...you."

I'm not sure if I should be offended. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Garrett picks up his sandpaper again. "It means we have nothing in common. It wouldn't be believable."

"Opposites attract?" I offer weakly.

He shakes his head, but I catch the faintest quirk at the corner of his mouth. Not quite a smile, but as close as Garrett Stone ever gets.

"Come on," I press. "One dinner. Three hours max. You can go back to being a hermit right after, I promise."

My phone alarm beeps from my pocket. Ten minutes until my client call.

"Think about it?" I ask, already backing toward my house. "I'll bring coffee and muffins later as a bribe."

Garrett just grunts and turns back to his dresser, but he doesn't outright refuse again, which from him is practically enthusiastic agreement.

As I rush inside to prepare for my call, I wonder what I've gotten myself into. Garrett Stone as my fake boyfriend? The man barely tolerates speaking to me over a fence. How would we ever convince my parents we're in love?

But desperate times call for desperate measures. And right now, I'm desperate enough to try anything, even recruiting my grumpy, gorgeous neighbor into the most ridiculous scheme of my life.

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I've lost my damn mind.

That's the only explanation for why I'm standing in my garage, staring at this half-sanded dresser, seriously considering playing boyfriend to my bubbly next-door neighbor.

Sunny Bloom. Even her name is ridiculous, like something out of a children's book about fairies.

She's twenty-five, for Christ's sake. Fifteen years my junior and about a thousand years younger in life experience.

She's all bright smiles and wild curls and relentless optimism, while I'm... well, not.

I run my palm over the dresser's surface, checking for rough spots. The repetitive motion calms me, gives me something to focus on besides the image of Sunny leaning against our fence, her hair a mess and those big brown eyes pleading with me.

"Focus, Stone," I mutter to myself, reaching for the sandpaper again.

I'd been up since 0500, same as every day for the past twenty years. Old habits from the military die hard, especially when the nightmares wake you anyway. My shoulder aches dully, a permanent souvenir from my last tour. The doctors did their best, but some damage can't be undone. Story of my life.

The quiet of Cedar Falls had been exactly what I needed after discharge.

No expectations, no one to be responsible for, no one to let down.

Just me, my projects, and blessed silence.

Until Sunny Bloom moved in next door eight months ago, bringing with her loud music, late nights, and constant attempts at conversation.

I should find her annoying. I tell myself I do. But there's something about her, something genuine, that makes it impossible to completely shut her out.

Still, pretending to be her boyfriend? That's crossing a line. Getting involved with anyone, even pretend-involved, means complications. Attachments. The very things I've been avoiding since settling here.

But the look on her face when she mentioned her parents... I recognize that look. It's the face of someone who's trying so damn hard to prove themselves worthy. I know it well—saw it in the mirror for years trying to live up to my father's impossible standards.

The sandpaper tears in my grip. I toss it aside, annoyed at myself for getting distracted.

Truth is, I've watched Sunny work herself to exhaustion through her office window too many nights. She's no flake, despite what her parents apparently think. She's just... young. Idealistic. Hasn't had life kick the hope out of her yet.

And God help me, I like that about her. I like that she bakes when she's stressed and leaves cookies on my porch despite my complaints. I like that she talks to her plants and dances while she waters them, not caring who sees. I even like her ridiculously cheerful "good mornings" over the fence.

What I don't like is how often I catch myself thinking about her. Or how I've memorized her schedule. Or how I make sure I'm in the garage when she typically takes her morning coffee on the porch.

"This is a bad idea," I tell the empty garage. The last thing Sunny needs is her parents thinking she's involved with the damaged, antisocial ex-military guy next door.

The last thing I need is pretending to be close to someone I've been trying to keep at arm's length.

I set aside my tools and step out into the mid-morning sun, stretching my stiff shoulder. It's nearly noon now. Sunny's client call should be long finished. I glance toward her house and notice her car is gone. Probably making a grocery store run or grabbing lunch.

Good. Gives me time to come to my senses.

I head inside to make a sandwich, my house feeling particularly empty today. Unlike Sunny's cheerful clutter, my place is organized with military precision. Neutral colors, minimal decor, everything in its place. It's exactly how I want it. No surprises, no chaos.

Except now I'm picturing Sunny here, how she'd probably insist on adding "a pop of color" or whatever the hell she's always talking about while showing me paint swatches over the fence.

She'd fill the silence with chatter, ask questions about my military service that I wouldn't want to answer, poke at wounds better left undisturbed.

And yet...

I find myself standing at my kitchen window, watching her driveway for her return.

The truth I've been avoiding slams into me with the subtlety of an IED: I want her. Not just physically, though there's definitely that, but all of her. The brightness she brings to everything. The way she sees good in everyone, even a grumpy bastard like me.

It's precisely why I should say no to this whole charade. Because pretending to be with Sunny, getting a taste of something I can't have—shouldn't have—would be torture.

Three hours, she said. Just dinner.

I'm still debating when her ancient Volkswagen Beetle pulls into her driveway, yellow as a damn sunflower, just like its owner. I watch as she struggles with grocery bags, dropping her keys twice before managing to get her front door open.

Before I can think better of it, I'm outside and crossing our yards.

"Need a hand?" I call, keeping my voice neutral.

She jumps, nearly dropping a bag. "Garrett! You scared me!"

"Sorry." I take two bags from her arms, ignoring how her fingers brush against mine. "Looked like you were about to lose the battle with gravity."

Her face lights up with that smile that always hits me. "My hero! I may have gone a little overboard shopping for tomorrow. I'm stress-buying groceries for my parents' visit."

I follow her into her kitchen, which looks like a paint store exploded in it. Yellow

cabinets, blue countertops, mismatched everything. It's chaotic but somehow works, just like her.

"About that," I say, setting the bags down.

Sunny freezes, a box of pasta halfway to a cabinet. "About what?" Her voice has that forced casual tone that tells me she's bracing for rejection.

I clear my throat. "Your proposal."

"My... oh! The boyfriend thing." She turns to face me, twisting her hands together. "Look, I totally understand if you don't want to. It was a crazy idea and—"

"I'll do it."

Her mouth stays open, mid-sentence. "You... will?"

I don't know what the hell I'm doing. This is a mistake. I should be keeping my distance, not inserting myself further into her life. But the way her eyes widen with surprise and hope makes something in my chest race.

"Two conditions," I say, keeping my voice firm. "You keep the music down for two months like you promised. And we need a story—how we got together, how long we've been dating. Your parents won't believe it otherwise."

She launches herself at me, throwing her arms around my neck. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

The scent of her strawberry shampoo fills my senses. Her body is warm against mine, curves pressing into me in ways that make it hard to remember why this is a bad idea. Instinctively, my hands come to rest at her waist.

Then she seems to realize what she's doing and jumps back, her cheeks flushed. "Sorry! I'm a hugger. Should've warned you."

"It's fine," I lie. It's not fine. Nothing about this situation is fine. I want to pull her back against me and find out if her mouth tastes as sweet as it looks.

Instead, I shove my hands in my pockets. "So, what's our story?"

She leans against the counter, eyes bright with excitement. "Well, obviously we met when I moved in. Maybe you helped me with something? Like, I don't know, fixing a leaky faucet?"

"I did fix your leaky faucet," I remind her. "In October. You brought me banana bread as thanks."

Her eyebrows shoot up. "You remember that?"

I shrug, not willing to admit I remember every interaction we've had. "It was good banana bread."

"Okay, so we start with truth! You fixed my faucet, I thanked you with baking, and... we started talking more? Then maybe you asked me out for coffee?"

I can't help the short laugh that escapes me. "Your parents would never believe I asked you out for coffee."

She tilts her head. "No, you're right. You'd be more direct." She deepens her voice in what I assume is an impression of me. "'Sunny, I'm taking you to dinner. Be ready at seven.'"

"I don't sound like that."

"You absolutely do." She grins. "Okay, so you demanded I have dinner with you, I was charmed by your caveman approach, and we've been dating for... three months?"

Three months. Long enough to be serious but not so long that her parents would be offended they're just now hearing about me.

"Fine. Dinner, three months ago. What else would they expect me to know about you?" I ask, trying to keep this practical.

Sunny hops up to sit on the counter, legs swinging. The casual movement draws my eyes to her bare thighs below her shorts.

"Let's see... they'll expect you to know I'm allergic to strawberries. That I went to art school for two years before dropping out to freelance. That I hate scary movies but love true crime podcasts, which makes no sense but there it is." She counts these off on her fingers.

"You're not allergic to strawberries," I say before I can stop myself. "You were eating them on your porch last week."

Her eyes widen slightly. "You... noticed that?"

Shit. "Hard not to notice when you're sitting ten feet from my garage."

She nods, but I can tell she's wondering what else I've noticed. Too much, is the answer. Way too much.

"What about you?" she asks. "What would I know about you if we'd been dating three months?"

"Not much," I say honestly. "I don't talk about myself."

"Oh, come on, I'd know something." She kicks her feet gently against the cabinets. "Did you serve? How long? Do you have family? Basic boyfriend knowledge."

I sigh, leaning against the opposite counter. "Army, fifteen years, three tours in Afghanistan. Parents both dead. One sister in Colorado I talk to maybe twice a year."

Sunny's playful expression softens. "I'm sorry about your parents."

"It was a long time ago." I don't mention that my father died never having said he was proud of me, or that my mother followed him a year later from what I'm convinced was a broken heart. Some details aren't needed for this charade.

"So, what's our couple dynamic?" she asks, mercifully changing the subject. "I'm thinking you're the strong, silent type—that's not a stretch—and I gradually wore down your defenses with my irresistible charm?"

The accuracy of her assessment is unsettling. "Something like that."

She claps her hands together. "This is actually going to work! My parents will be so shocked that I'm dating my older, responsible neighbor that they'll forget to lecture me about my career choices."

"Glad I can be of service," I say dryly, but I'm finding it hard to maintain my usual gruffness with her looking so damn happy.

"Dinner's at six tomorrow," she says, hopping down from the counter. "Wear something nice but not too nice. Like you're trying to impress them but don't want to look like you're trying."

"I know how to dress for dinner, Sunny."

"Of course you do." She smiles up at me, and suddenly the kitchen feels too small, "Thank you for doing this, Garrett. Really."

I should leave now. Say goodbye, walk out, and spend the next twenty-four hours remembering all the reasons this is a terrible idea. Instead, I find myself asking, "Need help with anything else? For tomorrow?"

Her surprise is evident, but she recovers quickly. "Actually, yes. I'm making lasagna, and I always mess up the layering. Would you mind being my taste-tester tonight when I do a practice run?"

"You're making a practice dinner?" This woman continues to baffle me.

"Of course! I can't risk messing up the actual dinner. Too much pressure." She says this like it's the most logical thing in the world. "Say yes, and I'll throw in a beer and promise not to ask too many personal questions."

I should say no. Go home. Maintain the distance I've cultivated.

"What time?" I hear myself ask instead.

"Seven? I need to get some work done first."

"I'll bring the beer," I say, already moving toward the door before I do something stupid like touch her again.

"It's a date!" she calls after me, then immediately backtracks. "I mean, not a date-date. A practice date. For our fake date. Tomorrow. Which is also not a real date."

I turn back to find her blushing, and something inside me—something I thought long dead—stirs to life.

"Seven," I confirm, and head back to my place before she can see what must be written all over my face.

I have no idea what the hell I'm doing, agreeing to this charade. Sunny deserves someone whole, someone who knows how to let people in. Not a broken ex-soldier with more baggage than the cargo hold of a C-17.

But for just a moment, one moment of weakness, I let myself imagine what it would be like if this were real. If I were actually the man lucky enough to be with Sunny Bloom.

It's a dangerous thought. One I'll need to bury deep before tomorrow.

Because the only thing worse than pretending to be with her would be letting her see just how much I wish it were true.

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I am losing it. Completely, totally losing it.

The lasagna is in the oven, the salad is mixed, and I've changed outfits four times in the past hour. For a fake practice dinner for my fake boyfriend. What is wrong with me?

"It's just Garrett," I tell my reflection as I dab at the sweat forming along my hairline. "Grumpy, scowling Garrett who's doing you a favor."

Grumpy, scowling, unfairly attractive Garrett who somehow looks at me like he can see straight through to all my insecurities.

I tug at the hem of the sundress I finally settled on—a blue floral number that my mother once said brings out the warmth in my eyes. Is it too much for a practice dinner? Probably. But after spending all afternoon hunched over my laptop finishing a rush project, I wanted to feel pretty.

The timer on my phone shows ten minutes until seven. Ten minutes until Garrett arrives, and my palms are already sweating like I'm waiting for an actual date.

"This is ridiculous," I mutter, pacing my small living room. "We're neighbors. We're planning a fake relationship. That's it."

Except when he was standing in my kitchen earlier today, filling the space with his presence, it didn't feel fake at all.

The way his eyes followed my movements, the brief moment when his hands rested

on my waist after my impulsive hug.

.. there was something there. Something that made my heart race in a way that had nothing to do with neighborly friendship.

Or maybe I'm just projecting because it's been approximately forever since I've had any romantic prospects. Cedar Falls isn't exactly a hotbed of eligible bachelors for twenty-something freelance designers.

Not that I'm looking at Garrett that way. He made it pretty clear he thinks I'm a kid. Fifteen years younger and "running out of time when I'm barely getting started," as I so tactlessly put it. I cringe remembering how his eyebrow had raised at that comment.

I check my phone again. Seven minutes.

The lasagna smells amazing, at least. I followed my grandmother's recipe to the letter, determined not to mess up the layers this time. Tomorrow has to be perfect. My parents already think my life is a mess; I can't serve them a messy dinner on top of everything else.

Anxiety bubbles in my chest as I think about tomorrow. Will they believe Garrett is my boyfriend? Will they approve? Do I even want them to approve? The whole point is to shock them enough that they stop nagging me about finding someone, not to actually get their blessing.

But a small, pathetic part of me still craves their approval, even as I rebel against their expectations.

I jump at the sound of a knock on my door—firm, decisive. Garrett's knock.

"Coming!" I call, my voice embarrassingly high-pitched. I check the mirror one last time, fluff my curls, and take a deep breath.

It's just dinner. With my neighbor. Who I see almost every day. Who agreed to pretend to be my boyfriend.

Totally normal.

I open the door to find Garrett standing there with a six-pack of craft beer in one hand and—surprisingly—a small bunch of wildflowers in the other. He's dressed in dark jeans and a button-down shirt the same steel blue as his eyes, the sleeves rolled up to reveal muscular forearms.

"H-hi," My voice trembles.

"Hi." His eyes do a quick sweep of my appearance, lingering just a moment too long to be casual. "You look... nice."

Is that surprise in his voice? The thought that Garrett might not have realized I own anything other than leggings and oversized t-shirts makes me feel both self-conscious and weirdly pleased.

"Thanks. So do you." I step back to let him in. "Are those for me?" I gesture to the wildflowers.

He holds them out somewhat stiffly. "Thought it would be more convincing. For tomorrow."

"Right. For tomorrow." I take the flowers, "That's really thoughtful, thank you."

An awkward silence falls between us as I search for a vase. I can feel him watching

me, and it makes me even more nervous, my movements becoming clumsy as I fill a mason jar with water.

"Dinner smells good," he says finally.

"Thanks! It's my grandmother's recipe. The secret is using both ricotta and cottage cheese in the filling." I'm babbling. Why am I babbling? "I mean, not that it's a secret anymore since I just told you, but—"

"Sunny." His voice is calm, steady. "Breathe."

I inhale deeply, setting the makeshift vase of wildflowers on the table. "Sorry. I get chatty when I'm nervous."

"Why are you nervous?"

Good question. "I don't know. This whole thing is weird, right? Practicing to pretend to be a couple?"

Garrett opens two beers, handing one to me. "A little weird," he admits, the corner of his mouth quirking slightly. "But practical."

"Practical," I echo, taking a sip of beer. "That's very you."

"What does that mean?" There's no defensiveness in his tone, just curiosity.

I gesture vaguely at him. "You know. Organized. Logical. Everything in its place." I peek around him toward the window where I can just see the edge of his meticulously maintained yard. "I bet you alphabetize your spices."

"I do not alphabetize my spices," he says, then pauses. "They're organized by

frequency of use."

A laugh bubbles out of me, and something in his expression softens at the sound.

"What about you?" he asks, leaning against my counter in a way that makes him look impossibly more attractive. "How are your spices organized?"

"Bold of you to assume they're organized at all." I check the oven timer. "Five more minutes on the lasagna. Want to sit?"

We move to my small dining table, which I've actually cleared of work materials for once. The wildflowers make a cheerful centerpiece, their casual beauty somehow perfect for this not-quite-date.

"So," I say, taking another sip of beer for courage. "Tell me something about yourself that a girlfriend of three months would know. Something not in your military resume."

Garrett seems to consider this, rolling his beer bottle between his palms. "I have trouble sleeping," he says finally. "Nightmares, sometimes. From my last tour."

The admission surprises me. It's more personal than I expected. "Is that why you're always up so early?"

He nods. "Hard to stay asleep past 5 AM when you're trained to function on four hours for years. The dreams don't help."

I resist the urge to reach for his hand. "I'm sorry. That must be hard."

"It is what it is." He shrugs, but I can see the tension in his shoulders. "Your turn. Something I should know about you."

I consider what to share... Something true but not too revealing. "I'm terrified of disappointing people," I admit. "Especially my parents. I act like I don't care what they think, but... I do. Too much, probably."

Garrett's eyes meet mine, and there's understanding there that makes my chest tighten. "What do you think would disappoint them more. You being single or you dating someone like me?"

The question catches me off guard. "Someone like you?"

"Older. Military. Not exactly the successful businessman type I'm guessing they want for their daughter."

I shake my head. "They'd actually love that you were military."

My dad's brother served. And they're so desperate for me to settle down they'd probably be thrilled with anyone who seems stable and responsible.

"I laugh lightly. "The age gap might raise eyebrows, but they'll be too busy being grateful I'm not dating another 'starving artist' to complain. "

"Another?" His eyebrow raises.

"My college boyfriend was a sculptor. Very passionate about his art, less passionate about things like paying rent or remembering my birthday." I wave dismissively. "Ancient history."

"He sounds like an idiot," Garrett says, his voice suddenly hard.

The timer on the oven beeps, saving me from having to respond to the unexpected intensity in his tone. I jump up, grateful for the distraction.

"Moment of truth!" I announce, pulling oven mitts shaped like lobster claws from a drawer. They were an impulse buy that make me smile every time I use them.

Garrett stares at them, looking torn between amusement and confusion. "Those are..."

"Practical and fashionable," I finish for him, grinning as I slide them on. "Don't be jealous you don't have lobster hands."

I could swear I see him fighting a smile as I open the oven and carefully extract the lasagna. The cheese is bubbling, golden brown on top, and it smells heavenly.

"It looks perfect," I breathe, setting it on the stovetop. "I've never managed to get the layers right before. This is a good omen for tomorrow!"

"I'm sure your parents would love you even if you served them a terrible lasagna," Garrett says, coming to stand beside me.

The comment is so unexpectedly gentle that I look up at him in surprise. He's closer than I realized, close enough that I can smell his soap—something clean and woody—and see the faint scar that runs along his jawline.

"That's..." I swallow hard. "That's a nice thing to say."

His eyes hold mine for a long moment. "I can be nice. Sometimes."

The air between us feels charged, and I suddenly can't remember what we were talking about. All I can focus on is how his proximity makes my heart race, how different he looks when his expression softens like this.

I clear my throat, stepping back. "We should let it cool for a few minutes before cutting into it."

Garrett nods, moving back to give me space. "Need help with anything else?"

"You could grab the salad from the fridge?" I suggest, grateful for something to do with my hands. I reach for plates, watching him moving around my kitchen.

As we settle in to eat, I can't help but think how strangely comfortable this feels—having Garrett in my space, sharing a meal I made. Almost like we've done this before, like it's a regular occurrence rather than an elaborate practice for a deception.

"This is good," he says after taking his first bite of lasagna. "Really good."

Pride blooms in my chest at the genuine approval in his voice. "Thanks. I stress-bake, but I stress-cook too, sometimes."

"You must be stressed a lot," he observes. "You're always bringing me baked goods."

I feel heat rise to my cheeks. "Well, freelancing isn't exactly stable. Feast or famine, you know? Either I have so many projects I'm pulling all-nighters, or I'm panicking about paying rent."

"Is that why you were up until 4 AM the other night?" he asks, surprising me again with how much he notices.

"Yeah, rush job for a client in California. Double my usual rate for the turnaround time. Sorry if my lights bothered you."

"They didn't," he says quickly. Then, more quietly: "I was already awake."

The nightmares, I realize. He was already up because of the nightmares.

"Well," I say, trying to lighten the mood, "maybe next time we can both be insomniacs together. I make great midnight nachos."

"I'll keep that in mind."

We eat in silence for a few minutes, and I find myself noticing a few things about him when he's not looking.

The way his broad hands handle his silverware with delicacy.

The slight furrow between his brows that never fully disappears, even when he's relaxed.

The way his shoulders remain slightly tensed, as if he's always ready to react to a threat.

What must it be like to live in his head? To carry whatever memories keep him up at night?

"So," I say as we finish eating, "should we practice any... couple stuff? For tomorrow?" My voice sounds strange even to my own ears, too high and breathless.

Garrett sets down his fork. "What kind of 'couple stuff'?"

"I don't know." I fiddle with my napkin. "Terms of endearment? Physical contact? We should probably seem comfortable with each other if we've been dating for three months."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Maybe just... basic stuff? Hand holding? A casual arm around the shoulders?" I'm

mortified to feel myself blushing. "Nothing weird, obviously."

He reaches across the table, his hand open, palm up. "Give me your hand."

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"Give me your hand."

The words come out more commanding than I intended, and for a second I think I've crossed a line. But Sunny doesn't hesitate. She places her small hand in mine, her eyes wide and curious.

Her skin is soft against my rugged palm. Warm. I can feel her pulse jumping at her wrist, quick as a hummingbird's wings. Or maybe that's my own heart hammering away.

"If we've been dating three months," I say, keeping my voice steady, "we'd be comfortable with casual contact." I run my thumb across her knuckles, a gesture that feels both innocent and intimate at the same time. "Like this."

Sunny nods, her cheeks flushed pink. "Right. Casual."

There's nothing casual about the way my body is responding to this simple touch. I've spent months keeping my distance, and now that I've allowed myself to breach that private space, it feels like stepping too close to a fire. Dangerous. Irresistible.

"What else?" she asks, her voice quieter now.

I should stop this. Draw a line. Remember that this is just preparation for a deception, not something real.

Instead, I say, "Stand up."

She does, and I rise with her, still holding her hand. We're standing closer now, the small dining space forcing proximity. I can smell her light and floral perfume and see the pulse beating at the base of her throat.

"If you were my girlfriend," I say, the words feeling strange in my mouth, "I'd probably do this." I place my free hand lightly on her waist, careful to keep the touch appropriate.

Sunny's breath catches audibly. "For authenticity," she agrees, her eyes not quite meeting mine.

"For authenticity," I repeat.

My hand spans nearly half her waist. She's so small compared to me, the top of her head barely reaching my shoulder. Something protective stirs in my chest—a feeling I've tried to ignore since she moved in next door.

"And maybe—" She hesitates. "Maybe we should practice, um, how we look at each other? My mom is super perceptive about that kind of thing."

"How should we look at each other?" My voice has dropped lower without my permission.

"Like we're... you know. Together." Her eyes finally meet mine, wide and uncertain. "Like we care about each other."

That shouldn't be hard. Not when I'm already fighting the urge to pull her closer, to cross boundaries I have no right to cross.

"Like this?" I ask, letting some of what I'm feeling show in my expression. Not everything—she'd run screaming if she saw everything—but enough. Enough to be

convincing.

Something shifts in her face, surprise followed by something softer. "Yeah," she whispers. "Just like that."

We're standing too close now, my hand still on her waist, hers resting lightly on my chest. I can feel her warmth through my shirt, can count every freckle scattered across the bridge of her nose.

This is a mistake. A massive, dangerous mistake.

I clear my throat and step back, releasing her. "That should be convincing enough."

Sunny blinks rapidly, as if coming out of a daze. "Right. Yes. Totally convincing." She tucks a curl behind her ear, her movements slightly flustered. "Um, there's one more thing."

"What's that?" I ask, grateful for the distance I've put between us.

"Would you be okay with... a goodbye kiss? When my parents are leaving?" The words tumble out quickly. "Nothing major, just a quick peck. For show."

My entire body goes still. Kiss Sunny. The thought has crossed my mind more times than I'd ever admit, but always as a fantasy I'd never act on. And now she's suggesting it herself.

"If you think it's necessary," I manage to say, my voice neutral.

"It would help sell it," she says, not quite looking at me. "But only if you're comfortable."

Comfortable is the last thing I am right now. "I'll manage."

I glance at my watch, looking for an escape. "It's getting late. I should probably head back."

"Oh! Right, of course." Is that disappointment in her voice? "Thank you for being my guinea pig. The lasagna passed the test, right?"

"Definitely." I help her clear the plates, our movements strangely comfortable in her small kitchen. "What time should I come over tomorrow?"

"My parents are arriving at six, so maybe 5:30? That way we can get our story straight one more time before they show up."

I nod, already calculating how many hours I need to spend in my garage tomorrow to work off this nervous energy. "5:30 it is."

At the door, we face each other again, uncertain. This isn't a real date. There's no goodnight kiss, no promise of seeing each other again soon. Except we will see each other tomorrow, playing parts in a charade that's starting to feel less like pretend with every passing minute.

"Thank you for doing this," Sunny says, her smile genuine. "I know it's weird and probably the last thing you want to be doing."

She's wrong about that. The last thing I want to be doing is walking away from her right now.

"It's fine," I say, because I can't say what I'm really thinking. "Get some rest. Big day tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Garrett."

"Goodnight, Sunny."

I force myself to turn and walk down her porch steps, feeling her eyes on my back as I cross the yard to my place. The night air is cool against my face, helping to clear my head.

What the hell am I doing?

Back in my house, I head straight for the shower, turning the water to cold. I need to get my head straight. Remember the boundaries. Remember why getting involved with anyone, especially someone like Sunny, is a bad idea.

She's young. Optimistic. Full of life and possibility. I'm... not. I've seen too much, lost too much. The nightmares that wake me most nights are just the surface of what's broken inside me.

But none of those rational thoughts stop me from remembering how perfectly her hand fit in mine, or how her eyes widened when I touched her waist.

I change into sweats and a t-shirt, but sleep feels impossible right now. Instead, I head to the garage, flipping on the lights and reaching for the project I abandoned earlier today—the antique dresser I've been restoring.

Working with my hands helps. The repetitive motions of sanding, the focus required for detailed work, the tangible progress. All of it quiets the noise in my head. By midnight, I've finished prepping the dresser for staining and my thoughts are marginally more ordered.

I need rules for tomorrow. Boundaries.

No unnecessary touching. Keep the charade convincing but minimal. Remember that it's all temporary—one dinner, then back to being neighbors.

But as I finally head to bed, the image that follows me into sleep isn't of tomorrow's dinner or of boundaries I need to maintain. It's of Sunny, looking up at me with those bright brown eyes, asking me to kiss her goodbye.

Even if it is just for show.

Next Morning

Morning comes too quickly after a restless night. I'm up before dawn as usual. I make coffee and step onto my back porch, watching the sky lighten gradually. Sunny's house is dark. She won't be up for hours yet. One of the many differences between us.

The day stretches ahead, hours to fill before I need to be next door, playing a part I'm increasingly concerned about. I decide to take a long run, pushing myself harder than usual, as if I can outpace my thoughts.

It doesn't work.

By mid-afternoon, I've exhausted all my usual distractions. The dresser is stained and drying. My house is already clean. I've even sharpened every knife in my kitchen, a task I usually save for Sunday mornings.

At 4:00, I finally admit to myself that I'm anxious. Not about meeting Sunny's parents. I've faced far more intimidating situations than dinner with civilians. I'm anxious about maintaining the facade, about keeping the appropriate distance when every instinct is telling me to do the opposite.

I shower and dress in dark jeans and a navy button-down that my sister sent for

Christmas last year, still with the tags on until today. I even trim my beard, which has grown more salt-and-pepper than I'd like to admit.

At precisely 5:30, I cross the yard to Sunny's porch, a bottle of decent red wine in hand.

She opens the door before I can knock, looking like she's been watching for me. Her hair is pulled back in some kind of twisty arrangement, a few curls escaping to frame her face. She's wearing a green dress that brings out the gold flecks in her brown eyes.

"You're exactly on time," she says, smiling nervously. "Very on-brand for you."

"Military precision," I say, stepping inside. Her house smells amazing—garlic, tomatoes, and something baking.

"Is that for dinner?" she asks, nodding at the wine.

"Unless you have something else planned."

"No, it's perfect." She takes the bottle, "Thank you."

I follow her to the kitchen, where every surface is covered with food preparation. The lasagna sits ready to go into the oven. A salad is partially assembled. Something sweet is cooling on a rack—cookies or brownies, I can't tell from here.

"Can I help with anything?" I offer, seeing the barely contained panic in her movements.

"Could you finish the salad? I need to change. Again." She looks down at herself.

"I've already gone through three outfits and I'm still not sure about this one."

"You look beautiful," I say before I can stop myself. It's the truth, but not something I should be saying out loud.

Sunny freezes, her eyes widening slightly. "I... thank you."

We stand there looking at each other until the timer on her phone beeps, breaking the moment.

"That's my ten-minute warning," she says, her voice higher than usual. "They're always exactly on time. Very on-brand for them, too."

"Go change if you need to," I tell her. "I'll handle the salad."

She nods and disappears down the hallway. I turn to the half-assembled salad, grateful for the task. The kitchen is organized chaos, much like Sunny herself. Ingredients everywhere, but somehow she knows where everything is.

I hear her muttering to herself down the hall, the sound of drawers opening and closing rapidly. The nervousness in her voice tugs at something in my chest. She's genuinely anxious about this dinner, about her parents' approval.

I finish the salad and pour myself a glass of water, trying to settle my own nerves. This isn't combat. It's just dinner. With the parents of a woman I'm pretending to date but am increasingly drawn to in ways I shouldn't be.

Simple.

Sunny reappears in a different dress. This one a deep blue that makes her skin glow. Her hair is the same, but she's added earrings that catch the light when she moves.

"Better?" she asks, doing a small spin.

"You looked fine before," I say honestly. "But yes, that's nice too."

She takes a deep breath, smoothing her hands down the front of her dress. "Okay. Quick review. We've been dating three months. You fixed my faucet, I thanked you with banana bread, and you asked me to dinner. We've been together ever since."

"You're overthinking this," I tell her, moving closer. I place my hands on her shoulders, feeling how tense she is. "Just follow my lead. We'll be fine."

She looks up at me, "What if they don't believe us?"

"They will." I squeeze her shoulders gently. "Trust me."

The doorbell rings, and Sunny jumps like she's been shocked. "They're here," she whispers unnecessarily.

I drop my hands from her shoulders and offer one to her instead. "Ready?"

She takes a deep breath, squares her shoulders, and places her hand in mine. "Ready."

As we walk to the door together, her small hand warm in mine, I have the distinct feeling that I'm stepping into something I won't be able to easily walk away from. This charade, this pretense... It's already blurring lines I thought were firmly drawn.

But when Sunny looks back at me, gratitude and nervousness in her eyes, I know it's too late to back out now.

I'm all in, for better or worse.

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My heart is pounding so hard I'm sure Garrett can feel it through our joined hands. I take one last deep breath, plaster on my brightest smile, and open the door.

"Mom! Dad!" I exclaim with what I hope passes for natural enthusiasm.

My parents stand on the porch, looking exactly as they always do.

My father in pressed khakis and a button-down, my mother in a tasteful blouse and slacks, both with identical expressions of polite assessment.

It's the look I've been on the receiving end of my entire life, a silent evaluation that inevitably finds me lacking.

And we're off to a fantastic start.

"Thanks, Mom." I resist the urge to touch my arranged curls. "Come in, please."

My father steps in behind her, giving me a brief hug. "The place looks... colorful," he says, eyeing my yellow walls with the same expression he'd use for a modern art exhibit he doesn't understand but feels obligated to appreciate.

Then, as if just noticing the large man standing beside me, both my parents' gazes shift to Garrett. My mother's eyebrows shoot up so high they nearly disappear into her hairline, while my father's expression changes into something more guarded.

"Mom, Dad, this is Garrett Stone," I say, squeezing his hand probably harder than necessary. "My boyfriend."

The silence that follows is exactly what I was hoping for—complete, stunned shock.

My mother recovers first. "Your... boyfriend? Well! This is certainly a surprise. You didn't mention you were seeing anyone, Sunshine."

"It's still relatively new," I explain, leaning slightly against Garrett's solid frame. "We wanted to be sure before making any announcements."

"Three months isn't that new," Garrett says, his deep voice rumbling beside me. He extends his free hand to my father. "Mr. Bloom. Nice to meet you."

My father shakes his hand, and I can see him noting Garrett's firm grip and direct gaze. "Three months, hmm? And you live...?"

"Next door," Garrett supplies. "I've owned my place for a while."

"Garrett's ex-military," I add, knowing this will score points with my dad.

Sure enough, my father's expression softens slightly. "Which branch?"

"Army. Fifteen years, three tours in Afghanistan."

"My brother was Navy," Dad says, a new note of respect in his voice.

"I gathered as much from the USS Enterprise model in Sunny's childhood photos," Garrett replies smoothly.

I blink in surprise. I'd shown him those photos? No, I hadn't, but he must have noticed them on the bookshelf during dinner last night. The man doesn't miss a detail.

My mother is circling Garrett like he's an interesting specimen she's trying to classify.

"And what do you do now, Garrett?"

"Custom furniture restoration, mainly. Some construction and renovation work when the projects interest me."

I can practically see my mother mentally adjusting whatever narrative she'd been crafting. Garrett doesn't fit neatly into any of the boxes she expected.

"How fascinating," she says, in that tone that could either be genuine interest or polite dismissal.

"Mom," I interject, "let's get you both something to drink before the interrogation continues, shall we? Garrett brought a lovely red wine."

"That would be wonderful, dear." She follows me toward the kitchen, while my father continues questioning Garrett about his military service.

In the kitchen, my mother immediately leans in close. "Sunshine," she whispers urgently, "he's at least fifteen years older than you!"

"And so what? Age is just a number."

"But he's so... serious. And those scars..." She glances back toward the living room where Garrett is showing my father something on his phone, probably military photos. "He doesn't seem like your usual type at all."

I busy myself opening the wine, choosing my words. "Maybe that's a good thing, considering how my previous relationships turned out."

"Well, yes, but—"

"Mom," I cut her off gently, handing her a glass of wine. "Garrett is kind, responsible, and he treats me well. Isn't that what you and Dad always wanted for me?"

She takes a sip, studying me over the rim of her glass. "Are you happy, Sunshine? That's all we've ever wanted."

The question catches me off guard. In our rehearsals, I'd prepared for skepticism, judgment, even disapproval, but not this simple, direct inquiry about my happiness.

Am I happy? The strange thing is, standing in my kitchen, playing this charade with Garrett, I realize I am. Happier than I've been in a long time, actually.

"Yes," I say, and I'm surprised by how much I mean it. "I am."

Something in my voice must convince her, because her expression softens. "Well then. That's what matters." She pats my cheek. "Though I still think your father is going to have questions. Many, many questions."

"I'm sure Garrett can handle it," I say, more confidently than I feel.

When we return to the living room, my father and Garrett are engaged in what appears to be a surprisingly comfortable conversation about vintage Jeeps. My father, who restores classic cars as a hobby, is actually smiling.

"Dinner's almost ready," I announce. "Dad, can you help me set the table?"

As my father follows me to the dining area, I catch Garrett and my mother exchanging what can only be described as wary glances, like two cats assessing each other's territory.

"He seems... decent," my father says quietly as we arrange plates and silverware.

"Military background explains a lot. How did you two actually get together? You're not exactly the type to go for the strong, silent routine."

I launch into our practiced story about the leaky faucet and banana bread, trying to keep my voice casual. "He asked me to dinner, and I said yes. We just... clicked."

My father makes a noncommittal sound. "And does he support your, ah, graphic design work?"

The slight hesitation before "graphic design" doesn't escape me. My parents have never quite accepted that my freelance career is legitimate, always referring to it as if it's a phase I'm going through before getting a "real job."

"Actually, he does," I say firmly. "Garrett understands the value of doing work you're passionate about."

As if on cue, Garrett's voice carries from the living room: "Sunny's latest website design increased her client's conversion rate by thirty percent. She's incredibly talented."

I nearly drop the fork I'm holding. We never discussed my work in our preparation. That specific project was something I'd mentioned in passing over the fence weeks ago, never expecting him to remember it.

My father looks impressed despite himself. "Well. That's good to hear."

The timer beeps from the kitchen, saving me from further conversation. "That's the lasagna," I announce, perhaps too enthusiastically. "Let's eat!"

Dinner itself goes surprisingly smoothly.

The lasagna is perfect. Layers intact, cheese browned just right.

Garrett sits beside me, occasionally placing his hand over mine in a gesture that feels both protective and possessive.

It's all for show, I remind myself, even as warmth spreads through me each time he touches me.

"So, Garrett," my mother says as we're finishing the main course, "Sunny tells us you live next door. What did you think when she moved in? She can be quite... exuberant."

I tense, waiting for him to mention my loud music or late-night work sessions.

Garrett's lips curve in what might almost be a smile. "I thought the neighborhood could use some color," he says. "Sunny brought that in spades."

"He complained about my music constantly," I add, trying to keep things honest and light. "Still does."

"Not constantly," Garrett corrects, his hand finding mine under the table. "Just when it's past midnight and I can feel the bass through the walls."

My parents exchange a look I can't quite interpret.

"How did you end up in Cedar Falls, Garrett?" my father asks. "Not exactly a military town."

"After my discharge, I wanted somewhere quiet. My rehab therapist was based here, so it made sense." His thumb traces small circles on the back of my hand as he speaks, and I wonder if he's even aware he's doing it.

"Rehab?" my mother asks, concern creasing her brow.

"Shoulder injury," Garrett explains briefly. "It's fine now."

I squeeze his hand, knowing there's more to that story than he's sharing. We hadn't discussed his injury in our preparation, and I find myself genuinely curious about what happened.

The conversation shifts to safer topics.

My parents' drive up from Portland, my father's latest car restoration project, my mother's book club.

Throughout it all, Garrett plays his part perfectly, asking thoughtful questions and offering just enough about himself to seem engaged without revealing too much.

What surprises me most is how natural it feels. The way he refills my water glass without asking. How he seems to sense when I'm feeling tense and diverts the conversation. The protective arm he drapes across the back of my chair when my mother begins subtly probing about my financial stability.

If I didn't know better, I'd think we really were a couple, comfortable in each other's space, attuned to each other's needs.

"Sunshine always had such creative friends," my mother says as I serve dessert—the chocolate cake I'd stress-baked last night. "I admit I was worried when she dropped out of college to pursue this freelance... adventure. But it seems she's finding her footing now."

I tense at the backhanded compliment. "Mom, I've been supporting myself entirely for three years now. I'd say I found my footing a while ago."

"Of course, dear," she says dismissively. "I just meant it's nice to see you settling down a bit. Finding some stability."

I feel Garrett's hand on my knee under the table, a steady pressure.

"Sunny's one of the hardest working people I know," he says, his voice measured but firm. "She built her business from nothing, and she's successful because she's talented and dedicated. That's not 'finding her footing', that's impressive by any standard."

The table falls silent. My mother looks taken aback, my father assessing. I'm frozen, fork halfway to my mouth, stunned by Garrett's defense.

"Well," my mother finally says, "I suppose you're right. We just worry, that's all. It's what parents do."

"I understand that," Garrett says, his tone softening slightly. "But maybe trust that you raised someone capable of making good choices."

My father clears his throat. "Fair point," he concedes, surprising me. "The cake is excellent, by the way, Sunshine."

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I've overstepped. I can see it in the way Sunny's parents exchange glances, in the slight stiffening of her posture beside me. This isn't my place. These aren't my battles to fight.

But watching her mother casually dismiss years of Sunny's hard work sparked something protective in me that I couldn't quite tamp down.

"Any interesting projects currently?" Mr. Bloom asks, breaking the awkward silence as he takes another bite of cake

"Criminal," Mr. Bloom says with feeling, and I find myself warming to him slightly. He may not fully understand his daughter, but there's genuine care beneath his gruff exterior.

"Exactly," I agree. "The wood underneath is in excellent condition, though. Just needs patience to bring it back."

"Like most worthwhile things," Mrs. Bloom interjects, her gaze flicking between Sunny and me.

Sunny's hand finds mine under the table, squeezing in what feels like gratitude or solidarity. I return the pressure, trying not to focus on how natural this contact has begun to feel.

"Do you have photos?" Mr. Bloom asks, genuine interest in his voice.

I pull out my phone, finding the before pictures of the dresser. As I show them to

Sunny's father, I'm aware of Mrs. Bloom watching me closely, her assessment almost tactical in its precision.

"Garrett was in Special Forces, Mom," Sunny says suddenly. "Isn't that impressive?"

I shoot her a questioning look. We never discussed my specific military role, and I certainly never mentioned Special Forces.

"Were you really?" Mrs. Bloom asks, her eyebrows raised.

"Yes," I admit, wondering how Sunny knew. "Though it's not something I usually advertise."

"How fascinating," Mrs. Bloom says, leaning forward. "That must have been challenging work."

"It was a job," I say simply, uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. "I served with good people."

Sunny's hand tightens on mine, and I realize she's thrown me this conversational lifeline intentionally—distracting her mother from our earlier tension by giving her something more intriguing to focus on.

Smart.

"Did you always want to serve?" Mr. Bloom asks, handing my phone back.

"My father was military," I explain. "It seemed like the natural path."

"And now you make beautiful things instead of..." Mrs. Bloom trails off delicately.

"Instead of destroying them?" I finish for her. "Yes. I find it balances the scales a bit."

Something shifts in Mrs. Bloom's expression—a softening, a reassessment. "I can understand that."

Sunny rises suddenly. "Coffee, anyone? I have decaf and regular."

"Decaf for me, dear," her mother says. "Your father and I should probably get back to our hotel soon. It's been a long day of driving."

"I'll help," I offer, following Sunny to the kitchen.

Once we're alone, she turns to me, "Thank you," she whispers. "For what you said earlier. About my work."

"I meant it," I say simply, because it's true. I've watched her work herself to exhaustion too many times to count, seen the pride she takes in each finished project.

She steps closer, resting her hand lightly on my chest. For a moment, I think she might hug me again, but instead she just looks up at me, those brown eyes wide and serious.

"I know you did," she says softly. "That's what makes it mean something."

The sincerity in her voice catches me off guard. This is no longer just a performance for her parents' benefit. We're standing in her kitchen, out of sight, and yet the connection between us feels more real than anything I've experienced in years.

I should step back. Remind us both of the boundaries, of the temporary nature of this arrangement.

Instead, my hand moves of its own accord to tuck a stray curl behind her ear. "You don't need me or anyone else to validate your success, Sunny."

Her breath catches, and for one dangerous moment, I consider lowering my head to hers, tasting the smile that's slowly spreading across her face.

The coffee maker beeps, shattering the moment.

Sunny jumps back slightly, turning to grab mugs from the cabinet. "Right! Coffee. That's what we came in here for."

I take a deep breath, steady myself. "I'll get the cream and sugar."

We work together, moving around each other in the small kitchen with surprising ease. It feels practiced, regular, like we've done this a hundred times before.

"So," she says as she arranges cookies on a plate, keeping her voice low. "How do you think it's going?"

"Your father likes me. Your mother is reserving judgment but leaning positive."

She looks up, surprised. "Really? That's your assessment?"

I nod. "Your father started showing me pictures of his restored Mustang. That's practically a marriage proposal in dad terms."

Sunny's laugh is bright and sudden. "You're not wrong. And my mom?"

"She's protective of you," I say. "As she should be. But I think she's decided I'm not an immediate threat to your happiness."

"High praise indeed." Sunny balances the cookie plate on top of her mug. "Ready to head back in there?"

"After you."

As we rejoin her parents in the dining room, I can't help but notice how Mr. Bloom's eyes track our movements, assessing our comfort with each other.

I place my hand at the small of Sunny's back as she sets down the cookies, and her father nods slightly to himself, apparently satisfied by what he sees.

"These look wonderful, Sunshine," Mrs. Bloom says, selecting a cookie. "You always did have a talent for baking. Remember when you wanted to open that cupcake shop?"

"That was in high school, Mom," Sunny says with a slight edge to her voice.

"Still, you made the most beautiful designs. Your attention to detail would have made you an excellent accountant, you know."

I feel Sunny tense beside me. Before she can respond, I interject smoothly, "That same eye for detail makes her an exceptional designer. Her latest logo for that outdoor company perfectly captured the brand's essence. Very technically impressive."

Mrs. Bloom blinks, then nods slowly. "I suppose that's true. We just always hoped she'd choose something more... stable."

"The traditional career path isn't for everyone," I say mildly, sipping my coffee. "Some of us do better charting our own course."

"Like you?" Mr. Bloom asks.

"Like Sunny," I correct him. "I followed a preset path for fifteen years. It took a forced medical retirement for me to figure out what I actually wanted to do with my life. Sunny was smart enough to pursue her passion from the start."

The look Sunny gives me is worth whatever awkwardness this conversation might create—pure gratitude mingled with something warmer, more intimate.

Mrs. Bloom glances at me over her coffee cup. "You seem to think very highly of our daughter, Garrett."

"I do," I say simply, meeting her gaze.

"And your intentions toward her are...?" She leaves the question hanging, a maternal minefield I now have to navigate.

Sunny makes a strangled sound beside me. "Mom! Seriously?"

"It's a fair question, Sunshine," her father interjects. "You've sprung this relationship on us quite suddenly."

I feel Sunny's panic like a tangible thing, her body tensing beside mine. This is the moment our charade could fall apart—a direct question about intentions, about the future.

I place my hand over hers on the table, my thumb tracing small circles on her wrist where I can feel her pulse racing.

"My intentions," I start, choosing each word with precision, "are to support Sunny in whatever she chooses to do. To be there when she needs me and give her space when

she doesn't. To make her happy, if I can."

It's not a lie. Not entirely. In this moment, I realize I would do all those things if given the chance, if this was real instead of pretend.

The room falls silent. Sunny's hand trembles slightly beneath mine.

Finally, Mr. Bloom clears his throat. "Well. That's a good answer."

Mrs. Bloom dabs at the corner of her eye with a napkin. "It certainly is."

Sunny's grip on my hand is almost painful now, but I don't pull away. Instead, I meet her gaze, finding her eyes wide and watery.

"Sorry," she says, her voice slightly unsteady. "I just... I didn't expect..."

"I know," I say quietly, just for her. "It's okay."

Suddenly, Mrs. Bloom's chair scrapes back, breaking the spell.

"Well, this has been lovely, Sunshine, but we should be heading back to our hotel. It's getting late, and your father and I want to get an early start tomorrow."

As Sunny's parents gather their things and move toward the door, I hang back slightly, giving her space for private goodbyes. I can see the tension on her shoulders as she hugs her mother, the careful way she responds to whatever Mrs. Bloom is whispering in her ear.

Mr. Bloom approaches me while the women are talking, extending his hand. "Take care of her," he says simply. "She acts tough, but she feels everything deeply."

"I know," I say, because I do. I've watched Sunny through my window, seen her dance with joy when she lands a new client and cry when she thinks no one is looking after a difficult call with her parents.

"Good man," he says, clapping me on the shoulder before moving to join his wife at the door.

Final hugs are exchanged, promises made to call soon, to visit again. Then Sunny's parents are stepping onto the porch, turning for one last wave before heading to their car.

And suddenly I remember—the goodbye kiss. The one Sunny mentioned during our practice dinner, the final touch to make our charade convincing.

As if reading my thoughts, Sunny turns to me, a question in her eyes. We're still visible from the driveway, her parents watching as they get into their car.

Without overthinking it, I step closer, sliding one hand down her back. "For authenticity," I murmur, just loud enough for her to hear.

She nods, her gaze dropping briefly to my mouth.

I lean down, intending to keep it brief, a light peck, nothing more. But as my lips touch hers, something changes. Her mouth is soft, yielding, her body melting against mine with a sigh that I feel rather than hear.

What should have been a quick goodbye becomes something else entirely. My hand slides from her back to her waist, drawing her closer as her fingers curl into the fabric of my shirt.

It lasts only seconds, but when I pull back, we're both breathing harder than we

should be for such a brief kiss.

"They're gone," Sunny whispers, her eyes still closed.

I glance over her shoulder to see the taillights of her parents' car disappearing down the street.

"So they are," I agree, not stepping away even though the audience for our performance has departed.

Sunny's eyes flutter open, confusion and something warmer swirling in their depths.
"Garrett..."

The spell breaks. I step back, shoving my hands in my pockets to keep from reaching for her again.

"Well," I say, my voice rougher than I'd like, "I think they bought it."

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"Well," Garrett says, his voice rough, "I think they bought it."

I stare at him, trying to process what just happened. That kiss was... not what I expected. Not a performance, not a quick peck for show. It was real. At least, it felt real to me. His strong hand on my waist, the way he drew me against him, the slight catch in his breath when our lips met.

But now he's stepping back, hands in his pockets, like it meant nothing. Like it was all part of the act.

Was I the only one who felt that spark? Am I imagining the tension still humming between us?

"Right," I say, trying to match his casual tone and failing miserably. "They definitely bought it. You were amazing. I mean, the whole thing was amazing. The act. The pretending."

I'm babbling again. I close my mouth before I can embarrass myself further.

"I should probably go," Garrett says, glancing toward the door. "Let you get some rest."

"Wait!" The word comes out more desperate than I intended. I take a breath, trying to compose myself. "I mean, would you like some tea before you go? As a thank you for... everything."

He hesitates, and for a terrible moment I think he's going to refuse. Then he nods

once. "Tea would be nice."

I'm not ready for him to leave, not ready to break whatever fragile connection still lingers between us.

"Great! I'll just put the kettle on." I turn toward the kitchen, grateful for something to do with my hands, which seem to have forgotten how to be still.

Garrett follows, leaning against the doorframe while I fill the kettle and set it on the stove.

"Do you prefer herbal or black tea?" I ask, searching through my cabinet. "I have chamomile, mint, English breakfast—"

"Whatever you're having is fine."

I settle on chamomile, hoping it might calm my racing heart. As I wait for the water to boil, a loaded silence stretches between us.

"How did you know I was Special Forces?" Garrett asks suddenly.

I look up, caught off guard by the question. "What?"

"Earlier. With your parents. You mentioned I was in Special Forces. We never discussed that."

"Oh." I busy myself with the tea preparations, avoiding his gaze. "I just... guessed? You have that look about you. I'm sorry," I add quickly. "I shouldn't have brought it up with my parents. It was presumptuous."

"It's fine," he says with a slight shrug. "It's in the past."

The kettle whistles, saving me from having to respond immediately. I pour the hot water into two mugs, the fragrant steam rising between us.

"Is it, though?" I ask as I hand him a mug. "In the past? Because if you're still having nightmares about it..."

"I guess not entirely," he admits, surprising me with his candor. "The things I've seen... they'll always be with me. But I'm not there anymore. I'm here, trying to be better. Do better."

"What's better?" I ask.

He sets down his untouched tea and steps closer, close enough that I have to tilt my head back to maintain eye contact.

"This," he says simply, and then his mouth is on mine.

There's nothing hesitant about this kiss. It's decisive and intentional, as if he's been thinking about it as much as I have. His hands frame my face, thumbs stroking my cheekbones as his lips claim mine with a hunger that makes my knees weak.

I melt into him, my back pressing against the kitchen counter as he deepens the kiss. His body is warm against mine, his musky odour filling my senses until I can't think of anything else.

My hands find their way to his chest, feeling the steady, rapid beat of his heart through his shirt. He makes a low sound in the back of his throat that sends heat pooling low in my panties.

When he finally pulls back, we're both gasping for breath. His eyes are dark, half-lidded, his expression filled with pure lust.

"I'm sorry," he says, stepping back abruptly. "I shouldn't have done that. I got... confused about what's real and what's pretend."

He turns to leave, and panic surges through me. I can't let him walk away, not now, not when I've finally had a taste of what could be between us.

"Garrett, wait," I call after him. "Please stay."

He pauses but doesn't turn around. "Why?"

Instead of answering with words, I move to him, gently tugging at his sleeve until he faces me. "Stop being an idiot," I say, summoning every ounce of courage I possess.

Then I'm the one kissing him, rising on my tiptoes to press my lips to his.

For a heart-stopping moment, he's still, and I fear I've misread everything.

Then his arms wrap around me, lifting me effortlessly.

One strong hand cups my ass as he carries me to the living room, his mouth never leaving mine.

We tumble onto the couch, a tangle of eager hands and urgent kisses. Garrett's weight presses me into the cushions, his body covering mine. I run my fingers through his hair, marveling at its softness compared to the rough stubble along his jaw.

"Are you sure about this?" he murmurs against my neck, his breath hot on my skin.

"I've never been surer of anything," I answer.

That's all the permission he needs. His hands find the zipper of my dress, easing it

down with surprising gentleness for someone so powerful. I work at the buttons of his shirt, fingers clumsy with eagerness.

Clothing falls away piece by piece. My dress puddling on the floor, his shirt joining it, shoes kicked off hastily. Each new expanse of skin revealed is a discovery.

When Garrett is down to just his boxer briefs and I'm in my matching bra and panties, he pauses, drinking me in with an intensity that should make me self-conscious but somehow does the opposite. The way he looks at me, like I'm precious and desired, makes me feel beautiful.

His body is magnificent. Broad shoulders tapering to a narrow waist, toned chest dusted with dark hair, abs defined from years of military discipline.

But what draws my attention are the scars—a puckered line across his left shoulder, smaller marks scattered across his torso, telling stories of pain and survival.

I trace them with gentle fingers, feeling the raised texture against his warm skin. He tenses slightly under my touch.

"I understand if they bother you," he says quietly.

I shake my head, meeting his gaze. "They don't. They're part of who you are, part of what made you the man standing here with me."

"You're incredible," he murmurs against my skin as he kisses his way down my body. He kneels between my legs, his large hands spanning my waist, thumbs stroking the soft curve of my belly.

I fight the urge to cover myself, to hide the parts of me that aren't perfect. I'm curvier than the women in magazines and softer in places society says should be firm. But

Garrett doesn't seem to notice or care. His hands grip my hips, my thighs, with appreciation rather than judgment.

"So beautiful," he whispers, pressing kisses along my inner thighs.

His fingers hook into the waistband of my panties, and suddenly I'm seized with panic. Not because I don't want this—I do, desperately—but because I'm terrified of disappointing him.

"Garrett, wait," I gasp. "I should tell you... I'm a virgin."

He stills, looking up at me with those intense blue eyes. There's no judgment there, no disappointment, just a fierce desire that makes me shiver.

"That's fine," he says, his voice rough with desire. "I'll just make sure I'm your first and your last."

He eases my panties down my legs, his gaze never leaving mine. I should feel exposed and vulnerable, but all I feel is wanted.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, feeling the dampness between my thighs. "I'm already so..."

"Wet?" He smirks for the first time. "That's good. It means you're ready for me." His hand strokes up my thigh. "Because I'm definitely ready for you."

His briefs join the pile of discarded clothing, and I can't help the small gasp that escapes me. Garrett is magnificent. His cock is thick and long. I've never seen a naked man in person before, and the reality is both intimidating and thrilling.

"We'll take it slow," he promises, returning to me on the couch. "I want this to be good for you."

"It already is," I admit, reaching for him.

As his body covers mine again, skin against skin, I know this isn't just about satisfaction or release; it's about connection, about finding something I didn't even know I was looking for.

In Garrett's arms, I'm not the quirky neighbor or the disappointing daughter or the struggling freelancer. I'm just Sunny, wanted and valued exactly as I am.

And as his hands and mouth begin to explore me, I surrender to the sensation, to the man, to the moment, to whatever tomorrow might bring.

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A virgin. Sunny is a virgin.

This woman... This bright, beautiful woman, is trusting me with something precious. Something I didn't expect and don't deserve, but something I suddenly want more than anything.

"Your first and your last," I repeat, the words taking on deeper meaning as I say them again. Because that's what I want—to be the only man who ever touches her like this, who makes her feel this way. I want to claim her, not just for tonight but for all the nights to come.

This isn't pretending anymore. There's no audience, no charade to maintain. This is real. The way my heart pounds when she looks at me, the way her touch both calms and ignites me, the feelings I've been fighting since she moved in next door.

I take myself in hand, stroking once from base to tip, watching her eyes widen as she follows the movement. Then I position myself at her entrance, feeling the heat and wetness there.

"Ready?" I ask, my voice barely recognizable.

She nods, and I push forward slowly, watching her face for any sign of discomfort as I ease into her tight heat. The sensation is overwhelming. She's so tight, so perfect around me.

Sunny throws her head back, teeth sinking into her lower lip as I fill her completely.

"Does it hurt?" I ask, forcing myself to remain still when every instinct screams at me to move.

"A bit," she admits, her voice breathy. "But nothing I can't handle. Just... give me a moment."

I wait, trembling with the effort of restraint, my hands stroking her hips, trying to help her relax. After what feels like an eternity, she moves toward me, and I feel her body yielding, accepting me.

I place my hand under her chin, lifting her face to mine. "You're perfect," I tell her, meaning it more than any words I've ever spoken. "Your body is perfect."

A blush spreads across her cheeks, down her neck to her chest. She squirms beneath me, and the movement nearly undoes me.

"Fuck me, Garrett," she says, the profanity sounding like poetry on her lips. "Please."

I don't need to be told twice. I begin to move, establishing a rhythm that starts gentle but quickly builds in intensity. Each thrust draws a soft sound from her that urges me on, makes me want to hear more, to give her more.

"God, Sunny," I groan, picking up speed. "You feel so good."

My hips snap forward with increasing force, and her response is immediate—back arching, nails digging into my shoulders, legs wrapping tighter around my waist.

"More," she gasps. "Please, more."

I give her what she asks for, driving into her harder, faster, watching in awe as pleasure transforms her face. Sweat trickles down my chest, glistening on the curve

of her breasts. I bend to taste her there, tongue capturing the salt of her skin.

Part of me still can't believe this is happening—that I'm buried deep inside Sunny Bloom, that she's welcoming me, wanting me.

That someone so young, so full of life and possibility, could desire someone like me.

Someone with scars both visible and hidden, someone who's seen the worst humanity has to offer and carries those memories like stones.

Yet here she is, looking at me like I'm something desirable. Her hand extends, fingers caressing my cheek with such tenderness it makes my chest ache. I lean into her touch, turning to press a kiss to her palm.

I slow my pace, making each thrust powerful, driving as deep as I can go. The change in tempo draws a new sound from her—a gasping, needy moan that vibrates through me.

"Garrett," she breathes. "Oh God, Garrett."

It's been too long since I've been with anyone, and the intensity of feeling her around me, of watching her come undone beneath me, is pushing me rapidly toward the edge. Heat builds at the base of my spine, my muscles tensing as I fight to hold back.

"Sunny," I warn, my voice strained. "I'm close. I need to pull out."

Her hands grip my ass, holding me to her. "Don't," she pleads. "I want all of you. Every part. I want to feel you."

Her words short-circuit whatever rational thought remains in my brain. The idea of emptying myself inside her, of marking her in the most primal way possible, is too

powerful to resist.

A few more hard, deep thrusts and I'm gone, release crashing through me with an intensity that leaves me gasping her name. I feel her inner walls contracting around me as she follows, her body arching off the couch, head thrown back in ecstasy as she finds her own climax.

For a moment, we're suspended in shared pleasure, connected in the most intimate way possible. Then I collapse beside her, careful not to crush her with my weight, and pull her against my chest.

We lie there catching our breath, her head tucked under my chin, her curves fitting perfectly against my angles. I run my hand along her spine, marveling at the softness of her skin.

"That was..." she finally murmurs against my chest, trailing off as if words are inadequate.

"Yeah," I agree, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "It was."

She shifts, looking up at me with those bright eyes. "I couldn't have asked for better."

"I'm glad you think so," I say, tracing patterns on her shoulder. "Though I'm guessing I'm not the type of man you expected to lose your virginity to."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm older. Damaged. Not exactly the carefree type."

She props herself up on one elbow to look at me properly. "Do you think that matters to me?"

I shrug, feeling unexpectedly vulnerable. "I just want you to know that this wasn't just... I'm not just..." I take a breath, forcing myself to be direct. "I like you, Sunny. A lot. Have for a while. I don't want to pretend anymore."

Her eyes widen. "You like me? But I always thought you hated me. You were always so grumpy when I tried to talk to you."

"I'm a good actor," I say with a hint of a smile. "Truth is, I've been drawn to you since the first day you moved in, dancing around your living room while unpacking boxes."

She blushes. "You saw that?"

"Hard to miss. You had the curtains wide open and were using a hairbrush as a microphone."

"Oh God," she groans, burying her face in my chest. Then she looks up, a mischievous glint in her eye. "You're really good at pretending then. But I was interested in you from the moment I saw you fixing your fence shirtless. I'm just glad we can be ourselves with each other now."

I brush a curl from her face, suddenly serious.

"You should know what you're getting into.

I'll have bad days. Nightmares. Sometimes I react to things in ways that don't make sense to people who haven't been where I've been.

"I need her to understand this isn't going to be easy.

"But I'll always work hard for you, Sunny.

I'll do everything I can to make you happy. "

She cradles my face in her hands, her expression earnest. "That's all I want and need—a man who makes me happy. Everything else? We can work through it together."

Something in my chest loosens at her words. For years, I've kept people at a distance, convinced that my baggage was too heavy for anyone else to help carry. But looking at Sunny, feeling her warmth against me, I wonder if maybe I've been wrong all this time.

I try to give her a genuine smile, the gesture feeling rusty and unfamiliar on my face.

"Are you trying to smile right now?" she asks, a teasing note in her voice.

"That obvious, huh?"

"A little." She traces my lips with her finger. "You have a beautiful smile, Garrett. You should use it more often."

"I'll work on that," I promise, capturing her finger and pressing a kiss to it.

As I look at her—wild curls even wilder now, lips swollen from my kisses, eyes bright with a mixture of satisfaction and affection—I'm struck by how lucky I am. Against all odds, against my own stubborn resistance, I've found someone worth fighting for. Someone worth staying for.

I pull her close again, "Spend the night with me," I murmur against her lips. "And tomorrow night. And the night after that."

Sunny smiles, "Are you asking me to be your actual girlfriend, Garrett Stone?"

"I'm asking for a lot more than that," I admit. "But we can start there."

"Yes," she says simply, pressing her lips to mine. "To all of it. Yes."

As I hold her against me, feeling her heartbeat steady and strong against my chest, I'm filled with a certainty I haven't felt in years. This isn't the end of something, but the beginning, messy and complicated and more perfect than I deserve.

And for the first time in longer than I can remember, I'm looking forward to tomorrow, and all the tomorrows after that, with Sunny Bloom in my arms.

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Eighteen months. That's how long it's been since our "fake" dinner with my parents turned into something very real. A new life I could never have imagined.

I glance down at the tiny bundle in my arms, still marveling at his perfect fingers, the dark hair that promises to be as thick as his father's, the way his little nose wrinkles when he's about to wake up. Ethan James Stone, two months old and already the center of our universe.

"They'll be here any minute," I fret, bouncing slightly as Ethan stirs. "What if they think we rushed everything? What if they judge our house? What if—"

"Sunny," Garrett's voice is steady as he takes Ethan from my arms, cradling our son. "Your parents adore you. They're going to adore him. And they've accepted me, which was the toughest sell."

I smile despite my anxiety. "They more than accepted you. My mom calls you for advice now, which is still weird."

It's true. Somewhere between our engagement announcement (six months after that first night together) and our small backyard wedding (three months after that), my mother decided Garrett was the most sensible person in our family.

Now she consults him about everything from retirement investments to vacation destinations.

Garrett settles Ethan against his broad shoulder, the contrast between his massive frame and our tiny son never failing to amaze me. "The house looks great. You look

beautiful. Ethan is perfect. Stop worrying."

He's right about the house—our house. He sold his place and we bought something together, a craftsman bungalow with enough room for Garrett's workshop and my home office, plus the nursery we painted sunshine yellow.

My colorful style has merged with Garrett's minimalism into something that feels uniquely ours.

The doorbell rings, and I instinctively smooth down my dress, touching my hair.

"Ready?" Garrett asks, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

"Ready," I confirm, drawing strength from his steadiness.

I open the door to find my parents beaming, arms laden with more baby gifts than one infant could possibly need.

"Sunshine!" My mother exclaims, dropping her packages to embrace me. "You look wonderful! Where's my grandson?"

"Mom, Dad, come in," I usher them inside, where Garrett waits with Ethan.

My mother makes a beeline for them, cooing over the baby while my father claps Garrett on the shoulder, careful not to disturb his grandson.

"He has your eyes," my mother says, gently stroking Ethan's cheek.

"And Garrett's serious expression," my father adds with a chuckle.

"Poor kid," Garrett says, the easy smile that once seemed so rare now coming naturally.

I watch them—my family, all of them—and feel a contentment I never knew was possible. Garrett catches my eye over my mother's head, his gaze softening in that way reserved just for me, and I'm transported back to that night when everything changed.

"Hard to believe it all started with a fake boyfriend scheme," I say later, after my parents have settled into the guest room and Ethan is asleep in his crib. We're curled together on the porch swing, watching fireflies blink in the summer twilight.

Garrett's arm tightens around me. "Best decision you ever made, asking me to pretend."

"Second best," I correct him. "Best was asking you to stay that night."

He kisses the top of my head. "Remember how nervous you were before that first dinner? And now look at you... Successful business, husband, baby."

It's true. My freelance work has flourished into a small design agency. Garrett's furniture restoration business has a six-month waiting list. We've both found our footing, together.

"My parents were right about one thing," I admit. "I did need stability. They just didn't understand I needed to find it my own way."

"And I needed chaos," Garrett says, his voice warm with amusement. "The good kind. Your kind."

I tilt my face up for his kiss, still feeling the same spark that ignited between us that first night.

"Think they suspect?" I ask when we part. "That the whole boyfriend thing started as a ruse?"

Garrett laughs, the sound still my favorite in the world (well, second favorite now, after Ethan's giggles). "Your mother asked me directly last Christmas. Said she knew the minute we opened the door that we weren't really together yet."

"What? And you didn't tell me?"

"She swore me to secrecy. Said she was glad we 'finally got our act together' because she'd never seen you look at anyone the way you looked at me."

I shake my head, laughing. "Mothers always know, I guess."

"Speaking of knowing things," Garrett says, his hand finding mine, "do you know how much I love you?"

Even after all this time, his words make my heart race. "I have some idea," I reply, leaning into his solid warmth. "But feel free to remind me."

"Every day," he promises. "For the rest of our lives."

Thank you for reading it!