



Tempted By the Handsome Doctor (Curvy Wives of Cedar Falls #3)

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Category: Romance

Description: One night with the sexy doctor was supposed to be my one bold move And now Im carrying his baby.

I dont do casual hookups. I dont do bars. And I definitely dont do gorgeous, green-eyed doctors with perfect hands and whispered promises that vanish by morning. But after one night with Daniel, Im left with more than just memories—Im pregnant, and the father is nowhere to be found.

When I finally track him down at Cedar Falls General, he looks as shocked as I feel. The man who disappeared without a word now claims he wants to be involved, that hell support whatever I decide. But in a small town where everyone knows everyones business, can I really trust the playboy doctor with my heart—let alone our childs future?

How do you build a life with someone you barely know, even if your body remembers exactly why you ended up in this mess in the first place?

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:03 am

"Breathe," I whisper to myself, gripping the bathroom sink. My reflection stares back at me, dark circles under my eyes, hair piled in a messy bun that's more "slept like garbage" than "effortlessly tousled."

It's been exactly twenty-nine days since Lisa, my best friend, dragged me to Finch's Bar downtown, insisting that I needed to "live a little" after two years of shuttling between the library and my dad's empty cottage.

Twenty-nine days since I met him. Twenty-nine days since I did something completely out of character and took a gorgeous man home.

Daniel Morrison. At least, that's what he said his name was.

I splash cold water on my face, trying to shock myself out of this nightmare. But when I look up, I'm still me, still pregnant, still completely, utterly screwed.

My phone buzzes on the counter. It's Lisa, because of course it is.

Did you take the test? her text reads.

I snap a photo of all three tests lined up on the sink and send it without comment.

Three dots appear immediately. Then: *HOLY SHIT*

Then: *What are you going to do?*

The million-dollar question. What am I going to do?

I'm twenty-five, living in my dead father's house, with student loans that make me nauseous every time I think about them, and a job that, while I love it, pays just enough to keep me treading water.

I have exactly \$1412 in my savings account.

I have no partner, no support system beyond Lisa and my elderly silver-haired neighbor, Mrs. Gunderson, who brings me homemade dumplings on Sundays.

What I do have is a name—possibly fake—and the knowledge that he works at Cedar Falls General Hospital. Or claimed to.

I'm going to find him, I type back.

My phone rings instantly.

"Maya, wait," Lisa says when I answer. "Think about this. The guy ghosted you. Complete radio silence for a month. Do you really want to track him down?"

"What choice do I have?" I snap, then immediately feel guilty. "Sorry. I'm just... freaking out."

"I know, honey. I'm coming over."

"No," I say, more firmly than I intend. "No, I need to do this now, before I lose my nerve. If I wait, I'll talk myself out of it."

Lisa sighs. "At least let me come with you."

"You have that big catalog meeting today. I'll be fine." I try to sound more confident than I feel. "I'm just going to confirm he actually works there. Maybe peek at him

from afar. I'm not planning to march up and announce my pregnancy in the middle of the emergency room."

Though the mental image is somewhat satisfying.

"Text me updates. Every fifteen minutes, or I'm calling the police," Lisa insists.

"Deal."

I hang up and stare at myself in the mirror again. I look exactly the same as I did yesterday, but everything has changed. The universe has tilted on its axis, and I'm hanging on by my fingernails.

Twenty minutes later, I'm dressed in my most professional-looking outfit—a navy pencil skirt and cream blouse that says "I have my life together" instead of "I just found out I'm pregnant with a stranger's baby."

"My hands shake as I twist my hair into a neat bun and slide on my glasses.

The librarian armor, Dad used to call it.

I take a deep breath and grab my car keys. The drive to Cedar Falls General is only fifteen minutes, but it feels like crossing an ocean. My ancient Toyota protests as I push it up the hill that leads to the hospital, as if it knows this is a terrible idea.

The parking garage is packed, of course. I circle for what feels like hours before finding a spot on the roof level, about as far from the entrance as physically possible. Figured.

Walking toward the hospital's main entrance, I rehearse what I'm going to say. *Hi, I'm looking for Dr. Daniel Morrison? No, too direct. Excuse me, could you tell me if

Dr. Morrison is working today? I need to speak with him about a... personal matter.*

God, this is a disaster. What am I doing?

The automatic doors slide open, and cool, antiseptic air washes over me.

The lobby bustles with activity—nurses speed-walking with purpose, visitors clutching wilting flower arrangements, patients being wheeled to and from various departments.

I force myself toward the information desk, where an older woman with steel-gray hair and kind eyes looks up at me.

"Can I help you, dear?" she asks.

"I'm looking for Dr. Morrison," I manage. "Daniel Morrison."

"Oh, Dan!" Her face lights up with recognition, and relief floods through me. He exists. "Are you a patient?"

"No, I'm..." What am I? A one-night stand? A walking catastrophe? "I'm a friend. I need to speak with him about something important."

She eyes me with a hint of suspicion, then softens. "He's just finishing up his shift in the ER. If you want to wait, you can have a seat in the cafeteria. It's down that hallway, make a left at the gift shop."

"Thank you," I say, already backing away.

The cafeteria is half-full, mostly with staff in various colored scrubs hunched over coffee cups. I buy a tea, and find a table in the corner with a clear view of the

entrance.

And then I wait.

Ten minutes pass. Twenty. I've shredded my paper napkin into confetti and am working on destroying the cardboard sleeve from my cup when my phone buzzes.

Status update? Lisa texts.

In hospital cafeteria. Waiting.

He works there?

Apparently.

Holy shit.

Holy shit indeed.

I'm typing a response when the cafeteria door swings open, and suddenly, there he is.

Daniel Morrison in the daylight. Daniel Morrison in scrubs, looking exhausted and somehow even more handsome than he did in the dim lighting of Finch's Bar.

His hair is messier than I remember, brown strands sticking up like he's been running his hands through it.

He has a stethoscope slung around his neck and dark circles under his eyes that match mine.

My heart pounds so hard I'm certain everyone can hear it. The cafeteria seems to

shrink, tunneling until he's all I can see. I'm frozen, tea clutched in my white-knuckled grip, as he approaches the coffee station.

He hasn't noticed me yet. I could still leave. I could walk out right now and figure this out on my own. I don't need him. I've been taking care of myself since Dad got sick. I can handle this, too.

But then he turns, coffee in hand, and his tired green eyes land on me.

For a moment, he just stares, coffee suspended halfway to his lips. I watch recognition dawn on his face—followed quickly by something that looks remarkably like panic.

"Maya?" he says, and I hate hearing him say my name. He doesn't deserve it.

I stand up, smoothing my skirt with damp palms. "We need to talk," I say, amazed that my voice doesn't shake. "Now."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:03 am

I've been awake for thirty-six hours straight. That's the only explanation for why I'm hallucinating Maya Sullivan sitting in my hospital cafeteria, looking like she wants to murder me with her teacup.

Except she's not a hallucination. She's real, she's here, and she just said we need to talk. Now.

"Maya?" I repeat stupidly, as if saying her name again might make her disappear.

She doesn't. Instead, she stands, smoothing down her skirt with a deliberate precision that suggests she's trying very hard to keep it together.

Her dark eyes lock onto mine with laser focus.

I know that look. It's the same one I saw a month ago across a crowded bar, except now there's no warmth behind it.

Just determination and something else. Fury? Fear?

"What are you doing here?" The question comes out harsher than I intended. Sleep deprivation has taken away all my social niceties.

"What am I doing here?" She lets out a hollow laugh. "That's rich, coming from you. You disappeared. Without a word."

I drag a hand through my hair, aware of how disheveled I must look. "I know. I'm sorry about that. It was a crazy morning, and then—"

"Save it," she cuts me off. "I don't care about your excuses."

The cafeteria suddenly feels very small and very public. Megan from Pediatrics is watching us from two tables over. Dr. Reeves, the Chief of Surgery, just walked in and is eyeing us as he heads to the coffee station.

"Look, can we talk somewhere private?" I nod toward the hallway. "My shift just ended."

Maya hesitates, clutching her teacup like it's the only thing keeping her upright. Then she nods once, a sharp, decisive movement. "Fine."

I lead her down the corridor toward the small doctors' lounge, hoping to God it's empty. My mind races as we walk in silence. It's been a month since that night—a night I've replayed more times than I care to admit. A night I'd deliberately tried to forget by burying myself in work.

The lounge is mercifully vacant. I hold the door for her, and she brushes past me, the faint scent of vanilla and old books hitting me with unexpected force. The same scent that clung to my sheets. To my skin.

I shake the thought away.

"Have a seat." I gesture to the worn couch against the wall.

She remains standing, arms crossed over her chest. "I'll stand."

"Suit yourself." I set my coffee down and mirror her stance. "So, what's this about?"

Maya stares at me for a long moment. Her eyes, usually so warm and expressive behind those wire-rimmed glasses, are unreadable now. Then she reaches into her

purse and pulls out something small, placing it on the table between us.

It takes my exhausted brain a moment to process what I'm looking at.

A pregnancy test. With two pink lines.

My world narrows to those two lines, and suddenly I can't breathe. Can't think. Can't move.

"I'm pregnant," Maya says, her voice steady despite the slight tremor in her hands. "And before you ask—yes, it's yours. Yes, I'm sure."

The room tilts slightly. I grab the edge of the table to steady myself. "That's... that's not possible."

"Evidently it is." Her laugh is brittle. "Believe me, I've spent the morning trying to convince myself of the same thing."

I sink into the nearest chair, my legs suddenly unable to support my weight. "I don't understand. We were careful."

"Condoms aren't foolproof. They break, they slip. Haven't you had this conversation with patients before, Doctor?"

The way she says "doctor" makes it sound like an insult.

"Of course I have, but—" I stop, forcing myself to take a breath. "I'm sorry. This is a shock."

"You think it's a shock for you?" Maya's composure cracks for just a moment, her voice rising. "I didn't even know if you were real! If Daniel Morrison was your actual

name, or if you worked here like you said you did!"

Guilt slams into me. "I didn't lie about who I am."

"No, you just left without a word after—" She cuts herself off, cheeks flushing. "After what happened between us."

The memory of that night flickers between us. Her skin under my hands. Her soft moans in my ear. The way she'd curled against me afterward, trusting and warm.

Until my pager went off at 5 AM. Until the multi-car pileup on Route 16 sent the ER into chaos and pulled me away before she woke.

"I got called in for an emergency," I explain, knowing how pathetic it sounds. "A major accident. Multiple traumas."

"And they don't have phones at this hospital?" She arches an eyebrow. "You couldn't have left a note? Sent a text?"

"I meant to call you later, but the day got away from me, and then—" I stop myself.

There's no excuse that doesn't make me sound like an ass.

Because the truth is, after that initial crazy shift, I could have called.

I should have called. But I didn't, because calling meant acknowledging what happened between us was more than just a one-night stand.

That the connection I felt wasn't just physical. And that terrified me.

Maya waits for me to finish, but when I don't, she just shakes her head. "It doesn't

matter now. What matters is this." She gestures to the pregnancy test between us.

"Are you... I mean, have you decided what you want to do?" I ask carefully.

Her eyes flash. "I don't know yet. I just found out this morning. I haven't had time to process any of this."

"Of course. I'm sorry." I scrub a hand over my face, stubble rough against my palm. "Whatever you decide, I'll support you. Financially, I mean. And... otherwise, if you want."

"How generous," she says flatly.

I wince. "That came out wrong. I just meant—"

"I know what you meant." Maya takes a deep breath, adjusting her glasses. "Look, I didn't come here to trap you or make demands. I came because you deserved to know, and because I needed to confirm you weren't some pathological liar who gave me a fake name."

"I'm not," I say softly. "I'm just a regular idiot who didn't call when he should have."

The corner of her mouth twitches, almost a smile, before she suppresses it.

She looks at me for a long moment, and I force myself to meet her gaze.

She's beautiful, even now—especially now—with her dark eyes full of fire and her chin lifted in defiance.

She's nothing like the women I usually go for.

Nothing like the casual, no-strings-attached relationships I've had over the years.

Maybe that's why I ran.

"I need time to think," she says finally, gathering her purse. "To figure out what I want to do."

"Of course." I stand, reaching into my pocket for my phone. "Can I at least get your number again? So we can... talk. When you're ready."

She hesitates, then recites her number as I type it in.

"I'll call you," I promise, and this time I mean it. "Whenever you want to talk. Day or night."

Maya nods, avoiding my eyes. "I have to go. My lunch break is almost over."

"You work at the library, right?" I remember her telling me that night, her face animated as she described her favorite sections, the reading programs she'd started.

She looks surprised that I remember. "Yes. Cedar Falls Public."

"I'll call you," I repeat, because I need her to believe me. "And Maya?"

She pauses at the door, looking back at me over her shoulder.

"I really am sorry. About not calling."

Something flickers across her face—not forgiveness, but maybe the seed of it. "Goodbye, Daniel."

And then she's gone, leaving me alone with a cold cup of coffee and the knowledge that my life has just irrevocably changed.

I collapse back into the chair, running both hands through my hair. A baby. Maya is pregnant with my baby. The thought is so enormous, so life-altering, that my mind keeps sliding away from it, unable to fully grasp its weight.

My pager beeps, jolting me out of my stupor. Another emergency. Because of course the universe won't even give me five minutes to process the fact that I'm going to be a father.

Father. The word sits heavy in my chest, dredging up memories I've spent years trying to suppress. My own father walking out the door when I was ten, duffel bag in hand, promising to call soon. The calls that never came. The birthdays that passed without a word.

I stand up, shoving the thoughts away. I can't think about this now. I have a job to do, lives to save, and a reputation to uphold. Later, when I'm home, when I've slept, I'll figure out what to do about Maya and the baby.

Our baby.

I grab my cold coffee and head back into the fray, but Maya's face stays with me, hovering at the edges of my consciousness like a ghost I can't quite shake.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:03 am

I make it to my car before the tears come.

They're hot and sudden, spilling down my cheeks as I grip the steering wheel like it's the only solid thing in my tilting world. I don't even know why I'm crying. Relief that he's real? Anger that he's so infuriatingly handsome even in wrinkled scrubs? Fear of the impossible choices ahead of me?

All of it, probably.

"Get it together, Maya," I whisper, wiping my face with the back of my hand. The dashboard clock tells me I have exactly seven minutes to pull myself together before my lunch break ends.

I catch my reflection in the rearview mirror—red eyes, flushed cheeks, mascara smudged beneath my lower lashes.

Great. I look exactly like someone who just confronted their one-night stand with a positive pregnancy test. I rummage through my purse for tissues and do my best to repair the damage, but there's no fixing the hollow feeling in my chest.

Daniel's face when he saw that test. I've never seen someone go so pale so quickly. For a moment, I thought he might actually pass out, and some vindictive part of me was glad. Let him feel a fraction of the shock I felt this morning.

But then... he said he'd support me. Whatever I decide. The words sounded rehearsed, clinical—the kind of thing doctors are trained to say to patients in crisis. But at least he said them.

My phone buzzes with a text from Lisa: *WELL??*

He's real. A real doctor. We talked. Will call you later.

I start the car and pull out of the parking garage, my mind replaying our conversation on a loop. The way he stumbled over his explanations. The genuine regret in his eyes when he apologized for not calling. The way he remembered where I work.

None of that changes the fact that he disappeared without a word after one of the most intimate nights of my life. None of it changes the fact that I'm carrying his child.

His child. Our child.

The thought sends a fresh wave of panic through me. I'm not ready for this. I'm still trying to figure out who I am after Dad died, still trying to build a life that feels like mine and not just the hollow shell he left behind. How can I possibly be responsible for another human being?

But then, as I stop at a red light, another thought surfaces: maybe this is exactly what I need. Someone to care for. Someone who will love me unconditionally. Someone who will never leave.

I shake my head. That's not fair to place on an unborn child. That's not a reason to become a mother.

The light turns green, and I drive toward the library, forcing myself to breathe slowly. One step at a time. I'll get through this afternoon's children's reading hour. I'll catalog the new mythology section. I'll do my job, and tonight, I'll think about what comes next.

But for now, I just need to survive the day.

A few hours later

The library closes at eight on Thursdays. As usual, I'm the last one out, taking my time locking up after shoos the final stragglers toward the exit. There's something peaceful about an empty library—all those stories tucked away for the night, waiting patiently to be discovered tomorrow.

Tonight, though, the silence feels oppressive. My thoughts are too loud, bouncing off the quiet stacks, echoing through the empty reading rooms. I've been running on autopilot all afternoon, my body going through the motions while my mind spins in useless circles.

I step outside into the cool evening air, fishing my keys from my purse as I descend the wide stone steps. The parking lot is nearly empty—just my Toyota, Mrs. Hendricks' ancient Buick, and...

A sleek, gunmetal gray Audi that definitely doesn't belong in Cedar Falls.

Leaning against it, arms crossed over his chest, is Daniel.

I stop. He looks different than he did this morning—showered, changed into dark jeans and a forest green henley that makes his eyes appear even greener. His hair is still damp, curling slightly at the ends. He's traded exhaustion for alertness, and the effect is... disconcerting.

This is the Daniel I met at the bar. The one who smiled at me across a crowded room and made me feel like the only woman in the world.

He straightens when he sees me, pushing away from the car. "Maya."

"Are you stalking me now?" I ask, but there's no real bite to my words. I'm too tired

for anger.

"No, I—" He runs a hand through his hair. "I wanted to talk. Properly. Without me being half-dead from exhaustion or you needing to rush back to work."

"And you thought ambushing me in a dark parking lot was the way to go?"

He winces. "When you put it that way, it does sound creepy. I'm sorry. I can leave if you want."

I should say yes. I should tell him to go, to call me tomorrow like a normal person. But curiosity gets the better of me. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Everything." He gestures to the passenger door of his car. "Can I buy you dinner? Madeline's should still be open."

My stomach chooses that moment to growl. I haven't eaten since a granola bar at noon, too nauseated by morning sickness and nerves to manage anything else.

Daniel's mouth quirks up. "I'll take that as a yes?"

I hesitate, weighing my options. Going to dinner means spending more time with him, prolonging this strange limbo we're in. But it also means food I don't have to cook, and maybe some actual answers.

"Fine," I say, walking toward him. "But I'm driving myself. I'll follow you there."

His face falls slightly. "Right. Of course."

We drive separately to Madeline's Diner, a Cedar Falls institution that's been serving the best burgers in three counties since before I was born.

The neon OPEN 24/7 sign buzzes in the window, and the parking lot is half-full with the usual Thursday night crowd—a few truckers passing through, some high school kids lingering over milkshakes, the night shift from the paper mill grabbing dinner before work.

Daniel holds the door for me, and the familiar smell of grilled onions and fresh coffee wraps around me like a blanket. Madeline herself is behind the counter, her gray hair piled on top of her head, reading glasses perched on the end of her nose as she tallies receipts.

She looks up as the bell above the door jingles, and her face lights up.

"Well, if it isn't Lou's grandson!" she calls, loud enough for the entire diner to hear. "Haven't seen you in here for ages, Danny!"

I glance at Daniel, surprised by both the nickname and the connection. His jaw is tight, a muscle ticking in his cheek, but he forces a smile. "Hi, Madeline. Table for two?"

"Sure thing, honey." She grabs two laminated menus and leads us to a booth by the window. "Your grandfather was here just four days ago, telling everyone about how his boy is saving lives at Cedar Falls General. You know how proud he is of you."

Daniel nods, his smile growing more strained. "How is he?"

"Ornery as ever," Madeline says with a laugh. "Still thinks Lou's Diner is better than mine." She turns to me, eyeing me with unabashed curiosity. "And who's your friend?"

"This is Maya Sullivan," Daniel says. "Maya, this is Madeline, owner of the second best diner in Cedar Falls and the keeper of all the town's secrets."

"Sullivan?" Madeline taps her chin. "You must be James Sullivan's girl, the librarian. Your daddy was a good man. Terrible loss."

"Thank you," I say softly. "He loved your apple pie."

"Everyone does, honey." She winks at me. "I'll give you two a minute to look over the menu, but the burger special tonight is the Smoky Mountain—bacon, cheddar, and barbecue sauce."

When she's gone, I turn to Daniel. "Lou's grandson?"

He sighs, running a hand through his hair again. "Welcome to small-town life. Where I'll always be 'Lou's grandson' no matter how many medical degrees I have."

"You don't like it," I observe.

"It's not that I don't like it. I love my grandfather." Daniel stares out the window for a moment. "It's just... I've spent my whole life trying to be more than just Lou Morrison's grandson. To be my own person. But in Cedar Falls, that's how everyone sees me first."

"Is that why you drive a car that probably cost more than most people here make in a year?" The question comes out more judgmental than I intended.

His eyes snap back to mine, defensive. "Maybe. Or maybe I just like nice cars."

I raise my hands in surrender. "Sorry. None of my business."

We're saved from further awkwardness by the arrival of our waitress, a teenager with braces and a Cedar Falls High School sweatshirt under her apron. We both order the special and chocolate milkshakes.

When we're alone again, Daniel leans forward. "Look, I know I messed up. But I'm here now, trying to do the right thing."

"And what is the right thing, exactly?" I set down my menu. "Supporting me financially if I decide to keep the baby? Writing a check every month and going on with your life?"

His jaw tightens. "That's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean? Because from where I'm sitting, you're the classic commitment-phobic playboy doctor with too much money and too little time for anything real."

"You don't know me," he says. "You spent one night with me. That's not enough to make those kinds of judgments."

He's right, and I know it, but admitting that feels like surrender. "Fine. Then tell me who you are, Daniel Morrison. Help me understand the man who might be the father of my child."

"I'm a third-year resident in emergency medicine," he says after a moment.

"I work eighty-hour weeks, sometimes more.

I live in a condo downtown that I barely see because I'm always at the hospital.

" He pauses. "And yes, I'm Lou Morrison's grandson.

He raised me, and he's the only real family I have. "

Our milkshakes arrive, thick and frosty in tall glasses. I take a sip, needing something

to do with my hands. "I didn't know Lou Morrison had a grandson."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:03 am

"He has two. My brother Jake and I, but Jake went to the military and never came back.

" Daniel shrugs. "Most people in town just know me as 'the doctor one' if they remember me at all.

I left for college and med school, only came back for the residency program because it's actually one of the best in the state. "

"I'm surprised you came back at all," I admit. "Most people who leave Cedar Falls don't return."

"Grandpa Lou needed someone close by. He'd never admit it, but he's getting older." Daniel's expression softens when he talks about his grandfather. "And the hospital here offered me autonomy I wouldn't get at a bigger program. They were desperate for new blood."

Our food arrives—enormous burgers on toasted brioche buns, a mountain of crispy fries, and little cups of coleslaw on the side. My stomach growls at the sight.

"So," Daniel says as we dig in, "tell me about your job. You're the head librarian?"

"For the past year and a half. I came back to Cedar Falls when Dad got sick, and just... stayed after he died. The library needed someone, and I needed a purpose."

"Do you like it?"

"I love it," I admit. "It's not exciting or glamorous, but it matters. Especially the children's programs. You should see their faces when they finish their first chapter book."

He smiles, a genuine smile that transforms his tired face. "I can imagine. You must be good with kids."

And just like that, the elephant in the room trumpets its presence again. Kids. A kid. Our potential kid.

I take a large bite of my burger to avoid responding immediately, savoring the perfect blend of smoky sauce and melted cheese.

"Maya," Daniel says after we've eaten silently for a few minutes. "I need to know what you're thinking. About the pregnancy."

I set down my burger. "Honestly? I don't know yet. Part of me is terrified. I'm barely keeping myself afloat financially. My house needs a new roof. I still have student loans. Having a baby would change everything."

He nods, listening.

"But another part of me..." I take a deep breath. "Another part feels like this might be my only chance. I've always wanted children."

I pause and blink rapidly, determined not to cry in Madeline's Diner over a half-eaten burger.

Daniel reaches across the table, his hand hovering over mine before retreating. "Whatever you decide, I meant what I said. I'll support you. And not just financially."

I look up, surprised. "What do you mean?"

He seems to be choosing his words carefully. "I mean, if you decide to have this baby, I want to be involved. Really involved. Not just writing checks."

"Why?" The question is blunt, but I need to know. "You don't know me any better than I know you."

"Because it would be my child too," he says simply. "And I... I want to be there."

The conviction in his voice is unmistakable. He holds my gaze, and for the first time since seeing those two pink lines this morning, I feel something like hope flicker in my chest.

"I need time," I say finally. "To think about all of this."

"Of course." He signals for the check, and Madeline herself brings it over, eyeing us with curiosity.

"Everything tasted good?" she asks, looking between us like she's trying to solve a puzzle.

"Perfect as always," Daniel says, handing her his credit card before I can protest.

"Tell your grandpa to stop by when he can," she says as she walks away. "I've got a new pie recipe I want him to try."

Daniel fakes his smile. "Will do."

The evening has grown cooler outside. I wrap my cardigan tighter around myself as we walk to our cars.

"I'm off this weekend," Daniel says as we walk to the library parking lot where my car still sits. "If you want to talk more. Or just... I don't know. Get to know each other a little better."

The idea is both appealing and terrifying. "I'll think about it."

We reach my car, and I unlock it, turning to face him.

In the dim glow of the streetlight, his face is all angles and shadows, beautiful in a way that makes my heart ache.

For a moment, I remember what it felt like to kiss him, to feel his hands on my skin, to believe that something magical was happening between us.

"Thank you for dinner," I say, breaking the spell.

"Maya," he says, and there's something in his voice that makes me look up. "I know I have no right to ask this, but... whatever you decide about the baby, can we start over? As friends, at least?"

The question catches me off guard. "Why would you want that?"

Daniel takes a step closer, his eyes never leaving mine. "Because that night wasn't just physical for me. There was something... I felt connected to you in a way I haven't felt with anyone in a long time. Maybe ever."

My breath catches. "You have a funny way of showing it."

"I know. I'm an idiot." His smile is self-deprecating. "But I'd like a chance to be less of an idiot, if you're willing."

I should say no. I should protect myself from this man who has already hurt me once. But something in his eyes makes me hesitate.

"I'll think about it," I say again, but softer this time.

He nods, accepting the non-answer. "Good night, Maya."

"Good night, Daniel."

I get into my car and watch in the rearview mirror as he walks back toward his flashy Audi, hands in his pockets, shoulders slightly hunched against the cool night air.

And despite everything—the shock, the anger, the fear—I find myself hoping, just a little, that we might find a way forward together.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:03 am

I sit in my car long after Maya drives away, hands gripping the steering wheel, knuckles white, trying to make sense of the last twenty-four hours.

Yesterday morning, I was just Dan Morrison, an overworked ER resident with a grandfather who talks too much and a flashy car. Now I'm... what? A potential father? The guy who knocked up the town librarian after a one-night stand?

The thought makes me dizzy. I lean my head back against the leather seat and close my eyes, but all I see is Maya's face—those expressive dark eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses, the way her mouth turns down slightly at the corners when she's upset, how her shoulders square when she's trying to be brave.

She's terrified. I could see it written all over her, even as she tried to hide it behind anger and pragmatism.

And why wouldn't she be? I'm terrified, too, and I'm not the one whose body is about to change.

I'm not the one who will face the judgment of a small town like Cedar Falls, where everyone knows everyone's business and rumors spread faster than wildfire.

My phone chimes with a text. For a wild moment, I think it might be Maya, but it's just Ethan, a fellow resident, asking if I want to grab a beer tomorrow night.

I don't respond. I can't imagine sitting in some bar, making small talk about difficult patients or hospital politics while this bomb ticks away in my life.

A baby. My baby. Maybe.

I turn the key in the ignition, suddenly desperate to be anywhere but this empty parking lot.

The Audi roars to life, and I pull out onto Main Street, driving aimlessly through the quiet streets of Cedar Falls.

I pass the high school I graduated from, the football field where I broke my arm sophomore year, the park where Grandpa Lou taught me to throw a baseball.

All these landmarks of a childhood I couldn't wait to escape, only to end up right back here.

I find myself driving toward the outskirts of town, toward the small house with the weather-beaten porch.

Lou's place. I haven't been by in almost two weeks—an inexcusable stretch given that he's seventy-two and lives alone.

But the thought of sitting across from him at his kitchen table, trying to make conversation while keeping this secret lodged in my throat, is more than I can handle tonight.

I drive past without stopping, looping back toward my condo downtown.

It's a sleek, modern building that sticks out like a sore thumb among Cedar Falls' century-old storefronts—another attempt to distinguish myself from this town, to prove I'm different, special, more than just Lou Morrison's grandson.

What a joke.

I park in the underground garage and take the elevator to the fifth floor, unlocking the door to an apartment that still feels more like a hotel room than a home after nearly a year.

The furniture is minimal and expensive, chosen from a catalog rather than accumulated over time.

No photos on the walls, no mementos cluttering the surfaces. Just clean lines and empty spaces.

For the first time, I try to imagine a baby here. A crib in the corner of my bedroom. A changing table next to my designer dresser. Colorful plastic toys scattered across my pristine hardwood floors.

The image is so out of place it's almost laughable.

I check my phone again—no messages from Maya. Not that I expected any. She said she needed time to think, and I need to respect that. But the waiting is already killing me.

Because the truth, the terrifying truth I barely admitted to myself at Madeline's, is that I want her to keep the baby.

Not just because it's the "right thing" to do, or because I'm afraid of turning into my father if I don't step up.

But because something about Maya Sullivan has gotten under my skin in a way no woman ever has.

And the thought of being connected to her, of building something with her—even if it's just co-parenting—feels like a chance I don't deserve but desperately want.

The realization is so unexpected, so contrary to everything I've built my life around, that I don't know what else to think.

I drop onto my sofa, head in my hands, and wonder how the hell I'm supposed to wait for her to make a decision that will change both our lives forever.

Two days later

My phone buzzes during morning rounds.

Dr. Patel, the attending I'm presenting to, gives me a sharp look, and I quickly silence it, continuing my summary of a patient's lab results. But the moment rounds are over, I duck into a supply closet to check my messages.

There's one from Maya: *At the hospital for blood tests. Just to confirm. I'm in the outpatient lab.*

My heart lurches. She's here, in the same building. After two days of silence, of checking my phone obsessively between patients, of rehearsing conversations we might have.

On my way, I text back, then hesitate.

Is that too eager? Too presumptive? But she did text me to let me know she was here. That has to mean she wants to see me.

I check my watch. I have forty-five minutes before I need to be back for an afternoon clinic. Enough time to get to the lab, at least.

The outpatient lab is on the second floor, in the far east wing. I take the stairs instead of waiting for the elevator, my legs carrying me faster than is probably dignified for a

doctor in his white coat. I slow as I approach the lab's waiting area, trying to compose myself.

And there she is, sitting in one of the molded plastic chairs, flipping through an ancient copy of National Geographic. She's wearing a dark green sweater and jeans, her hair pulled back in a low ponytail. She looks tired but beautiful, and something in my chest constricts at the sight of her.

"Maya," I say, and she looks up, startled. For a moment, something like relief flashes across her face before she schools her expression into something more neutral.

"Daniel." She sets down the magazine. "That was fast."

"I was already on this floor," I lie, not wanting to admit I practically sprinted across the hospital to get here. "How are you feeling?"

"Physically? Nauseous. Tired. My breasts hurt." She delivers this clinical assessment without emotion, but I see a flush creep up her neck. "Emotionally? Still processing."

I take the seat next to her, leaving space between us. "Have they drawn your blood already?"

She nods. "Just waiting for them to say I can go. My doctor ordered an hCG test and some other standard panels. Just to confirm and make sure everything's... normal."

"That's good. Thorough." I sound like an idiot, like I'm talking to a patient instead of the woman carrying my child. "Who's your doctor?"

"Dr. Larsen."

"Sarah Larsen? She's excellent. One of the best OBs in the region."

Maya gives me a sideways look. "I know. That's why I chose her."

"Right. Of course." I clear my throat. "Look, Maya, I'm glad you texted me. I've been thinking about you—about us, this situation—constantly."

"Me too." She looks down at her hands, twisting in her lap. "I still wish this wasn't happening."

The words sting, even though I understand them completely. "I know."

"But it is happening." She takes a deep breath. "And I think... I think I'm going to keep it. The baby."

The world seems to stop for a moment. The ambient noise of the waiting room—pages over the intercom, shuffling papers, muted conversations—fades away until all I can hear is the blood rushing in my ears.

"You're sure?" I manage to ask.

"No," she says with a small, wry smile. "I'm not sure of anything right now. But I keep thinking about what you said at dinner. About being involved, really involved." She meets my eyes directly. "Did you mean that?"

"Every word," I say without hesitation.

"Because I can't do this alone, Daniel. I don't want to do this alone."

"You won't have to." I resist the urge to take her hand, to offer physical comfort when I'm not sure it would be welcome. "I promise you that."

She stares at me, and whatever she sees seems to satisfy her, because she nods once, a

short, decisive motion.

"Okay. Then we're having a baby." The words come out slightly choked, somewhere between a laugh and a sob.

"We're having a baby," I repeat, and saying it out loud makes it real in a way it hasn't been until now.

A lab technician appears in the doorway. "Ms. Sullivan? You're all set. Dr. Larsen will call you with the results in a day or two."

Maya stands, gathering her purse. "Thank you."

I stand too, suddenly reluctant to let her go. "Can I walk you out?"

She hesitates, then nods. We walk side by side through the hospital corridors, not touching but close enough that I can smell her shampoo—something floral but very subtle.

"Do you have to get back to work?" she asks as we approach the main entrance.

I check my watch. "In about twenty minutes."

"I took the morning off," she says. "I was thinking of getting some tea at that cafe across the street. If you wanted to join me. Just for a few minutes..."

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:03 am

The café across from Cedar Falls General is called The Daily Grind, and it's the kind of place that thinks mismatched furniture and Edison bulbs are the height of charm. Still, they make decent tea, and it's close enough to the hospital that I won't lose my nerve walking there.

I'm not entirely sure why I invited Daniel to join me.

The words spilled out before I could stop them, like my body recognized the need for his presence before my brain caught up.

Maybe it's because we just acknowledged we're having a baby together.

Perhaps it's because he looked at me with those green eyes so full of sincerity that I almost believe he won't disappear again.

"I'd love to," he says, and the relief in his voice is palpable. "I just need to let Dr. Patel know I'm taking a short break."

"If you don't have time—"

"I have time," he says firmly, already typing a message on his phone. "There. All set."

The way he prioritizes this moment, this conversation, over whatever important doctor things he should be doing—it makes something flutter in my chest. Something I immediately try to squash. One gesture doesn't erase a month of silence.

We cross the street together, not quite close enough to touch.

The autumn air has a bite to it today, and I pull my cardigan around myself, suddenly aware that soon, very soon, my body will start to change.

The sweater won't close so easily. My balance will shift.

I'll become a vessel for someone else, someone who depends on me entirely.

The enormity of it makes me dizzy.

"Maya?" Daniel's voice breaks through my spiral. "Are you okay?"

I realize I've stopped walking in the middle of the crosswalk. "Sorry. Just... thinking."

His eyes soften with understanding. "It's a lot."

"Yeah."

The Daily Grind is half-full, mostly with hospital staff grabbing coffee between shifts.

A few heads turn when we enter—Daniel in his white coat beside me—and I immediately feel the weight of Cedar Falls' small-town scrutiny.

By dinner, half the town will know Dr. Morrison was seen with James Sullivan's daughter. By tomorrow, they'll have us engaged.

If they only knew.

We find a table in the back corner, away from the windows and curious eyes. Daniel

insists on ordering for us, and I let him, sinking into a worn armchair that's trying too hard to be vintage.

"Chamomile okay?" he asks. "It's caffeine-free."

"I'm allowed up to 200 milligrams of caffeine a day," I say. I've been researching pregnancy guidelines obsessively for the last forty-eight hours. "But chamomile is fine."

He returns a few minutes later with two steaming mugs and a plate with a single chocolate chip cookie. "The barista said their cookies are baked fresh this morning. I thought you might..." He trails off, suddenly uncertain.

"Thanks." I take the cookie, touched by the small gesture. "I haven't had much of an appetite lately, but sweets still work."

Daniel sits across from me, his long legs bumping against mine under the small table. He immediately shifts them away, trying his best not to invade my space. "When did the symptoms start?"

"About a week ago." I break off a piece of cookie, not meeting his eyes. "At first I thought it was just stress. Or a stomach bug. But then I was late, and—" I stop myself. He doesn't need the play-by-play of my panic.

"I still can't believe it," Daniel says softly. "Not in a bad way. Just... the odds."

"Believe me, I've done the math." I finally look up at him. "Condoms are supposed to be 98% effective. We got really unlucky. Or lucky, depending on how you look at it."

His eyes search mine. "How are you looking at it?"

The question is gentle, but it hits like a freight train. I've been so busy cycling through shock, panic, and pragmatic planning that I haven't stopped to really examine how I feel about the actual baby.

"I don't know yet," I admit. "Part of me is terrified. Not ready. But another part..." I take a sip of tea, buying time. "I always wanted kids someday. Just not like this. Not with someone I barely know."

Daniel winces slightly, and I immediately regret my bluntness.

"Sorry, that came out wrong."

"No, it's the truth." He wraps his hands around his mug. "We don't know each other. One night and a couple of conversations don't make us anything close to ready for parenthood together."

"So what do we do about that?" I ask, the question that's been gnawing at me since I saw those two pink lines.

He looks thoughtful. "We get to know each other. Properly."

"Like dating?" The word feels absurd in our situation.

"Not exactly. More like... accelerated friendship." A small smile tugs at his lips. "With a very serious deadline."

Despite everything, I find myself smiling back. "That's one way to put it."

"I have Saturday off," he offers. "The whole day. We could... I don't know. Do something."

"Something?"

"Something normal. Not hospital cafeterias or pregnancy tests or late-night diner confessions." He leans forward slightly. "Something that would let us talk. Really talk."

I can't help but notice his earnest expression, the way he's leaning toward me as if drawn by gravity, the hint of vulnerability beneath his doctor's confidence. He's trying. Really trying.

But I've been burned before, and not just by him. Life has a way of promising things and then snatching them away. Dad's cancer was supposed to be treatable. My career in the city was supposed to be fulfilling. Daniel was supposed to be just a one-night escape, not the father of my child.

"I'm not sure if I can trust you yet," I say finally, the words coming out softer than I intended.

He doesn't flinch from the honesty. "I know. I haven't earned it."

"But I want to try." The admission surprises even me. "For the baby's sake, if nothing else."

"For the baby," he agrees, though something flickers in his eyes that suggests he might be hoping for more.

I break off another piece of cookie, considering. "There's a fall festival at Riverbank Park on Saturday. Local artists, food trucks, that kind of thing. We could meet there around noon?"

"That sounds perfect." His smile is immediate and genuine, lighting up his tired face.

My phone chimes with a calendar reminder. "I should get back to the library," I say, reluctantly gathering my things. "We're doing a special reading for the preschool group today."

Daniel stands when I do, a reflexive old-fashioned courtesy that makes me wonder about the grandfather who raised him. "Can I walk you to your car?"

"I'm parked in the hospital lot." I hesitate, then add, "But you can walk me to the corner."

We exit the café together, and I know how we must look to passersby...The handsome doctor and the librarian, an unlikely pair on a weekday morning.

At the corner, we pause awkwardly. There should be a protocol for saying goodbye to the father of your unborn child whom you barely know, but no one has ever covered this particular situation.

"So, Saturday?" Daniel confirms. "Noon at the park entrance?"

"Saturday," I nod.

He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, clearly debating something. Then, slowly, he reaches out and briefly squeezes my hand. "Take care of yourself, Maya."

The touch is fleeting but electric, sending a jolt up my arm that has nothing to do with pregnancy hormones and everything to do with the memory of his hands on other parts of me. I pull away first, flustered.

"You too," I manage. "Don't work too hard."

A wry smile twists his lips. "Doctor's orders?"

"Librarian's," I counter, and am rewarded with a genuine laugh.

We part ways at the corner, and I feel his eyes on my back as I walk toward the hospital parking lot. I don't turn around, though I want to. I need to maintain some distance, some perspective.

Because the truth is, I'm terrified of how easily I could fall for Daniel Morrison. How naturally we seem to fit together, even in these strange, strained circumstances. How much I want to believe that his promises of support and involvement are real.

But wanting something doesn't make it true. My father wanted to see me turn thirty, wanted to meet his grandchildren someday, wanted to grow old in the house he loved. Wanting didn't save him.

And Daniel might truly believe his own promises now, in the flush of shock and responsibility. But what happens when reality sets in? When my belly swells and midnight feedings loom, and his career demands more and more of his time? When the baby becomes real and not just a concept?

I can't afford to trust him completely. Not yet. But I can give him the chance to prove himself, step by careful step.

Starting with a fall festival on Saturday.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:03 am

I arrive at Riverbank Park thirty minutes early, because apparently impending fatherhood has turned me into the kind of guy who worries about punctuality.

The kind of guy who spends forty-five minutes deciding what to wear to a small-town fall festival.

The kind of guy who buys flowers on the way—then panics and leaves them in the car because they might seem too forward.

I settle for leaning against a lamp post near the park entrance, trying to look casual despite the knot of anxiety in my stomach. The fall festival is already in full swing, spilling out from the park's boundaries onto Main Street.

Booths with colorful canopies line the walkways, selling everything from hand-knitted scarves to maple candy. Children dart between adults' legs, their faces sticky with caramel apple. A band sets up on the small stage by the river, testing microphones and tuning guitars.

It's the kind of wholesome small-town event I used to mock when I was younger, desperate to escape Cedar Falls for the excitement of a bigger city.

Now, watching families stroll past, the afternoon sun turning the changing leaves to fire, I find myself wondering if I've been missing something all these years.

"Danny? That you?"

I turn to find Sheriff Mike approaching, his uniform exchanged for jeans and a Cedar

Falls High School sweatshirt. We played football together back in the day, before I left for college and he stayed to join the police force.

"Hey, Mike." We shake hands. "How's it going?"

"Can't complain. Daughters are happy and well." He nods toward a pair of little girls in matching pumpkin sweaters, holding hands as they peer into a booth selling handmade jewelry. "What about you? Don't usually see you at these things."

"Just thought I'd check it out. Take a break from the hospital."

Mike raises an eyebrow. "Alone?"

I hesitate just long enough for his cop instincts to kick in. His eyes narrow slightly.

"Waiting for someone," I admit.

"Ahh." A knowing grin spreads across his face. "Anyone I know?"

Before I can answer, his radio crackles from his hip. "Gotta take this," he says, already backing away. "Have fun on your date, Doc."

Is it a date? Maya and I never defined it. We're getting to know each other for the baby's sake. Accelerated friendship, I called it. But as I check my watch for the third time in five minutes, my nervous energy feels decidedly date-like.

And then I see her, walking toward the park entrance...

Maya is wearing a rust-colored dress that falls just below her knees, paired with a denim jacket and ankle boots.

Her dark hair is down today, falling in soft waves around her shoulders.

No glasses—contacts, maybe—and the slightest hint of makeup that brings out the warmth in her eyes.

She looks beautiful, approachable, and slightly nervous.

She spots me and raises a hand in greeting, and suddenly I'm walking toward her, drawn like a magnet.

"Hi," she says when we meet in the middle. "Am I late?"

"No, I'm early." I resist the urge to touch her, to offer my hand, or lean in for a hug. We haven't established those boundaries yet. "You look nice."

"Thanks." A hint of color touches her cheeks. "It's weird to be out of librarian clothes."

"Weird good?"

Her mouth quirks up. "Just different." She looks past me to the festival. "I haven't been to one of these since high school. Dad used to have a booth selling old books."

"What would you like to do first?" I ask. "There's food, crafts, music..."

"Food," she says immediately. "I'm starving. Apparently growing a person works up an appetite."

I laugh, relieved by her straightforwardness. "Food it is."

We make our way into the park, falling into step beside each other. The food trucks

are clustered near the river, a mouth-watering variety of options from wood-fired pizza to tacos.

"Any cravings I should know about?" I ask.

"Nothing weird yet," Maya says, scanning the options. "Though I did eat pickles with ice cream at 2 AM the other night."

"That's... inventive."

"It was disgusting." She wrinkles her nose. "But somehow exactly what I needed."

She settles on a pulled pork sandwich from the local barbecue joint, while I opt for fish tacos from a truck I've never seen before. We find an empty picnic table with a view of the river and sit across from each other. Maya takes a massive bite of her sandwich, closing her eyes in apparent bliss.

"Good?" I ask, amused.

"You have no idea." She dabs sauce from the corner of her mouth. "I've been nauseous all week, but today I woke up ravenous."

"That's normal," I say, then catch myself. "Sorry, you probably don't need me to doctor-splain pregnancy symptoms to you."

She laughs. "Actually, I don't mind. The internet is terrifying. Everything either means I'm having a healthy pregnancy or I'm about to die horribly."

"Fair point." I take a bite of my taco, considering. "The nausea usually eases up after the first trimester for most women. Not all, but most."

"When will we know? If everything's okay, I mean."

The question holds an edge of anxiety that makes me want to reach across the table and take her hand. I don't.

"Dr. Larsen will probably schedule an ultrasound soon," I say. "Around eight weeks is standard for a first look. This is your sixth week, right?"

"Yeah." She looks down at her sandwich. "Based on, you know..."

"Right." The night we met. The night that changed everything.

A slightly awkward silence falls. I search for a neutral topic. "So, how's the library?"

"Good. Busy." Maya seems grateful for the shift. "We just got a grant to expand our children's section. I'm designing a reading nook shaped like a treehouse."

"That sounds amazing."

"It's nice to have a project to focus on. To think about something besides..." She gestures vaguely at her belly.

"I get it." And I do. I've been throwing myself into work with even more intensity than usual, staying late to review charts, volunteering for extra shifts. Anything to quiet the voice in my head that keeps repeating *you're going to be a father* on endless loop.

"What about you?" she asks. "How's the hospital?"

"Hectic. We're short-staffed in the ER, as usual." I finish my first taco. "I've been thinking about looking at private practice options after residency. More regular

hours."

"Oh?" She looks up, surprised. "I thought emergency medicine was your passion."

"It is, but..." I hesitate, not sure how much to reveal. "Priorities change."

Her eyes widen slightly, understanding what I'm not saying. That I'm already thinking about how to restructure my life around the baby. Around her.

"Daniel, you don't have to—"

"I know I don't have to," I interrupt gently. "But I want to consider all options. That's all."

We finish eating in silence, watching a pair of ducks navigate the lazy current of the river. It's peaceful, sitting here with her. Easy in a way I didn't expect.

"Want to walk around?" I suggest when we've disposed of our trash. "Check out the crafts?"

"Sure."

We wander through the rows of booths, stopping to admire hand-thrown pottery and intricate quilts. Maya pauses at a display of handmade children's toys—wooden trains and soft fabric dolls.

"These are beautiful," she says, running her fingers over a small stuffed rabbit with embroidered eyes.

"They are," I agree, watching her rather than the toys. There's a softness to her expression, a hint of wonder that makes my heart ache.

The woman running the booth, gray-haired and grandmotherly, beams at us. "Are you two expecting?" she asks.

Maya freezes, her hand still on the rabbit. I step in smoothly.

"Just browsing today," I say with a polite smile. "Everything is lovely."

"Well, keep me in mind when the time comes," the woman says with a wink. "I'm here every year."

We move on quickly. Maya is quiet, her shoulders tense.

"I'm sorry about that," I say once we're out of earshot. "People in this town are—"

"Nosy," she finishes. "I know. I grew up here too, remember?"

"Right." Sometimes I forget that Maya is as much a part of Cedar Falls as I am, with all the complicated history that entails. "Do you want to leave? We could go somewhere else."

She considers for a moment, then shakes her head. "No, I'm okay. Just caught me off guard."

"We should probably get used to it," I say wryly. "Small town, unexpected pregnancy..."

"God, the gossip." She looks horrified. "By the time I start showing, everyone will be counting backward to figure out when it happened."

"Would it help if we came up with a cover story? Secret engagement? Whirlwind romance?"

She snorts. "Because that's so much more believable than 'we had a one-night stand and here we are.'"

"At least it's a good story for the kid someday," I offer. "Better than 'we met in college and got married after graduation.'"

That draws a genuine laugh from her, the sound warm and bright in the autumn air. "True. Though we might want to edit out some details."

We've reached the small stage where the band is now playing, a local group covering folk rock classics. Couples sway to the music on a makeshift dance floor of flattened grass. Without thinking, I hold out my hand.

"Dance with me?"

Maya looks at my outstretched hand, then up at me, surprise written across her face. "Here? Now?"

"Why not? We're supposed to be getting to know each other, right? I'd like to know if you dance."

She hesitates, and for a moment I think she'll refuse. Then she places her hand in mine. "I warn you, I'm terrible."

"I find that hard to believe," I say, leading her toward the other dancers.

"Believe it. My dad used to say I dance like I have two left feet, and both of them are asleep."

I laugh, placing my other hand lightly on her waist as we begin to sway to the music. "I'll take my chances."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:03 am

Despite her warning, Maya moves with grace, falling easily into rhythm with me. We're not quite embracing, there's still space between us, but I can smell her strawberry shampoo, can feel the warmth of her through the denim of her jacket.

"See?" I murmur. "You're a natural."

"The bar is very low at small-town festivals," she replies, but she's smiling.

The band transitions into a cover of "Landslide," the singer's voice a husky contralto that spills over the crowd like honey. Maya's expression turns wistful.

"My dad loved this song," she says softly. "He used to play it on his old record player on Sunday mornings."

"You miss him a lot."

It's not a question, but she answers anyway. "Every day. But especially now. He would have been so excited about a grandchild."

Her voice catches on the last word, and without thinking, I pull her closer, my hand sliding from her waist to the small of her back. She doesn't resist, letting her head rest against my shoulder for just a moment.

"I'm sorry he's not here," I say into her hair.

"Me too." She pulls back slightly, composing herself. "What about your grandfather? Have you told him yet?"

"No." The question makes me tense involuntarily. "Not yet."

"Are you going to?"

"Of course. Just... waiting for the right time." The truth is, I've been avoiding Lou's calls all week, unsure how to tell the man who raised me that I'm about to become a father under less-than-ideal circumstances.

Maya seems to sense my discomfort and doesn't press. The song ends, and we step apart, the spell broken.

"Thank you for the dance," she says, and I can't help but smile at her prim librarian tone.

"My pleasure."

We continue our stroll through the festival, stopping to watch a glass blower demonstrate his craft, his movements precise as he shapes molten glass into a delicate hummingbird.

Maya asks intelligent questions about the process, her genuine curiosity drawing the artist out of his usual rehearsed spiel.

"You're good at that," I comment as we walk away.

"At what?"

"Making people comfortable. Getting them to open up."

She shrugs. "It's a librarian skill. Half my job is helping people find what they're looking for, even when they're not sure what that is."

"Is that what you always wanted to be? A librarian?"

"Not always. I wanted to be a writer for a while." She smiles ruefully. "Then I realized I prefer organizing stories to creating them."

"What kind of stories did you write?"

"Fantasy, mostly. Elaborate worlds with complicated magic systems." She glances at me. "Go ahead, make your nerdy librarian jokes."

"No jokes," I say honestly. "I think it's cool. Creative."

She looks pleased but embarrassed by the compliment. "What about you? Always wanted to be a doctor?"

"Since I was ten." I don't elaborate on the timing, on how my father's abandonment pushed me toward a profession built on fixing, healing, making whole what's broken.

"Well, you're good at it," she says. "At least, that's what everyone in town says. Lou's boy, the brilliant doctor."

There's no malice in her words, but I wince anyway. "That's the problem. I'm always Lou's boy here."

"Is that so bad?" she asks, genuine curiosity in her voice. "Being connected to someone everyone loves?"

"It's not bad, it's just..." I struggle to articulate feelings I've never fully examined. "I told you. I want to be known for my own accomplishments, not as an extension of his."

Maya considers this. "I get that. After Dad died, I was 'poor James Sullivan's daughter' for months. Everyone looking at me with pity, offering casseroles and platitudes."

"Exactly. And Lou is... larger than life in this town." I shake my head. "You should see how patients light up when they realize I'm his grandson. Half of them launch into stories about how he served them the best burger they ever had."

"My dad used to take me there for milkshakes after school."

"Everyone in Cedar Falls has a Lou's Diner story," I say with a rueful smile. "Everyone except me."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I grew up in the back of that place, doing homework in a booth while Lou worked, eating the same burgers everyone raves about until I couldn't stand the smell of them anymore.

"The words come out more bitter than I intended.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful for everything he did for me.

But sometimes I felt like I had to share him with the whole town. "

Maya is quiet for a moment, absorbing this. "That must have been lonely."

Lonely. Yes, that's exactly what it was, though I've never put it into words before.

"Sometimes," I admit. "But it made me independent. Focused."

"And it made you get an Audi and a fancy condo downtown," she adds, her tone gently teasing but insightful.

I laugh, caught. "Guilty as charged."

We've reached the far end of the park, where the crowd thins out and the river bends away from town. By silent mutual agreement, we find a bench overlooking the water and sit down, close but not touching.

"Can I ask you something?" Maya says after a comfortable silence.

"Anything."

"Why didn't you call me? After that night?" She keeps her eyes on the river. "The real reason, not the excuse about being busy."

I owe her honesty, even if it doesn't paint me in the best light. "I was scared."

She turns to look at me then, surprise evident in her expression. "Of what?"

"Of how I felt with you." I meet her gaze steadily. "That night wasn't just physical for me, Maya. It was... I don't know how to explain it without sounding like a greeting card. But there was a connection there that I wasn't prepared for."

"So you ran."

"So I ran," I agree. "And I've been kicking myself ever since."

"Even before you knew about the baby?"

"Even before." I take a risk and reach for her hand, relieved when she doesn't pull

away. "I'm not saying this to pressure you or complicate things. I just want you to know the truth."

Maya looks down at our joined hands, her expression thoughtful. "I felt it too," she admits quietly. "The connection. It scared me too."

I run my thumb over her knuckles, marveling at how small her hand feels in mine.

"So where does that leave us?" I ask. "Beyond co-parents?"

"I don't know." She meets my eyes again. "But I think I'd like to find out."

Hope blooms in my chest, cautious but real. "Me too."

We sit there by the river as the afternoon light turns golden, holding hands and watching the water flow past, carrying leaves the color of Maya's dress downstream.

And for the first time since she showed me that pregnancy test, I feel like maybe—just maybe—this unexpected detour might lead somewhere beautiful.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:03 am

The river carries fallen leaves downstream, crimson and gold against the dark water. Daniel's hand is warm around mine, his thumb tracing patterns on my skin. The afternoon light catches in his hair, turning the brown strands almost golden at the edges.

The thought scares me, but I'm tired of being afraid. Of holding everyone at arm's length since Dad died. Of wrapping myself in books and quiet and solitude.

A child deserves better than a mother who's afraid to live.

The festival continues behind us, the cheerful noise a counterpoint to our quiet bubble. Families stroll past, children laughing, couples holding hands. Normal life unfolding around us while we sit on this bench, suspended between strangers and something more.

"Can I ask you something else?" I say, not letting go of his hand.

Daniel turns to me, his expression open. "Of course."

"You mentioned your grandfather raised you. What happened to your parents?"

His expression shutters immediately, the openness replaced by something carefully blank. His hand tenses in mine, and for a moment I think he might pull away.

"You don't have to tell me," I add quickly. "If it's too personal."

"No, it's... you should know." He takes a deep breath. "Especially with the baby. Our

family histories matter now."

He stares out at the river, gathering his thoughts. I wait, giving him the space to find his words. The music from the festival fades as the band takes a break, leaving us with just the gentle sound of moving water and distant conversation.

"My mom died when I was eight," he says finally. "Car accident. Drunk driver hit her head-on one night when she was coming home from work."

"I'm so sorry," I whisper, tightening my grip on his hand.

He nods, acknowledging but not dwelling. "Dad tried, at first. He really did. But he was never the same after she died. Started drinking more. Working less. By the time I was ten, Lou was practically raising me anyway."

Daniel's voice is steady, but I notice his free hand trembling slightly where it rests on his knee. This is costing him something to share.

"Then one day, I came home from school and found Dad packing a duffel bag. He said he needed some time away, that he was suffocating in Cedar Falls, where everything reminded him of Mom." His jaw tightens. "He promised he'd call soon, that it was just temporary. I believed him."

The river rushes past, indifferent to human pain. A group of teenagers walks by, laughing loudly about something on a phone screen. Life continuing all around us while Daniel opens a wound he clearly keeps bandaged.

"He left me with Lou and just... never came back. Called a few times the first year. Sent a birthday card or two. Then nothing." Daniel's voice has gone flat, as if he's reciting someone else's story. "Last I heard, he was in Arizona with a new family. That was about six years ago."

"Daniel..." I don't know what to say, how to respond to this revelation that explains so much about him—his independence, his fear of connection, his need to distinguish himself from his grandfather's shadow.

"It's fine," he says. "Lou was more of a father than he ever was anyway."

But I can see it's not fine in the way his shoulders have tensed, in the slight tremor that still runs through his free hand. I reach over and take that hand too, so I'm holding both of his in mine.

"It's not fine," I say quietly. "What he did was cruel. You deserved better."

Something in Daniel's facade cracks at that—just for a moment, but I see it. The hurt little boy beneath the successful doctor. The abandoned child who grew up determined never to need anyone too much.

"Yeah, well." He attempts a smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "It made me who I am."

"And who is that?" I ask gently.

He meets my gaze directly, something vulnerable and honest in his green eyes. "Someone who won't walk away from his child. Ever."

This time, I believe him. Despite everything—our brief history, the circumstances of our connection—I believe him absolutely.

"I know," I say, and I mean it.

We sit in silence for a moment, still holding hands, the weight of his confession settling between us. A cool breeze skims across the river, making me shiver slightly in my denim jacket.

"Are you cold?" Daniel asks, immediately alert. "We should head back."

"I'm okay," I assure him, but I don't resist when he stands, gently pulling me up with him. He doesn't let go of my hand as we start walking back toward the heart of the festival, and I don't pull away.

"Thank you for telling me," I say as we navigate around a group of children chasing each other with sticky hands. "About your dad."

Daniel nods, his expression still guarded. "I don't talk about it much."

"I can tell." I squeeze his hand. "It helps me understand you better."

"Does it?" He glances at me, curious despite his discomfort.

"Mmm." I consider how to explain. "It makes sense now why you were so quick to promise involvement with the baby. Why you tensed up when I asked about telling your grandfather."

His step falters slightly. "How so?"

"You're determined to be different from your father. Better. And you're worried about disappointing the man who stepped up when your dad stepped out." I look up at him. "Am I wrong?"

Daniel stares at me, something like wonder in his expression. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"See through me so easily. We barely know each other."

I shrug, a little embarrassed by his intensity. "Like I said, librarian skill. Reading between the lines."

He shakes his head, not accepting the deflection. "It's more than that. You pay attention. You see people."

The compliment warms me from the inside out. "Maybe I just see you."

His eyes squint at that, his gaze dropping briefly to my lips before returning to my eyes. For a charged moment, I think he might kiss me, right here among the pumpkin displays and apple cider stands.

Instead, he clears his throat and gently tugs me toward a booth selling handmade scarves.

"You were shivering earlier. Let me buy you something warmer."

I want to protest that I don't need gifts, that my jacket is fine, but there's something sweet in his concern that stops me. "Okay."

The woman running the booth recognizes Daniel immediately. "Dr. Morrison! How's your grandfather doing? That arthritis giving him trouble?"

"He's managing. How's your husband's blood pressure?"

"Much better since you adjusted his medication." She beams at him, then notices me beside him, our joined hands. Her eyes widen with interest. "And who's this?"

"This is Maya Sullivan," Daniel says smoothly. "We're looking for a scarf for her. Something warm."

Mrs. Tyra's gaze flicks between us, clearly filing away this new information for the Cedar Falls gossip mill. "Of course, of course. James Sullivan's daughter, yes? Such a shame about him. Wonderful teacher."

"Thank you," I say, used to this reaction even two years after Dad's death. In a town this size, grief has a long memory.

She turns to her display, selecting a soft burgundy scarf with intricate golden threads woven through it. "This would look lovely with your coloring, dear."

She's right. The red complements my pale skin and dark hair perfectly. I finger the delicate fabric. "It's beautiful."

"Try it on," Daniel encourages.

I let him take my purse while I wrap the scarf around my neck. The wool is incredibly soft against my skin, warming me instantly.

"Perfect," Daniel says, his voice gone slightly husky. His eyes linger on my face in a way that makes my cheeks warm.

"How much?" I ask Mrs. Tyra, reaching for my purse.

"Daniel's hand on my arm stops me. "My treat."

"You don't have to—"

"I want to." His eyes hold mine, sincere and warm. "Please."

Something about the simple request, the earnestness behind it, makes it impossible to refuse. I nod, and Daniel pays Mrs. Tyra, who wraps the scarf back in tissue paper

with a tiny smile.

"You two enjoy the rest of the festival," she says, handing the package to Daniel. "And tell Lou I said hello, Dr. Morrison."

As we walk away, I can't help but laugh softly. "She'll tell everyone in town we're an item by dinnertime."

"Does that bother you?" Daniel asks, a note of uncertainty in his voice.

I consider the question seriously. "It probably should. But no, not really." I glance up at him. "Does it bother you?"

"Not even a little." He hands me the tissue-wrapped scarf. "Though it might make it harder to break the news about the baby when the time comes. Everyone will think we've been secretly dating."

"Maybe that's not such a bad cover story after all," I admit. "Better than the truth."

"Which is?"

"That we had amazing sex one night after too many whiskey sours, and now we're having a baby together while still figuring out if we even like each other."

Daniel chokes on a surprised laugh. "When you put it that way..." He sobers slightly. "For what it's worth, I do. Like you."

"I like you too. When you're not being an emotionally unavailable jerk who disappears after sex."

"Harsh but fair." He winces, but there's humor in his eyes. "In my defense, it was

really good sex."

"So good you ran away?" I raise an eyebrow, enjoying the flush that creeps up his neck.

"So good it scared the hell out of me," he corrects, his voice dropping lower. "I'm not used to feeling that... connected to someone."

The honesty in his voice steals my next teasing remark. I look away, suddenly self-conscious. "Me neither."

We've reached the central area of the festival again, where the band has resumed playing, this time an upbeat cover of a pop song I vaguely recognize. The dance area is packed now, with people moving with enthusiastic, if not always rhythmic, energy.

"Want to dance again?" Daniel asks.

I shake my head. "I think I've had enough public exposure for one day. Besides—" I check my watch "—I should probably head home soon."

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:03 am

"Can I drive you home?" The question slips out before I can overthink it, casual but hopeful. "Or we could walk, if you'd prefer. It's a nice evening."

Maya considers me for a moment, her dark eyes thoughtful. She's still holding the tissue-wrapped scarf I bought her, fingers absently tracing the edge of the paper.

"Sure," she says finally. "A ride would be nice. I walked here, and my feet are starting to hate me for it."

Relief washes through me, though I try not to show how much her acceptance means. "My car's just outside the south entrance."

We make our way through the festival crowd, which is now thicker as the afternoon stretches toward evening.

I place a hand at the small of Maya's back to guide her through a particularly dense cluster of people and wonder if I've overstepped.

But she doesn't pull away; she just glances up with a small smile that makes my heart stutter in my chest.

The Audi is exactly where I left it, gleaming gunmetal gray in the slanted afternoon light. I unlock it with a click of the key fob and open the passenger door for Maya.

"Still think it's too flashy for Cedar Falls?" I ask, remembering her comment from the diner.

"Absolutely." She slides into the leather seat. "But I have to admit, it's a beautiful car."

I close her door and walk around to the driver's side, oddly pleased by the concession. When I get in, she's running a hand over the dashboard.

"Dad would have loved this," she says. "He was a Toyota loyalist to the core, but he secretly drooled over sports cars."

"What kind?" I ask, starting the engine. It purrs to life with a satisfying rumble.

"Corvettes, mostly. He had a whole collection of model ones." Her voice turns wistful. "They're still on a shelf in his study. I couldn't bear to pack them away."

I navigate out of the crowded parking area, "Where to?"

"Willow Lane," she says. "The little blue cottage at the end, number seventeen."

I know the street—a quiet, tree-lined road of modest older homes on the east side of town, not far from the library. It's the kind of neighborhood where people still put out flags on the Fourth of July and bring casseroles when someone gets sick.

"I grew up on Orchard Street," I tell her as we drive. "Just a few blocks over."

"In Lou's house, right?"

I nod. "Same house he's in now. He refused to move even after his knee got bad and the stairs became a challenge."

"Stubborn," Maya observes.

"Runs in the family, apparently." I flash her a quick smile before returning my eyes to the road.

"I've noticed."

The drive is short, just ten minutes from the park to Willow Lane. As we turn onto her street, the setting sun bathes the row of modest homes in golden light. Mature trees line the sidewalks, their branches creating dappled shadows on the pavement.

"That's it," Maya points to the last house on the right—a small blue cottage with white trim and a wide front porch. A massive oak tree dominates the front yard, its lower branches perfect for climbing. The kind of tree kids dream about.

Our kid might climb that tree someday.

The thought hits me. This isn't just Maya's house; it's potentially my child's first home. Where they'll take their first steps, say their first words, build their earliest memories.

I put the car in park and turn off the engine, suddenly overwhelmed by the weight of it all.

"You okay?" Maya asks, noticing my expression.

"Yeah," I manage. "Just... thinking."

"It's a lot, isn't it? When it becomes real."

"Yeah." I run a hand through my hair. "Sorry, I don't mean to be weird about it."

"You're not being weird. I had the same moment this morning when I couldn't button

my favorite jeans." She offers a rueful smile. "Reality checks come in all forms."

I laugh, grateful for her honesty, for the way she can defuse tension with a simple truth. "I guess they do."

We sit in silence for a few minutes, the car cooling around us. Through the windshield, I can see flowering bushes flanking her porch steps and a ceramic pot of chrysanthemums by the front door. It's a home, lived-in and loved, not just a house.

"Would you like to come in?" Maya asks suddenly. "For coffee—or tea, since it's late? I could show you around. Since this is probably where..." She hesitates. "Where the baby will grow up."

My pulse quickens at the invitation, at what it represents—trust, openness, a step forward. "I'd like that."

We get out of the car and walk up the stone path to her front porch. The steps creak slightly underfoot, and I notice a few places where the paint is peeling. Maya catches me looking.

"It needs work," she admits, digging through her purse for keys. "Dad was going to repaint, but he never got to it, and I just haven't had the time or energy."

"I could help," I offer, then worry it sounds presumptuous. "I mean, if you want. I'm pretty handy with a paintbrush."

She looks up from her key ring, surprise flitting across her features. "You don't have to do that."

"I know. But I'd like to." I shrug, trying for casual. "Grandpa Lou taught all his boys basic home maintenance. Said no Morrison should ever have to pay someone to do

what they could learn to do themselves."

A small smile curves her lips. "I'll keep that in mind."

She unlocks the door and steps inside, flipping on a light switch. I follow, immediately hugged by the essence of Maya—old books and cinnamon.

"Welcome to my house," she says, a hint of self-consciousness in her voice. "It's not much, but it's home."

It's charming is what it is. The front door opens directly into a cozy living room with hardwood floors and a brick fireplace.

Bookshelves line every available wall, stuffed to capacity and then some, with stacks of overflow piled neatly beside armchairs and on the coffee table.

A faded but comfortable-looking sofa faces the fireplace, draped with a colorful knit throw.

"I love it," I say honestly.

Maya raises an eyebrow. "You don't have to be polite. I know it's small."

"I'm not being polite. It feels like a home." I move toward one of the bookshelves, scanning titles. "These organized by the Dewey Decimal System, Librarian Sullivan?"

She laughs. "God, no. That would be taking work home. They're loosely grouped by genre, then alphabetical by author. Except that shelf—" she points to one near the window "—which is just favorites, in no particular order."

I examine the favorites shelf, curious what it might reveal about her. Classic literature mingles with fantasy novels, poetry collections, and dog-eared paperback mysteries. I spot a well-worn copy of "The Night Circus" next to Octavia Butler's "Kindred" and a collection of Mary Oliver poems.

"Good taste," I comment.

"Says the man who has clearly read some of these," she counters, looking pleased nonetheless. "Tea or coffee?"

"Tea is fine." I follow her through an arched doorway into a small but cheerful kitchen, painted a soft yellow with white cabinets and butcher block countertops.

"Make yourself comfortable," Maya says, filling a kettle at the sink. "There are some cookies in that jar if you're hungry."

I lean against the counter, watching as she moves around the kitchen, taking down mugs and a tin of tea. There's something mesmerizing about seeing her in her space, unguarded and at ease.

"This was your dad's house?" I ask.

She nods, setting the kettle on the stove. "He bought it when I was two. We lived in an apartment before that, but he wanted a yard for me to play in, a real home." Her expression softens with memory. "He used to push me for hours on the tire swing that hung from that oak tree out front."

"It's still there?"

"No, the rope finally rotted through a few years ago. Dad kept saying he'd replace it, but..." She trails off, and I understand the unspoken end to that sentence. But then he

got sick. But then he ran out of time.

"We could put up a new one," I suggest. "For the baby."

Maya looks up, surprise and something warmer flickering in her eyes. "We could."

The simple agreement, the use of 'we,' feels momentous somehow. I clear my throat, "Can I see the rest of the house?" I ask.

"Sure." She turns off the stove as the kettle starts to whistle. "Tea can wait."

She leads me back through the living room and down a short hallway. "Bathroom," she says, gesturing to a door on the left. "Nothing exciting, though I did retile it myself last year."

"Impressive."

"YouTube tutorials are a homeowner's best friend." She continues to a door on the right. "This was Dad's study. I haven't changed much in here."

I follow her into a small room with a large oak desk positioned under a window overlooking the backyard.

Bookshelves here too, but these hold more textbooks and literary criticism, alongside framed photos and the promised collection of model Corvettes.

A worn leather chair sits behind the desk, and I can easily imagine James Sullivan grading papers there, reading glasses perched on his nose.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:03 am

Watching Daniel in my father's study feels like worlds colliding. He moves around the space, hands clasped behind his back as if afraid to disturb anything. His eyes linger on the model Corvettes lined up on the shelf, gleaming under a thin layer of dust I haven't had the heart to wipe away.

"This was his pride and joy," I say, nodding toward the collection. "He'd spend hours detailing them with tiny brushes. I used to sit on the floor and hand him the colors he asked for."

"That was the first one. I gave it to him for Father's Day when I was fourteen. Saved up my babysitting money for months." My throat feels like it's closing. "He acted like I'd handed him the keys to the actual car."

Daniel sets it back exactly where he found it, aligning it perfectly with the others. The care in that small gesture touches me more than I expected.

"You were close," he says. Not a question.

"He was everything." The simple truth of it still hurts. "Mom left when I was a baby, so it was just us. Team Sullivan, he called us."

Daniel's eyes find mine, full of quiet understanding. "When was he diagnosed?"

"Three and a half years ago." I move to the window, looking out at the darkening yard. The memory still feels razor-sharp. "Pancreatic cancer. Stage four by the time they found it."

"I'm sorry." He comes to stand beside me. "That's a difficult diagnosis."

"The doctor gave him six months." I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly cold despite the warm house. "He made it fourteen, stubborn to the end. Long enough for me to move back from Chicago, to get the library job, to say a proper goodbye."

"Small mercies," Daniel says softly.

"That's exactly what he called it." I look up, surprised. "A small mercy, getting time to put his affairs in order. To make sure I was settled."

"He sounds like a remarkable man."

"He was." My voice wavers, and I clear my throat. "Sorry, I don't usually get emotional about it anymore. It's been two years."

"Grief doesn't have an expiration date." Daniel hesitates, then gently touches my arm. "And you don't need to apologize for missing him."

The kindness in his voice unlocks something in my chest—a knot of grief I've been carrying so long I've stopped noticing its weight. Tears spring to my eyes before I can stop them.

"I just wish he could have known about the baby," I whisper. "He would have been such an amazing grandfather."

Daniel doesn't offer empty platitudes or awkward reassurances. Instead, he simply pulls me into his arms, one hand cradling the back of my head, the other warm against my spine. I stiffen for a moment, then surrender to the comfort, letting my forehead rest against his shoulder.

"He would have threatened me with bodily harm for getting his daughter pregnant," Daniel says, his voice rumbling against my ear. "Then grudgingly accepted me when you told him to be nice."

A watery laugh escapes me. "Probably. He was protective but not unreasonable."

"And he raised an incredible daughter." Daniel's hand moves in slow, soothing circles on my back. "So, I think part of him will be there, in how you parent."

The observation is so unexpectedly perceptive that fresh tears spill over. I let them come, no longer fighting the release. Daniel holds me through it, solid and steady, his shirt growing damp beneath my cheek. He smells like autumn air and something faintly spicy—cologne, maybe, or just him.

When the wave of grief recedes, I don't immediately pull away. There's something healing about being held like this, about allowing myself to be vulnerable with someone who isn't trying to fix or change my feelings. Just witnessing them.

"Thank you," I murmur against his chest.

"For what?"

"For not saying it gets easier with time. Or that he's in a better place. Or any of those things people think they're supposed to say."

His arms tighten slightly around me. "I had enough of those after my mom died to last a lifetime. They don't help."

I pull back just enough to see his face, suddenly aware of how little I really know about his mother. "What was she like? Your mom."

A shadow crosses his features, but he doesn't deflect the question. "Beautiful. Smart as hell—she was a math teacher. Always laughing." A small, sad smile touches his lips. "She baked cookies every Sunday without fail, even during finals week when she had stacks of exams to grade."

"She sounds wonderful."

"She was." He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, the gesture startlingly intimate. "You remind me of her sometimes. The way you see people, really see them."

"I wish I could have met her."

"Me too." His eyes hold mine.

We stand like that for a long moment, close enough that I can feel the rise and fall of his chest, the warmth radiating from his body.

I should step back, restore some sense of distance and perspective.

But I don't want to. For the first time in longer than I can remember, I don't want to be alone with my grief and fear and uncertainty.

I want to be here, with him.

"I should show you the rest of the house," I say finally, my voice coming out huskier than intended.

Daniel nods, dropping his arms reluctantly. "Lead the way."

We leave my father's study, closing the door gently behind us. The hallway feels narrower than usual as we navigate it side by side, shoulders brushing.

"Last door on the left is the guest room," I say, pointing but not entering. "Nothing exciting in there. And this—" I push open the door at the end of the hall "—is my room."

I step inside, suddenly self-conscious. My bedroom is undeniably mine—walls painted a soft sage green, a patchwork quilt in blues and purples spread across the queen-sized bed, more bookshelves (of course), and a small reading nook tucked beneath the window.

It's tidy but lived-in, with a cardigan draped over the armchair and a stack of library books on the nightstand.

Daniel follows me in, his eyes taking in every detail. "It suits you," he says after a moment.

"Is that a polite way of saying it's exactly what you'd expect a librarian's bedroom to look like?"

He laughs. "Maybe. But in the best possible way." He moves to my bookshelf, examining titles just as he did in the living room. "Though I'm not sure how many librarians have an entire shelf dedicated to murder mysteries."

"Occupational hazard," I joke. "We know too many creative ways to kill people and hide the evidence."

"Remind me never to get on your bad side." He picks up a small framed photo from my dresser—me and Dad at my college graduation, both of us beaming at the camera. "You have his smile."

"And his stubbornness," I add, coming to stand beside him. "And his taste in books. And his terrible sense of direction."

"All excellent qualities to pass down to our child," Daniel says, setting the photo back carefully. He turns to face me, suddenly serious. "Thank you for showing me your home. For trusting me enough to let me in."

"Thank you for listening." I meet his gaze, aware of how close we're standing, of the quiet intimacy of being in my bedroom with him. "About Dad. About everything."

"Always."

Daniel's eyes drop to my mouth, then back to my eyes, a question in them.

My heart pounds against my ribs. This is probably a bad idea.

Definitely a complication we don't need.

But I'm tired of making the safe choice, of holding everyone at arm's length.

And my body remembers his—remembers the feel of his hands, the taste of his mouth, the way he made me feel that night a month ago.

I answer his unspoken question by rising onto my tiptoes and pressing my lips to his.

For a heartbeat, he goes completely still, as if afraid any movement might shatter the moment. Then his hands come up to frame my face, gentle but sure, and he kisses me back.

It's nothing like our first kiss, that night at Finch's Bar. That had been all heat and urgency, tequila-brave and stranger-bold. This is slower, deeper, more deliberate. A getting-to-know-you kiss. A maybe-there's-something-real-here kiss.

His thumbs brush my cheeks as his lips move against mine, coaxing rather than

demanding.

I sigh into the contact, my hands finding home on his shoulders, feeling his solid strength beneath soft fabric.

He tastes faintly of the caramel apple he had at the festival, sweet with an edge of tartness that makes me want more.

I curl my fingers into the fabric of his shirt, drawing him closer.

What started slowly quickly deepens as Daniel angles his head, changing the pressure in a way that makes my knees weaken.

His tongue traces the seam of my lips, requesting rather than demanding entrance, and I open to him with a soft sound that seems to ignite something in him.

He breaks the kiss, breathing hard, his forehead resting against mine.

"Maya," he whispers, "I can't—I've been thinking about you, about us, every day since that night."

"Me too," I admit, the confession easier in the dim light of my bedroom, with his hands warm against my skin.

"I want you," he says, voice rough with desire. "I've tried to be patient, to take things slow, but God, Maya, I want you so much it hurts."

The raw honesty in his voice sends heat spiraling through me. I pull back just enough to meet his eyes. "What are you expecting, Daniel? From this? From us?"

His gaze is steady, unwavering. "Everything you're willing to give. I just know I don't

want to walk away again."

It's the right answer—the only answer that could have bridged the distance I've maintained. I rise on tiptoes again and capture his mouth with mine, pouring every feeling into the contact.

The kiss turns molten almost instantly. Daniel's restraint dissolves as his hands slide down my back to my hips, pulling me flush against him. I can feel his hard bulge pressing against me, a tangible reminder of how much he wants this. Wants me.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:03 am

My fingers find the buttons of his shirt, working them free with trembling urgency. He helps, shrugging out of it and tossing it aside, then reaches for the hem of my dress. Our eyes meet, a silent question. I nod, lifting my arms so he can pull it over my head.

The dress joins his shirt on the floor, leaving me in just my bra and underwear. Daniel's eyes darken as they travel over me, lingering on the swell of my breasts above simple cotton lace.

"You're so beautiful," he murmurs, reverence in his voice. "Even more beautiful than I remembered."

Before I can respond, his mouth is on mine again, hungrier now. His hands explore newly exposed skin, tracing the curve of my waist, the dip of my spine. I press closer, craving the contact, and he groans into my mouth.

"I need to touch you," he says against my lips. "All of you."

His fingers find the clasp of my bra, unhooking it with surprising dexterity. The straps slide down my arms, and then I'm bare to him from the waist up, my breasts heavy and sensitive. Daniel pulls back just enough to look at me, his pupils blown wide with desire.

"God," he breathes, something like wonder in his expression. He cups my breast in his palm, his thumb brushing over the nipple, already stiff from anticipation. "Perfect."

He lowers his head, pressing open-mouthed kisses along my collarbone, down the slope of my breast, until his lips close around the stiff nipple.

I gasp at the sensation, my fingers threading through his hair to hold him there.

His tongue circles the areola before flicking across the tightened bud, sending sparks of pleasure shooting down my spine.

My legs feel too weak to support me, and Daniel seems to sense it. He straightens, lifting me effortlessly and carrying me the few steps to my bed. He lays me down with care, as if I'm something precious and fragile.

I can't help but notice his body. Broad shoulders tapering to a narrow waist, defined abs, and a light trail of hair disappearing beneath his jeans. I've seen him like this before, but the impact hasn't lessened. His body is a work of art, all lean muscle and perfect proportion.

"Come here," I whisper, holding out my arms.

Daniel stretches out beside me, his weight dipping the mattress, his skin hot against mine as he gathers me close. We kiss again, slower now but no less intense, his hand trailing down my side to my hip, then lower, tracing patterns on my bare thigh.

"I want to taste you," he murmurs against my lips. "Can I?"

I nod, though a flicker of self-consciousness passes through me. I haven't shaved in days, haven't been expecting anyone to see me like this.

Daniel seems to read my hesitation. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not... I didn't exactly prepare for this," I admit, feeling my cheeks warm.

His expression softens. "Maya, I just want you. However you are."

He kisses me again, deep and sure, before trailing his lips down my body—my neck, my collarbone, between my breasts, across my stomach. His hands slide my underwear down my legs, and then he's settling between my thighs, looking up at me with such raw desire that my embarrassment quickly vanishes.

The first touch of his mouth against me draws a gasp from my lips.

"You taste incredible," he says, his breath hot against me. "Exactly how I remembered."

I blush at his praise, my fingers finding his hair again. "Thank you," I manage, the words coming out breathier than intended.

Daniel takes his time, exploring me with lips and tongue, learning what makes me gasp and what makes me moan. When he slides a finger inside me, curling it just so while his tongue circles my most sensitive spot, I arch off the bed.

"Daniel," I pant, teetering on the edge. "I need you. Inside me."

He lifts his head, his eyes meeting mine, dark with desire. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," I say, reaching for him. "Please."

He rises to his knees, unbuckling his belt and tossing it to the floor with a dull thud. His jeans and boxers follow, and then he's naked before me, his arousal evident and impressive. I remember the stretch of him inside me, the fullness that bordered on too much but felt so perfectly right.

Daniel returns to me, covering my body with his, his weight supported on his

forearms. He kisses me deeply, letting me taste myself on his lips, and the intimacy of it makes me writhe.

"Protection?" he asks, his voice strained with the effort of restraint.

I almost laugh at the irony. "I think we're past that concern," I say, gesturing vaguely at my still-flat stomach.

He smiles against my lips. "Fair point."

Then he's positioning himself at my entrance, the blunt head of his cock pressing against me. Our eyes lock as he pushes forward, slowly, giving me time to adjust to the stretch. I gasp at the sensation, my body remembering his, welcoming him home.

When he's fully seated, he pauses, his forehead resting against mine, our breath mingling. "Okay?" he whispers.

"More than okay," I assure him, rolling my hips to take him deeper.

He groans, his control visibly slipping. Then he begins to move, setting a rhythm that starts slow and deliberate but quickly builds in intensity. Each thrust drives him deeper, hitting places inside me that make sparks dance behind my eyes.

Our lips meet again and again, kisses growing messier as our movements become more urgent. Sweat slicks our skin, and the sounds of our ragged breathing fill the room. Daniel shifts, changing the angle, and suddenly he's hitting a spot that makes me cry out.

"There?" he asks, his voice tight with restraint.

"Yes," I gasp. "Don't stop."

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:03 am

I can't believe this is happening.

That's the only coherent thought I can form as I move inside Maya, watching her face contort with pleasure beneath me.

I never expected this when I showed up at the fall festival—hoped for it, maybe, in some secret corner of my mind, but never truly believed we'd end up here, in her bed, our bodies joined as intimately as two people can be.

"Don't stop," she gasps, her nails digging half-moons into my shoulders.

As if I could. As if anything short of cardiac arrest could pull me away from her now.

I drive into her again, maintaining the angle that makes her cry out, mesmerized by the sight of her.

She's stunning like this—hair splayed across the pillow, skin flushed pink with exertion and arousal, a thin sheen of sweat making her glow in the dim light.

A droplet trickles down her forehead, following the curve of her cheek to her neck, and I have the irrational urge to chase it with my tongue.

Her breasts bounce with each thrust, occasionally brushing against my chest, the contact electric even through the sweat slicking our skin. I lower myself to feel more of her, to press my body more fully against hers, and she moans at the increased friction.

"Daniel," she breathes, my name a prayer on her lips. "So good. So—ah!"

Her words dissolve into incoherent sounds as I increase the pace, driven by her responses, by the tight heat of her around me.

This feels different than that first night—more honest, more raw.

Then, we were strangers finding comfort in each other's bodies.

Now, we're something else, something undefined but undeniably real.

Maya arches beneath me, her body bowing off the bed, thighs clenching around my hips with surprising strength. I feel her inner walls begin to flutter and tighten around me—she's close, so close.

"Come for me," I urge, the words rough against her ear. "Let go, Maya. I've got you."

Her eyes fly open, locking with mine with an intimacy that's almost unbearable. Then she's coming, her body shuddering around me, a cry torn from her throat that might be my name. The sight of her undoing is beautiful—her face open and vulnerable, completely lost to pleasure.

It's too much. The visual combined with the clenching of her body around mine pushes me to the edge. I grip the sheets beside her head, knuckles white with the effort to hold on just a little longer, to extend her pleasure.

But it's a losing battle. Five more thrusts, each one deeper than the last, and I'm following her over the edge, release crashing through me with an intensity that borders on painful. I bury my face in the curve of her neck, muffling my groan against her skin as I empty myself inside her.

For several moments, we stay like that, connected, breathing hard, hearts racing together.

I'm careful not to collapse on her, supporting my weight on trembling arms. When I finally find the strength to move, I ease out of her gently and roll to the side, bringing her with me so we're facing the same direction, her back to my front.

She nestles against me naturally, as if we've been sleeping this way for years instead of minutes.

Her curves fit perfectly against my angles, her ass nestled against my spent cock, her head tucked under my chin.

I drape an arm over her waist, palm splayed across her still-flat stomach.

Somewhere beneath my hand, our child is growing—an almost impossible thought after what we just shared.

"That was..." Maya trails off, seemingly at a loss for words.

"Yeah," I agree, pressing a kiss to her shoulder. "It was."

She's quiet for a moment, her fingers tracing patterns on the arm I have wrapped around her.

"Do you think we'll be good parents?" she asks suddenly, her voice small in the darkness.

The question catches me off guard, though perhaps it shouldn't. We've just been as physically intimate as two people can be, and now she's seeking a different kind of intimacy—honesty about the future we're facing together.

"I have no idea," I admit, tightening my hold on her slightly. "I don't have the best role model for fatherhood. But I know we'll both give everything we have so our kid can have the best life possible."

I feel her relax against me, her hand coming to rest over mine on her stomach. "That's all we can do, isn't it? Our best."

"And we'll figure it out together," I add, surprising myself with how right the words feel. "Day by day."

"Together," she echoes, a note of wonder in her voice, as if the concept is both foreign and fascinating to her.

We fall silent, our breathing synchronizing as we drift toward sleep. The last thing I'm aware of before succumbing is the gentle rise and fall of Maya's ribs beneath my arm, the soft scent of her hair, and a profound sense of rightness I've never felt before.

Following evening

I pull up in front of the small white house with blue shutters where I spent most of my childhood. The porch light is on, casting a warm glow over the worn welcome mat and the ancient rocking chair where Grandpa Lou sits most evenings, watching the world go by.

He's there now, a plaid blanket across his knees despite the mild evening, a mug of something steaming in his gnarled hands. He squints as my headlights sweep across the porch, then lifts a hand in greeting when he recognizes my car.

My stomach churns with nerves as I cut the engine. I texted him earlier, asking if I could stop by, saying I had news. He responded with typical Lou brevity: *Door's

open. Bring beer.*

I grab the six-pack from the passenger seat—his favorite local IPA—and make my way up the walkway. Each step feels leaden, weighted with the enormity of what I'm about to tell him.

"About time you showed your face around here," Lou calls as I approach. His voice is gruff but affectionate. "Beginning to think you'd forgotten where I live."

"Sorry, Grandpa," I say, climbing the porch steps. "Hospital's been crazy."

"Hospital's always crazy." He peers at me over his reading glasses, his gaze still sharp despite his eighty-two years. "But that's not why you're here tonight, is it?"

Straight to the point, as always. I hand him the beer and take the seat beside him, an identical rocking chair that's been there as long as I can remember.

"No, it's not." I twist the cap off a bottle and take a long swallow, buying time. "I have some news."

Lou grunts, setting aside whatever he was drinking—tea, from the smell of it—in favor of the beer. "Good or bad?"

"Both? Neither?" I run a hand through my hair. "It's complicated."

"Son, I've been around long enough to know that when a man says 'it's complicated,' it usually involves a woman." He takes a sip of beer, eyeing me over the bottle. "This about that pretty librarian you were seen with at the fall festival?"

I shouldn't be surprised—Cedar Falls gossip mill works with ruthless efficiency—but I am. "How did you—"

"Tyra called me not ten minutes after she sold you two a scarf," Lou says with a snort. "Said you looked sweet together. Wanted to know if I was pleased my grandson finally found a nice girl."

Heat creeps up my neck. "We're not exactly—I mean, we are, but it's not—"

"Spit it out, Danny," Lou says, his patience visibly waning. "What's got you tied up in knots?"

I take a deep breath, then look him straight in the eye. "Maya's pregnant. I'm going to be a father."

For a long moment, Lou just stares at me, his bushy eyebrows climbing toward his hairline. Then he sets his beer down carefully on the small table between our chairs.

"Well, damn," he says finally. "That was faster work than I expected."

A startled laugh escapes me.

"It's not—we're not—" I stop, recalibrate. "We met about a month ago, before I knew who she was. It was just supposed to be one night, but..."

"But life had other plans," Lou finishes for me, nodding sagely. "Always does."

"You're not... disappointed?" I ask, the question that's been eating at me since I found out about the baby.

Lou's expression softens. "Why the hell would I be disappointed? You're a grown man, Danny. And from what I hear, Maya Sullivan is a fine young woman. Smart, kind—bit on the quiet side, but that's probably good to balance out the Morrison temperament."

"But we're not married, not even dating really," I point out. "It's not exactly the traditional way to start a family."

"Traditional," Lou scoffs. "What's traditional got to do with it?"

Your grandmother and I eloped after knowing each other six weeks, and we had fifty good years together.

"He leans forward, his eyes intent on mine.

"The only thing that matters is what you do now.

Are you going to step up? Be there for her and the baby? "

"Yes," I say without hesitation. "Absolutely."

"Then I'm proud of you." He settles back in his chair. "And I'm going to be a great-grandfather. Hot damn."

The simple acceptance, the lack of judgment or disappointment, makes something tight in my chest loosen. "You'll be a great one," I say, meaning it. "The best."

Lou smiles, creases fanning from the corners of his eyes. "How's Maya taking all this?"

"Better than I deserve," I admit. "She was angry at first—I didn't call her after that night, like an idiot—but we're... figuring things out. Taking it day by day."

"Smart approach." Lou takes another sip of his beer. "You know, Danny, maybe this is just what you need."

"What do you mean?"

"A reason to slow down. To remember there's more to life than that hospital." He gestures vaguely toward town. "You work too hard, always have. Drive yourself like you've got something to prove."

I start to protest, but the words die in my throat because he's right. I've been running myself ragged for years, first through med school, then residency, taking extra shifts, volunteering for the hardest cases. Trying to build a name for myself separate from being "Lou's grandson."

"A baby changes everything," Lou continues, his voice softening with memory. "Makes you see what really matters."

"I'm scared," I admit, the confession easier in the growing darkness. "What if I'm terrible at it? What if I'm like—" I cut myself off, unwilling to even say it.

"Like your father?" Lou finishes anyway, always able to read between the lines. "You're nothing like him, Danny. Never have been."

"How can you be sure?" The question comes out more vulnerable than I intended.

"Because I raised you," Lou says simply. "And I know your heart. You don't run from what scares you—you face it head-on. Always have, even as a kid."

His faith in me is humbling. "I hope you're right."

"I'm always right," he says with a wink. "About time you figured that out."

We lapse into comfortable silence, rocking gently, watching as the last light fades from the sky and stars begin to appear.

"Bring her to dinner," Lou says suddenly. "Sunday. I'll make my famous pot roast."

The thought of Maya meeting Lou, of these two important parts of my life intersecting, fills me with unexpected warmth. "I'll ask her."

"Do that." Lou drains the last of his beer and sets the bottle aside. "And Danny?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm happy for you, son. Really happy."

The simple words, spoken with such genuine affection, wrap around my heart like a balm. I set my own beer down and stand, crossing the short distance between our chairs. Lou looks up, surprised, as I bend to embrace him.

His arms come around me, strong despite his age, patting my back in that slightly awkward way men in our family have always shown physical affection.

"Thank you, Grandpa," I murmur against his shoulder, inhaling the familiar scent of Old Spice that has meant safety and home for as long as I can remember.

"What for?" he asks gruffly.

"For everything. For being there. For believing in me."

Lou's arms tighten briefly before he releases me, clearing his throat. "Always will be, Danny. Always will be."

I straighten, blinking back the unexpected moisture in my eyes. Lou pretends not to notice, reaching for another beer.

"Now sit back down and tell me how far along she is," he orders. "And whether you think it's a boy or a girl."

I laugh, the sound freer and lighter than it's been in years and do as I'm told. As the night deepens around us, stars scattered like promises across the velvet sky, I tell my grandfather everything about Maya, about the baby, about the terrifying, exhilarating future opening before me.

And for the second time since seeing that positive pregnancy test, I feel not just acceptance or resignation, but genuine excitement for what comes next.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:03 am

Three years later

"Almost home, sweetheart," I murmur to the drowsy kid in my arms.

Emma blinks up at me with eyes exactly like her father's—that same intense green that still makes my heart skip when Daniel looks at me a certain way.

Her chubby cheek is creased from where she fell asleep against the car seat, and wisps of dark hair curl around her face, damp with the sweat of an active two-year-old who refused to nap at daycare.

I shift her weight as I dig for my keys. She's getting heavier by the day, it seems—"growing like a weed," as Lou likes to say whenever we visit, beaming with great-grandfatherly pride as he sneaks her extra cookies behind my back.

"Daddy home?" Emma asks sleepily, her vocabulary expanding daily in ways that amaze me.

"Not yet, sweet pea. Daddy's still at work. He'll be home for dinner." Daniel's been on a more regular schedule since joining a private practice last year, home most nights by six. A far cry from the eighty-hour weeks he used to work at the hospital.

I finally locate my keys beneath a half-eaten package of fish crackers and a tiny board book about ducks.

The chaos of motherhood still occasionally overwhelms me, but I wouldn't trade it for anything—not the sticky fingerprints on every surface, not the toys scattered across

the living room floor, not the bedtime negotiations that can rival United Nations peace talks.

The lock clicks open, and I nudge the door with my hip, already mentally planning dinner. There's leftover lasagna we can reheat, and I should really make a salad to balance all that cheese. Daniel won't be home for at least two hours, which gives me time to get Emma fed, bathed, and maybe even—

My thoughts screech to a halt as I step inside. Rose petals. Dozens of them, forming a trail across our hardwood floors.

"Pretty!" Emma exclaims, instantly alert, pointing at the splash of crimson against the oak.

"Yes," I agree, my voice faint even to my own ears. "Very pretty."

I set my purse down, my heart suddenly hammering against my ribs.

The trail leads down the hallway, past the living room where Daniel has gradually replaced my shabby furniture with pieces we chose together, past the kitchen where we've spent countless evenings cooking and laughing and occasionally burning things when we get distracted by each other.

"Down," Emma demands, squirming in my arms. "Walk."

I set her on her feet, and she immediately toddles toward the rose petals, delighted by this unexpected game. I follow her, feeling almost as unsteady on my feet as she is.

The trail leads to Emma's bedroom—the room that once was my father's study, now transformed with pale yellow walls and a hand-painted mural of a tree that Daniel spent three weekends perfecting. Emma pushes the door open with both hands, and I follow, unprepared for the sight that greets me.

More rose petals cover the floor, arranged in a perfect heart. And in the center, kneeling on one knee, is Daniel.

He's wearing the charcoal gray suit I love, the one that makes him look like he stepped out of a magazine.

His hair is slightly tousled, the way it gets when he runs his hands through it nervously.

And in his outstretched palm sits a small velvet box, open to reveal a ring that catches the afternoon sunlight streaming through the window.

"Daddy!" Emma squeals, launching herself at him with the single-minded determination of a toddler who adores her father.

Daniel catches her with his free arm, balancing her on his knee without taking his eyes off me.

"Hey, princess," he says, pressing a kiss to her dark curls. "Daddy needs to ask Mommy a very important question. Can you help me?"

Emma nods solemnly, though I doubt she understands what's happening. I stand frozen in the doorway, one hand pressed to my mouth, tears already blurring my vision.

"Maya Sullivan," Daniel says, his voice steady despite the emotion I can see in his eyes. "I had a whole speech prepared, but now that you're standing here, looking at me like that, I can't remember a word of it."

A watery laugh escapes me. "You're doing fine so far."

"I wanted to do this here, in Emma's room," he continues, "because without her, we

might never have found our way to each other. She's the best surprise of my life—second only to falling in love with her mother."

Emma, sensing the importance of the moment despite her young age, stays unusually still in her father's arms, her small hand patting his cheek in what looks remarkably like encouragement.

"These past years have been the happiest of my life," Daniel says. "Watching you be a mother, building a home with you, waking up beside you every morning—it's more than I ever thought I'd have. More than I knew to want."

The tears are flowing freely now, tracking down my cheeks. I don't bother to wipe them away.

"I know we've done things a little out of order," he continues with a smile. "But I'd like to get at least one tradition right." He holds the ring a little higher. "Maya Sullivan, will you marry me?"

"Say yes, Mama!" Emma chimes in, clearly catching on that this is her cue to participate.

Through my tears, I see the ring—a vintage-looking oval diamond surrounded by smaller stones, set in rose gold. It's perfect, exactly what I would have chosen.

"Yes," I manage, the word catching on a sob. "Of course, yes."

Daniel's face breaks into that gorgeous smile that still makes my knees weak. He stands, lifting Emma with him, and crosses to me in two long strides. With our daughter balanced on his hip, he takes my left hand and slides the ring onto my finger. It fits perfectly.

"I love you," he says, cupping my cheek with his free hand. "Both of you, more than I

have words for."

"We love you too," I whisper, rising on tiptoes to kiss him softly. "Don't we, Em?"

"Love Daddy," Emma agrees, pressing a slightly wet kiss to his cheek before squirming to be put down. Once on her feet, she immediately begins playing with the rose petals, tossing handfuls into the air with delighted giggles.

Daniel pulls me close, his arms encircling my waist as we watch our daughter play.

"I had planned a much more elaborate proposal," he admits, his breath warm against my ear.

"Dinner reservations, violin players, the works.

But then I realized... this is us. Our family.

Our home. It felt right to ask you here, where it all started. "

I turn in his arms to face him, reaching up to trace the line of his jaw with my fingertips.

"It was perfect," I assure him. "Absolutely perfect."

"Yeah?" Relief and love mingle in his expression.

"Yeah." I glance around the room—at Emma playing happily, at the walls Daniel painted, at the crib he assembled while I was seven months pregnant and too big to help. At the life we've built together from the most unexpected beginning. "Though I have one question."

"Anything," he says immediately.

"How many rose petals am I going to be finding around this house for the next month?"

Daniel laughs, the sound I never tire of hearing. "Approximately three thousand," he admits. "Lou and I might have gone a little overboard at the flower shop."

"Lou knew about this?"

"Who do you think help me set it all up?" Daniel grins. "He's been badgering me to 'make an honest woman of you' for at least a year."

I shake my head, laughing through the tears that still threaten. "That sounds about right."

Daniel's expression grows serious again, his hands warm on my waist. "Are you happy, Maya? Truly?"

I look up at this man who came into my life in the most unexpected way, who has become not just Emma's father but my partner, my best friend, my home.

Who moved into my small cottage without complaint, who painted walls and fixed the roof and built bookshelves that stretch to the ceiling.

Who reads to Emma every night in funny voices that make her shriek with laughter.

Who still looks at me across a crowded room like I'm the only person in it.

"Happier than I ever thought possible," I tell him honestly.

He kisses me then, soft and sure and full of promise. Emma, not to be left out, wraps her arms around our legs, rose petals clutched in her small fists.

And as we stand there, the three of us in a tangle of limbs and laughter and love, I think of how sometimes the best stories come from the most unexpected beginnings. How a night that should have been forgettable became the first page of the most important chapter of my life.

How sometimes, when you least expect it, you find exactly what you never knew you were looking for.

Thank you for reading it!