



Protected by the Single Dad Sheriff (Curvy Wives of Cedar Falls #4)

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Category: Romance

Description: Some brides get cold feet I get a hot sheriff and a second chance at finding what real love feels like.

When I flee the altar, I have no destination in mind—just an overwhelming need to escape a life that isn't mine. Cedar Falls is supposed to be a temporary stop, a place to catch my breath before figuring out my next move. I never expect to find Sheriff Jake Reynolds, with his kind eyes and two adorable daughters who immediately adopt me into their world.

Jake offers me shelter for the night, no questions asked. He doesn't judge my impulsive decision or the mess I've made of my planned life. Instead, he offers understanding, mac and cheese, bedtime stories and a glimpse of what genuine family connection looks like.

As I watch Jake with his daughters, a surprising question forms in my heart: what if this accidental detour isn't just an escape, but the beginning of the life I was always meant to find?

Protected by the Single Dad Sheriff is a short, sweet, and steamy small town insta-love 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): 10

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I'm running late again.

The cedar trees lining Main Street blur past my cruiser window as I push the speedometer just a few miles above what I'd ticket someone else for. Emma's softball practice started ten minutes ago, and I promised, actually promised this time, that I wouldn't miss it.

I don't wait for Doris's acknowledgment before hanging up the radio. She knows where I'm headed. The whole department knows my daughter's practice schedule by now.

The afternoon sun glints off my badge as I park haphazardly at Cedar Falls Community Park.

I grab Emma's forgotten glove from the passenger seat—the reason for this mad dash across town in the first place—and sprint toward the diamond where eight-year-old girls in matching green jerseys are already running bases.

Coach Miller spots me first, his weathered face breaking into a knowing smile beneath his baseball cap. "Sheriff! A bit late, no?"

"Sorry, Ted," I mutter, scanning the field for my daughter. "I had to pick up Emma's glove at home and then an emergency call about Mrs. Laura missing cat."

"Found in her own pantry again?"

"Sleeping in an empty cereal box." I shake my head. "Third time this month."

Emma stands near second base, her dark ponytail swinging as she turns and catches sight of me. For one heartbreaking second, I see her face light up, then immediately fall when she notices the glove in my hand. I forgot again. I'm the reason she's the only kid playing without proper equipment.

"Daddy!" she calls, jogging over with that half-excited, half-exasperated expression that makes her look exactly like her mother. The thought catches in my chest like it always does. Four years later, grief still ambushes me in these small, ordinary moments.

"Hey, slugger." I hold up her glove. "Special delivery."

She snatches it with an eye roll that seems far too teenage for her eight years. "Coach said I could borrow one of the extras."

"I know, but you play better with your own." I ruffle her hair, and she ducks away, mortified.

"Dad! Not at practice!"

I hold up my hands in surrender. "Sorry, sorry. Professional distance maintained, Deputy Emma."

That earns me a reluctant smile. "Are you staying?"

"Whole practice. Front row seat. I even turned my radio off."

"Really?" Her brown eyes, same shade as mine, go wide.

"Really."

"Okay, but you have to actually watch. No checking your phone for work stuff every five seconds."

"Deal." I cross my heart solemnly, and she seems satisfied, racing back to her position with renewed energy.

I settle onto the aluminum bleachers, forcing my shoulders to relax. My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I squeeze my eyes shut, counting to five before checking it. It's Sophie's after-school program, not the station. Small mercies.

The text reads: *Sheriff, Sophie says she has a tummy ache. Not an emergency but thought you should know.*

I text back: *Thanks, Jen. I'll be there in an hour to pick her up.*

Guilt gnaws at me as I watch Emma swing at a pitch and miss. I should be at both places at once. I should be better at this. Claire would have known exactly what to do, would have somehow been in three places simultaneously without breaking a sweat.

But Claire's gone, and I'm here, stretched too thin between a town that needs protecting and two little girls who need a father.

I force myself to focus on Emma's next swing—a solid hit that sends her tearing toward first base. I leap to my feet, cheering loudly enough that she shoots me a mortified glance even as she slides safely onto the base.

"That's my girl," I whisper, not caring who hears the pride cracking my voice.

My radio crackles despite being turned down, and I instinctively reach for it before stopping myself.

Cedar Falls will survive without its sheriff for one hour.

The town hasn't had a major crime in months, mostly just neighborly disputes, teenagers being teenagers, and the occasional tourist getting lost on the hiking trails.

By the time practice ends, I've kept my promise. I watched every pitch, every hit, every base run. Emma trots over, sweaty and grinning.

"Did you see when I caught that pop fly?"

"With one hand," I confirm, high-fiving her. "Major league material right there."

She preens a little, then asks, "Where's Sophie?"

"Still at after-school. She has a tummy ache." I guide her toward the cruiser. "We'll pick her up now."

Emma's face falls. "But you said we could get ice cream after practice."

The promise I'd made yesterday crashes back into my consciousness. "Right. Ice cream." I glance at my watch. "Tell you what—quick scoop at Hank's, then we get Sophie?"

"Yes!" She pumps her fist victoriously, all disappointment forgotten.

Ten minutes later, we're seated at Hank's Creamery, Emma with a mountain of mint chocolate chip and me nursing a black coffee. I've managed to check in with Doris without Emma noticing, confirming there's nothing requiring my immediate attention.

"Dad?" Emma licks her spoon thoughtfully. "Is it okay that I still miss Mom sometimes?"

The question blindsides me. I set my coffee down, buying time. "Of course it is, Em. I miss her every day."

"But it's been four years." She stares into her ice cream. "Sophie doesn't even remember her."

"That doesn't mean you have to stop missing her." I reach across the table, covering her small hand with mine. "Grief doesn't have an expiration date."

"Mrs. Miller says maybe you should start dating again."

I choke on my coffee. "She said what?"

"At the class potluck. She told Mrs. Jenkins that you're too young to be alone forever and that me and Sophie need a mom."

Great. The elementary school teachers are discussing my love life.

"Emma, you and Sophie have me. We're doing okay, right?"

Her shrug devastates me. "I guess. But sometimes I forget stuff for school because you're busy, and Sophie cried last week because you missed bedtime stories three nights in a row."

Each word is a direct hit. I struggle to keep my expression neutral when I want to wince. "I'm trying my best, kiddo."

"I know." She pats my hand in a gesture so adult it makes my throat tight. "But maybe Mrs. Miller is right. Maybe we need help."

I want to argue, to tell her that no one could replace Claire, that our little family of

three is complete just as it is. But the truth hammers in my chest: I'm drowning. Every day is a desperate juggling act that ends with me dropping at least one critical ball.

"Maybe," I concede, the word almost painful to voice. "But it would have to be someone pretty special."

Emma nods sagely. "Someone who likes softball and doesn't mind that Sophie still sleeps with her baby blanket."

"And someone who understands that sometimes the sheriff has to work at weird hours."

"And who makes good pancakes," Emma adds, completely serious.

I laugh despite myself. "That's a pretty specific list."

"I have standards, Dad."

We finish our ice cream, and I'm reaching for my wallet when my radio crackles to life.

"Sheriff Reynolds, come in." Doris's voice has that particular tone that means something unusual is happening.

I pick up the radio. "Reynolds here. What's up, Doris?"

"We've got a... situation on Main Street. Near the town square."

"What kind of situation?" I glance at Emma, who's pretending not to listen while clearly absorbing every word.

"It's a... well, it's a bride, sir."

"A bride," I repeat, certain I've misheard.

"Yes, sir. A woman in a wedding dress walking down the middle of Main Street. She appears to be... distressed. Mrs. Finch from the bakery called it in. Says the woman looks lost."

"I'll be right there." I hook the radio back on my belt and look apologetically at Emma. "Sorry, kiddo. Quick detour before we get Sophie."

Emma sighs with the weight of a child who's used to her father's job interrupting plans. "Is it a real emergency?"

"Probably not." I guide her toward the cruiser. "Just someone who needs help. Ten minutes, tops."

"You always say that," she mumbles but climbs into the back seat without further protest.

Five minutes later, I'm crawling down Main Street, scanning the sidewalks for a woman in white. Emma's face is pressed against the window, clearly intrigued by this bizarre call.

"There!" She points excitedly. "By the bookstore!"

I follow her finger and spot a flash of white among the pedestrians. As we get closer, the crowd seems to part, revealing a woman who looks like she's stepped out of a bridal magazine, if that magazine had a feature on "Brides in Crisis."

Her elaborate white gown is a stark contrast to the casual Saturday attire of everyone

around her.

Even from this distance, I can see that the dress is expensive—layers of delicate lace and beading catching the late afternoon light.

Her auburn hair is partially falling from what must have been an intricate updo, copper tendrils framing a face that's a complicated mix of determination and distress.

I pull the cruiser to the curb and turn to Emma. "Stay in the car, okay? I'll be quick."

She nods, already unbuckling her seatbelt to get a better view of the unfolding drama.

As I approach the woman, I notice details that weren't visible from the car: her smudged makeup, the tear in the hem of her dress, the painful-looking designer heels she's wobbling on.

She's clutching a small purse against her chest like a shield, and her eyes—a striking green—are darting around with the wary vigilance of someone who expects pursuit.

"Ma'am?" I call, keeping my voice gentle. "I'm Sheriff Jake Reynolds. Is everything all right?"

She whirls toward me, those green eyes widening as they take in my uniform, my badge, and finally my face.

For a moment, she seems frozen in place, like a deer caught in headlights.

Then she draws herself up, chin lifting in a gesture of defiance that's somewhat undermined by the visible trembling of her lower lip.

"That depends," she says, her voice surprisingly steady despite her disheveled

appearance, "on whether running away from your own wedding is considered 'all right' in Cedar Falls."

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I can't believe I just said that out loud. To a sheriff, of all people.

His eyebrows shoot up, and I watch his expression shift from professional concern to startled curiosity.

He's tall, much taller than me even in these ridiculous three-inch heels that are currently murdering my feet.

The late afternoon sun catches on his badge and the hints of silver at his temples, and there's something steadying about his presence that makes me want to keep talking, to explain myself to this stranger with kind eyes and an authoritative stance.

But I don't. I've said enough impulsive things today.

Running away from Sebastian at the altar, stealing my maid of honor's car, driving two hours without a destination in mind until I found this picturesque little town.

All of it feels simultaneously like the most reckless and the most honest thing I've ever done.

"I'm sorry," I say, trying to sound more composed than I feel. "That was inappropriate. I'm just a bit... lost."

"Geographically or metaphorically?" the sheriff asks, and there's a hint of something warm in his voice. Not quite humor, but understanding.

Both, I think, but don't tell him.

"I just needed to stop somewhere. My feet are killing me." I gesture down at my satin heels, now stained with dirt and what appears to be gum.

My mother would be horrified. Thirty thousand dollars for this dress, and I've been dragging it through the streets like a rented Halloween costume.

The sheriff follows my gaze, and his mouth quirks slightly. "Those don't look like practical running-away shoes."

"I didn't exactly plan this," I admit. "It was more of an impulse decision. Right before the 'I do' part."

A small face appears in the window of his police cruiser—a little girl with dark hair pulled into a ponytail, watching us.

His daughter, I'm guessing. Something about her curious expression makes my chest ache.

Children are so wonderfully direct, so unencumbered by the social constraints that have been strangling me for years.

"Do you need medical attention?" the sheriff asks, his gaze assessing me for injuries. "Or are you in any danger?"

"No, nothing like that." I shift my weight, wincing as a new blister makes itself known. "Unless you count my family's wrath when they catch up with me."

His eyes narrow slightly. "Are they looking for you?"

My phone has been vibrating non-stop in my small clutch purse. I pull it out to show him the screen: 47 missed calls. 23 voicemails. 112 text messages. "What do you

think?"

He whistles low. "That's quite a search party."

"My father probably has private investigators already on the road.

" I try to make it sound like a joke, but we both know it isn't one.

Senator Howard Rosewood doesn't accept public embarrassment gracefully, especially not from his only daughter.

"The Rosewood-Blackwell wedding was supposed to be the social event of the season.

Three hundred guests, including two governors and a supreme court justice. "

I don't mention the business merger that was supposed to be finalized tomorrow.

The real reason my parents were so invested in this match.

Sebastian's family owns shipping ports all along the eastern seaboard, a perfect complement to my family's import business.

Love wasn't a consideration in the equation.

The sheriff's radio crackles, and he responds with a brief "Ten minutes, Doris" before turning his attention back to me. "Miss Rosewood, is it?"

"Isabella," I correct him automatically. "But everyone calls me Bella."

"Isabella," he repeats, ignoring my preference, and somehow the way he says my full

name—like it's worthy of all its syllables—makes me forget to correct him again.

"I can't force you to go back to your wedding, but I also can't leave you wandering around town in that dress. People are starting to stare."

I glance around and realize he's right. A small crowd has gathered at a discreet distance, whispering and pointing. A teenage boy is not-so-subtly taking pictures with his phone. Great. Social media evidence of my meltdown is exactly what I need right now.

"I just need somewhere to sit and think," I tell him, trying to sound more in control than I feel. "And maybe a change of clothes. I'll figure out the rest from there."

He stares at me, and I resist the urge to fidget under his gaze. There's something disconcertingly direct about the way he looks at me, like he's seeing past the mascara streaks and wrinkled silk to something underneath.

"Alright," he finally says. "I was about to pick up my younger daughter from her after-school program. You're welcome to ride along, and then we can get you sorted out. Maybe find you some more comfortable shoes."

It's a ridiculous offer. Getting into a police car with a strange man and his child is exactly the kind of impulsive decision my mother has lectured me against my entire life. But then again, I've already blown past all reasonable boundaries today. What's one more questionable choice?

"Thank you," I say, surprising both of us. "That's very kind."

He gestures toward the cruiser. "Just to be clear, this isn't an arrest. You're free to change your mind."

"Are all Cedar Falls sheriffs this accommodating to runaway brides?" I ask, hobbling beside him toward the car.

"You're actually my first," he admits, and there's that ghost of a smile again, deepening the lines around his eyes. "Small town. We improvise."

When we reach the cruiser, he opens the back door for me. The little girl's eyes go as wide as saucers when she sees me up close.

"Emma," the sheriff says, "this is Miss Isabella. She's going to ride with us to pick up your sister."

"Are you a real princess?" Emma asks, staring at my dress with open awe.

The question catches me off guard. I've been called many things today—selfish, ungrateful, hysterical—but "princess" wasn't one of them.

"No," I say gently. "Just a girl in a very uncomfortable dress."

"It's the prettiest dress I've ever seen," she declares with absolute certainty.

I smile at her, my first genuine smile in what feels like days. "Thank you. I like your softball uniform too."

Her face lights up. "I play second base! Do you like softball?"

"Emma," her father interrupts, "let Miss Isabella breathe. She's had a long day."

"It's okay," I assure him, arranging my dress as I slide into the seat. The absurdity of cramming a couture wedding gown into the back of a police cruiser isn't lost on me. "And to answer your question, Emma, I've never played softball, but I'd like to learn

someday."

This is apparently the right answer, because Emma immediately launches into a detailed explanation of positions and rules as her father starts the engine. I catch his eyes in the rearview mirror, and there's something like amused appreciation in his gaze.

"Sorry," he mouths silently.

I shake my head slightly, hoping he understands that I don't mind. The girl's enthusiasm is actually soothing, so refreshingly straightforward after months of navigating the treacherous waters of wedding planning and family expectations.

As we drive through the town, I notice charming storefronts with hand-painted signs, a gazebo in a small central park, and flowers blooming in window boxes.

Cedar Falls looks like something from a travel magazine about idyllic American small towns—the kind of place where people know their neighbors and community events draw actual crowds.

"Have you lived here long?" I ask the sheriff, interrupting Emma's explanation of the infield fly rule.

"All my life," he answers, making a turn onto a tree-lined street. "Except for college and police academy."

"It's pretty," I say, meaning it. "Peaceful."

He glances at me in the mirror again. "Most days. Though it's not every Saturday we get a runaway bride."

My cheeks warm. "I'm sorry to cause a disruption."

"Don't be," he says, and there's something in his tone that makes me look up and meet his eyes. "Sometimes disruptions are necessary."

The simple statement lands like a weight in my chest. That's exactly what today was—a necessary disruption. A breaking point after years of bending myself into shapes that pleased everyone but me.

We pull up in front of a cheerful building with a playground visible around the side. A sign reads "Cedar Falls Community Center - After School Program."

"I'll just be a minute," the sheriff says, unbuckling his seatbelt. "Emma, stay with Miss Isabella, please."

"Okay, Dad," she agrees readily, then turns to me. "Sophie has a tummy ache. She gets them when she's worried."

"What's she worried about?" I ask, genuinely curious.

Emma shrugs. "Dad working too much. Me forgetting to play with her. Monsters under her bed. Regular five-year-old stuff."

There's something so adult about her assessment that it makes my heart twist. I recognize that protective older sibling tone. I've heard it in my own voice when talking about my younger brother, before he went off to boarding school and came back a stranger.

"It's nice that she has you looking out for her," I tell Emma.

She beams at me. "Dad says I'm the best deputy he's got."

Through the windshield, I watch Sheriff Reynolds emerge from the building holding the hand of a tiny girl with blonde pigtails and a pink backpack nearly as big as she is.

She's dragging her feet slightly, but when she spots the police car, she perks up and points excitedly.

I can see the sheriff bending down, explaining something to her—probably the unexpected wedding dress-clad passenger in their car.

Sophie's face transforms with wonder, and she practically drags her father toward the cruiser now, bouncing with each step.

When the door opens, she stares at me with huge blue eyes, momentarily speechless.

"Sophie," the sheriff says gently, "this is Miss Isabella. She's going to come with us for a little while."

"Are you getting married?" Sophie asks, climbing into the car and immediately crawling across her sister to get closer to me.

"Sophie!" Emma hisses. "Don't be rude."

"Not today," I answer honestly, something about this child's directness making it impossible to offer platitudes. "I was supposed to, but I changed my mind."

Sophie considers this seriously. "Like when I wanted chocolate ice cream but then I saw they had rainbow sprinkles for vanilla and I changed my mind?"

A startled laugh escapes me. "Something like that, yes."

"Dad says it's okay to change your mind as long as you're nice about it," Sophie informs me, settling between Emma and me. "Were you nice?"

I think about Sebastian's shocked face, my mother's horrified gasp, the whispers that followed me as I ran down the aisle and out of the church.

"I tried to be," I say finally. "But it was complicated."

"Grown-up stuff is always complicated," Sophie sighs with the resignation of someone who has heard this explanation many times.

From the front seat, Sheriff Reynolds clears his throat. "Girls, let's give Miss Isabella some space."

"It's fine," I assure him quickly. "Really."

And it is fine. More than fine. There's something incredibly grounding about these children with their curious questions and earnest observations.

They're not looking at me like I'm having a psychological breakdown or calculating the social and financial implications of my actions.

They're just interested in the novelty of a woman in a wedding dress in their police car.

As we drive away from the community center, I finally allow myself to fully process what I've done today.

I've run away from my wedding. I've disappointed my family in the most public way possible.

I've likely torpedoed my father's business deal and my mother's social standing.

I have no plan, no change of clothes, and no idea what comes next.

And yet, sitting here in the back of a small-town sheriff's cruiser with a softball player and her curious little sister, I feel something I haven't felt in months: relief.

"Where are we going now?" I ask, realizing I've put myself entirely in this stranger's hands.

Sheriff Reynolds meets my eyes in the mirror again. "Well, that depends on you, Isabella. I can take you to the bus station if you want to keep moving, or to our one motel if you want to stay the night."

"Or you could come to our house!" Sophie suggests brightly. "We have mac and cheese for dinner. And ice cream!"

"Sophie," her father says, his tone warning but gentle.

"Actually," I say slowly, an idea taking shape, "is there anywhere in town I could buy some clothes? I should probably get out of this dress before someone recognizes me from the society pages."

The sheriff considers this. "Libby's Boutique on Main Street should still be open. She carries a little bit of everything."

"Perfect," I say, making a decision. "Let's start there."

He nods, making a U-turn at the next intersection. As we head back toward town, I notice my phone lighting up again in my purse. I pull it out and see Sebastian's name on the screen. With a deep breath, I power it off completely.

Whatever comes next, I'm determined to face it on my own terms. Starting with getting out of this dress that was never really my choice to begin with.

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I've lost my mind.

That's the only explanation for why I'm pulling up to Libby's Boutique with a runaway bride and my daughters in tow. This goes well beyond professional courtesy and straight into what-the-hell-are-you-thinking territory.

"Wait here a sec," I tell Isabella, putting the cruiser in park.

I step out and walk around to open her door, aware of how the afternoon shoppers on Main Street have all stopped to stare.

Cedar Falls hasn't had gossip this good since Mayor Peterson's toupee blew off during last year's Fourth of July speech.

"Sheriff?" Libby appears in the doorway of her boutique, curiosity written all over her face as she takes in the scene. "Everything okay?"

"Fine, Libby. Just helping out a visitor." I offer Isabella my hand as she struggles to maneuver her massive dress out of the backseat. Her fingers are cool and delicate against my palm, but her grip is surprisingly strong as she leverages herself upright.

"Thanks," she murmurs, a flush spreading across her cheeks as she becomes aware of our audience.

Emma and Sophie tumble out after her, instantly flanking her like tiny bodyguards.

The sight makes something twist in my chest. They've attached themselves to her

with that immediate, uncomplicated acceptance that children sometimes offer strangers, and that I've long since lost the ability to give.

"Miss Isabella needs clothes," Sophie announces to Libby, who's still standing frozen in her doorway. "Her wedding dress is pretty but not good for mac and cheese."

Libby's eyebrows shoot upward, and I feel compelled to provide some semblance of a normal explanation. "Miss Rosewood is passing through town and needs some, uh, more practical attire."

"I see," Libby says, though she clearly doesn't. Her eyes rake over Isabella's expensive gown, the torn hem, the mud-stained satin heels.

To her credit, she switches instantly into professional mode.

"Well, you've come to the right place. We carry everything from casual to business casual, sizes 0 to 18. "

"Thank you," Isabella says. "I just need something simple. Jeans, t-shirts, sensible shoes. And maybe a change for tomorrow."

Tomorrow. The word hangs in the air, reminding me that I have no idea what her plans are beyond the next few hours. Not that it's any of my business. My job is to ensure she's safe, not to insert myself into her personal crisis.

"Let me know if you need anything else," I tell her, suddenly feeling awkward in my uniform. "We can wait in the car."

"Actually," Libby interjects, "I just got in a new shipment of those comic books Emma likes. They're on the display by the register if you all want to look while I help Miss Rosewood."

Emma's eyes light up. "Dad, can we?"

I hesitate, looking at Isabella. "If that's okay with you?"

"Of course," she says quickly. "I won't be long."

I nod, grateful for the distraction for the girls. As we follow everyone inside, I send a quick text to Doris at the station: *Still with the bride. Taking her to get clothes, then will assess next steps. Call if any emergencies.*

The response comes immediately: *Roger that. Town's quiet. Mrs. Laura called again about her cat. Told her to check the pantry.*

I smile despite myself, pocketing my phone as Sophie tugs me toward a display of stuffed animals while Emma makes a beeline for the comics. Libby leads Isabella to the back of the store, already pulling items from various racks.

"Dad, look!" Sophie holds up a plush wolf. "He looks like the ones in the woods behind our house."

"Very realistic," I agree, checking the price tag and wincing. Twenty-five dollars for something she'll likely forget about in a week. "Maybe for your birthday, Soph."

Her lower lip juts out in a practiced pout. "But that's forever away."

"Three months," I correct her. "Not forever."

"Feels like forever," she sighs dramatically, reluctantly returning the wolf to its shelf.

I ruffle her hair, glancing toward the back of the store where Isabella has disappeared into a changing room with an armful of clothes. My daughters aren't the only ones

who've been immediately drawn to her.

There's something magnetic about her presence—the combination of vulnerability and fierce determination in those green eyes. The way she speaks directly and honestly, even about her own complicated situation.

Or maybe I'm just out of practice at interacting with women who aren't grieving widows, concerned teachers, or my female deputies.

"Sheriff?" Libby approaches, lowering her voice. "Your, um, friend mentioned she doesn't have a place to stay tonight."

"She's not my—" I stop myself, realizing how defensive I sound. "We just met. She needed assistance."

Libby gives me a look that says she doesn't quite believe me. "Well, in any case, I suggested the Cedar Inn, but they're booked solid this weekend with that fishing tournament. The closest vacancy is in Millfield, about forty minutes from here."

Great. Another complication. "Thanks for letting me know."

"She seems... nice," Libby adds.

"I wouldn't know," I reply, more curtly than intended. "Like I said, we just met."

Libby holds up her hands in surrender. "Just making conversation. It's not every day we get a runaway bride in designer couture shopping for jeans and sensible shoes."

Before I can respond, there's a commotion from the changing area.

Isabella emerges in dark jeans, a simple green t-shirt that exactly matches her eyes,

and flat sandals.

The transformation is startling—from fairytale princess to casual beauty in an instant.

She's pulled her hair into a messy ponytail, and without the elaborate gown, I can better appreciate the natural grace in her movements.

My daughters notice immediately.

"You look like a normal person now!" Sophie exclaims with characteristic bluntness.

"Sophie," I warn, but Isabella just laughs.

"Thank you, I think," she replies, smoothing her hands over the jeans. "It feels good to be in normal clothes again."

"What about your wedding dress?" Emma asks, practical as always.

Isabella glances back at the changing room where the white gown is presumably heaped on the floor. "I'm not sure. I don't need it anymore."

"Libby sells clothes too," Emma informs her. "Maybe she could sell it for you."

Libby looks startled at being volunteered, but quickly recovers. "I don't typically handle formal wear that... high-end, but I could make some calls if you're interested."

Isabella considers this. "Would it sell here? It's a Marchesa. Retails for—" She cuts herself off, looking embarrassed. "It was very expensive."

Libby whistles low. "Honey, no one in Cedar Falls is buying Marchesa, but I have a contact at a bridal consignment shop in Portland who might be interested."

"That would be wonderful," Isabella says, relief evident in her voice. "I'd like to be rid of it, honestly."

There's a story there—more than just a last-minute case of cold feet, I suspect. The way she looks at that dress, like it represents something that was suffocating her.

"I'll need your contact information," Libby says, moving toward the register. "For when it sells."

Isabella hesitates. "Actually, could you donate the proceeds to a local charity? Maybe something for children?"

The request surprises me. Most people don't casually donate what must be thousands of dollars.

"Our school's art program could use funding," I find myself saying. "Budget cuts hit them hard last year."

Isabella's face brightens. "Perfect. I love art."

"You're an artist?" Emma asks, suddenly more interested.

"I used to be," Isabella replies, something wistful entering her expression. "I studied art history in college and worked at a gallery for a while."

"What happened?" The question slips out before I can stop myself.

She meets my eyes, and there's a quiet resignation there that makes me regret asking. "Life happened. Family expectations. Practical considerations."

I know that tone. It's the same one I use when someone asks why I haven't moved to a

bigger department with better pay and advancement opportunities. Sometimes our choices aren't really choices at all.

"Well," Libby interjects, breaking the moment, "let's get you rung up. I've put together a few outfits that should get you through several days."

As Isabella pays for her new clothes, I notice she uses cash—a thick envelope of it pulled from her small purse. No credit cards. Another clue that she's trying to avoid being tracked.

"Do you have luggage?" I ask when she finishes the transaction.

She shakes her head. "Just the dress I came in and whatever I'm buying now."

Libby produces a sturdy canvas tote bag with "Cedar Falls" printed on the side. "On the house," she says with a wink. "Consider it a welcome gift."

"Thank you," Isabella says, genuine gratitude in her voice as she folds her new clothes into the bag. "For everything."

We exit the shop, Isabella now looking like any other tourist who might be passing through our town, except for the slightly shell-shocked look in her eyes that suggests she's still processing her own actions.

"Libby mentioned the motel is full," I tell her as we approach the cruiser. "She said there's another one in Millfield, about forty minutes from here."

She bites her lower lip, uncertainty crossing her features. "Is there a bus station in town? Or a car rental place?"

"Bus comes through once a day, at 6 AM. Nearest car rental is in Portland, about two

hours away.

" I hesitate, then add, "Look, it's getting late.

The girls need dinner, and you look like you could use a hot meal yourself.

Why don't you come to our place? We can figure out your next steps after everyone's fed. "

The words surprise me as much as they seem to surprise her. I've never invited a stranger to my home—especially not a woman, and definitely not with the girls. Claire would be shocked. I'm a little shocked myself.

"I couldn't impose," she says right away.

"Mac and cheese!" Sophie reminds her, bouncing on her toes. "And Dad makes the good kind, with the crunchy stuff on top."

Isabella looks from Sophie's hopeful face to mine, clearly torn between politeness and practical need. "Are you sure? I don't want to disrupt your evening more than I already have."

No, I'm not sure. This crosses every professional and personal boundary I've established since becoming both sheriff and a single father. But there's something about her lost expression that makes it impossible to just drop her off at a bus stop or make her wait forty minutes for a motel room.

"It's just dinner," I say, trying to sound casual. "And maybe a plan for getting you wherever you need to go tomorrow."

Whatever she sees in my face must reassure her, because she finally nods.

"Okay. Thank you. But I insist on helping with dinner."

"Deal," I agree, opening the cruiser door for her. As she slides into the passenger seat this time—I can't keep putting a civilian in the back like a perp—I catch a hint of her perfume. Something expensive and floral, but subtle.

"Can we have ice cream too?" Emma asks as she and Sophie climb into the back.

"One sugar bomb at a time," I tell her, starting the engine. "Let's see how dinner goes first."

As we pull away from the curb, I catch Isabella's reflection in the side mirror. She's gazing out at Cedar Falls' main street with an expression I can't quite decipher—part wonder, part fear, part something that might be hope.

What am I doing? This woman is clearly running from something or someone. The last thing my daughters need is to get attached to a stranger who will disappear from their lives as quickly as she entered.

The last thing I need is the complication of feeling drawn to someone so obviously in transition, so clearly unavailable in every way that matters.

Yet here we are, driving toward my home with a runaway bride in designer jeans riding shotgun and my daughters chattering excitedly in the back seat.

"Home is about five minutes up this road." I tell her as we approach the residential area west of town.

"It's pretty," she says, taking in the tall pines and glimpses of the river through the trees.

"Wait till you see our house," Sophie pipes up. "It has a treehouse that Dad built!"

"And a tire swing," Emma adds. "Dad says it's a safety hazard, but he lets us use it anyway."

Isabella laughs softly. "Sounds like your dad is a man of many talents."

I feel a flush creeping up my neck at the casual compliment. "Jack of all trades, master of none," I mutter, embarrassed.

"I doubt that's true," she says, and when I glance over, she's looking directly at me with those clear green eyes. "Sheriff, father, carpenter... seems like you're managing a lot of roles quite well."

There's no flirtation in her tone, just a simple observation that somehow cuts right through my usual defenses.

I've gotten so used to downplaying everything I do, to feeling like I'm barely keeping my head above water with work and parenting.

Having someone, even a stranger, acknowledge my efforts is unexpectedly affecting.

"We make it work," I say gruffly, turning onto our gravel driveway.

Our house comes into view. It's a two-story cabin-style home I've spent the last decade slowly renovating.

It's nothing fancy, but with its wide front porch and large windows, it's comfortable and welcoming.

The yard is a bit overgrown, toys scattered across the lawn despite my constant

reminders to the girls to clean up after themselves.

"It's beautiful," Isabella says, and she sounds like she means it.

"It's home," I reply, parking beside my personal truck.

As we all climb out, I notice Isabella taking in every detail—the wind chimes Claire hung years ago, the mismatched flower pots the girls painted last summer, the half-finished birdhouse on the porch railing.

This is my sanctuary, my private world with my daughters, the place I've kept separated from my professional life and the complications of the outside world. And I've just invited a beautiful, mysterious, clearly troubled woman right into the heart of it.

"Come on," I say, fishing my keys from my pocket. "Let's get that mac and cheese started."

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The moment I step into Sheriff Reynolds' home, I feel it...

That sense of a space being truly lived in, truly loved.

It's nothing like the sterile perfection of my parents' Boston mansion or the meticulously curated apartment Sebastian and I were supposed to share after the wedding. This place has soul.

Toys are scattered across a worn but comfortable-looking living room.

Colorful artwork—clearly created by small hands—adorns the refrigerator.

A bookshelf overflows with an eclectic mix of crime novels, children's picture books, and what appear to be carpentry manuals.

Everything about this house tells the story of the family that inhabits it.

"Sorry about the mess," the sheriff says, quickly gathering up a pile of laundry from the couch. "Didn't exactly plan for company today."

"It's perfect," I tell him honestly. "Please don't apologize."

Sophie immediately grabs my hand. "Want to see my room? I have a stuffed animal collection and a special rock that looks like a heart."

"Sophie," her father warns, "let Miss Isabella breathe. She's our guest, not your show-and-tell project."

"It's really okay," I assure him, secretly delighted by the child's enthusiasm. "I'd love to see your room, Sophie. Maybe after dinner?"

This compromise seems to satisfy everyone. Sophie nods solemnly, and Sheriff Reynolds gives me a grateful look as he moves toward the kitchen.

"Girls, homework while I start dinner," he directs, opening the refrigerator. "Emma, help your sister with her reading sheet, please."

"But Dad," Emma protests, "Miss Isabella is way more interesting than homework."

I laugh, touched by the compliment. "Homework is important. Besides, I promised your dad I'd help with dinner." I turn to him. "I meant that, by the way. I'm not a great cook, but I can follow directions."

He looks momentarily caught off guard, as if he's not used to having help in the kitchen. "Uh, sure. You can grate the cheese if you want."

I roll up my sleeves, oddly eager for this simple domestic task. After months of fittings and tastings and endless discussions about floral arrangements, there's something deeply appealing about doing something as straightforward as grating cheese for a family meal.

The sheriff moves and gathers all the ingredients while giving occasional guidance to the girls, who have settled at the dining table with their backpacks. I notice how his eyes constantly flick toward them, checking, reassuring himself of their presence.

"Block of cheddar's in the fridge," he tells me, nodding toward an ancient-looking box grater on the counter. "And there's some parmesan in there too, if you can find it."

I open the refrigerator, eventually locating both kinds of cheese, and set to work at the counter beside him.

"I'm realizing I don't know your first name," I say as I begin grating. "Unless it's actually 'Sheriff.'"

The corner of his mouth quirks up. "Jake. Jake Reynolds."

"Jake," I repeat, testing the name. It suits him—straightforward, unpretentious, strong.

"And I know you go by Bella, but I like Isabella," he says, not looking up from the pasta he's measuring. "It suits you."

Sebastian always called me Bells, slightly nasal and clipped. My father uses "Isabella" only when he's disappointed in me, which is often.

"Thank you," I say softly, focusing on the cheese to hide my flushed cheeks. "For everything. Not many people would take in a stranger like this."

"Cedar Falls is a small town," he replies, as if that explains everything. "We look out for people in need."

"Is that why you became sheriff?" I ask, genuinely curious about this man who seems so naturally protective.

He considers this while filling a pot with water. "Partly. My dad was sheriff before me. It was sort of expected, I guess."

I recognize that tone—the weight of family legacy, of predetermined paths. "I understand that feeling."

He glances at me, something knowing in his expression. "I figured you might."

"Daddy wanted to be a forest ranger," Sophie pipes up from the table, apparently eavesdropping. "He told us so."

Jake's ears redden slightly. "Focus on your worksheet, Soph."

"Is that true?" I ask, moving on to the parmesan.

He shrugs, looking slightly embarrassed. "Kid's dream. I like being outdoors and working with my hands. But the sheriff's department was a better fit, especially after..." He trails off, eyes darting toward his daughters.

"I think it's admirable," I say. "Following your own path, even if it wasn't your first choice."

I wonder what he sees when he looks at me—a spoiled rich girl running from responsibility or someone trying to find her authentic self beneath years of familial expectation?

"Dad!" Emma calls out. "Sophie's not doing her work. She's drawing you and Miss Isabella."

Sophie quickly tries to cover her paper, shooting her sister a betrayed look. "Tattletale!"

"Let me see," Jake says, wiping his hands on a dish towel and crossing to the table. He examines the drawing and smiles. "That's pretty good, Soph. But you still need to finish your reading first."

"What does it look like?" I ask, curious.

Sophie holds up the paper proudly. It's a typical child's drawing—stick figures with disproportionate features—but unmistakably depicts a tall man in what must be a sheriff's uniform standing beside a woman with red hair. We're holding hands. My face heats.

"It's very nice," I manage, catching Jake's equally embarrassed expression.

"Kids and their imaginations," he mutters, returning to the stove where the water has begun to boil.

An awkward silence falls as he adds pasta to the pot and I finish with the cheese. I can't help but be aware of his presence beside me—the way he moves, the faint scent of pine and something uniquely him, the occasional brush of his arm against mine in the confined kitchen space.

"So," he finally says, keeping his voice low enough that the girls can't hear. "Do you want to talk about it? What happened today?"

I consider deflecting, changing the subject. But something about his direct gaze makes me want to be honest.

"I couldn't go through with it," I say simply.

"Standing there in the church, everyone watching, my mother hissing last-minute instructions about how to hold my bouquet.

.." I shake my head at the memory. "I suddenly couldn't breathe.

Couldn't take another step. And I realized I was about to make a promise I didn't intend to keep. "

He nods, not rushing to fill the silence.

"Sebastian, my fiancé, he's not a bad person," I continue, surprising myself with my candor. "He's just... not the right person. Not for me. And I'm not the right person for him either, though he doesn't see that yet."

"How long were you together?" Jake asks, stirring the pasta.

"Two years. But it never felt..." I search for the right word. "Real. It was more like we were playing roles in some elaborate production my parents were directing."

"And you decided to go off-script."

I smile at his phrasing. "Very off-script. My understudy was not prepared."

This earns me a low chuckle. "What will you do now?" he asks.

The question I've been avoiding since I fled the church. "I'm not sure," I admit. "I have some savings, separate from my family. Not a lot, but enough to figure things out. I just need to..." I trail off, unsure how to articulate what I need.

"Breathe?" he suggests.

"Yes," I say, grateful for his understanding. "Exactly that."

He nods, reaching for the colander. "Well, Cedar Falls has good air. Lots of trees. Good place for breathing."

Is he suggesting I stay? The thought is simultaneously terrifying and tempting. I've never lived anywhere but Boston, never been more than a few hours from my family's influence.

"I've never done anything like this before," I confess. "Just... run. Without a plan."

"Sometimes plans are overrated," he says, draining the pasta. "Sometimes you just need to trust your instincts."

My instincts led me here—to this kitchen, this man, these children. To this moment of quiet domesticity that feels more genuine than anything in my recent memory.

"Dinner's ready," Jake announces, his voice lifting to reach the girls. "Emma, clear your homework. Sophie, wash your hands."

The family dinner's routine unfolds around me. Emma setting mismatched plates on the table, Sophie carrying napkins, Jake transferring the bubbling mac and cheese to a serving dish. I stand awkwardly, unsure of my role in this tableau.

"You can sit here," Sophie declares, patting the chair beside hers. "It's Mommy's chair, but she's in heaven now, so she won't mind."

"Sophie," Jake says sharply, then softens his tone. "We've talked about this. That's not something we say to guests."

"It's okay," I tell him, though my heart aches at the child's matter-of-fact reference to her mother's absence. "Thank you, Sophie. I'd be honored to sit here."

As we settle around the table, I'm struck by how long it's been since I've experienced a family meal this unpretentious.

Growing up, dinner was a formal affair, even when it was just the four of us—cloth napkins, multiple courses, conversation restricted to appropriate topics.

When I started dating Sebastian, meals became networking opportunities, each

restaurant chosen for who might see us there.

This—mismatched plates, slightly lumpy mac and cheese, elbows on the table—feels revolutionary in its ordinariness.

"We hold hands for grace," Emma informs me, extending her small hand toward mine.

I take it, surprised by the lump forming in my throat as Jake takes my other hand to complete the circle. His palm is warm and calloused against mine, the touch sending an unexpected current up my arm.

"Would you like to say grace, Isabella?" he asks, his eyes meeting mine across the table.

I panic slightly. My family wasn't religious. I don't know the right words. "I—"

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"It's easy," Sophie assures me. "You just say thank you for the food and the people."

Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes. "Thank you for this food and for the kindness of the people around this table. I'm very grateful to be here tonight."

It's simple, probably inadequate, but when I open my eyes, Jake is looking at me with a warmth that makes me feel like I've said exactly the right thing.

"Amen," he adds softly, giving my hand a gentle squeeze before releasing it.

Dinner is a lively affair, with Sophie dominating the conversation through detailed descriptions of her day at school, occasional corrections from Emma, and patient questions from Jake.

I find myself laughing more than I have in months, drawn into their family dynamic as if I've known them for years rather than hours.

"Miss Isabella, do you have kids?" Sophie asks suddenly, in the direct way of children.

"Sophie," Jake warns. "Remember what we talked about? Some questions are private."

"It's okay," I assure him again, "No, Sophie, I don't have children."

"Do you want them?" she persists, ignoring her father's pointed look.

The question catches me off guard. "I do," I answer honestly. "Someday. With the right person."

"Like Daddy found Mommy?" she asks.

I glance at Jake, whose expression has grown guarded.

"Yes," I say. "Like that."

"Dad doesn't date," Emma informs me, with the slightly smug knowledge of an older child. "Mrs. Miller says he should, but he says he's too busy."

Jake nearly chokes on his water. "Emma, that's enough about Mrs. Miller's opinions."

I hide my smile, filing away this information despite myself. It's none of my business whether this attractive, kind single father dates. I'm only passing through his life, a temporary disruption that will be forgotten once I figure out my next move.

"Can I show Miss Isabella my rock collection now?" Sophie asks, clearly bored with the adult conversation.

"After you help clear the table," Jake tells her. "Everyone helps with cleanup."

"I'll help too," I say quickly, standing to gather plates.

Jake looks like he might protest, but then thinks better of it. "Thanks."

The moment strikes me again as we work together to clean the kitchen—Jake rinsing dishes, me loading them into the dishwasher, the girls wiping down the table. It's such a simple thing, this cooperative effort, but it fills me with a strange longing for something I've never had.

"Dad," Emma says as we finish, "can we have ice cream now? You promised."

Jake glances at the clock. "One scoop, then homework check, then bed."

The girls cheer, and Sophie immediately grabs my hand. "You'll have ice cream too, right? Dad bought chocolate and vanilla and strawberry because we can never agree."

"I'd love some," I tell her, allowing myself to be pulled toward the freezer. "I'm partial to chocolate."

"That's my favorite too!" Sophie exclaims, as if we've discovered we're long-lost soulmates.

Jake catches my eye over her head, an apologetic smile playing around his lips.

"She attaches quickly," he says quietly as he reaches past me for the ice cream. "Don't feel obligated."

"I don't," I assure him, meaning it. "This is the most normal I've felt in... maybe ever."

Something shifts in his expression—surprise, perhaps, or understanding. Before he can respond, Sophie is tugging me toward the stairs.

"Ice cream in my room while I show you my collection!" she declares.

"Nice try," Jake calls after her. "Ice cream at the table, then you can give Miss Isabella the tour."

Sophie sighs dramatically but returns to the table, where Jake is scooping ice cream into colorful plastic bowls.

I watch him with his daughters—the easy affection, the clear boundaries, the gentle authority.

He's a good father. The realization shouldn't surprise me, but it does deepen my already growing admiration for him.

After ice cream, true to her word, Sophie leads me on a tour of the upstairs, proudly showing me her rock collection, her stuffed animals, and the "secret" hideout under her bed. Emma joins us, eager to display her softball trophies and collection of nature books.

Their room is exactly what a children's room should be—colorful, slightly messy, filled with evidence of their personalities and interests.

It stands in sharp contrast to my own childhood bedroom, which was decorated by a professional in pale pink and white, with furniture too delicate to actually use with any enthusiasm.

"And this is Dad's room," Sophie announces, pushing open a door at the end of the hall before I can stop her.

"Sophie, I don't think—" I begin, but I've already glimpsed the interior.

A large, simply furnished room with a patchwork quilt on the unmade bed, a stack of books on the nightstand, and framed children's artwork on the walls. It's deeply personal, and I feel like an intruder.

"Sophie," Jake's voice comes from behind us, making me jump. "We don't show people Dad's room without asking. Remember our conversation about privacy?"

Sophie's face falls. "Sorry, Daddy."

"It's okay," he says, ruffling her hair. "Just remember for next time."

"I'm sorry too," I tell him, embarrassed. "I should have stopped her."

He shakes his head. "Not your fault. She's a force of nature." He checks his watch. "Alright, girls. Bedtime routine starts now. Teeth, pajamas, one story."

"But Miss Isabella hasn't seen the treehouse!" Sophie protests.

"Another time," he says firmly. "It's dark outside now anyway."

Another time. Yes, I hope so.

"Can Miss Isabella read our bedtime story?" Emma asks, surprising me with her request.

Jake looks at me questioningly. "Only if she wants to. She's had a long day."

"I'd love to," I say, touched by the invitation into this sacred family ritual.

Twenty minutes later, I find myself perched on the edge of Sophie's bed, a well-worn copy of "Where the Wild Things Are" in my hands, two pajama-clad girls watching me with rapt attention as I read about Max's wild rumpus.

Jake leans against the doorframe, arms crossed, a soft expression on his face as he watches us.

When I finish the story, Sophie is already half-asleep, her eyelids heavy. "Will you be here tomorrow?" she mumbles as Jake tucks her blanket around her.

I glance at him, unsure how to answer. "I'm not sure yet, sweetheart."

"Hope so," she murmurs, then drifts off, her small face peaceful in sleep.

Emma is more pragmatic. "If you stay, I can show you how to throw a proper fastball."

"I'd like that," I tell her, meaning it.

Jake kisses each girl goodnight, and I follow him out of the room, emotion thick in my throat at witnessing such tender fatherhood.

Downstairs, in the sudden quiet of the living room, an awkwardness falls between us. The structured activities of dinner and bedtime are behind us, and now we're just two adults, essentially strangers, left alone.

"Thank you," I say, breaking the silence. "For dinner, for everything. I should probably figure out where I'm going to stay tonight."

Jake runs a hand through his hair, a gesture I'm beginning to recognize as a sign of his discomfort. "About that. I called the motel in Millfield. They're booked too—some regional softball tournament this weekend."

My heart sinks. "Oh. Is there somewhere else nearby?"

He hesitates. "Next town with vacancies is about two hours away."

"I see." I gnaw at my lower lip, considering my options. Which are, frankly, limited.

"You can stay here," he says abruptly. "You'll sleep in my bedroom. I'll sleep on the couch. It's comfortable enough. Just for tonight, until we can figure something out tomorrow."

The offer is generous, possibly inappropriate given his position, definitely more than I deserve. "I couldn't impose like that."

"It's not an imposition. It's practical." His tone is matter-of-fact. "It's late, you're exhausted, and I'm not going to send you off to wander in the dark."

"Are you sure?" I ask, searching his face. "It's not exactly proper, having a strange woman sleep in your bed."

A ghost of a smile touches his lips. "Isabella, you ran away from your own wedding today and ended up in my town. I think we're well past 'proper' at this point."

He has a point. And the thought of staying here, in this house that already feels safer than anywhere I've been in years, is undeniably appealing.

"Okay," I agree finally. "Just for tonight. And I'll take the first bus out tomorrow."

He nods, looking relieved and something else I can't quite identify. "I'll get some blankets."

As he disappears down the hall, I sink onto the couch, the full weight of the day finally crashing over me.

I ran away from my wedding. I abandoned my fiancé at the altar.

I fled Boston without a plan or proper luggage.

I'm now preparing to sleep in a small-town sheriff's bed while his daughters dream down the hall.

It's insane. Completely outside the structured life I've always led.

And yet, sitting here in the warm glow of a lamp in Jake Reynolds' living room, I feel more myself than I have in years.

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I grab extra blankets from the hall closet, my hands moving on autopilot while my mind races. What the hell am I doing? I've invited a complete stranger—a runaway bride, no less—to spend the night in my bed. In my house. With my daughters sleeping just down the hall.

It's completely unprofessional. If any of my deputies pulled something like this, I'd have them on desk duty for a month with a lecture about boundaries and protocol.

But Isabella isn't just any stranger. There's something about her that bypassed all my usual defenses... The ones I've spent four years constructing.

Maybe it's the lost look in her eyes that mirrors what I see in my own reflection some mornings. Or maybe it's the way she immediately connected with my girls, reading to them with such natural warmth that for a moment our broken little family felt whole again.

I grab a spare toothbrush from the bathroom cabinet, one of those extras from the dentist that I keep for the girls, and add it to the small pile of necessities: towel, washcloth, t-shirt that might work as a nightgown.

When I return to the living room, Isabella is sitting exactly where I left her, looking small and vulnerable on my oversized couch. Her makeup has long since worn off, and without the armor of her wedding dress or even the casual clothes she bought at Libby's, she seems younger somehow. More real.

"Here," I say, setting the pile beside her. "It's not exactly the honeymoon suite, but it should get you through the night."

She looks up with those clear green eyes, and something in my chest tightens. "I'm the one who should be apologizing for putting you out of your bed."

"It's fine. I fall asleep on this couch half the time anyway." It's true. Many nights, after the girls are in bed, I sink onto this couch intending to watch just a few minutes of TV and wake up hours later with a crick in my neck.

"Thank you." She takes the towel and toothbrush, her fingers brushing mine. "For everything. Most people wouldn't have gone to all this trouble."

I shrug, uncomfortable with her gratitude. "It's my job to help people."

"Is it your job to bring them home and feed them mac and cheese?"

"No," I admit, a warmth spreading through me at the gentle teasing in her voice. "That part's... not standard procedure."

"I gathered." She smiles slightly. "Your daughters are wonderful. You're a great single dad. You're doing an amazing job with them."

Most people either avoid mentioning my single-parent status or offer pitying platitudes about how "strong" I am. But there's a genuine admiration in her words.

"I'm sorry about Sophie," I say, the words tumbling out before I can stop them. "About what she said regarding her mother's chair. Kids that age don't have filters."

Isabella shakes her head quickly. "Please, don't apologize. She's processing her loss in her own way. It's healthy."

"Still. It couldn't have been comfortable for you."

She considers this. "Actually, I appreciated her honesty. Adults spend so much time talking around difficult subjects. It's refreshing, the way children just say what they're thinking."

I sit down on the opposite end of the couch, maintaining a respectful distance even as something in me yearns to be closer.

"Claire, my wife, she was like that too. Straightforward. No games." The memory brings both pain and comfort, as it always does.

"How long were you together?" Isabella asks softly.

"High school sweethearts. Married right after college." I find myself calculating the years. "Would have been fifteen years this December."

"I'm so sorry, Jake."

It's the first time she's used my first name, and something about the way she says it makes my chest constrict. Not just grief—something else. Something I'd almost forgotten existed.

"Four years ago," I continue, surprising myself with my openness.

"Car accident on Highway 14. Drunk driver crossed the center line.

She was coming home from her book club." I swallow hard, the memory still razor-sharp despite the passage of time.

"I was supposed to pick her up, but there was an incident at the station. I asked her to drive herself."

Isabella moves closer, and I feel the couch dip slightly with her weight. "It wasn't your fault."

"Logically, I know that," I say, staring at my hands. "The drunk driver is serving fifteen years. But if I'd just left work on time..."

"You can't live in that alternative universe," she says gently. "Trust me, I've tried. The 'what-ifs' will destroy you."

Something in her tone suggests personal experience. "What's your what-if?" I ask.

She looks down at her hands, twisting them in her lap.

"What if I'd stood up to my parents years ago?"

What if I'd pursued art instead of the business degree they wanted?

What if I'd refused the first date with Sebastian instead of agreeing because my father thought it would be 'advantageous'?

"She gives a small, bitter laugh. "Today was my first real act of defiance. "

"Better late than never," I offer, wanting desperately to comfort her.

"Maybe." She sighs, and the sound carries the weight of years of suppressed desires. "My entire life has been a curated performance—the right schools, the right clothes, the right fiancé."

"Until today."

"Until today," she agrees. "When I realized I couldn't breathe inside that dress, inside

that church, inside that life."

We fall silent for a moment. Outside, an owl hoots softly in the darkness. Inside, the refrigerator hums and the old grandfather clock in the hallway—a wedding gift from Claire's parents—ticks steadily.

"It's been hard," I find myself admitting, my voice rough with emotion. "Since Claire died. Not just the grief, but the practical stuff. Being both parents. Working full-time. Trying to remember permission slips and softball practices and dental appointments."

"You seem to be managing it all beautifully," Isabella says, her voice gentle.

I shake my head, a lump forming in my throat. "I'm drowning most days. The girls deserve better than a dad who's always distracted, always rushing, always forgetting something important."

"They adore you," she counters, and there's such conviction in her voice that I almost believe her. "That's obvious to anyone who spends five minutes with them. The way they look at you—like you're their whole world."

"They're mine," I say simply, emotion making my voice crack. "But I worry it's not enough. That I'm not enough."

"I think that worry is probably the hallmark of good parenting," Isabella observes softly. "The bad ones never question themselves."

I've never thought of it that way. "Maybe. Still feels like I'm failing more often than not."

"Join the club," she says with a rueful smile. "I've spent my entire adult life feeling like I'm failing. At being the daughter my parents wanted, at becoming the wife

Sebastian deserved, at figuring out who I actually am beneath all the expectations."

"And who is that person?" I ask, wanting desperately to understand her. "The real Isabella Rosewood?"

She considers this, tucking a strand of auburn hair behind her ear.

"I'm not entirely sure yet. But I know she loves art—creating it, studying it, being surrounded by it.

She prefers quiet evenings with a book to elaborate charity galas.

She wants a family someday, but one built on genuine connection, not social advantage.

" She pauses, her voice softening. "And apparently, she has the capacity to run away from her own wedding, so there's that. "

I can't help but smile, "Sounds like someone worth getting to know. But, hey, it's late," I say, standing abruptly. "You must be exhausted."

Isabella nods, rising as well. "It's been... quite a day."

"I'll show you upstairs," I offer, "You'll need clean sheets."

"Please, don't go to that trouble. I can manage."

"It's no trouble," I insist.

"Thank you. But, look... Can we stay here a little longer?" She asks me, rubbing her rosy cheek.

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"Thank you. But, look... Can we stay here a little longer?" I ask, rubbing my cheek a bit too much.

The thought of being alone in his bedroom feels suddenly overwhelming, though not for the reasons it should be.

Jake settles back onto the couch, a questioning look in his brown eyes. "Of course. Is everything okay?"

No, nothing is okay. I'm sitting in a stranger's living room, having run away from my own wedding mere hours ago, and all I can think about is how his lips and mouth might taste. It's inappropriate and ridiculous and completely unlike me.

And yet, I can't stop noticing things about him.

The breadth of his shoulders beneath his worn t-shirt.

The strong line of his jaw, slightly shadowed with stubble.

The gentle way his hands move when he talks about his daughters.

The deep timbre of his voice that seems to resonate somewhere behind my ribcage.

He's nothing like Sebastian or any of the polished, ambitious men my parents approved of. Jake Reynolds is solid, rooted to this place and these people he protects. There's an authenticity to him that makes every man I've ever known seem like pale imitations of the real thing.

"I was just wondering..." I begin, then hesitate. Is this too personal? Too forward? But the events of today have stripped away my usual caution. "Have you dated at all? Since your wife passed?"

The question clearly surprises him. He leans back slightly, running a hand through his hair.

"Sorry," I say quickly. "That's none of my business."

"No, it's okay." He sighs, eyes fixed on the wall behind me. "The answer is yes, but not much. A few coffee dates set up by well-meaning friends. Dinner once with a kindergarten teacher from the next county over." He shrugs. "Nothing that went anywhere."

"No chemistry?" I ask, leaning forward slightly.

"Something like that." His gaze drops to his hands. "Or maybe I didn't give them a fair chance. It's hard to explain, but dating as a widower with kids... it's complicated. There's guilt involved."

"Guilt?"

"Like I'm betraying Claire somehow. Which is irrational.

She'd be the first one to tell me to move on, to find happiness again.

But still." He shakes his head. "And then there's the girls.

They're just starting to adjust, to feel stable again.

What if I bring someone into their lives and it doesn't work out?

That's another loss for them to process. "

His consideration for his daughters' emotional wellbeing only makes him more attractive to me. Sebastian saw children as an eventual necessity—heirs to continue the family name and business—not as actual people with feelings and needs.

"That's understandable," I say softly, shifting a little closer. "They're lucky to have a father who thinks so deeply about their happiness."

He glances up, a hint of surprise in his expression. "Most women I've met aren't exactly thrilled at the prospect of instant motherhood. It's a lot to ask."

"I think it depends on the children," I reply honestly. "And the father."

I feel my heart accelerating, my palms growing damp. I've never been good at this, the delicate dance of attraction and timing. My romantic history consists of men selected and vetted by my parents, relationships that developed through structured dates and social expectations.

This—this organic, unexpected connection—is entirely new territory.

I lean closer, hoping he'll bridge the gap between us. But Jake remains perfectly still, clearly confused. Is he oblivious to what I'm trying to communicate, or deliberately holding back?

My courage falters. Maybe I've misread everything. Maybe he's just being kind to a woman in crisis, and I'm projecting attraction where there is only compassion.

"You seem distracted," he says, his voice lower than before. "Everything okay?"

"I'm thinking," I admit.

"About what?"

About how your mouth would feel against mine. About how those strong hands would feel on my skin. About how long it's been since I felt genuinely desired rather than merely suitable.

"About regrets," I say instead, the word hanging between us. "About all the moments I let pass by because I was too afraid to act, too concerned with what others might think."

His eyes darken slightly. "And what are you afraid of now?"

I've spent my entire life waiting for permission—from my parents, from society, from the constructed rules that have governed my existence. Today, I finally broke free of those constraints. Why stop now?

Before I can overthink it, I lean forward and press my lips to his.

It's clumsy at first.

The angle isn't quite right, and I nearly miss his mouth entirely.

For one horrifying second, I think I've made a catastrophic mistake.

But then his hand comes up to cradle my cheek, calloused palm warm against my skin, and he guides me gently, correcting the trajectory until our mouths align perfectly.

The first real contact sends electricity coursing through me. His lips are surprisingly soft against mine, the contrast with the roughness of his hand making my skin tingle in the most delicious way. The kiss is gentle for only a moment before something

seems to snap inside both of us.

Suddenly we're devouring each other, months—years—of loneliness and restraint evaporating in the heat between us. His hand slides from my cheek to the back of my neck, fingers threading through my hair, holding me close as his mouth moves hungrily against mine.

I make a small, desperate sound in the back of my throat that would embarrass me if I had any capacity for embarrassment left. But all social conditioning has disappeared, replaced by pure, primal need. I want more. More contact, more pressure, more of him.

As if reading my mind, Jake's strong hands move to my waist, and in one fluid motion, he lifts me onto his lap. I find myself straddling him, my knees on either side of his hips, our bodies pressed together in a way that makes my head spin.

"Isabella," he breathes against my mouth, my name a question and a prayer.

"Yes," I answer, though he hasn't actually asked anything. Yes to whatever this is. Yes to wherever it leads.

His hands slide up my sides, respectful but hungry, as if he's rediscovering sensations long forgotten. I arch into his touch, chasing the warmth of his palms through the thin fabric of my green t-shirt.

When his tongue traces the seam of my lips, I open to him without hesitation. The taste of him—coffee and chocolate ice cream—floods my senses, making me dizzy with lust.

I press closer, my body acting on instinct rather than experience. Sebastian's kisses were always controlled, performative. This is raw, honest, consuming.

Jake's hands settle at my hips, his fingers flexing slightly as if he's restraining himself. Even in this moment of abandon, he's considerate, careful. It makes me want him more.

I slide my fingers into his hair, marveling at the texture—softer than it looks, with those threads of silver at the temples that caught my attention from the first moment. He groans when I tug gently, the sound vibrating through me, settling low in my belly.

This is madness. I've known this man less than twelve hours. I just ran away from my wedding to another man. I have no plan, no stability, nothing to offer but complications and baggage.

None of that matters when his mouth leaves mine to trace a burning path along my jaw, down the column of my throat. I tilt my head back, giving him better access, a soft gasp escaping me when he finds a particularly sensitive spot just below my ear.

"We should stop," he murmurs against my skin, even as his hands tighten on my hips, pulling me more firmly against him.

"Probably," I agree, making no move to pull away. Instead, I rock slightly against him, the friction drawing matching moans from both of us.

He pulls back enough to look at me, his pupils dilated, lips swollen from our kisses. The raw desire in his expression makes me feel powerful, desirable in a way I've never experienced before.

"This is crazy," he says, though his hands remain on my hips, thumbs drawing small circles that make it hard to concentrate.

"I know," I whisper. "But I've spent my whole life being sensible, doing what was

expected. Look where that got me."

His expression softens, one hand leaving my hip to brush a strand of hair from my face with surprising tenderness. "You deserve better than to be someone's rebound, Isabella. And I haven't... it's been a long time for me."

"I'm not asking for promises," I tell him, pressing my palm against his chest, feeling the steady, rapid beat of his heart. "Just this moment. Just... feeling something real for once."

The conflict in his eyes is palpable—desire warring with responsibility, with caution. I understand it completely. This isn't just about the two of us. He has his daughters to consider, his position in this small community. I have a life in shambles, bridges burning behind me.

Logic dictates we should walk away now, before this goes any further. But logic has never made my heart race like this, never made my skin feel too tight, too hot, too sensitive to every whisper of air and touch.

"The girls," he says, regret coloring his voice. "They're right upstairs."

I start to move off his lap, embarrassment flooding me, but his hands tighten, holding me in place.

"Wait," he says. "I didn't mean... I just meant we need to be... discreet."

The implication sends a fresh wave of heat through me. "Oh."

His eyes search mine. "Unless you want to stop? We can, Isabella. No expectations. No pressure."

When was the last time someone genuinely cared what I wanted? Not what was appropriate or advantageous, but what I, Isabella Rosewood, actually desired?

"I don't want to stop," I admit, the honesty both terrifying and liberating. "But I don't want to make things complicated for you either."

He laughs softly, the sound warm and intimate in the quiet room. "Too late for that. You complicated things the moment you walked down Main Street in that wedding dress."

I smile, a weight lifting from my chest. "Sorry about that."

"Don't be." His hand comes up to cup my cheek again, his touch caring. "I'm not."

This time when our lips meet, it's slower, deeper, an exploration rather than an explosion. His hands slide under the hem of my shirt, rugged fingers against the sensitive skin of my lower back sending shivers up my spine.

"You're beautiful," he murmurs against my mouth. "So damn beautiful."

No one has ever called me beautiful like this—like it's a revelation, a discovery, rather than an expected compliment. Sebastian complimented my appearance the way one might admire an expensive painting with appreciation for its value rather than genuine awe.

Jake's admiration feels earned somehow, as if he's seeing past the surface to something essential in me. It makes me brave.

I reach for the hem of my shirt, ready to pull it over my head, but his hands gently catch mine.

"Not here," he says, his voice husky. "Not like this."

For a moment I'm confused, hurt even, until he clarifies.

"If we're doing this," he continues, "I want to do it right. In a bed. With time to..." He trails off, color rising in his cheeks.

"Time to what?" I press, suddenly needing to hear him say it.

"Time to learn you. Every inch." The promise in those words makes my pussy throb, juices trickling down to my panties.

He stands, lifting me with him. My legs wrap around his waist instinctively, arms looping around his neck for balance. The display of strength sends a fresh pulse of desire through me.

"Upstairs?" I whisper against his ear, feeling him shudder in response.

He nods, adjusting his grip. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure," I tell him, and in this moment, it's the truest thing I've ever said.

Jake carries me toward the stairs, his steps deliberate and quiet. As we pass the grandfather clock in the hallway, I glance at the time—just past midnight. Yesterday at this hour, I was lying awake in my childhood bedroom, dreading the morning and the wedding that awaited me.

Now I'm in the arms of a man I barely know, my heart pounding with anticipation rather than dread, my body alive rather than numb with resignation.

For the first time in longer than I can remember, I feel present in my own life. Not

going through the motions, not playing a role, but fully, vibrantly here. Whatever happens now, whatever complications await ahead, this moment is real. And it's mine to claim.

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My hands grip Isabella's curves as I carry her up the stairs, each soft inch of her against my palms reminding me of Renaissance sculptures—perfectly formed, impossibly smooth. The weight of her in my arms feels right in a way I can't explain, like she was designed to fit against me.

Am I really doing this? Bringing a woman I've known less than a day to my bedroom while my daughters sleep down the hall?

Every rational part of me is screaming to stop, to slow down, to think about the consequences.

But those voices are drowned out by the thundering of my pulse and the soft sounds Isabella makes when I adjust my grip on her.

Four years of control, of putting my desires last, of focusing solely on my girls and my job... All of it dissolving under the touch of this woman who crashed into my life wearing a wedding dress and carrying nothing but determination.

There's a rightness to this that defies explanation. The immediate connection, the way she fits not just against my body but into my home, into my daughters' affections. I've dated, sure, but I've never felt this instant chemistry, this bone-deep recognition.

Too fast, too soon—I know this. But I can't bring myself to stop. Not when she's looking at me like I'm something precious, something desired. Not when my body is responding with an urgency I'd forgotten I was capable of feeling.

We reach the bedroom door, and I manage to turn the handle without dropping her,

slipping inside and closing it behind us with a soft click.

The darkness envelops us, broken only by slivers of moonlight through the blinds.

I set Isabella down gently on the edge of my unmade bed, the reality of what we're doing suddenly crystal clear in the quiet sanctuary of my room.

"Jake," she whispers, her voice threading through the darkness like silk.

I kneel before her, hands trembling slightly as I find the hem of her t-shirt. She raises her arms, allowing me to pull it over her head, leaving her in just underwear that looks delicate and expensive against her pale skin.

"You're so beautiful," I murmur, hands skimming down her sides to her hips.

She shivers under my touch, and I hook my fingers into the waistband of her panties, sliding them down her legs.

My breath catches at the sight of her—all soft curves and moonlit skin.

I run my hands up her calves, over her knees, to her thighs, marveling at the way she responds to each touch, how her skin pebbles beneath my fingertips.

I lean forward, pressing my lips to her knee, then higher, trailing kisses up the inside of her thigh. Her breathing quickens, hands fisting in the sheets as I move higher still, my destination clear. When I reach the juncture of her thighs, her back arches in anticipation.

"Wait," she gasps suddenly, her hand coming down to stop my progress. "Jake, wait."

I pull back immediately, concern flooding me. "What's wrong? Did I hurt you?"

She shakes her head, reaching for me, pulling me up to sit beside her on the bed. In the dim light, I can see the conflict in her eyes, the hesitation.

"There's something I need to tell you," she says, voice barely audible. "Something I should have said downstairs."

I take her hand, trying to calm the sudden anxiety rising in my chest. "You can tell me anything."

Isabella takes a deep breath, her fingers tightening around mine. "I've never... I haven't..." She closes her eyes briefly, then meets my gaze directly. "I'm a virgin."

"You... and Sebastian never...?"

She shakes her head. "We were waiting until marriage. Or rather, my family was insistent upon it. Old money, old values." A bitter smile crosses her lips. "The Rosewood bride must be pure for her wedding night."

"And that's why you ran?" I ask softly.

"One of the main reasons," she admits. "The thought of my first time being with him, someone I didn't truly love, someone I was only marrying to please my family..." She shudders. "I couldn't bear it. I would never have forgiven myself. Or them."

My heart aches for her—for the pressure she's been under, for the choices that were never really choices at all.

"Isabella," I say gently, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "We can stop right now. No expectations, no disappointment. We can just sleep."

"No," she says firmly, surprising me with her certainty.

"That's not what I want. I'm telling you this because I want you to know that this—" she gestures between us, "—is my choice.

My first real choice about my own body, my own desires.

" Her hand comes up to cup my cheek. "I want you, Jake. I've never been more sure of anything."

The weight of her trust, her vulnerability, nearly overwhelms me. "Are you certain?"

"Completely." She leans forward, pressing her lips to mine in a kiss that erases any remaining doubt.

I ease her back onto the bed, cradling her head as it meets the pillow. My hands shake slightly as I remove my own shirt, her half-lidded eyes following my movements, drinking in every detail. When I reach for my belt buckle, her hand stops me.

"Let me," she whispers, fingers fumbling slightly with the leather strap.

I guide her gently, helping her unfasten the belt, unbutton my jeans. When she tugs them down my hips, I kick them off the rest of the way, leaving me in just my boxers. Her eyes widen slightly at the visible evidence of my desire, and a flush spreads across her cheeks.

"We'll go slow," I promise, lowering myself beside her. "And we can stop anytime. Just say the word."

She nods, then surprises me by taking my hand and placing it on her breast.

"Teach me," she says simply.

The request sends a surge of heat through me. I bend to kiss her, keeping it gentle, exploratory, as my hand caresses the soft weight of her breast. When my thumb brushes across her nipple, she gasps into my mouth, arching into the touch.

I trail kisses down her throat, across her collarbone, taking my time, learning the landscape of her body. When my mouth replaces my hand on her breast, she bites her lip to stifle a moan, her fingers threading through my hair.

"Is this okay?" I murmur against her skin.

"More than okay," she breathes.

Encouraged, I continue my path downward, pausing to press kisses to the soft curve of her stomach, the jut of her hipbone. When I settle between her thighs again, I glance up, seeking final permission.

She nods, eyes heavy-lidded with desire.

I start slowly, pressing gentle kisses to her inner thighs, gradually working my way inward. When I finally taste her, her hips lift off the bed in surprise and pleasure. I place a steadying hand on her stomach, holding her in place as I explore her with my tongue.

Isabella's hands fly to her mouth, stifling the sounds she's making. I glance up to see her eyes squeezed shut, both palms pressed against her lips. The sight sends a fresh wave of desire through me—her trying so desperately to be quiet, to not wake my daughters down the hall.

I double my efforts, circling her most sensitive spot with my tongue before drawing it between my lips. Her thighs tremble on either side of my head, her breathing growing more ragged by the second. When I slide a finger inside her, she gasps against her

hands, her body clenching around it.

"Okay?" I whisper.

She nods, hips moving against my hand as I establish a rhythm, adding a second finger when her body relaxes enough to accept it. The combination of my mouth and hand soon has her writhing beneath me, her efforts to stay quiet growing more desperate as she approaches the edge.

I curl my fingers, finding the spot that makes her back arch off the bed, and focus my attention there. Her free hand grips my hair almost painfully, holding me exactly where she needs me. The sharp tug sends a jolt of pleasure-pain through me, my hard cock straining against my boxers.

When she comes, it's with a muffled cry against her palm, her body pulsing around my fingers, thighs clamping around my head. I work her through it gently, easing off as the aftershocks subside.

"Jake," she gasps when she can speak again. "That was... I never knew..."

I press a final kiss to her inner thigh before moving up to lie beside her. Her face is flushed, eyes bright, hair a tangled mess against my pillow. She's never looked more beautiful.

"We can stop here," I tell her, meaning it despite the almost painful state of my arousal. "That can be enough for tonight."

She reaches for me, pulling me down for a kiss. When she tastes herself on my lips, she makes a small sound of surprise that quickly turns to renewed desire.

"I want more," she whispers against my mouth. "I want all of you."

I reach for the nightstand drawer, fumbling for the box of condoms I keep there—remnants of an optimism I'd long since abandoned.

"Let me help," Isabella says, taking the packet from my trembling fingers. She opens it, then looks at me with a mixture of determination and vulnerability. "Show me how."

I guide her hands as she rolls the condom onto me, her touch sending sparks of pleasure up my spine. When she's finished, I ease her back onto the pillows, positioning myself above her.

"This might hurt," I warn, brushing hair from her face. "We'll go slow, and you tell me if you need to stop."

She nods, wrapping her arms around my neck, drawing me down for another kiss. As our lips meet, I position myself at her entrance, slowly pressing forward. The heat of her tight pussy nearly undoes me immediately, and I have to pause, fighting for control.

Isabella tenses at the first thrust. I freeze, giving her time to adjust.

"Breathe," I whisper, pressing kisses to her eyelids, her cheeks, the corner of her mouth. "Just breathe."

She exhales shakily, then nods. "Keep going."

I push forward another inch, watching her face for signs of discomfort. When I meet resistance, I pause again. "This is the part that might hurt," I tell her. "Ready?"

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"I'm ready," I whisper, meeting Jake's concerned gaze.

His eyes search mine one last time, looking for any hint of hesitation.

Finding none, he nods and pushes forward with a controlled thrust. The sharp pain makes me gasp, my body instinctively tensing around the intrusion.

It's uncomfortable, more than I expected, but there's something about the fullness, the intimacy of our connection, that transcends the physical discomfort.

"Breathe," Jake murmurs, holding perfectly still above me. His arms tremble slightly with the effort of restraint. "Just breathe through it."

I force myself to take a deep breath, then another, focusing on relaxing around him.

This is worth it—worth the momentary pain to share this experience with someone who treats me with such care, such respect.

Sebastian would never have been this patient, this attentive to my needs. I know this with bone-deep certainty.

"You okay?" Jake asks, his voice strained.

I nod, biting my lower lip. "Don't stop."

He begins to move, slow, shallow thrusts that gradually deepen as my body adjusts to accommodate him. The initial sharp pain fades, replaced by a sensation that hovers

between discomfort and something more intriguing.

I close my eyes, concentrating on the feeling of him moving inside me, the weight of his body above mine, the gentle brush of his lips against my forehead.

When I open my eyes again, my gaze fixes on the ceiling for a moment before finding his face.

The sight nearly takes my breath away. Jake's expression is a mixture of intense concentration and raw pleasure, sweat beading along his hairline and dampening his beard.

His muscles flex with each careful movement, shoulders and arms working to support his weight above me.

"You're so beautiful," I whisper, surprising myself with the words.

His rhythm falters for a moment, eyes opening to meet mine. The vulnerability I see there makes my heart skip a beat. This isn't just physical for him either.

"Isabella," he breathes.

His thrusts deepen, gaining confidence as my body relaxes further, accepting him more completely. The discomfort recedes, replaced by a building pressure that makes me arch upward, seeking more.

Jake shifts suddenly, sitting up and pulling me with him without breaking our connection. I find myself straddling his lap, his strong hands supporting my hips as he guides me into a new rhythm. The position pushes him impossibly deeper, drawing a gasp from my lips.

"Is this good?" he asks, his voice trembling with desire.

"Yes," I manage, gripping his shoulders for balance.

In this position, I can feel the flex of every muscle as he uses his powerful thighs and core to thrust upward.

My body feels weightless, suspended in his strong grip as he moves beneath me.

It's the most physically connected I've ever felt to another person, not just our bodies joined, but our breath syncing, our heartbeats accelerating together.

The new angle creates friction against a spot inside me. Each thrust builds the sensation higher until I'm struggling to maintain my silence. A moan escapes before I can catch it, the sound seeming obscenely loud in the quiet room.

Jake's eyes darken at the noise, his movements becoming more urgent, more purposeful.

"That's it," he encourages softly. "Let me hear you."

I shake my head frantically, all too aware of his sleeping daughters down the hall. "Can't," I gasp.

He understands immediately, adjusting his grip to pull me closer, my face tucking against his neck to muffle any sounds I can't contain. The change in position intensifies everything—the depth of his thrusts, the friction against my most sensitive spots, the intimate press of our bodies.

"Jake," I whisper against his skin, feeling something building inside me, a tension coiling tighter with each movement. "I think I'm going to—"

"Let go," he murmurs into my hair. "I've got you."

His thrusts increase in speed and intensity, hitting that perfect spot with unerring accuracy. The pleasure builds to an almost unbearable peak before crashing over me in waves. I bite down on his shoulder to stifle my cry, my entire body pulsing around him as the orgasm sweeps through me.

Jake groans low in his throat, and his hands grip my thighs hard enough to leave marks as he makes one final, deep thrust. I feel the pulse of his release inside me, his body shuddering against mine.

For several long moments, we stay perfectly still, our ragged breathing the only sound in the room. I remain draped against him, boneless and overwhelmed, his arms wrapped securely around my waist. When he finally eases me back onto the bed, I feel the loss of connection like a physical ache.

Jake disappears briefly to the bathroom, returning with a warm washcloth. With tender care, he cleans between my thighs, his touch gentle on sensitized skin.

"Are you okay?" he asks, voice full of concern as he settles beside me. "I didn't hurt you too much?"

I shake my head, suddenly shy despite the intimacy we've just shared. "It was perfect," I tell him honestly. "I wouldn't change anything."

He pulls me against his chest, tucking my head under his chin. "I didn't plan for this to happen," he says softly. "Not that I regret it. Not for a second."

"Me neither." I trace patterns on his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart beneath my palm.

"I think you're extraordinary, Isabella. And I think we both felt something neither of us was expecting."

"What happens now?" I ask, voicing the question that's been hovering at the edges of my mind.

Jake's hand strokes gently up and down my spine. "That depends on what you want. You said you needed time to figure things out, to breathe. I don't want to complicate that for you."

"You already have," I admit with a small laugh. "In the best possible way."

"I'm serious, though," he says, shifting to look at me. "You ran away from a life that was suffocating you. The last thing I want is to trap you in another situation before you've had a chance to figure out what you really want."

His consideration touches me deeply. "What if what I want is to stay? At least for a little while?"

Something like hope flickers in his eyes. "In Cedar Falls?"

"Yes. It seems like a good place to... breathe."

"It is," he agrees, a cautious smile forming. "But Isabella, I need to be clear about something. I have the girls to consider. If you stay, if we... explore whatever this is between us, I need to know you understand that they come first. Always."

"I wouldn't expect anything less," I tell him, meaning it completely. "They're wonderful, Jake. And they need stability."

He nods, relief evident in his expression. "So we take things slow? See where this

goes?"

"Slow," I agree, then can't resist adding, "Starting tomorrow?"

His laugh rumbles through his chest beneath my ear. "Starting tomorrow."

We talk late into the night, sharing stories and secrets in the darkness.

I tell him about my childhood in Boston's elite circles, about the pressure to be perfect, about my dreams of becoming an artist that were systematically discouraged.

He tells me about growing up in Cedar Falls, following in his father's footsteps, meeting Claire in high school and building a life with her that ended far too soon.

There are tears—mine when I describe my mother's coldness, his when he recounts telling his daughters their mother wasn't coming home. But there's laughter too, and a deepening connection that feels both exhilarating and terrifying in its intensity.

I fall asleep curled against his side, more content than I can ever remember being.

Next Day

The sound of giggling wakes me.

I blink against the morning light streaming through the blinds, momentarily disoriented until I feel the warm weight of Jake's arm around my waist, his steady breathing against my neck.

More giggling, then a small voice: "They're sleeping like in the fairy tales, Emma!"

"Shh, Sophie! You're gonna wake them up!"

I freeze. I'm naked beneath the sheets! Jake stirs behind me, his body tensing as he registers his daughters' presence in the doorway.

"Daddy slept with the princess!" Sophie announces delightedly.

My cheeks burn with mortification. I wait for Jake to panic, to usher the girls out with stern words about privacy and boundaries. Instead, to my surprise, he chuckles, his arm tightening briefly around me before he sits up, keeping the sheets carefully in place.

"Good morning, troublemakers," he says, voice rough with sleep but warm with affection. "What happened to knocking?"

"We did knock," Emma insists. "But you didn't answer, and we're hungry."

"And I wanted to show Miss Isabella my new drawing," Sophie adds.

Jake runs a hand through his disheveled hair, looking impossibly handsome in the morning light.

"Tell you what. You two go downstairs and get the cereal boxes out. I'll be down in five minutes to make breakfast."

"Can Miss Isabella have breakfast with us too?" Sophie asks hopefully.

Jake glances at me, eyebrows raised in silent question.

"I'd love to," I tell her, clutching the sheet to my chest.

The girls beam in unison, then turn to leave, Sophie's voice drifting back as they head down the hallway: "I told you they're in love like Princess Ella and Prince

Charming!"

"They just met yesterday, dummy," Emma responds, though she sounds pleased by the prospect.

"So? Cinderella just met her prince too!"

Their bickering fades as they descend the stairs, leaving Jake and me in stunned silence.

"I am so sorry," he says finally, turning to face me. "They don't understand... I mean, they're just excited that—"

I silence him with a kiss, morning breath be damned.

"It's okay," I assure him when we part. "They're children. They see the world in simple terms."

"Still." He looks genuinely concerned. "I don't want them getting attached if..." He trails off, not completing the thought.

"If I'm going to leave?" I finish for him.

He nods, vulnerability plain on his face.

"I understand," I tell him. "And I would never want to hurt them. But Jake, I meant what I said last night. I'd like to stay in Cedar Falls."

"I'd like that too." He glances at the clock on the nightstand. "I should get downstairs before they decide to cook something themselves. Last time Sophie tried to make pancakes, we almost had to call the fire department."

I laugh, then squeal in surprise as he suddenly rolls on top of me, pinning me to the mattress. "But first," he murmurs, lips brushing mine, "good morning."

Morning responsibilities are momentarily forgotten as his hand slides beneath the sheets, finding me already wet and receptive. I arch into his touch, desire rekindling instantly.

"We don't have time," I protest weakly, even as my body responds to his touches.

"Five minutes," he counters, sliding down my body. "I can do a lot in five minutes."

He proves this assertion thoroughly, reducing me to a quivering mess in considerably less time than promised. When I reach for him afterward, eager to reciprocate, he catches my hand and brings it to his lips.

"Later," he promises, eyes dark with unfulfilled desire. "When we don't have an audience waiting downstairs."

The reminder of his daughters sobers me instantly. "Right. Breakfast."

We dress quickly—me in yesterday's clothes, Jake in clean jeans and a faded t-shirt that hugs his broad shoulders in a way that makes me want to undress him all over again. Before we leave the bedroom, he pulls me into one last embrace.

"No regrets?" he asks, searching my face.

I shake my head, smiling up at him. "Not a single one."

Downstairs, the girls have indeed gotten out cereal boxes, along with eggs, maple syrup, chocolate chips, and what appears to be every fruit in the refrigerator.

"We're making a special breakfast!" Sophie announces proudly. "Because Miss Isabella is here!"

"That's very thoughtful," Jake says, eyeing the chaos on the counter with good-natured resignation. "How about I handle the stove parts, and you two can be my assistants?"

Emma immediately begins organizing the ingredients while Sophie tugs me toward the table.

"You sit here," she instructs. "Next to Daddy's chair."

I obey, watching the Reynolds family morning routine unfold with a mixture of wonder and longing.

Jake moves around the kitchen, cracking eggs one-handed while simultaneously flipping pancakes and answering Sophie's stream-of-consciousness questions.

Emma sets the table with precision, placing a fresh wildflower in a small vase by my plate.

"It's a welcome gift," she explains when she catches me admiring it. "Sophie picked it this morning."

"It's beautiful," I tell her. "Thank you both."

Jake brings over plates piled with pancakes, some shaped like lopsided hearts, others dotted with chocolate chips or blueberries.

"Breakfast is served," he announces, taking the seat beside me.

As the girls dig in enthusiastically, Jake's hand finds mine beneath the table, giving it a gentle squeeze.

I squeeze back, overwhelmed by the simple joy of this moment—sitting at a kitchen table with maple syrup-sticky children, morning sunshine streaming through windows that need washing, a man who looks at me like I'm some kind of miracle.

I ran away from my wedding less than twenty-four hours ago, fled a life that had been meticulously planned for me since birth. I should be terrified, overwhelmed, regretting my impulsive decision.

Instead, watching Sophie demonstrate how to make a pancake mustache while Jake laughs and Emma pretends to be mortified, I feel like I've finally found my way home.

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The house is quiet when I pull up in the cruiser, but warm light spills from the living room windows, painting rectangles of gold on the front lawn. It's these moments—coming home to my family—that make every difficult day worth it.

I hang my gun belt in the locked cabinet by the door. The sound of the Paw Patrol theme song drifts from the living room, along with Sophie's enthusiastic narration.

"And that's Marshall, James. He's the fire pup. He's clumsy but brave, just like Daddy says you'll be someday."

I pause in the doorway, taking in the scene before me.

Isabella is curled up on our oversized couch, her paint-stained maternity overalls testament to a productive day in her studio.

Our eighteen-month-old son is propped against her chest, his dark curls wild and untamed like his mother's.

Emma, now thirteen and starting to show hints of the young woman she'll become, is sprawled on the floor with her homework spread around her.

And Sophie, ten going on thirty, sits cross-legged in front of the TV, taking her big sister duties very seriously.

"Everything okay at the station?" Isabella asks, noticing me first.

Her smile still hits me the same way it did that first night, like sunshine breaking

through clouds.

"Just paperwork today," I assure her, crossing to kiss her hello. James immediately reaches for me with grabby hands, his favorite word "Dada" tumbling from his lips.

"Someone missed you," Isabella laughs as I scoop up our son. He immediately grabs my beard with both hands—a habit that should be annoying but somehow never is.

"Dad," Emma looks up from her math homework. "Can you help me with these equations later? Mom tried but she admits she's useless at algebra."

"Hey!" Isabella protests good-naturedly. "I help with English and...Painting!"

It's an old joke between them. Emma had been skeptical of Isabella at first, testing boundaries and watching for any sign that this new woman might try to replace her mother's memory.

But Isabella never tried to be Claire. Instead, she carved out her own space in our family, supporting Emma's softball dreams while admitting her own athletic limitations, helping with English homework but deferring to me for math and science.

"Speaking of paintings," I settle onto the couch with James, who's already half-asleep against my shoulder, "how did the gallery showing go?"

Isabella's eyes light up. "Sold three pieces! And the owner wants to feature my work in their summer exhibition."

"That's amazing, sweetheart."

Pride swells in my chest. Five years ago, she arrived in Cedar Falls with nothing but a wedding dress and broken dreams. Now her little art studio downtown is thriving, her paintings selling in galleries across the state.

"Mom painted me and James today," Sophie announces, finally tearing herself away from the TV. "But she won't let us see it until it's finished."

"It's a surprise for Father's Day," Isabella explains, then immediately claps a hand over her mouth. "Which I wasn't supposed to mention."

I laugh, shifting James to a more comfortable position. "I'll pretend to be surprised."

"Dad," Emma says suddenly, "did you tell Mom about the college recruiter who came to my game yesterday?"

Isabella sits up straighter. "What recruiter?"

"From Oregon State," I explain. "She was impressed with Emma's pitching. Wants to track her progress over the next few years."

"My baby, the future college athlete," Isabella beams, reaching over to ruffle Emma's hair. The casual gesture—and the fact that Emma allows it—speaks volumes about how far they've come.

"Mo-om," Emma protests, but she's smiling. "I'm not a baby anymore."

"No," Isabella agrees softly. "You're growing into an amazing young woman. Just like your mom would have wanted."

The mention of Claire doesn't bring pain anymore.

Just a gentle ache of remembrance and gratitude.

We keep her memory alive in the family, her photos still hanging on the walls alongside newer ones.

Isabella made sure of that, understanding that love doesn't have to be diminished to make room for more.

"Speaking of growing," Sophie pipes up, "when is the new baby coming? James needs someone to play with."

Isabella rubs her barely-visible bump. "Still about four months to go, honey. These things take time."

"It's a girl," Sophie declares with absolute certainty. "I can tell."

"Oh you can, can you?" I tease. "Like you could 'tell' James was going to be a girl?"

Sophie shrugs, unperturbed. "I was practicing my prediction skills then. I'm better now."

"Your mother called today," Isabella tells me, changing the subject. "She's coming for a visit next week. Says she needs to spoil her grandchildren before the new one arrives."

My mom had taken to Isabella immediately, recognizing in her the same strength she'd always admired in Claire. She'd been instrumental in helping us navigate those early days of blending our family, offering wisdom without judgment.

Isabella's own mother had taken longer to come around.

She'd missed our small wedding ceremony, though she'd sent a lovely but impersonal gift.

It wasn't until James was born that something shifted.

Maybe it was seeing her daughter truly happy, or maybe it was just the primal pull of

grandmotherhood, but she's been making slow steps toward reconciliation ever since.

Her father remains distant, though Isabella seems at peace with that now. "You can't make someone love you the way you need to be loved," she told me once. "Sometimes the kindest thing is to let go."

"Daddy," James mumbles against my neck, pulling me from my thoughts. "Story?"

"Bath first," I tell him, standing. "Then story."

"I'll help," Sophie volunteers, always eager to assist with her little brother. "I can do all the voices better than Dad anyway."

"True," I admit, following her toward the stairs. "But I do better sound effects."

"Mom does the best voices," Emma calls after us. "Remember when she did the entire cast of Frozen?"

"That's because your mom is talented at everything," I call back, hearing Isabella's laugh in response.

Later, after James is bathed and storied and tucked into his big-boy bed, after Emma has finished her homework and Sophie has finally run out of things to tell us about her day, after the house has settled into its nighttime quiet, I find Isabella in our bedroom.

She's standing at the window, one hand resting on her small bump, looking out at the stars.

"Penny for your thoughts," I say, wrapping my arms around her from behind.

She leans back against me, sighing contentedly. "Just thinking about that first night.

When you found me wandering down Main Street in that ridiculous dress."

"Best traffic stop of my career," I murmur, pressing a kiss to her neck.

"Did you know then?" she asks. "That this is how it would turn out?"

"Not consciously," I admit. "But something in me recognized you. Like my heart knew what my head hadn't figured out yet."

She turns in my arms, rising on tiptoes to kiss me. "My running away brought me home."

"Our home," I agree, sliding my hand over her bump. "Our family."

"Our future," she adds, then laughs as tiny feet kick against my palm. "See? Even this one agrees."

I pull her closer, breathing in the familiar scent of her hair, paint and lavender and something uniquely Isabella. Five years ago, I thought I knew what happiness was, what love could be. I was wrong.

This—this beautiful, messy, perfectly imperfect life we've built together—this is everything I never knew I needed.

"I love you," I tell her, the words as true now as they were the first time I said them.

"I love you too," she replies, then adds with a mischievous smile, "Sheriff Reynolds."

"Mrs. Reynolds," I counter, backing her toward our bed.

Her laughter, bright and free, echoes through our home—the home she helped make whole again, the home she ran away to find, the home we build together every day.

And I think, not for the first time, how grateful I am that she chose that particular street to walk down, wearing that particular dress, on that particular day five years ago.

Some things, it turns out, are simply meant to be.

Thank you for reading it!