







# Riding with the Secret Billionaire

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**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance

**Description:** She doesn't know who I am. But I'd burn down my life to keep her safe.

I don't do detours. I don't do weddings. And I sure as hell don't play chauffeur to women I don't know.

But when Trish's flight to Nevada gets canceled and she shows up on my ride share app? Something in me snaps.

She's all sass, curves, and don't-mess-with-me attitude. And I can't stand the thought of her missing her best friend's wedding because of airline chaos.

So I accept her request, even though passengers aren't my thing.

Now we're locked in my truck for days, Route 14 stretching endlessly before us, and she's testing every ounce of my control. She asks too many questions. Sees too much. Looks at me like she knows there's more beneath the surface.

She doesn't know who I am—that I created the very app that matched us, that I'm worth billions, that I'm heading to the same wedding for a completely different reason. But the longer we drive, the harder it is to keep my secrets.

And when we stop pretending this is just a ride?

Everything changes.

Riding with the Secret Billionaire is a spicy, insta-love road trip romance featuring a bold, curvy heroine, a broody secret billionaire with a protective streak, light bdsm, and forced proximity that sizzles from mile one. Get ready for big feelings, bigger tension, and a wedding road trip that changes everything. Novella Length. Guaranteed HEA. – A Crimson Hollow: Kane Brothers Spinoff

**Total Pages (Source):** 40

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

1

TRISH

I'm staring at my phone in the middle of Toronto Pearson International Airport's Terminal 1, my left eye twitching uncontrollably. The email from the airline might as well be written in hieroglyphics because I read it three times and still can't process what it's telling me.

We regret to inform you that Flight AC7654 to Las Vegas has been canceled due to mechanical issues...

Canceled? My perfect, meticulously planned first-class ticket that I splurged on specifically to arrive for dress fittings before Jordyn's wedding in Foxfire Valley, Nevada? The one I spent an obscene amount of money on because I promised my best friend I wouldn't miss a single pre-wedding event?

That flight. Canceled.

"Excuse me," I say, approaching the customer service desk where an exhausted-looking agent types furiously at her computer. "I need to get to Nevada. Today. It's an emergency."

The woman barely glances up. "Everyone here needs to get somewhere today, ma'am. We're rebooking all passengers as quickly as possible."

"You don't understand," I lean in, lowering my voice to what I hope sounds urgent

but not crazy-person desperate."My best friend is getting married in two weeks.I'm the maid of honor. I have to be there for the final dress fitting on Saturday."

Her fingers pause over the keyboard."Wedding emergency. Got it." She types for what feels like seventeen years."I can get you on a flight Sunday afternoon..."

"Sunday afternoon? Today's Sunday.Do you mean seven days from now?" My voice rises enough that several fellow stranded travelers look my way."That's not going to work."

The agent gives me a look that says she's dealt with a thousand women like me today."I'm sorry, but with the mechanical issues affecting some of our fleet, we've had to cancel over thirty flights.There's nothing available until Sunday."

I grip the counter, calculating the possibilities."What about other airlines? Other routes?"

"You're welcome to check, but most carriers are affected.It's a cascading problem. The storms across the Midwest last week grounded so many planes that maintenance schedules are backed up everywhere.If it helps, we're providing hotel vouchers for tonight, then we'll reevaluate tomorrow."

The dress fitting is at 2 PM on Saturday at the Heirloom Rose Hotel in Foxfire Valley.Even if I made a Sunday morning flight, I'd be too late.

I'm already pulling out my phone, ready to drop even more money I don't have."I'll keep checking other options."

"Good luck," she says, sounding genuinely sympathetic as she hands me a hotel voucher.

Great. That'll explain to Jordyn why her maid of honor isn't there to help with last-minute wedding details.

I move away from the counter, dropping onto the nearest uncomfortable airport chair. This is a nightmare. I scroll through flight booking apps, finding exactly what the agent warned, nothing available to get me anywhere near Nevada before the weekend.

My phone buzzes with an incoming call. Jordyn's smiling face lights up my screen, and my stomach drops.

"Hey!" I answer with forced cheer. "How's the bride-to-be?"

"Freaking out in the best possible way," Jordyn laughs. "Please tell me you're about to board your flight. Talia is already here, and she's driving me crazy with her 'organizational suggestions' for the reception seating."

I close my eyes, swallowing hard. Even her brother's new unofficial girlfriend got there before me. I could tell her about the cancellation, watch her try to pretend she's not disappointed, listen to her insist that missing the dress fitting isn't a big deal... but I know better. Jordyn's been dreaming of this wedding since we were twelve, planning every detail with military precision. The last thing she needs is one more complication.

"Actually..." I scan the departure board one last time. "Everything's fine! Just waiting to board."

The lie slips out before I can stop it.

"Thank God," she sighs. "I need you here, Trish. Silas's brothers are all arriving early, and I'm pretty sure Noah is about to murder the wedding planner for suggesting we

change the table arrangements."

"Don't worry, I'll handle everything when I get there," I promise, already knowing I'm completely screwed. "You just focus on being a beautiful bride."

We chat for a few more minutes before hanging up. I stare at my phone, panic rising in my chest. I've got approximately six days to figure out how to teleport from Toronto to Nevada.

Wait.

What if I don't fly? What if I drive?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

I punch the route into Google Maps. Thirty-three hours by car. If I left now and drove through the next few days, barely stopping, I could make it just in time for the fitting.

Except... I don't have a car in Toronto. Renting one would be astronomical for a one-way trip this length, if I could even find one available on short notice.

I pull up my contacts, scrolling frantically. There has to be someone who can help. My finger hovers over Oliver's name, my ex who still occasionally drunk texts me. He has a car. But asking him for a thirty-three-hour road trip favor would come with strings attached I'm not willing to deal with.

Then I see it. The solution, blazing on my screen like a neon sign.

The RoadRunner app.

It's the newest ride share platform, specializing in long-distance travel rather than just city trips. I'd downloaded it after reading an article about it in a marketing journal. It's a brilliant concept from some mysterious tech billionaire who remained curiously anonymous despite creating one of the fastest-growing travel apps in North America.

I open it, typing frantically: "Toronto to Foxfire Valley, Nevada. Within 6 days. Emergency. Will pay extra."

Within minutes, responses start appearing. Most are obvious noes, people going in completely different directions or wanting to leave days from now. Then one catches my eye.



JWinters:Heading west down Route 14.Can take you as far as Nevada.Leaving in 30.  
Terminal pickup.

Route 14.That's the scenic highway Jordyn mentioned runs near their wedding venue.This could actually work.

Me:Terminal 1.Can be there in 10. Will pay half gas plus \$500.

Three dots appear.

JWinters:Make it \$750.Meet at passenger pickup. Black Ford F-150.License plate WINTERS1.

Somethingabout the terseness of his messages makes me hesitate.Meeting a complete stranger for a thirty-three-hour drive could be the beginning of a true-crime podcast episode starring yours truly.But what choice do I have?

Me:Deal. On my way. How will I recognize you?

JWinters: You won't miss me.

Cryptic much?I grab my suitcase and weave through frustrated travelers, practically running toward the pickup area.My heels click aggressively against the tile floor, matching my racing heartbeat.

I reach the passenger pickup area breathless, scanning for a black pickup.The line of cars seems endless, drivers staring at phones, passengers loading luggage.

"Come on, come on," I mutter, standing on tiptoes despite my already substantial height.I check the time. I'm right at the thirty-minute mark.What if he got tired of waiting and left already?

Then I see it. A massive black Ford F-150, gleaming in the afternoon sun. The license plate confirms it. WINTERS1.

I wheel my suitcase over, rehearsing a quick introduction in my head. Professional but friendly. Let him know I'm not some weirdo, just a desperate maid of honor.

As I approach, the driver's door opens, and a man unfolds himself from the cab.

He's tall. That's the first thing that registers. Tall enough that I have to tilt my head up, which almost never happens with my five-foot-ten frame. His shoulders stretch the fabric of a plain black t-shirt that looks expensive despite its simplicity. Dark jeans, boots. A jawline that could cut glass, partly covered by strategic stubble.

But it's his eyes that stop me cold. They're a piercing blue-green, almost unnaturally so, currently narrowed as he assesses me from head to toe.

"You're Trish?" His voice is deep, with the faintest hint of a Western drawl that definitely wasn't present in his messages.

I straighten my spine, refusing to be intimidated by his size or his ridiculously symmetrical face. "Yes. And you're JWinters, I assume?"

"Jake," he corrects, taking my suitcase without asking and lifting it into the truck bed like it weighs nothing. My very heavy suitcase. The one I had to use both hands and a silent prayer to get into the terminal.

"Right. Jake." I clear my throat. "Thanks for agreeing to the ride. It's kind of a wedding emergency situation."

He doesn't ask what kind of emergency, doesn't smile, doesn't offer any of the normal pleasantries that make these awkward stranger interactions bearable. He just opens the

passenger door and waits, one eyebrow slightly raised.

"Always this chatty?" I quip before I can stop myself.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

Something that might be amusement flickers across his face. "Always this punctual?"

"I'm exactly on time," I protest.

"Exactly on time is late in my book." He gestures to the open door. "We need to move. Weather should be clear most of our route, but I want to stay ahead of any potential systems."

I climb into the truck, which requires more vertical effort than I anticipated. The interior is immaculate. There are no fast food wrappers, no random receipts, no sign that anyone actually uses this vehicle. It smells faintly of leather and something woodsy I can't identify.

Jake slides into the driver's seat, his presence immediately making the spacious cab feel smaller. He starts the engine with a low rumble.

"Ground rules," he says, not looking at me as he navigates out of the pickup area. "No smoking in my truck. No feet on the dashboard. Music selection is negotiable, volume is not. I stop every three hours for a rest stop, whether you need to or not. You sleep when I sleep, no exceptions."

"Excuse me?" I turn in my seat to face him. "I sleep when you sleep? What kind of controlling nonsense is that?"

He glances at me, those breathtaking eyes briefly leaving the road. "It's the kind of controlling nonsense that keeps us both safe. I don't drive more than twelve hours without rest, which means we'll need to stop for the night. I'm not leaving you alone in

sketchy roadside motels while I sleep, and I'm sure as hell not leaving you alone in my truck either."

"That's... actually almost sweet, in a weirdly overprotective way," I admit."But unnecessary. I'm a grown woman who can handle herself."

"I'm sure you can." His tone suggests he's humoring me."Rule stands. And one more thing - we're taking Route 14, which adds a few hours, but it's the most reliable path west right now.The recent storm systems left a lot of other routes with issues."

"You've got this all figured out, don't you?" I can't keep the sarcasm from my voice.

"I always have a plan," he responds, completely unfazed."That's why I can drive when the airlines are still sorting out their mess."

I open my mouth to argue, then close it again.I need this ride, and antagonizing my driver in the first five minutes probably isn't the smartest move.

"Fine," I concede. "Any other commandments I should be aware of, Captain Control?"

The corner of his mouth twitches, just slightly."Just one. Whatever wedding emergency you're rushing to, leave the stress out of my truck.Thirty-three hours is a long time to be trapped with someone's anxiety."

As he merges onto the highway, I steal another glance at my mysterious driver. His profile is all hard angles and sharp lines, his posture military straight. His hands grip the wheel precisely at ten and two, large knuckles and long fingers that make something low in my belly tighten unexpectedly.

I force my gaze back to the road ahead. Thirty-three hours in close quarters with this

man suddenly feels like a very, very long time.

2

JAKE

I'd spotted her from fifty feet away, standing on tiptoes despite being nearly six feet tall in those impractical heels, scanning the pickup area with an aura that made her stand out from the crowd. Her curly black hair was up in a puff, leaving soft shoulders and voluminous cleavage on display. Curves that her business casual outfit couldn't quite downplay. A woman who takes up space unapologetically.

Now, three hours into our drive, I'm acutely aware of every inch of that space beside me in the truck.

"So, Jake," she breaks the companionable silence that's fallen between us since crossing the border into upstate New York. "What takes you all the way to Nevada?"

"Business," I reply, keeping it simple. The truth is significantly more complicated, involving security protocols for a high-profile wedding that happens to be the same one she's racing toward. But she doesn't need to know that yet.

"Wow, fascinating. Tell me less," she mutters, rolling her eyes.

A smile threatens at the corner of my mouth. She's quick. I like that despite myself.

"What kind of business are you in, Trish?" I redirect, though I already know the answer from my background check.

"Marketing consultant. I help businesses rebrand and expand their digital presence." She watches me for a reaction, but I maintain my neutral expression. "Currently

working with a luxury wellness retreat in British Columbia.Or I was, until my flight got canceled and I jumped into a stranger's truck like the beginning of a cautionary tale."

The wellness retreat. That would be Noah Kane's place in Crimson Hollow.Another connection I'm not supposed to know about yet.

"Smart move," I say dryly.

"Says the man who picked up a random woman at the airport."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

"Not random," I correct her. "I checked your profile before accepting. Trish Walker, 32, marketing consultant with verified employment at Walker Digital. Five-star rating as a passenger. Previous ride share to Muskoka last summer."

She blinks, clearly surprised. "You researched me?"

"I don't let just anyone into my truck." The words come out more possessive than intended.

I check the GPS. We're making good time despite the minor traffic outside Buffalo. If we maintain this pace, we should reach our first overnight stop in Heartstone, Missouri, by early evening tomorrow. I've already made reservations at the Nighty Night Bed and Breakfast, the most secure lodging option in that small town, according to my research.

"And what would your profile say, Jake Winters?" she asks, still studying me. "Besides your apparent control issues and preference for silence?"

"38. Business owner. Perfect five-star rating as a driver. Never been late for a pickup." I keep my response as vague as my RoadRunner bio.

"That tells me absolutely nothing about you as a person," she challenges.

"You don't need to know me as a person," I say simply. "You need a ride to Nevada. I'm providing one."

She crosses her arms, her chin lifting in a way that signals I've annoyed her. "And why



exactly are you on a ride share app if you're so reluctant to interact with your passengers?"

I consider how much to reveal. "It's a good way to cover gas for trips I'd be taking anyway. And occasionally, the company isn't terrible."

"Sounds like you love your job," she snorts. "Let me guess, you're one of those mysterious loner types who think having basic social skills is beneath them?"

For the first time, I actually laugh, a short, deep sound that seems to catch her off guard. "No, I'm one of those boring types who prefer quiet after spending my days talking to people."

"And what people would those be, Mr. Vague? Other mysterious men in black t-shirts with control issues?"

I glance at her, raising an eyebrow. "You've been noticing my t-shirt?"

A faint flush colors her cheeks, but she recovers quickly. "Hard not to notice when it's the only item in your wardrobe, apparently."

"I have six identical black t-shirts," I admit. "Makes mornings simpler."

"Of course, you do," she sighs, but there's a hint of amusement in her voice. "Let me guess what else about you. You work out at exactly the same time every day. You eat the same high-protein, low-carb meal with perfectly calculated macronutrients. Your idea of spontaneity is taking a slightly different route on your morning run."

The accuracy of her assessment is irritating. "Not every day."

"Oh my God, you totally do!" She laughs, the sound filling the truck cab. "I'm a

marketer, remember? Reading people is literally my job."

As the afternoon wears on, I relax into her presence more than I expected. Trish has a way of filling silences without making them uncomfortable, telling me about her friend's wedding, her marketing projects, her cat back in Toronto who'll be watched by a neighbor.

"My turn for questions," she announces as we pull into a service station for our first scheduled break. "Why Route 14 specifically? Won't the interstates be faster?"

I kill the engine, turning slightly to face her. "Route 14 passes through smaller towns, less traffic, more predictable patterns. And after the recent storms, many of the major highways still have sections under repair."

"Always the practical answer," she notes. "Fine, keep your mystique, Jake Winters. I'll figure you out eventually."

The certainty in her voice sends an unexpected current down my spine. Something about this woman makes me want to both maintain my distance and draw her closer, a contradiction that's becoming increasingly difficult to manage.

"Twenty minutes," I say, nodding toward the service station. "Bathroom, food, whatever you need."

"Only twenty minutes? What if I want to enjoy the fine cuisine this place has to offer?" There's that teasing lilt in her voice again.

"You want to sit down for a meal at a highway service station?" I raise an eyebrow.

"God no," she laughs, the sound surprisingly musical. "But I do need more than twenty minutes to feel human again after sitting in traffic."

I check my watch. We're actually ahead of schedule.

"Thirty minutes," I concede. "Not a minute more."

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

"So generous," she replies, rolling her eyes as she opens her door.

I watch her walk toward the entrance, her stride confident despite those ridiculous heels. I normally maintain strict professional distance with clients, but something about Trish Walker makes it difficult to remember why those boundaries exist. The way she challenges me, sees through my carefully constructed façade, and notices details most people overlook.

It's refreshing. And dangerous.

When she returns, I'm waiting with two cups of coffee.

"Black, one sugar," I say, offering her one. "Saw you drinking it in the terminal while you were waiting."

She takes the cup, surprise flickering across her face. "You were watching me before I approached your truck?"

"Force of habit," I shrug, not elaborating.

"Of course, it is," she murmurs, but there's amusement in her voice rather than annoyance. She takes a sip, nodding appreciatively. "Good coffee. You have good taste, at least."

As we get back on the road, I grow increasingly aware of her presence beside me, the way she tucks one leg under herself, the faint scent of her perfume, the casual way she gestures with her hands when making a point. It's been a long time since anyone's

captured my attention this way, and even longer since I've allowed it.

"So where exactly is our first overnight stop?" she asks as the sun begins to set, painting the horizon in fiery oranges and golds.

"A small town called Heartstone in Missouri," I reply, changing lanes to pass a slow-moving truck. "I've booked rooms at a place called the Nighty Night Bed and Breakfast."

"Rooms? Plural?" She turns to face me, eyebrow raised. "I thought the rule was I sleep when you sleep, like we're joined at the hip or something."

"Adjacent rooms," I clarify. "I'll be able to hear if there's any trouble, but you'll have your privacy."

"So thoughtful," she says with mock sweetness. "And here I thought you were going to handcuff me to the bed to make sure I didn't run off in the night."

The image her words conjure sends a jolt of heat through me that I immediately suppress. "Don't tempt me."

Her eyes widen slightly, and I realize how the words sounded.

"That was a joke," I add, though the expression on her face suggests she's not entirely convinced.

"Was it, though?" she challenges, her voice dropping slightly. "Because you strike me as someone who likes being in control, Jake. Maybe a little too much."

The directness of her observation catches me off guard. Most people dance around it, intimidated by my size or demeanor. Not Trish. She sees it and calls it out

without hesitation.

"Control keeps people safe," I say finally. "Especially in unfamiliar situations."

"And is that what I am to you? An unfamiliar situation that needs controlling?"

I glance at her, finding her dark eyes fixed on me. My grip tightens on the steering wheel. "You're certainly unfamiliar."

"But not unpleasant?" There's a hint of vulnerability beneath her boldness.

"No," I admit. "Not unpleasant at all."

A small smile plays at the corner of her mouth. "Good to know, Captain Control. Good to know."

As darkness falls completely, we settle into a comfortable rhythm of conversation and silence. She tells me more about her friend's wedding, about growing up in Toronto, and about her work. I share carefully edited stories from my security background, nothing classified or identifying, just enough to satisfy her curiosity.

And all the while, I'm acutely aware of a tension building between us that has everything to do with the way she challenges me. It makes me want to push back, just to see how she responds.

It's going to be a long drive to Nevada.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

The sky outside the truck window has transformed from inky blackness to the soft lavender of pre-dawn by the time Jake announces we're crossing into Missouri. I blink awake, disoriented after dozing off somewhere in Illinois, my neck stiff from leaning against the window.

"Did I sleep through an entire state?" I mumble, straightening up and wincing as my spine protests.

"Two, actually," Jake replies, looking frustratingly fresh for someone who's been driving through the night. "Ohio and Illinois."

"Why didn't you wake me for our scheduled stops?"

"You needed the rest." He hands me a travel mug that's still warm. "Coffee. Black, one sugar."

I accept it gratefully, the caffeine hitting my system with welcome intensity. "How are you not exhausted? Please tell me you didn't drive straight through."

"I pulled over at the rest stops. Took power naps." He looks over at me, one eyebrow raised. "I don't need much sleep."

"Of course, you don't," I mutter, taking another sip. "Let me guess, you've trained yourself to function on four hours like some kind of superhuman robot."

A hint of a smile crosses his face. "Three, actually."

I roll my eyes, but my irritation is undermined by how touched I am that he let me sleep. I check my appearance in the visor mirror and grimace. My makeup has faded, my hair has partially escaped its updo, and there's a crease on my cheek from where it pressed against the window.

"We should reach Heartstone by early afternoon," Jake says, checking the GPS. "We'll stop there for the night. Get proper meals, showers, actual beds."

"Thank God," I sigh, stretching as much as the confined space allows. "No offense to your very comfortable truck, but I need to be horizontal on something that doesn't move for at least eight hours."

Jake's eyes flick to me briefly, something darkening in their depths before returning to the road. "I've made reservations at the Nighty Night Bed and Breakfast. It's run by a couple named Jeremy and Dawn Lincoln. Highly rated, secure property."

"Of course you've researched the security of a bed and breakfast in a town I've never heard of," I laugh. "Do you ever just... wing it?"

"No," he says simply.

"Not even once? Not even for something small and inconsequential?"

He considers this for a moment. "I once ordered coffee without checking the Yelp reviews first."

I stare at him, then burst out laughing when I realize he's joking. "Oh my God, was that actual humor from the robot? Alert the media."

That almost-smile appears again, transforming his face in a way that makes my stomach do a little flip. "I have my moments."



"So what's in Heartstone?" I ask, curious about our first major stop. "Besides this highly secure B&B you've vetted."

"Small town, about 2,000 residents. They have a local theater, a diner that's apparently something of an institution, and a classic car restoration shop. Route 14 runs right through it."

"Sounds like you've memorized the tourist brochure."

"I like knowing what to expect," he says, changing lanes to pass a slow-moving truck.

The morning continues with the miles rolling beneath us. As my body gradually adjusts to being awake, I become increasingly aware of the man beside me. In the soft morning light, Jake's profile is even more striking.

There's something about him that draws my attention in a way I can't explain. Maybe it's the contradiction between his controlled exterior and those rare moments of dry humor. Maybe it's the way he radiates competence and safety. Or maybe it's just that he fills out that black t-shirt in ways that should be illegal.

"You're staring," he says without looking at me.

Heat floods my cheeks. "Sorry. Just trying to figure you out."

"Any conclusions?"

"You're complicated," I admit. "All these rigid rules and boundaries, but then you do something unexpectedly considerate, like letting me sleep or getting my coffee exactly right."

"Complicated isn't the word most people use," he says, a hint of curiosity in his voice.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

"What word do they use?"

"Difficult. Intense. Controlling." He says it matter-of-factly, without any apparent discomfort.

"Those too," I agree with a smile. "But complicated covers all of it."

We stop at a roadside diner for breakfast. The place is nearly empty, just a couple of truckers at the counter and an elderly couple in a booth near the window. Jake chooses a booth with clear sightlines to both exits, his back to the wall. I slide in across from him, amused by his predictable choice.

"Let me guess," I say as the waitress hands us menus. "You always sit facing the door."

"Always," he confirms, scanning the menu with the same focused attention he gives the road.

"And you'll order something protein-heavy, minimal carbs, nothing too messy or complicated."

He looks up, those striking eyes meeting mine directly. "You think you've got me all figured out, don't you?"

"Am I wrong?" I challenge.

When the waitress returns, Jake orders the steak and eggs, protein-heavy just as I

predicted. I opt for blueberry pancakes with a side of bacon, partly because I want them and partly to be his opposite.

"You're smirking," he observes after the waitress leaves.

"You're just so delightfully predictable," I reply. "It's like I've created a psychological profile of you after less than twenty-four hours."

"And what does this profile tell you?"

I lean forward, dropping my voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "That beneath all that control and precision beats the heart of an actual human being who occasionally makes jokes and lets exhausted women sleep in his truck."

"Groundbreaking analysis," he says dryly, but there's amusement in his eyes.

Our food arrives, and I nearly moan at the first bite of pancakes. It's been almost twelve hours since I last ate anything substantial, and the sweet, fluffy goodness hits all the right notes.

"These are amazing," I say around a mouthful. "You should try some."

"I'm good with my predictable protein," he replies, cutting his steak.

"Live a little, Jake. One bite of pancake won't destroy your macros or whatever."

He looks at me for a long moment, then sighs and puts down his knife. "One bite."

I slice off a perfect portion with enough blueberries and syrup, then offer it across the table. Instead of taking the fork from me, he leans forward and takes the bite directly from my fork, his eyes locked on mine.

Something hot and electric shoots through me at the unexpected intimacy of the gesture. His lips close around the fork, and I'm suddenly hyperaware of their shape, their fullness.

"Verdict?" I ask, my voice embarrassingly husky.

He swallows, his expression thoughtful. "Not bad."

"Not bad? These are celestial pancakes, Jake. They're practically a religious experience."

"I prefer savory to sweet," he says with a shrug, but there's something in his eyes that suggests he enjoyed more than just the taste of the pancakes.

After breakfast, we're back on the road. The landscape has changed from flat farmland to gently rolling hills as we make our way deeper into Missouri. The tension between us has shifted somehow, charged with an awareness that wasn't there before. I find myself noticing things I'd missed earlier, the way his t-shirt pulls across his shoulders when he adjusts his grip on the wheel, the subtle woodsy scent of his cologne, the controlled strength in his movements.

"Tell me about this wedding we're racing to," he says, breaking a comfortable silence. "Must be important for you to go to these lengths."

"My best friend Jordyn is marrying this mountain man lawyer named Silas. They're total opposites but somehow perfect together. She's been planning this wedding forever, and I promised I wouldn't miss a thing."

"The dress fitting on Saturday," he remembers. "Is that the only deadline we're working against?"

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

"The main one. There are some other pre-wedding events next week, but the fitting is crucial. The dresses had to be remade after one of the bridesmaids announced she was pregnant and would be showing by the wedding date."

Jake nods, processing this information. "We'll get you there."

The certainty in his voice is reassuring. Despite having known him for less than a day, I believe him completely. Jake Winters strikes me as a man who keeps his promises, whatever the cost.

"So, what's your connection to Foxfire Valley?" I ask. "You said you had business there?"

"Client meeting," he says vaguely.

"Always so specific," I tease. "Let me try again. What exactly is your business, Jake? You mentioned security, but that covers everything from mall cop to James Bond."

He glances at me, a hint of amusement in his eyes. "Risk assessment and security protocols for high-net-worth individuals and events."

"So closer to James Bond than mall cop."

"Neither, actually. More administrative than field work these days."

I study his profile. "I don't believe that for a second. You have 'field operative' written

all over you."

"Is that so?" The corner of his mouth lifts slightly.

"The way you're always aware of exits, the way you position yourself, the way you continuously scan for threats, that's not behavior you learn sitting behind a desk writing security protocols."

His expression shifts, becoming more guarded. "You're observant."

"I told you, marketing is applied psychology. I notice how people behave." I tilt my head, still watching him. "So, what were you before? Military? Law enforcement?"

"Both," he admits after a pause. "Marines, then private security."

"That explains a lot." The pieces are starting to fit together.

"Does it?" There's an edge to his voice now, a warning I choose to ignore.

"It explains why you're so..." I gesture vaguely at all of him.

"So what?" he challenges.

"Dominant," I say, the word slipping out before I can stop it.

His hands tighten on the steering wheel, knuckles whitening briefly before relaxing. "That's an interesting choice of word."

Heat floods my cheeks, but I hold his gaze when he briefly looks at me. "Am I wrong?"

The tension in the truck cab thickens, charged with something I'm not sure I'm ready to name.

"No," he says finally, his voice deeper than before. "You're not wrong."

The admission hangs between us, loaded with implications neither of us addresses. I look away first, suddenly needing to break the intensity of the moment.

"We're about an hour from Heartstone," Jake says, his voice back to its usual controlled tone. "You should text your friend, let her know you're making progress."

Grateful for the distraction, I pull out my phone to update Jordyn, still hyperaware of Jake beside me.

When we finally see the sign welcoming us to Heartstone, Missouri, a mix of relief and regret fills me. Relief at the prospect of a real bed and a proper shower, regret that this first leg of our journey is ending. Despite the strangeness of our situation, there's something about being contained in this truck with Jake that feels oddly right, as if we've created our own little world where only the two of us exist.

"There it is," Jake says as we drive past a sign reading "Welcome to Heartstone – A Sweet Little Town Close to the Heart of Missouri."

The town unfolds before us like a movie set, charming storefronts with colorful awnings, a small park with benches beneath leafy trees, locals going about their business with unhurried ease. We pass a diner with a neon sign declaring it "Kathy's Diner," a theater called "Upstage Dinner Theater," and an auto shop with "Miller Car Restoration & Repair" painted on the large garage doors.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

"It's exactly like you said," I murmur, taking in the picture-perfect small-town scene. "Like something out of a Hallmark movie."

"The Nighty Night should be up ahead on the right," Jake says, slowing as we approach a large, white Victorian house set back from the road. "There it is."

The B&B is a grand old house with a wrap-around porch and gabled windows, overlooking what appears to be a lake behind it. As Jake pulls into the gravel driveway, the front door opens and a woman steps out. She's beautiful, with natural curly hair framing a round face, full lips curved in a welcoming smile.

"That must be Dawn Lincoln," Jake says, parking the truck. "The co-owner I mentioned."

He cuts the engine, and for a moment, neither of us moves. Our journey has only just begun, but I already feel like something significant has shifted between us. This small town in Missouri marks not just our first stop, but the first acknowledgment of the undeniable tension building between us.

"Ready?" Jake asks, his eyes meeting mine making my breath catch.

The question feels weighted with meaning beyond our immediate situation.

"As I'll ever be," I reply, holding his gaze.

Whatever happens in Heartstone, I have a feeling it will change the course of our entire journey.



## TRISH

Dawn Lincoln leads us into the Nighty Night Bed and Breakfast with a warmth that immediately melts away the tension of our long drive. Her natural curls bounce around her face as she moves through the foyer, her dark eyes bright with genuine welcome.

"So, you two are traveling all the way to Nevada?" she asks, turning to face us. "What a romantic road trip!"

"Oh, we're not--" I start.

"It's not--" Jake says simultaneously.

Dawn's smile widens. "Of course not. Just two strangers sharing a cross-country journey. I hear that story at least once a month." She winks at me. "Honey, the way that man watches you when you're not looking? That's not 'just a ride share' territory."

Heat floods my cheeks as I avoid looking at Jake. We've barely known each other twenty-four hours, but something about the knowing gleam in Dawn's eye makes me wonder just how transparent our growing tension is to outsiders.

"Two rooms, please," Jake says firmly, seemingly unruffled by her assumption.

"Of course," Dawn agrees, but her smile remains skeptical. "Though I should mention we only have one room with a private bath available. The other has a shared bathroom down the hall."

Jake's jaw tightens almost imperceptibly. "I'll take the shared."

"Such a gentleman," Dawn murmurs, pulling out an old-fashioned guest book. "Sign here, please. Jeremy will show you to your rooms once you're registered."

As if summoned, a man appears from what must be a back office. He's tall with reddish-brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard, wearing a flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His eyes are a startling cobalt blue, but it's the quiet confidence in his demeanor that reminds me immediately of Jake.

"I'm Jeremy," he says, his voice softer than I expected from someone his size. "Welcome to Heartstone."

Jake extends his hand. "Jake Winters. This is Trish Walker."

They shake hands, and I don't miss the way Jeremy's eyes flick between us, assessing. Another former military man, if I had to guess.

"I'll take your bags up," Jeremy offers, reaching for my suitcase.

"I've got it," Jake says, already lifting both our bags with ease.

Jeremy nods, not offended. "Follow me, then."

The B&B is everything a Victorian country home should be, polished wood floors, tall windows that let in streams of golden afternoon light, and antique furniture that somehow manages to look both elegant and comfortable. As we climb the wooden staircase, I notice framed photographs lining the wall, Dawn and Jeremy throughout the years, the B&B in different seasons, and what looks like local Heartstone events.

"Your room is here," Jeremy says to me, stopping at a door with "Sweet Dreams" painted in elegant script on a small wooden plaque. He unlocks it and steps aside.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

The room is charming. It has a queen bed with a handmade quilt, a small writing desk by the window overlooking the lake, fresh flowers in a simple vase. It's cozy without being cluttered, perfectly capturing the essence of small-town hospitality.

"And you're just down the hall," Jeremy tells Jake, leading him further along the corridor.

Once they're gone, I sink onto the edge of the bed, suddenly aware of how exhausted I am from our journey. The mattress is perfect, not too soft, not too firm, and the sheets smell faintly of lavender. I could easily curl up right now and sleep until morning, but we've been on the road for so long that I desperately need to shower and change into clean clothes.

The private bathroom is a blessing. I stand under the hot spray longer than necessary, washing away the road dust and the lingering stiffness from sitting for so many hours. By the time I emerge, wrapped in a fluffy towel, I feel human again.

I check my phone and find a text from Jake.

Jake: Meet me downstairs in 30 min if you want dinner. Locals recommend Kathy's Diner.

I reply with a simple thumbs-up emoji and set about getting ready. I choose a pair of jeans that hug my curves in all the right places and a deep burgundy sweater that drapes nicely over my full bust. After taming my curls and applying just enough makeup to look refreshed, I head downstairs.

Jake is waiting in the small sitting room, scrolling through his phone. He's changed too, still in jeans and a black t-shirt, but freshly showered, his jaw smooth from a recent shave. He looks up when I enter, and something flashes in his eyes that makes my pulse quicken.

"Feel better?" he asks, pocketing his phone.

"Worlds better," I confirm. "I didn't realize how much I needed a shower and actual walls around me."

"My truck has walls," he says with mock offense.

"Your truck is lovely, but it's no Victorian B&B." I glance around the charming sitting room. "This place is incredible."

"Dawn and Jeremy have owned it for twelve years," he says. "Converted it from a private residence."

"You researched the owners too?" I raise an eyebrow.

"Force of habit," he replies with that now-familiar response.

Outside, the streets of Heartstone are bathed in the golden light of early evening. We walk side by side toward Main Street, where Kathy's Diner sits on the corner, its neon sign glowing cheerfully against the darkening sky.

"Dawn mentioned there's an actual diner counter where we can sit, or booths if you prefer more privacy," Jake says as we approach.

"Counter sounds fun," I reply. "More authentic small-town experience."

The interior of Kathy's Diner is pure 1950s Americana with red vinyl booths, black and white checkered floor, and chrome fixtures gleaming under warm lighting. A cherry-red accent wall runs along the back, covered with high school and college pennants. An actual jukebox sits in the corner, and I'm delighted to see it's not just decorative but playing actual music.

A woman in her fifties with bottle-blond hair swept into soft waves greets us with a wide smile. "Welcome to Kathy's! Just the two of you tonight?"

"Yes," Jake confirms. "Counter seats available?"

"Always room at my counter for handsome travelers," she says with a wink. "Follow me."

As we take our seats at the gleaming counter, she slides menus in front of us. "I'm Kathy, by the way. This is my place."

"I'm Trish, this is Jake," I introduce us. "Your diner is amazing. It's like stepping back in time."

"That's the idea," she says proudly. "Been keeping it exactly the same since my family opened it in the forties. What brings you two to Heartstone?"

"Just passing through," Jake says before I can answer. "On our way to Nevada."

"Ah, Route 14 travelers," Kathy nods knowingly. "Well, you picked a good stop. What can I get you to drink? Milkshakes are our specialty."

I can't resist. "Chocolate for me, please."

"Water," Jake says predictably.

Kathy puts a hand on her hip, eyeing him. "Really, sugar? Life's too short to skip the good stuff."

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

The corner of Jake's mouth twitches. "Fine. Vanilla."

"That's more like it," she says with satisfaction, moving away to prepare our drinks.

"Vanilla?" I tease once she's out of earshot. "Living dangerously, Captain Control."

"I'm full of surprises," he deadpans, but there's a light in his eyes that wasn't there earlier.

Our milkshakes arrive, mine topped with whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles, his classic and unadorned. I take my first sip and can't help the small moan of pleasure that escapes me.

"God, that's good," I sigh, closing my eyes briefly.

When I open them, Jake is watching me with an intensity that makes my skin tingle. His eyes have darkened, his focus entirely on my mouth.

"Sorry," I say, suddenly self-conscious. "I get enthusiastic about desserts."

"No need to apologize," he says, his voice rougher than before. "It's... refreshing to see someone enjoy things so openly."

There's a weight to his words that suggests he's not just talking about milkshakes. I hold his gaze, the air between us charging with that now-familiar tension.

"You should try it sometime," I challenge softly. "Letting yourself enjoy things

openly."

His expression shifts, something darker and more primal flickering behind the careful control. "Maybe I will," he says, his voice dropping to a register that sends heat spiraling through me.

We're interrupted by Kathy returning for our orders. I choose the famous Hearty Breakfast platter, while Jake opts for the Club Special, both recommended as house specialties.

As we wait for our food, conversation flows more easily than it has since we began our journey. Jake tells me more about his time in the Marines, carefully edited stories that still reveal his natural leadership and strategic mind. I share anecdotes from my marketing career, the challenging clients and surprising successes.

"So, wait," I say, pausing with a fry halfway to my mouth. "You actually designed a security system for a Saudi prince?"

"Among others," he confirms. "High-net-worth individuals have unique security concerns."

"I can imagine." I study him over my plate. "Is that the kind of work you still do? For celebrities and royalty?"

He hesitates, choosing his words carefully. "Sometimes. These days I'm more selective about my clients. I prefer projects with actual security needs rather than just paranoid wealth."

"And yet you still drive ride share on the side," I point out. "Which doesn't add up, by the way. A high-end security consultant moonlighting as a driver? There's more to that story."



Jake takes a sip of water, his expression unreadable. "Maybe there is."

I wait for him to elaborate, but he doesn't. Another piece of the puzzle that is Jake Winters, offering tantalizing glimpses of disclosure that never quite reveal the full picture.

After dinner, we step back onto the street, now fully dark except for the warm glow of streetlights. The night air carries a hint of coolness, despite the summer season.

"Want to walk a bit before heading back?" Jake asks. "Dawn mentioned something called Lover's Stroll Park nearby."

I laugh at the name. "Sounds dangerous. Like it was designed specifically for couples to make out."

"I think that's exactly what it's for," he says with a rare smile. "But the walking path is supposed to be nice, and I could use the movement after sitting all day."

We make our way to the park, which lives up to its romantic name. Tree-lined paths wind through carefully maintained gardens, with wrought-iron benches positioned at scenic intervals. A narrow wooden bridge crosses a small stream, looking charmingly rustic in the moonlight.

As we walk side by side, close but not touching, I'm acutely aware of the rhythm of his breathing, the subtle scent of his soap, and the way he positions himself slightly ahead of me when we pass other people.

"You weren't kidding about always being on alert, were you?" I observe as he subtly scans the area for what must be the twentieth time.

"No," he admits. "It's ingrained at this point."

"Even here? In possibly the safest-looking small town in America?"

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

He glances down at me. "Especially in places that look safe. That's when people let their guard down."

"That's an exhausting way to live," I say quietly.

"It's kept me alive," he counters, but there's no defensive edge to his tone. Just simple truth.

We reach the narrow bridge, and I pause in the middle, leaning against the railing to look at the moonlight reflecting on the water below. Jake stands beside me, closer than before, his arm almost brushing mine.

"Can I ask you something personal?" I venture, still gazing at the water.

"You can ask," he says, which isn't quite permission.

"Do you ever get tired of it? The constant vigilance, the planning for every contingency?"

He's quiet for so long I think he might not answer. Finally, he says, "Sometimes."

I turn to face him then, finding him already looking at me. I swallow to wet my throat. "Like when?"

"Like now," he says, his voice low and rough.

The air between us grows heavy. He's so close I can feel the heat radiating from his

body, can see the subtle pulse at the base of his throat. If I leaned forward just a few inches, our lips would meet.

"Jake," I whisper, not sure what I'm asking for but needing... something.

He lifts his hand, and for one heart-stopping moment I think he's going to touch my face. Instead, he gently tucks a stray curl behind my ear, his fingers barely grazing my skin.

"We should head back," he says, his voice controlled once more. "Early start tomorrow."

The withdrawal feels like a physical loss, cold air rushing into the space where his warmth had been. I nod, not trusting my voice, and follow him back toward the path that will lead us to the B&B.

As we walk, I try to make sense of what just happened, or rather, what almost happened. The pull between us is becoming impossible to ignore, a magnetic force drawing us closer despite all the reasons we should maintain distance.

Back at the Nighty Night, we pause at my door. Jake stands with his hands in his pockets, maintaining a careful distance.

"Goodnight, Trish," he says formally. "Six AM departure tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Jake," I reply, equally formal on the surface, though my insides are anything but composed. "Sleep well."

He turns to go, then pauses, looking back over his shoulder. "Lock your door," he says, his voice carrying a weight I don't fully understand.

"I will."

Once inside my room, I lean against the closed door, my heart racing. Whatever is building between Jake and me has shifted tonight, evolving from simple attraction to something more complex and potentially stupid.

But the most frightening part is that I'm not sure I want to stop it.

5

JAKE

The Nighty Night Bed and Breakfast is silent as I make my way down the hall at 5 AM. Dawn and Jeremy likely won't be up for another hour, and Trish is hopefully still sleeping soundly behind her locked door. I'd verified the sound of the deadbolt clicking last night before I'd gone to my own room, unwilling to leave her security to chance even in this seemingly idyllic town.

I slip out the front door and into the pre-dawn darkness, needing the solitude of a morning run to clear my head. My self-control nearly shattered on that bridge last night, and that's unacceptable. I don't lose control. Ever. Not since Kandahar.

The streets of Heartstone are deserted at this hour, perfect for a five-mile loop to burn off the tension that's been building since I first laid eyes on Trish Walker in Toronto. I set a punishing pace, focusing on the rhythm of my breathing, the steady impact of my feet on pavement, anything but the memory of her face in the moonlight and the soft whisper of my name on her lips.

By the time I return, the eastern sky has lightened to a pale lavender. I'm slightly startled to find Trish sitting on the B&B's front porch swing, a steaming mug cradled in her hands.

"You're up early," I say, slowing to a walk as I approach.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

"Couldn't sleep." She raises the mug in a small salute. "Dawn was already up, making coffee. She's prepping breakfast now."

I take the porch steps two at a time, conscious of the sweat dampening my shirt. "I'll shower quickly."

"Sit first," she says, patting the space beside her on the swing. "Dawn brought out two mugs."

Indeed, there's a second mug on the small table beside the swing. The thought of sitting so close to Trish while my body is still charged from the run seems unwise, but refusing would be equally suspicious.

I take the seat, maintaining as much distance as the swing allows, and reach for the coffee. "Thanks."

"How far did you run?" she asks, eyeing me over the rim of her mug.

"Five miles. It's my standard morning routine."

"Of course, it is," she says with a small smile. "I bet you ran exactly five miles, not 4.9, not 5.1."

"5.2 actually," I correct, which earns me a surprised look. "There's a nice loop around the lake."

She laughs, the sound unexpectedly delightful in the quiet morning. "Look at you,

deviating from the plan by a whole two-tenths of a mile. Next thing you know, you'll be ordering chocolate milkshakes and jaywalking."

"Unlikely," I say dryly, but I can't help the small smile tugging at my lips.

We sit in comfortable silence for a few minutes, watching as the town gradually wakes up. A bakery truck makes deliveries across the street. An elderly man walks his dog along the sidewalk. The normalcy of it all is almost jarring after years of operating in environments where ordinary moments are rare.

"I think I understand why you came back to small-town life after your time in security," Trish says suddenly. "There's something grounding about places like this."

"It's an illusion," I reply, though not unkindly. "Every place has its dangers. Its secrets."

"Even Heartstone?" She looks skeptical.

"Especially places like Heartstone." I finish my coffee and stand. "I should get ready. We're still on schedule to leave by six."

"About that," she says, setting her mug down. "Dawn mentioned there's a famous breakfast at Kathy's Diner that we absolutely have to try before leaving. She called it the 'heart-stopper special' or something."

"The Hearty Breakfast?" I correct, remembering the menu from last night. "That would put us behind schedule."

"By what, an hour?" She tilts her head, studying me. "The way you drive, you'd make it up before noon."



She's not wrong, but schedule deviations make me uncomfortable for reasons I can't explain to her without revealing more than I should.

"Please?" she adds, looking up at me with those dark eyes that seem to see right through my carefully constructed barriers."Dawn says it's a local tradition for travelers.Two eggs, hashbrowns, four pancakes, bacon, and sausage.A real artery-clogger."

"Not the best sales pitch," I observe.

She laughs again, and I find myself wanting to be the cause of that sound more often."Live a little, Jake. One breakfast detour won't destroy your precious timeline."

I should say no. Maintaining the schedule is important, especially with the deadline of her friend's dress fitting looming.But the eagerness in her expression is strangely difficult to resist.

"Fine," I concede. "But we leave immediately after breakfast."

Her smile is like the sun breaking over the horizon, warm, bright, and impossible to look away from."Deal."

I head inside to shower, uncomfortably aware that this is the second time in less than twelve hours that I've deviated from my plan because of Trish Walker.The realization is unsettling.Control has been my cornerstone since leaving the Marines, the foundation upon which I've rebuilt my life and my security business.Control is what makes me effective, keeps my clients safe, keeps me safe.

Yet around Trish, that control feels increasingly fragile.The way she sees through my defenses and elicits reactions I thought I'd buried years ago is dangerous.And not just to my carefully organized schedule.

In the shower, I turn the water to cold, seeking clarity. Our journey has only just begun, and already the boundaries I established are blurring. This isn't like me. I don't get distracted by beautiful women with quick minds and quicker smiles. I don't deviate from plans. I don't lose focus on missions.

And this is a mission, whether Trish realizes it or not. My presence on Route 14 isn't a coincidence, nor is my destination of Foxfire Valley. The security contract for the Kane-McCrae wedding is my largest of the year, a complex operation involving high-profile guests and multiple potential threat vectors.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

Trish is a complication I hadn't anticipated, one that's becoming increasingly difficult to manage.

Dressed and ready, I make my way downstairs to find Trish chatting animatedly with Dawn in the dining room. She laughs at something Dawn says, the sound making my chest tighten in a way I refuse to examine too closely.

"Ready for breakfast?" Trish asks, looking up as I enter. "Dawn says Kathy's famous for her pancakes, and that we'd be committing a cardinal sin if we left town without trying them."

Dawn nods in agreement, a knowing twinkle in her eye as she glances between us. "The Hearty Breakfast is worth every calorie. Though you might want to share one, the portions are enormous."

"I can handle large portions," Trish says with a grin, then immediately blushes as she realizes how that sounds. "I mean, I'm hungry. For food. Pancakes specifically."

Dawn's smile widens. "Of course, honey. Just pancakes."

I clear my throat. "We should go if we want to stay somewhat on schedule."

Outside, the morning has fully bloomed, sunlight warming the cobblestone streets as we make our way to Kathy's Diner. The place is significantly busier than last night, nearly every booth filled with locals starting their day.

Kathy spots us immediately, waving us over to two reserved seats at the

counter."Morning, travelers! Dawn called ahead, said you needed the works before hitting the road."

"You have amazing friends in this town," Trish observes as we take our seats.

"Small towns," I explain. "Everyone knows everyone's business."

"Which means everyone's already talking about the tall, mysterious stranger and his gorgeous companion passing through," Kathy confirms cheerfully, sliding coffee in front of us without asking."So, two Hearty Breakfasts?"

"Just one," I cut in before Trish can answer."We'll share."

Trish raises an eyebrow at me."Worried about my calorie intake, Jake?"

"Worried about food coma while driving," I counter."Trust me, you haven't seen the size of this thing."

Kathy laughs. "Man knows what he's talking about.One Hearty Breakfast with extra bacon coming up.You can fight over who gets the most pancakes."

As Kathy moves away, Trish turns to face me fully on her stool."So, where are we headed after this?Still planning to make it all the way to Kansas tonight?"

"That was the plan," I confirm."There's another small town called Basic Plaines, about ten hours from here if we maintain a good pace.Not much there except a rest stop and a high school football team they're apparently very proud of."

"Sounds exciting," she says dryly."What's our accommodation situation there?"

"There's a motel off the highway.Basic but clean, according to the reviews."

She nods, taking a sip of her coffee. "And after Kansas? Where's our next stop before Nevada?"

"Rustic Junction, Colorado. It's a tourist town designed to look like an old Western movie set. Staged gunfights, saloon girls, the works."

"That actually sounds fun," she says, brightening. "I've never been to one of those Old West towns."

"It's mostly for tourists," I warn. "Very manufactured nostalgia."

"Still better than another generic motel. Where are we staying there?"

"Place called the Rustic Love Hotel." I immediately regret the name as her eyes widen slightly. "It's the only accommodation in town," I add quickly. "Separate rooms, of course."

"Of course," she echoes, but there's a teasing glint in her eye. "Though that might raise some eyebrows, Mr. Control. A couple checking into the 'Love Hotel' but requesting separate rooms? Scandalous."

"We're not a couple," I remind her, more sharply than intended.

Something flashes across her face--disappointment? Hurt? It's gone too quickly to identify.

"Believe me, I'm well aware," she says, her tone cooling. "Just making a joke."

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

I've managed to offend her, which wasn't my intention. Before I can figure out how to navigate this sudden shift, Kathy returns with a breakfast platter that's genuinely alarming in its proportions.

"One Hearty Breakfast for the not-a-couple," she announces with a wink, setting down a plate heaped with golden pancakes, eggs, hash browns, and enough bacon and sausage to feed a small army. "Enjoy, darlings."

Trish's eyes widen comically. "Okay, I see your point about sharing now."

The moment of tension passes as we both survey the mountain of food before us. Kathy has thoughtfully provided two sets of silverware, and Trish immediately claims the larger stack of pancakes, drowning them in maple syrup.

"So," she says, cutting into her pancakes with gusto, "what's your story with Route 14? You seem to know it well for someone who supposedly doesn't do road trips often."

Her question catches me off guard. "What makes you think I don't do road trips often?"

"Your entire demeanor screams 'routine-driven city dweller.' Plus, you mentioned your security work is mostly administrative now, which suggests an office, not open roads."

"I've driven this route before," I admit carefully. "For work."

"Security work?" she presses, taking a bite of pancake that leaves a small dot of syrup at the corner of her mouth.

Without thinking, I reach out and brush it away with my thumb. Her breath catches audibly, and for a moment, we're frozen in that point of connection.

I pull my hand back, cursing my lapse in judgment. "Yes, security work," I confirm, returning to the safer topic. "A client project a few years back."

She studies me over her coffee mug, clearly not satisfied with my vague answer but seeming to decide not to push further. "Well, I'm glad one of us knows where we're going. My sense of direction is legendarily terrible. I once got lost inside a mall."

The conversation turns to lighter topics as we make our way through the enormous breakfast. By the time we finish eating, barely making a dent in the monstrous breakfast, the diner has mostly cleared out as locals head to work. Kathy brings our check personally, refusing Trish's attempt to pay.

"Dawn already called and settled it," she explains with a smile. "She said it's a gift for the road. We don't get many interesting travelers through Heartstone, so we like to make it memorable when we do."

"That's incredibly kind," Trish says, clearly touched by the gesture.

"Just promise you'll stop by again if you're ever back this way," Kathy replies, giving us both a warm smile. "Maybe on your way back from Nevada?"

"Maybe," I say noncommittally, knowing my return journey will likely be by private plane, not Route 14.

Back at the B&B, we find our bags already loaded in my truck, with Dawn and

Jeremy waiting to say goodbye.

"Safe travels," Dawn says, hugging Trish like they're old friends instead of overnight guests."And remember what I said about not letting good opportunities pass you by," she adds with a meaningful glance in my direction.

Jeremy shakes my hand with a firm grip that confirms my military suspicions about him."Route 14 can be unpredictable this time of year," he warns quietly."Weather changes fast in the mountains.Keep an eye on the forecasts."

"Always do," I assure him.

With final goodbyes exchanged, we climb into the truck and pull away from the Nighty Night, heading west toward Kansas and the next leg of our journey.

"I liked them," Trish says, watching Heartstone recede in the side mirror."Dawn and Jeremy, Kathy, all of them.There's something nice about places where people still look out for each other."

"Small towns have their advantages," I concede, merging onto the highway."And their disadvantages."

"Such as?"

"Everyone knows everyone's business, for one.Privacy is a luxury."

She considers this. "I suppose that would bother someone like you.All those secrets to maintain."

The accuracy of her observation is again unsettling."I don't have secrets," I lie."Just personal boundaries."



"Right," she says skeptically. "Mr. Open Book. That's definitely the vibe you give off."

I choose not to respond, focusing on the road ahead instead. The sky is clear, promising good driving conditions, and despite our breakfast detour, we're still on track to reach Basic Plaines by early evening.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

"You can put on music if you want," I offer after a stretch of silence.

Trish looks genuinely surprised. "Really? You're letting me choose?"

"Within reason," I qualify. "Nothing that would compromise driving safety."

She laughs, the sound filling the cab of the truck. "God forbid we listen to something dangerous like death metal or explicit hip-hop. What happens then? Does the truck explode?"

Despite myself, I smile at her teasing. "Just choose something, Trish."

She connects her phone to the truck's audio system and scrolls through her playlists. After a moment of deliberation, soft acoustic guitar fills the speakers, not what I expected from her at all.

"Surprised?" she asks, clearly reading my expression. "You thought I'd pick something loud and chaotic just to annoy you, didn't you?"

"The thought had crossed my mind," I admit.

"I contain multitudes, Jake Winters." She settles back in her seat, a small smile playing on her lips. "Just like you."

As we drive west toward Kansas, the music creates a peaceful backdrop to the scenery rolling past. Trish eventually dozes off, her head resting against the window, curls tumbling around her face. I find my gaze drawn to the gentle curve of her cheek,

and the slight part of her lips as she breathes deeply more often than is safe while driving.

This attraction is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore, especially after last night on the bridge. I'd come dangerously close to crossing a line I'd drawn clearly for myself when accepting this ride share request. Professional distance. No complications. Complete focus on the mission.

But watching Trish sleep, vulnerable and trusting in my presence, I'm forced to acknowledge that the line has already blurred beyond recognition. Whatever is building between us isn't something I can control with my usual protocols.

And that, more than anything, is what terrifies me.

6

TRISH

Basic Plains, Kansas lives up to its name in every possible way. As Jake pulls off Route 14 into what barely qualifies as a town, I stare out the window at the flat, endless landscape stretching in all directions.

"Please tell me this isn't really where we're staying tonight," I say, eyeing the single motel that appears to be the town's only accommodation option. The sign reads "Plains Motel" with several letters burnt out, making it look more like "Plains Motel" instead.

"It's this or sleeping in the truck," Jake replies, pulling into the small parking lot. "We've been on the road for almost eleven hours. We need rest."

He's right, of course. After leaving Heartstone this morning, we've driven straight

through with only brief stops for gas and bathroom breaks. My body aches from sitting so long, and despite my nap earlier, fatigue weighs heavily on me.

"Fine," I concede. "But if there are bedbugs, I'm sleeping on top of you."

The moment the words leave my mouth, I want to snatch them back. Jake's eyes meet mine, something dark and hungry flashing in their depths before he carefully masks it.

"Let's hope the reviews are accurate, then," he says, his voice rougher than before.

The motel office is manned by a bored teenager who barely looks up from his phone as Jake requests two rooms. The kid's disinterest shifts to something more alert when he checks the computer.

"Only got one room left," he announces, eyes darting between us with newfound interest. "Double bed, though. Not single."

Jake's jaw tightens visibly. "Nothing else available?"

"Nope. High school football game tonight against our rivals. Town's packed with visitors." The kid shrugs, clearly enjoying our predicament. "Take it or leave it."

Jake glances at me, his expression unreadable. "Your call."

I weigh our options. Keep driving, potentially for hours, when we're both already exhausted. Sleep in the truck, which would be uncomfortable at best. Or share a room with Jake, with all the complications that might entail.

"We'll take it," I decide, meeting Jake's gaze squarely. "We're both adults. We can handle one night in the same room."

Jake turns back to the desk clerk. "We'll take it."

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

The room is exactly what you'd expect from a roadside motel in a town that considers its high school football team the height of cultural achievement. Faded floral bedspreads, thin carpeting, generic landscape art bolted to the walls. But it's clean, at least, and the air conditioning works, which is a blessing after the Kansas summer heat.

"I'll take the floor," Jake says immediately, setting our bags down just inside the door.

"Don't be ridiculous," I counter, kicking off my shoes. "The bed is plenty big enough for both of us. We can build a pillow barrier down the middle if you're worried about your virtue."

His mouth twitches. "It's not my virtue I'm concerned about."

"Oh please," I scoff, though his words send a thrill through me. "I think I can control myself for one night, no matter how irresistible you think you are."

"Trish," he says, my name a low warning.

"Jake," I mimic his tone. "Seriously, I don't bite. Unless asked nicely."

His eyes darken at that, and for a moment, the air between us charges like it had last night. Then he deliberately looks away, breaking the connection.

"I'm going to shower," he announces, grabbing his bag and heading for the bathroom. "There's a diner across the street if you're hungry."

The bathroom door closes with a definitive click, and the water starts running moments later. I flop back on the bed, staring at the ceiling and wondering what I've gotten myself into. The attraction between us has been building since Toronto, growing more intense with each mile we travel. Being stuck in this small room together is either going to force us to address it or drive us both insane.

I pull out my phone to distract myself, finding a text from Jordyn. I had opted to shoot her a text earlier, explaining the situation in very vague terms so as not to have her worrying about me in the weeks leading up to her wedding.

Jordyn:Where are you now? Still on track for Saturday?

Me: Basic Plaines, Kansas. Literally the most boring place on Earth. Yes, still on track. How's pre-wedding stuff going?

Jordyn:Still chaotic, but still in the best way. Silas's brothers all have Strong Opinions™ about everything. Miss you. How's the mysterious Jake holding up?

I glance toward the bathroom door, behind which Jake is currently showering. My mind unhelpfully supplies images of water running down his muscular torso, and I quickly redirect my thoughts.

Me: Still mysterious. Still controlling. Still infuriatingly attractive. We're sharing a motel room tonight. Only one available in this football-obsessed town.

Jordyn:Hmm, do I need to plan for an extra plus-one at my wedding?

Me: Very funny. It's not like that. He's taking the floor like some kind of chivalrous caveman.

Jordyn:Suuuure. Just remember, I want ALL the details when you get here.

I put my phone away as the water shuts off. A few minutes later, Jake emerges in a cloud of steam, wearing a fresh black t-shirt and sweatpants that hang low on his hips. His hair is damp, his face freshly shaved, and I have to force myself not to stare at the sliver of abdomen that appears when he reaches up to run a hand through his wet hair.

"All yours," he says, seemingly oblivious to my reaction.

I grab my toiletries and practically flee to the bathroom, needing space to compose myself. The shower helps, washing away the day's travel grime and cooling my overheated thoughts. By the time I emerge in my own sleep shorts and tank top, I've regained some semblance of control.

Jake is sitting at the small desk by the window, typing something on his laptop. He glances up when I enter, his eyes widening slightly as they take in my bare legs before quickly returning to his screen.

"Hungry?" he asks, his voice carefully neutral.

As if on cue, my stomach growls audibly. "Starving, actually. Diner still open?"

"Until nine," he confirms, checking his watch. "We have time."

At least that'll give us time outside for me to get a grip. "I'll just need a few minutes to change, then we can head over."

The diner across the street is nearly empty, most of the town apparently at the football game. We slide into a booth by the window, and a waitress promptly brings menus.

"You folks just passing through?" she asks, pouring coffee without asking if we want it.



"Yes," Jake answers before I can. "Just tonight."

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

"Too bad," she says, eyeing the football stadium visible through the window. "Big game tonight. Whole town'll be celebrating after we crush the Eagles."

"I'm sure it'll be very exciting," I say politely.

After she takes our orders, a burger for me, grilled chicken for Jake, we fall into surprisingly comfortable conversation. The awkwardness from the motel room has dissipated, replaced by the easy rapport we've been developing over the past two days.

"Do you have siblings?" I ask, genuinely curious about Jake's background.

"One sister," he says. "Younger. She lives in Seattle with her husband and two kids."

"Are you close?"

"As close as we can be with the distance. I try to visit for major holidays when work allows." He takes a sip of his water. "You?"

"Only child," I reply. "Explains my control issues, probably. Never had to share toys or attention."

His mouth quirks in that almost-smile that's becoming familiar. "Not all only children have control issues."

"True. Some just become incredibly independent and self-sufficient instead." I pause, then add, "Like you, I'm guessing?"

He studies me for a moment. "My parents died when I was sixteen. Car accident. My sister was twelve. We went to live with our aunt, but she was... not equipped for suddenly having two teenagers."

The simple statement, delivered without self-pity, creates a tightness in my chest. "I'm sorry, Jake."

He shrugs. "It was a long time ago."

"Still," I say softly. "Losing parents is hard at any age."

Something shifts in his expression, a softening around the eyes that makes him look younger somehow. "Yes, it is."

Our food arrives, breaking the momentary intimacy of the exchange. As we eat, the conversation turns to lighter topics like favorite books, movies, places we've visited. It's strangely normal, sitting in this small-town diner with a man I've known for barely forty-eight hours, discussing whether *The Godfather* is superior to *Goodfellas*, because of course it is, and Jake agrees.

"Can I ask you something potentially uncomfortable?" I venture as we finish our meal.

His expression turns guarded. "You can ask."

"Why ride share? Really?" I lean forward, keeping my voice low. "You're clearly successful in your security work. You've traveled extensively. You have resources. So why pick up strangers and drive them across the country?"

Jake is quiet for a long moment, considering. "The honest answer?"

"Please."

"Control," he says finally. "When I'm driving, I'm in control of the situation. The route, the stops, the vehicle itself. It's... calming, in a way other things aren't."

"But why add passengers to the equation? Wouldn't driving alone be more controlled?"

"You'd think so," he concedes. "But there's something about the specific parameters of a ride share arrangement. Clear expectations. Defined roles. Beginning and end points established in advance."

Understanding dawns. "It's a controlled form of human interaction."

His eyes meet mine, surprised and perhaps a little impressed. "Exactly."

"So, what happens when a passenger disrupts that control?" I can't help asking. "Someone who challenges your rules, changes your schedule, makes you take breakfast detours?"

Something flickers in his eyes--heat, frustration, interest, I can't quite tell. "That depends on the passenger," he says carefully. "And how the disruption manifests."

The air between us thickens with unspoken tension. I'm suddenly acutely aware of the narrowness of the table separating us, his gaze meets mine, and my pulse quickens.

"And in my case?" I press, feeling bold. "How is my disruption manifesting?"

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

Jake leans forward slightly, close enough that I can see the faint stubble already beginning to shadow his freshly shaved jaw. "Unpredictably," he says, his voice dropping to a register that sends heat pooling low in my belly. "Which makes it both problematic and... interesting."

The waitress chooses that moment to appear with our check, breaking the charged moment. Jake pays-- "Company card," he explains when I try to contribute, and we walk back to the motel in silence, the night air heavy with humidity and unspoken words.

In our shared room, the awkwardness returns full force. Jake makes a show of arranging extra blankets on the floor beside the bed, despite my earlier insistence that we can share.

"You're really going to sleep down there?" I ask, sitting cross-legged on the bed. "That carpet hasn't been deep-cleaned since the Clinton administration."

"I've slept in worse conditions," he replies, not looking up from his makeshift bed.

"I'm not going to attack you in your sleep, you know," I say, trying for levity. "Unless you snore. Then all bets are off."

He glances up at me then, something serious in his expression. "It's not about that, Trish."

"Then what is it about? Because from where I'm sitting, it looks a lot like you're afraid to share a bed with me."

"I'm not afraid," he says, an edge entering his voice. "I'm being respectful."

"Respectful would be accepting my offer instead of martyring yourself on the gross motel carpet," I counter. "Unless there's another reason you're so determined to maintain physical distance?"

He straightens, his full height making the small room feel even smaller. "You want to know the reason? Fine. I'm attracted to you. Have been since I saw you standing in that airport terminal. And I don't trust myself to maintain appropriate boundaries if we're sleeping inches apart all night."

The frank admission sends a jolt of electricity through me. "Who says I want you to maintain appropriate boundaries?"

His eyes darken. "Don't, Trish."

"Don't what? Be honest about what's happening between us?" I stand up, crossing the small space between us until we're nearly touching. "I'm attracted to you too, Jake. I have been since you first stepped out of your truck. And I'm tired of pretending otherwise."

He remains perfectly still as I move closer, but I can see the tension radiating through him, the careful control he's exerting to keep himself in check. His breathing has accelerated slightly, his pupils dilated as they fix on my face.

"This is a bad idea," he says, but doesn't move away.

"Probably," I agree, tilting my face up toward his. "But I'm still going to ask you to kiss me."

Something flares in his eyes, desire, conflict, maybe hunger. "Trish," he says, my

name half warning, half plea.

"Kiss me, Jake," I whisper. "One kiss. If it's terrible, we'll laugh it off and never speak of it again. If it's not..." I leave the rest unspoken, an invitation hanging in the air between us.

For a moment, I think he might refuse. Then his hand comes up to cup my cheek, large and warm against my skin. "One kiss," he agrees, his voice rough. "Then we talk about this rationally."

I nod, already leaning into his touch. "Rationally. Absolutely."

His head dips slowly, deliberately, giving me every chance to change my mind. I hold my ground, heart hammering in my chest, skin tingling with anticipation.

When his lips finally meet mine, the contact is gentle, almost cautious. I answer by pressing closer, my hands coming up to rest on his chest, feeling the solid warmth of him through his t-shirt.

Something shifts then. A dam breaking, control shattering. Jake makes a sound low in his throat, his hand sliding from my cheek to tangle in my hair, tilting my head to deepen the kiss. His other arm wraps around my waist, pulling me flush against him, and I gasp at the sudden full-body contact.

He takes advantage of my parted lips, his tongue sweeping into my mouth with a thoroughness that makes my knees weak. This isn't just a kiss; it's a claiming, a conversation without words, a declaration of intent. I respond in kind, rising on tiptoes to press myself more firmly against him, my arms winding around his neck.

I've been kissed before, but never like this, never with such focused intensity, such careful deliberation beneath the passion. Jake kisses like he does everything else, with

absolute precision, yet there's an edge of something wilder underneath, something he's holding back with iron discipline.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathing hard. His eyes are darker than I've ever seen them, pupils blown wide with desire. My hands are still on his shoulders, his still in my hair and at my waist, keeping me anchored against him.

"That was..." I start, my voice embarrassingly breathless.

"A mistake," he finishes, though he makes no move to release me.

"Not the word I was going to use," I counter, threading my fingers through the short hair at the nape of his neck. "I was thinking more along the lines of 'incredible' or 'worth repeating immediately.'"



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

His grip tightens slightly in my hair, the slight pressure sending a cascade of sensation down my spine. "Trish," he says, my name a warning again. "We need to think this through."

"I've been thinking about it for two days," I admit. "Haven't you?"

The raw honesty in my question seems to catch him off guard. His expression shifts, the careful mask slipping to reveal something darker, more primal.

"Yes," he admits, voice pitched low. "More than I should have."

"Then why are we still talking?" I challenge, pressing myself more firmly against him, feeling the evidence of his desire hard against my stomach.

A growl escapes him, the sound so unexpected and arousing that I gasp. In one fluid motion, he lifts me, my legs instinctively wrapping around his waist as he carries me the few steps to the bed. We tumble onto it together, his weight pressing me into the mattress in the most delicious way.

His mouth finds mine again, the kiss deeper, hungrier than before. My hands explore the broad expanse of his shoulders, the solid muscle of his back, the narrow taper of his waist. When I slip my fingers under the hem of his t-shirt to touch bare skin, he makes that sound again, halfway between a groan and a growl that sends liquid heat pooling between my thighs.

"Jake," I breathe against his mouth, arching up as his lips trail down my neck. "God, that feels good."

His hand slides under my tank top, spanning my ribs, his thumb brushing the underside of my breast with maddening restraint. I squirm beneath him, seeking more direct contact, but he holds back, his touches teasing, controlled despite the obvious desire radiating from him.

"Please," I whisper, not even sure what I'm asking for.

He lifts his head, meeting my eyes. "What do you want, Trish? Tell me exactly."

The command in his voice hits me like a physical touch. "I want you," I say, my voice steadier than I feel. "All of you. No holding back."

Something flashes in his eyes, hunger, yes, but also conflict. "You don't know what you're asking for."

"Then show me," I challenge, reaching up to cup his face. "Show me what I'm asking for, Jake."

For a moment, I think he might actually do it, might let go of that rigid control and give us both what we so clearly want. Then he closes his eyes briefly, and when he opens them again, the wild heat has been banked, contained once more behind his disciplined facade.

"Not like this," he says, drawing back slightly. "Not in some random motel in Kansas, after two days of forced proximity and building tension. You deserve better than that."

"I deserve to make my own choices," I counter, frustration edging into my voice. "And I'm choosing this. You."

He brushes a curl from my face, the tenderness of the gesture at odds with the

restraint in his expression. "You don't even know me, Trish. Not really."

"I know enough," I insist. "I know how you make me feel. I know there's something happening between us that's worth exploring. Isn't that enough for now?"

Jake sits up, creating space between us that feels like miles after the intimacy of moments before. "It should be," he admits. "But there are complications you're not aware of."

"Such as?"

He hesitates, clearly weighing what to tell me. "My business in Nevada... it's connected to your friend's wedding."

This catches me completely off guard. "What? How?"

"I'm handling security for the Kane-McCrae wedding," he says, watching my reaction carefully. "It's a high-profile event with some unique security concerns. That's why I'm heading to Foxfire Valley."

I sit up too, processing this revelation. "So, when I appeared on your ride share app, requesting a ride to the same wedding..."

"It wasn't a coincidence," he confirms. "I was already going there. Taking you along was convenient and allowed me to gather information about the event from someone with inside knowledge."

The implication lands like a stone in my stomach. "You've been using me for intelligence gathering?"

"Not exactly," he says quickly. "The ride share was genuine. But yes, learning more

about the wedding and guests from your perspective has been useful for my security planning."

I stand up, needing distance. "So, all of this, the ride, the conversations, the kiss just now, it's been what? Part of your job?"

"No," he says firmly, standing as well. "The ride, yes. That aligned with my existing plans. But everything else, our conversations, my attraction to you, what just happened between us, that's been entirely separate from my professional obligations."

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

I want to believe him, but doubt has crept in, tarnishing the magic of moments before. "How convenient that the woman you're supposedly attracted to happens to be your direct line to information about your security contract."

"Trish," he says, reaching for me, but I step back.

"I need some air," I announce, grabbing my key card from the bedside table. "Don't wait up."

I'm out the door before he can respond, my feet carrying me across the motel parking lot toward the only place still lit up in this tiny town, the high school football stadium. The sound of cheering reaches me as I approach, the game apparently still in progress despite the late hour.

I pay the entrance fee automatically, not really caring about the game, but needing somewhere to clear my head, to process the roller coaster of emotions of the past hour.

The bleachers are packed with enthusiastic fans dressed in the home team's blue and gold colors. I find a spot at the far end, away from the main crowd, and sit down, watching without really seeing as teenage boys crash into each other on the field below.

Jake had a professional reason to be heading to Foxfire Valley. To Jordyn's wedding. The revelation shouldn't bother me as much as it does. After all, it makes perfect sense that a high-profile wedding would have security. And it's not like Jake lied to me, he just omitted certain details.

But combined with his cryptic comments about "complications" and his reluctance to take our physical relationship further, the revelation casts everything in a different light. Is his attraction to me genuine? Or is it a calculated part of maintaining my cooperation during our journey?

The home team scores a touchdown, and the crowd erupts around me, momentarily pulling me from my thoughts. As the cheering subsides, someone sits beside me on the bleacher.

"You're not much of a football fan, are you?" asks a deep voice that isn't Jake's.

I turn to find a middle-aged man in a Basic Plainses coaching jacket watching me with friendly curiosity. "Is it that obvious?"

He laughs. "Well, our team just scored the winning touchdown in the biggest game of the season, and you didn't even blink."

"Sorry," I say, attempting a smile. "Just a lot on my mind."

"Passing through?" he guesses. "Not many visitors stop in Basic Plainses unless they have to."

"Just for the night," I confirm. "On my way to Nevada."

"Long drive," he comments. "Alone?"

The question sends up a small warning flag, making me suddenly aware of how isolated I am from the main crowd. "No," I say firmly. "My... partner is back at the motel. Expecting me soon."

The man nods, seeming to accept this without suspicion. "Well, enjoy your stay, brief

as it is. Not much to see in Basic Plaines, but we're proud of what we have." He gestures toward the celebrating team. "Mostly this."

"I can see why," I say politely. "They seem very... enthusiastic."

He laughs again, standing up. "That's one word for it. Have a safe trip to Nevada."

As he moves away, I realize the game is ending. Fans are beginning to file out of the stadium. I should head back to the motel, face Jake, and the uncomfortable conversation that awaits. But the thought of returning to that small room, filled with the lingering tension of our interrupted moment, makes my stomach twist.

My phone buzzes with a text. Jake.

Jake: Where are you? It's not safe to be out alone in an unfamiliar town.

The concern would be touching if I wasn't still annoyed with him.

Me: At the football game. I'm fine. Need space to think.

Three dots appear immediately, then disappear, then appear again.

Jake: I understand. Take your time. But please be careful coming back. I'll wait up.

Despite my irritation, warmth blooms in my chest at his message. Even now, his first priority is my safety. It's both infuriating and endearing.

I stay at the stadium until the crowd has mostly dispersed, the excitement of the home team's victory fading into the quiet of the late Kansas night. When I finally make my way back to the motel, the parking lot is dark except for the flickering neon of the sign and a single light visible through the curtains of our room.

Jake is waiting up, just as he promised.



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

I open the door to find him sitting at the small desk, still dressed, clearly on high alert despite the late hour. He stands when I enter, relief evident in his expression.

"You didn't need to wait up," I say, though we both know it's not true. Of course, he waited up.

"Yes, I did," he replies simply.

We stand on opposite sides of the room, the bed between us like a no-man's-land neither is willing to cross first.

"I should have told you about the security contract earlier," he says finally. "I'm sorry for withholding that information."

The apology is unexpected, and it takes some of the wind out of my indignation. "Why didn't you?"

"Professional habit," he admits. "The less people know about security operations, the more effective they are. And initially, you were just a passenger. I didn't anticipate..." He gestures vaguely between us.

"This," I supply. "Whatever this is."

"Yes. This."

I sink onto the edge of the bed, suddenly exhausted. "I don't even know what 'this' is, Jake. One minute you're kissing me like your life depends on it, the next you're

pulling back and talking about complications. Then I find out you're working security for my best friend's wedding, which means we were always heading to the same place for entirely different reasons. It's a lot to process."

He approaches cautiously, sitting on the opposite edge of the bed, maintaining a respectful distance. "I know. And I'm not handling it well. But my attraction to you is real, Trish. So is my concern for your wellbeing. Those aren't part of any professional calculation."

I want to believe him. Despite the complications, despite the brief time we've known each other, despite the warning bells sounding in my head, I want to believe Jake is telling me the truth.

"So, what happens now?" I ask, too tired for games or further evasion.

"Now, we get some sleep," he says pragmatically. "It's late, and we have another long drive tomorrow."

"And after that? When we reach Nevada? When the wedding is over and your security contract is fulfilled?"

He looks at me directly, his expression more open than I've seen it since we met. "That depends on what you want, Trish. What are you looking for?"

It's a fair question, one I'm not sure I have an answer to yet. "I don't know," I admit. "I didn't exactly plan to develop feelings for my ride share driver."

The confession slips out before I can censor it. Jake's expression softens, something warm and surprised flickering in his eyes.

"Feelings," he repeats, as if testing the word.

"Don't make me say it again," I mutter, embarrassment heating my cheeks. "It's been a long day, and I'm not thinking clearly."

"No, you're not," he agrees, but there's no dismissal in his tone. "Neither of us is. Which is why we should sleep now and talk more tomorrow. When we've both had time to process."

It's the rational approach, of course. The controlled approach. Pure Jake Winters logic. And as much as I want to argue, to push for resolution tonight, I know he's right.

"Fine," I concede. "But you're taking the bed. I refuse to be responsible for your back pain tomorrow if you sleep on that floor."

"We can share," he says, surprising me. "Just to sleep," he adds quickly. "The bed is big enough, and we're both adults. As you pointed out earlier."

"Are you sure?"

"No," he says with unexpected honesty. "But I'm willing to try. For you."

The simple admission touches me more deeply than any grand gesture could have. "Okay," I say softly. "Thank you."

We prepare for bed in awkward silence, taking turns in the bathroom, carefully maintaining distance as we slide under the covers from opposite sides. Though it's impossible to ignore his presence beside me, the heat radiating from his body, the steady rhythm of his breathing.

"Goodnight, Trish," he says into the darkness.

"Goodnight, Jake," I reply, turning onto my side, facing away from him to resist the temptation to reach out.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

Sleep seems impossible with him so close yet so deliberately distant. But the events of the day catch up with me faster than expected, and I find myself drifting off despite the tumultuous emotions still swirling inside me.

The last thing I register before sleep claims me completely is the gentle weight of Jake's hand coming to rest in the space between us, not quite touching me, but there. An offering. A possibility.

A bridge across the no-man's-land of the bed.

I wake to the gentle rumble of Jake's truck and the changing landscape outside my window. Somehow, I've slept through our morning departure from Basic Plains--packing, checkout, Jake's inevitable coffee run, getting into the truck, all of it lost to exhaustion after yesterday's emotional rollercoaster.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," Jake says, glancing at me as I straighten in my seat. "We've been on the road for almost three hours."

I blink, disoriented. "Three hours? Why didn't you wake me? How did I get into the van?"

"You needed the rest, and I carried you." His eyes return to the road, but there's a softness in his profile I haven't seen before. "And you're less argumentative when you're sleeping."

I snort, stretching my arms overhead as much as the truck cab allows. "Very funny. Where are we?"

"About to cross into Colorado. I rerouted us slightly. We're going to stop in Rustic Junction for the night."

"Rustic Junction?" I check my phone, finding a string of missed texts from Jordyn. "That wasn't on the original itinerary."

"It's on Route 14," he explains, "and the accommodations are better than what we'd find if we stuck to our planned route."

I study him, trying to decipher if this detour has a deeper purpose. "You just decided this while I was sleeping?"

"I made a few calls this morning before we left Basic Plains." He hesitates. "I booked a room at the Rustic Love Hotel."

"A room," I repeat, emphasizing the singular. "As in, one room?"

"With two beds," he clarifies quickly. "I thought after last night... it seemed practical. Unless you'd prefer separate rooms?"

The question hangs between us. Last night's kiss, the almost-more-than-a-kiss, the revelations about his security contract, all of it simmers beneath this seemingly mundane travel adjustment.

"One room is fine," I say finally. "We're adults. We can handle sleeping in the same space without combusting."

His lips twitch. "Speak for yourself."

The unexpected humor catches me off guard, drawing a genuine laugh from me that seems to please him.

We reach Rustic Junction as sunset paints the mountains in gold and crimson. The town is exactly what its name suggests, a carefully maintained Old West tourist attraction, complete with wooden boardwalks, saloon façades, and staff in period costumes.

"This is... something else," I say as Jake parks in front of the Rustic Love Hotel, which manages to maintain the frontier theme while still looking surprisingly upscale.

"Wait until you see the staged gunfights," Jake replies with that hint of a smile I'm beginning to crave. "Happens twice daily in the town square."

Our room continues the Western motif with cowhide rugs, rustic wood furniture, and vintage-looking fixtures, but with modern amenities and, as promised, two queen beds with a respectable distance between them.

"Definitely an upgrade from Basic Plaines," I comment, dropping my overnight bag on one of the beds.

Jake places his duffel on the other bed, his movements precise and controlled as always. "Hungry? The Guns Blazing Saloon supposedly serves decent steaks."

"Lead the way, cowboy," I reply with more lightness than I've felt since our kiss. "I'm starving."

The evening unfolds like something from a travel brochure, we watch a surprisingly entertaining shootout performance, eat genuinely good steaks at the saloon, and wander the main street as lamplight replaces the fading sun.

By the time we return to our room, a tentative truce seems to have formed between us. The awkwardness of Basic Plaines hasn't disappeared, but it's transmuted into something more manageable, a mutual agreement to enjoy this strange liminal space

between Kansas and Nevada, between strangers and something more.

As I prepare for bed, I catch Jake watching me with an unguarded expression that makes my heart stutter. Tomorrow will bring us one day closer to Foxfire Valley, one day closer to professional complications and difficult decisions. But tonight, in this fake frontier town with its real mountain views, I'll let myself enjoy the unexpected detour this journey has become.

I just hope I don't wake up in his arms. Or maybe, secretly, I hope I do.



### JAKE

The sun rises over Rustic Junction's mock Old West storefronts, casting long shadows across the dusty main street. I've been awake for hours, watching Trish sleep in the adjacent motel bed. Despite my reservations in Basic Plains, nothing has happened beyond sleep since our kiss. Last night, was harder than the night before. Her body curled toward mine during the night, seeking warmth or comfort, but I maintained the boundaries I'd set for myself and remained in my own bed.

I ease out of bed without waking her, needing the solitude of a morning run to clear my head. After the revelations and near-intimacy of last night, my thoughts are more tangled than they've been in years. The security professional in me knows I've compromised objectivity by developing feelings for Trish. The man in me doesn't care.

As I run through the empty streets of Rustic Junction, I try to make sense of what's happening between us. The attraction was immediate, unexpected, and powerful. But it's more than physical. There's something about her directness, perception, and personality that draws me to her in ways I haven't experienced in nearly six years.

Six years since Afghanistan. Since coming home. Since Valerie.

By the time I return to the Rustic Love Hotel, the sun has fully risen, and tourists are beginning to appear on the boardwalks, ready for a day of staged gunfights and saloon shows. I pause outside our room, steady myself before entering.

Trish is awake, sitting cross-legged on the bed, scrolling through her phone. She looks up when I enter, her eyes widening slightly as they take in my sweat-dampened t-shirt.

"Morning," she says, her voice carefully neutral. "Good run?"

"Productive," I reply, which isn't exactly an answer. "How did you sleep?"

"Better than expected." She sets her phone aside. "We need to talk about Basic Plaines."

I nod, appreciating her directness. "We do. Let me shower first."

"Of course."

In the bathroom, I let the hot water sluice over me, hoping it might wash away some of the tension coiled in my muscles. It doesn't. When I emerge, dressed in fresh clothes, Trish is standing by the window, looking out at the staged Western town.

"This place is something else," she says without turning. "You weren't kidding when you said it was like a movie set."

"It's designed that way," I explain, moving to stand beside her but maintaining a careful distance. "Most of the 'residents' are actually performers."

"So, nothing here is real?" There's something pointed in her question that has nothing to do with Rustic Junction.

"The buildings are real," I say. "The experiences people have here are real. The context is just... curated."

She turns to face me then. "Like you? A curated version of Jake Winters, security consultant, ride share driver, occasional control freak?"

A small smile tugs at my lips. "I've never claimed to be an open book, Trish."

"No, you haven't." She sighs, running a hand through her sleep-tousled curls. "Look, I've been thinking about what you told me the other night. About the security contract for Jordyn's wedding."

I wait, giving her space to continue.

"I understand why you didn't mention it right away. Professional discretion and all that. But I need to know if there's anything else you're not telling me that might be relevant to... whatever this is between us."

It's a fair question, one I've been anticipating since our conversation in Basic Plains. The problem is, there are aspects of my security work that I'm not at liberty to disclose, even to her.

"My involvement with the Kane-McCrae wedding is strictly professional," I begin carefully. "But yes, there are details about the security operation I can't share. Not because I don't trust you, but because client confidentiality is non-negotiable in my line of work."

"Just like doctor-patient privilege or attorney-client confidentiality," she says, nodding.

"Exactly."

"I understand that part. But Jake..." She hesitates, then looks at me directly. "Yesterday you explained why you drive for RoadRunner - the controlled interaction,

the clear parameters. I get that. But there's something else, isn't there? Something about how you can just... arrange premium vehicles, perfect routes, override system protocols when needed?"

I feel my chest tighten. She's more observant than I gave her credit for.

"You don't drive for RoadRunner," she continues, her voice growing more certain.

"You ARE RoadRunner, aren't you?"

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

The direct question hits home. I meet her gaze, knowing there's no point in deflection now.

"Yes," I admit quietly. "I created the platform. I own the company."

Her eyes widen, jaw dropping slightly as she processes my words. "Holy shit. I figured there was something you weren't saying, but I was just going on a hunch. You're THE Jake Winters? The tech mogul Forbes called 'the invisible billionaire'?"

I shift uncomfortably under her scrutiny. "The media exaggerates. But yes, I founded and own RoadRunner."

"I don't know, I always imagined you'd be off lounging on a private island somewhere. Isn't that what billionaires do? Leave your employees to do the grunt work?"

"I prefer to maintain a hands-on approach to quality control," I say, my explanation sounding hollow even to my own ears. "And as I told you before, I find driving... clarifying."

She stares at me like she's seeing me for the first time. "So that's why the premium vehicle, the perfect driving record, the meticulous route planning. You're not just some guy with a side hustle. You're the CEO of one of the fastest-growing tech companies in America."

I try to read her expression--shock, certainly, but also something else. Betrayal? Anger? Curiosity?

"Does this change things between us?" I ask directly.

She laughs, the sound sharp and surprised. "You mean besides the fact that I've been sharing motel rooms with a secret billionaire? That I kissed a man who could buy this entire town on a whim?"

I frown. "My financial status doesn't define me, Trish."

"And what about us?" she asks, her voice softer but still tinged with disbelief. "Is that convenient too? Another quality control check for the company founder?"

I look at her directly, needing her to see the truth in my eyes. "There is nothing convenient about what's happening between us, Trish. It's complicated everything."

"Good complicated or bad complicated?" she challenges, still visibly processing the revelation but returning to sit beside me, maintaining a careful distance.

"Both," I admit. "You're a distraction from work that requires my full attention. But you're also..." I struggle to find the right words. "You're the first person in a very long time who's made me want more than what I've settled for."

Something shifts in her expression, a softening around the eyes. "And what exactly have you settled for?"

The question hits a tender spot I've avoided for years. "Control. Distance. Safety." I look down at my hands. "After Afghanistan, after what happened when I came back, it was easier to keep people at arm's length."

"What happened when you came back?" she asks softly, her hand covering mine.

I take a deep breath. This isn't something I discuss, ever. But Trish deserves honesty if

we're going to continue whatever is building between us.

"I got involved with someone. Valerie. She seemed to understand me, understand what I needed after years in combat zones." I pause, choosing my words carefully. "I've always had certain... preferences when it comes to intimacy. A need for structure, for rules. Sometimes taking control, sometimes relinquishing it."

Understanding dawns in her eyes. "BDSM."

I nod, watching her reaction closely. "Yes. I'm what they call a switch. I can take either role, depending on the partner, the situation. With Valerie, I thought I'd found someone who respected that, who understood the importance of trust in that kind of relationship."

Trish's expression remains open, interested rather than judgmental. It gives me the courage to continue.

"During one session, when I was in a vulnerable position of being physically restrained, and emotionally open, she violated every boundary we'd established. Used my vulnerability against me in ways I won't detail." My jaw tightens at the memory. "It wasn't just the physical pain, though that was significant. It was the betrayal of trust. In BDSM, that trust is everything."

"I'm so sorry, Jake," Trish says, her fingers tightening around mine. "That's horrible."

"After that, I shut down that part of myself completely. Built walls. Established rigid control over every aspect of my life. It was safer that way." I meet her eyes again. "Until you. Something about you makes me want things I've denied myself for years."

"What things?" she asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Connection. Surrender. The freedom that comes with trusting someone enough to be vulnerable again."

She absorbs this, her gaze never leaving mine."And that scares you."

"Terrifies me," I correct. "But not as much as the thought of walking away from whatever this is between us."



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

"I feel the same way," she admits. "And for what it's worth, I understand boundaries and consent better than most. Owning a marketing firm requires me to honor people's boundaries, respecting their stories and their view of life, knowing when to push those limits and when to back off."

The parallel isn't one I'd considered, but it resonates. "I believe you."

She leans forward slightly. "So, what now?"

"Now, we keep driving," I say pragmatically. "We reach Foxfire Valley by tomorrow afternoon. You attend your dress fitting. I begin security preparations. And we take each day as it comes."

"Very zen of you," she teases, though the levity doesn't quite reach her eyes.

"Not zen. Just realistic." I squeeze her hand gently. "I'm not walking away from this, Trish. But I also can't make promises about what happens after the wedding."

"I know." She smiles, though it's tinged with a sadness that makes my chest ache. "Me neither."

We sit in silence for a moment, both aware of the unspoken complications but unwilling to let them overshadow the present. Finally, Trish stands, breaking the moment.

"Well, if we're spending our day in a fake Old West town, I'm going to need coffee. Lots of it."

I stand as well, grateful for the shift to practicalities. "I hear the Guns Blazing Saloon serves a decent breakfast. Though, probably not as good as Kathy's Diner."

"Nothing could be as good as Kathy's pancakes," she says with exaggerated reverence. "But I'm willing to be disappointed for the sake of experiencing all this Old West kitsch."

As we gather our things and prepare to check out, I watch Trish with an awareness that's both comfortable and unsettling. Whatever happens after we reach Nevada, these days on the road with her have changed something fundamental in me. As I'm now a man who might be ready to live again, not just exist.

8

## TRISH

The Guns Blazing Saloon looks exactly like every Western movie cliché brought to life. It has swinging doors, and a wooden bar with brass foot rail. Even at this early hour, the staff is fully committed to the bit, dressed in period costume with performance-ready smiles.

"Howdy, partners!" greets a tall, skinny bartender in a black vest and crisp white shirt, complete with sleeve garters. According to the name tag pinned to his vest, he's Jude Marshall. "Welcome to the Guns Blazing! Two for breakfast?"

"Yes, please," I reply, unable to suppress a smile at the enthusiastic commitment to character.

"Right this way," he says, leading us to a corner table. "Our breakfast menu's on the chalkboard. Melody will be your server this morning."

As if on cue, a young woman in a corseted dress approaches, her dark hair styled in perfect vintage curls. Her name tag identifies her as Melody Shoehorn. She has the hourglass figure of a pinup model, accentuated by her period-appropriate clothing, and a smile that could light up the room.

"Morning, folks! Coffee to start?" Her voice is bright but not annoyingly so, and she holds a genuine antique-looking coffee pot.

"Please," Jake and I say in unison.

As she pours, I notice Jake subtly scanning the room, his security training evident in the way his eyes track entrances, exits, other guests. Old habits, I suppose.

"First time in Rustic Junction?" Melody asks as she fills our cups.

"Just passing through," Jake replies with his standard response.

"On our way to a wedding in Foxfire Valley," I add, ignoring Jake's slight frown at my volunteered information.

Melody's eyes light up. "Foxfire Valley? The Heirloom Rose Hotel by any chance?"

I blink in surprise. "Yes, actually. My friend is getting married there this weekend."

"Small world! My aunt Wynona has a friend who works there, Patty Calendar, one of their wedding coordinators. Apparently, they're hosting some big fancy wedding this weekend."

I can practically feel Jake tensing beside me at this cascade of coincidences and connections. His security consultant brain is probably spinning through implications and potential risks.

"That's the one," I confirm. "I'm the maid of honor, actually."

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

"Well, honey, you are in for a treat," Melody says, leaning in conspiratorially. "The Heirloom Rose is gorgeous. They've got a casino, a spa, a wedding chapel, and the Holy Rolling Steakhouse serves the best porterhouse this side of Texas."

"Sounds impressive," I say, genuinely interested now. Jordyn had mentioned the venue was nice, but this sounds more upscale than I'd anticipated.

"Ready to order, or do you need a minute?" Melody asks, straightening up.

We order, French toast for me, a western omelet for Jake, and Melody bustles away, off to charm other tables.

"Small world," I comment once she's gone.

"Too small," Jake mutters, taking a sip of his coffee.

"Is that your professional paranoia talking, or do you actually think there's something suspicious about a waitress having connections to Nevada?"

"Not suspicious," he clarifies. "Just unusual. The connection circuit between here and Foxfire Valley is... statistically improbable."

I laugh. "Statistical improbability isn't necessarily sinister, Jake. Sometimes coincidences are just coincidences."

"In my experience, they rarely are." But he says it with a softness that suggests it's a professional observation rather than a genuine concern.

As we eat breakfast, the saloon gradually fills with other tourists, all eager for their authentic Old West experience. Despite the obvious artifice of the setting, there's something genuinely charming about Rustic Junction's commitment to its theme. Every detail, from the period-appropriate dishware to the player piano that occasionally bursts into a tinny tune without apparent human intervention, is carefully designed to transport visitors to another era.

"So, what's the plan for today?" I ask as I finish the last bite of my French toast which was surprisingly good for a tourist trap. "Are we hitting the road right after breakfast?"

Jake nods. "We'll make one more stop before leaving Colorado, a scenic overlook about an hour from here. Then it's straight through to Nevada. We should reach Foxfire Valley by early afternoon tomorrow, plenty of time for your dress fitting."

"And for you to start your security preparations," I add, still not entirely comfortable with the dual purpose of our journey.

"Yes." He hesitates, then continues, "Once we reach the Heirloom Rose, things will change. I'll need to slip into my professional role, which means--"

"Which means whatever this is between us needs to go on pause," I finish for him.

"Not pause," he corrects. "Just... discretion. My client doesn't know about our connection, and I'd prefer to keep personal and professional separate when possible."

"Your client being my best friend's future husband," I point out.

"Whom I've never met, by the way," Jake cuts in. "He's a new client for my firm. It's why I shouldn't have allowed things to develop between us. But here we are."

"Here we are," I echo, raising my coffee cup in a mock toast. "To professional complications and personal entanglements."

A ghost of a smile crosses his face as he raises his own cup. "To unexpected detours."

After breakfast, we wander through Rustic Junction's main street, taking in the staged gunfights and various Old West attractions. Despite the obvious tourist trappings, there's something undeniably fun about the whole setup. I even convince Jake to pose for a sepia-toned old-time photo, though getting him to wear the cowboy hat requires more persuasion than should be necessary for a grown man.

"You look good in Western wear," I tease as we exit the photography studio, the resulting image tucked safely in my purse. "Very rugged and authoritative."

"I look ridiculous," he counters, but there's no heat in it. In fact, he seems more relaxed than I've seen him since we met, as if the brief respite from driving has allowed some of his rigid control to slip.

By noon, we're back on the road, the staged Western town receding in the rearview mirror as we head toward the scenic overlook Jake mentioned. The landscape grows increasingly dramatic as we climb higher into the Colorado mountains, jagged peaks and deep valleys creating a stunning backdrop for our journey.

The overlook, when we reach it, takes my breath away. A vast panorama of mountains stretches before us, their slopes dotted with pine and aspen, valleys carved by ancient glaciers now filled with emerald forests. The air is cooler at this elevation, crisp and clean in a way city air never is.

Jake parks the truck in the small lot, and we walk to the edge of the viewing platform. For a long moment, we stand in silence, absorbing the majesty of the scene before us.

"It's incredible," I say finally, my voice hushed as if in a cathedral.

"Worth the detour?" Jake asks, standing close enough that our shoulders almost touch.

"Definitely." I glance up at him, struck by his profile against the backdrop of mountains. "Thank you for showing me this."



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

He looks down at me, something unguarded in his expression that makes my heart beat faster. "There's a lot I want to show you, Trish. If we had the time."

The simple statement carries more weight than its words suggest.

"Maybe we'll find it," I say softly. "The time."

He doesn't respond verbally, but his hand finds mine, fingers intertwining with a sureness that belies the uncertainty of our situation. We stand that way for several minutes, connected by that simple point of contact.

When we finally return to the truck, something has shifted between us again. Not a resolution, there are still too many unanswered questions for that, but a mutual acknowledgment that whatever happens in Foxfire Valley, what we've found on this journey matters. To both of us.

Jake navigates the winding mountain roads that will eventually lead us out of Colorado and into Nevada, while I study him more openly than before. The controlled power in his hands on the wheel has shifted since that first day even though the focused attention he gives to the road remains. This time, though, I don't miss the occasional glances he casts my way when he thinks I'm not looking, all of it speaks to the complexity of the man I've improbably fallen for over the course of a few days.

"What?" he asks, catching me staring.

"Just thinking," I reply, not quite ready to voice all that's on my mind.

"Dangerous pastime," he comments, but his tone is light.

"Only if you're afraid of the conclusions."

His eyes meet mine briefly before returning to the road. "And what conclusions have you reached, Trish Walker?"

I consider the question, aware that my answer carries weight. "That some detours are worth taking, even if you don't know where they'll lead."

The corner of his mouth lifts in that almost-smile I've come to cherish. "Some detours change your destination entirely."

"Is that what's happening here?" I ask, suddenly needing clarity. "Are we changing destinations?"

His hands tighten almost imperceptibly on the wheel. "I don't know," he admits. "But for the first time in a long time, I'm open to the possibility."

It's not a declaration of love or a promise of forever. But coming from Jake Winters, man of rigid plans and careful control, it might be something even more significant.

It's an opening of a door I thought firmly closed, an invitation to explore whatever this connection between us might become, beyond the constraints of our journey to Foxfire Valley.

And for now, that's enough.

The Nevada state line appears in the distance as the sun begins its descent toward the western horizon. We've been driving for hours, conversation flowing more easily than I would have expected after the intensity of our stop at the overlook. Trish has been telling me about her years in Toronto, her journey from lifestyle journalist to social justice reporter, the challenges and satisfactions of her career.

I share more than I normally would as I drive, telling stories from my time in the Marines that I rarely discuss, the early days of building my security firm, even a few carefully selected anecdotes about my life before Valerie that don't feel like betrayal to speak aloud. The ease between us is both comforting and unsettling, a reminder of how quickly and completely this woman has breached my defenses.

"Welcome to Nevada," I say as we cross the state line. "Last leg of our journey."

Trish stretches in her seat, her movement drawing my eye despite my best efforts to stay focused on the road. "Hard to believe we're almost there. It feels like we've been traveling for weeks, not days."

I understand the sentiment. Time has taken on a strange elasticity since Toronto, stretching and compressing in ways that have little to do with the actual passage of hours. In some ways, it feels like I've known Trish far longer than our brief acquaintance would suggest. In others, the time has flown by too quickly, leaving me grasping for more.

"We should reach Foxfire Valley by early afternoon tomorrow," I say, returning to practical matters. "The Heirloom Rose is expecting us."

"Have you stayed there before?" she asks.

"Once, during the initial security assessment for the wedding." I change lanes to pass a slower vehicle. "It's impressive, very upscale."

"So I've heard. That waitress in Rustic Junction couldn't stop raving about it."

I nod, recalling Melody's enthusiastic description. "It's Vegas-adjacent luxury without the Vegas crowds. Still has gambling, shows, the works, but on a more intimate scale."

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

"Jordyn's mentioned the wedding venue a few times, but she's been surprisingly tight-lipped about the details. Something about wanting me to be surprised."

This doesn't surprise me. From the security briefings I've received, the Kane-McCrae wedding is designed to be an exclusive affair, with several high-profile guests whose attendance hasn't been publicized. The media blackout is partly for privacy, partly for security, something I normally appreciate in my clients.

"The Heirloom Rose has multiple wedding venues," I inform her. "But the main one is impressive. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the mountains, capacity for up to two hundred guests."

Trish tilts her head, studying me. "You're really thorough with your security assessments, aren't you?"

"It's my job to know the layout of every venue I secure," I reply, perhaps a bit defensively. "Entrances, exits, blind spots, staff access points, all of it matters."

"I wasn't criticizing," she says, her voice softening. "It's impressive, actually. The attention to detail."

I glance at her, finding no mockery in her expression, just genuine interest. "Thank you."

We fall into comfortable silence as the Nevada landscape unfolds around us. This part of Nevada offers a stark, open beauty with vast stretches of desert punctuated by rugged rock formations, all painted in shades of rust and gold by the setting sun.

"We'll stop in about an hour," I announce, checking the GPS. "Small town called Sage Brush. Not much there, but there's a decent motel where we can spend the night."

"Our last night on the road," Trish observes, something in her tone I can't quite identify. "Hard to believe."

I understand the sentiment. There's something about our time in the truck, contained in this bubble of privacy and proximity, that has allowed our connection to develop without the complications of the outside world. Tomorrow, that bubble bursts. We arrive at our destination, resume our separate roles and all the practicalities we've been avoiding become impossible to ignore.

The motel in Sage Brush is exactly what you'd expect from a small desert town, basic but clean, with a distinctly 1970s aesthetic that's either charmingly retro or woefully outdated, depending on your perspective. The woman at the front desk barely looks up from her romance novel as she hands over a single room key, clearly uninterested in our story or our relationship status.

Unlike Basic Plaines, there's no awkward negotiation over sleeping arrangements this time. We both know we'll share the queen bed, though what that entails remains unspoken as we settle into the room.

"I'm going to shower," Trish announces, grabbing her toiletry bag. "Wash off the road dust."

I nod, watching as she disappears into the bathroom. When the water starts running, I sit heavily on the edge of the bed, running a hand over my face.

Tomorrow changes everything. Our carefully constructed bubble of intimacy bursts, exposing our fledgling relationship to real-world complications we've been able to ignore on the road.

And yet.

What we've built over these past days isn't easily dismissed or forgotten. The connection between us has grown roots, tenacious and persistent despite the rocky soil of our circumstances. I'm no longer capable of simply walking away from Trish, and I refuse to beat myself up about that fact.

The bathroom door opens in a cloud of steam, revealing Trish wrapped in a towel, her curls damp and clinging to her neck. My breath catches involuntarily at the sight.

"Your turn," she says, seemingly unaware of the effect she's having on me.

I grab my bag and head for the bathroom, needing the space and cool water to regain my composure. By the time I emerge, clean and changed into fresh clothes, Trish is sitting cross-legged on the bed in sleep shorts and a tank top, scrolling through her phone.

"Jordyn's been texting non-stop," she says without looking up. "Apparently, there's some crisis with the floral arrangements that's thrown the entire wedding timeline into chaos. And she's dying to know exactly when we'll arrive tomorrow."

"We?" I raise an eyebrow.

"I might have mentioned I was getting a ride to Nevada," she admits. "Though I kept your full name out of it, as requested."

"Thank you." I sit on the opposite side of the bed, maintaining a cautious distance. "The fewer connections drawn between us initially, the better. From a security perspective."

She sets her phone aside, turning to face me fully. "From a security perspective," she

repeats, a question in her tone.

"Yes."

"And from a personal perspective?"

I meet her gaze directly. "From a personal perspective, I wish circumstances were different."

"Different how?" she presses.



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

"Simpler. Without the complications of your best friend marrying my client, without the professional boundaries I need to maintain, without the geographical challenges once this is all over."

She nods, absorbing this. "Simpler would be nice," she agrees. "But maybe not as interesting."

That draws a smile from me. "No, probably not as interesting."

"Jake." She says my name softly, shifting closer on the bed. "We have one more night before all those complications become unavoidable. One more night before this journey ends and real life begins again."

The implication in her words is clear, sending heat coursing through me. "Trish--"

"I'm not asking for promises," she interrupts. "I'm not asking for guarantees about what happens after tomorrow. I'm just asking for tonight. For right now."

She moves closer still, until our knees are touching where we sit on the bed, her scent, something floral and warm, enveloping me. Her hand comes up to rest on my chest, directly over my heart, which is beating faster than I'd like to admit.

"If you don't want this, tell me now," she whispers. "And I'll respect that. But if you do..." She leaves the sentence unfinished, an invitation for me to accept or reject.

For a moment, I consider all the reasons I should refuse. The professional complications. The uncertain future. The potential for pain when this inevitably ends.

But then I look into her eyes, dark and luminous in the dim light of the motel room, and all those reasons seem insubstantial against the weight of my desire for her.

"I want this," I admit, my voice rougher than intended. "I want you, Trish. Have since Toronto."

Relief and desire flash across her face, and then she's moving, shifting to straddle my lap in one fluid motion that takes my breath away. Her arms wind around my neck as she settles against me, the thin fabric of her sleep clothes doing nothing to disguise the heat of her body.

"Then stop thinking," she murmurs, her lips hovering just above mine. "Just for tonight. Be here with me."

I respond by closing the distance between our lips, capturing her mouth in a kiss that contains all the hunger and need I've been suppressing for days. She makes a small sound of approval in the back of her throat, her body pressing closer as her fingers tangle in my hair.

The restraint I've maintained since Basic Planes crumbles under her touch. My hands move to her waist, slipping beneath the hem of her tank top to find the warm skin beneath. She shivers as my fingers trace the curve of her spine, her own hands growing bolder, exploring the contours of my shoulders and chest with increasing urgency.

When we break apart, both breathless, her eyes are dark with desire, her lips slightly swollen from our kiss. "More," she whispers, the single word a command I'm powerless to resist.

I shift our positions, laying her back against the pillows, my body covering hers. "Tell me what you want," I say, needing her to be explicit in her consent despite the

obvious desire between us.

"Everything," she replies without hesitation. "I want everything, Jake. No holding back. Not tonight."

The last thread of my control snaps at her words. I kiss her again, deeper, hungrier, my hands exploring her body with a thoroughness that draws gasps and small moans from her throat. Her tank top disappears, followed by her sleep shorts, leaving her in nothing but simple black underwear that somehow manages to be the most erotic thing I've ever seen.

"Wow," I murmur, taking in the sight of her, all curves and smooth brown skin, her body responding to my gaze with visible anticipation.

"Your turn," she says, tugging at the hem of my t-shirt. "Fair's fair."

I sit back, pulling the shirt over my head in one fluid motion. Her eyes widen slightly as she takes in my bare chest, her fingers reaching out to trace the faint scars now covered by tattoos scattered across my skin, souvenirs from my military days.

"War wounds?" she asks softly.

"Some," I admit. "Others are just life."

She leans forward, pressing her lips to a particularly prominent scar on my shoulder, the unexpected tenderness of the gesture making my breath catch. "And this one?"

"Afghanistan. Shrapnel." The memory is distant now, dulled by time and overshadowed by the present moment.

She kisses another scar, this one along my ribs. "And this?"

"Training accident. Rappelling line snapped."

Her fingers trace a third scar, a thin white line on my forearm. "This?"

"Kitchen mishap, actually," I admit with a hint of a smile. "Not all injuries are heroic."

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

She laughs, the sound warm and intimate in the quiet room. "I like that," she says. "The mix of extraordinary and ordinary. It suits you."

"Not what most people would say."

"I'm not most people." Her gaze meets mine, charged with intent.

No. She isn't.

The thought unleashes something in me, and I lower her back to the bed, my weight pressing her into the mattress. I trail my lips down her neck, across her collarbone, along the line of her bra. She arches beneath me, legs wrapping around my waist, urging me closer. The feel of her beneath me, soft and willing, sends a jolt of desire through me.

"Jake," she gasps, my name a plea, a demand.

I shift, freeing one hand to unhook her bra, tossing it aside. My mouth finds the curve of her breast, drawing a moan from her that goes straight to my core. Her nails rake lightly down my back, the sensation electrifying.

"Tell me if it's too much," I say, my voice rough with need and restraint.

"More," she breathes, the word throaty and wrecked. "Don't hold back."

The raw need in her voice snaps the last of my control. I catch her wrists, pinning them above her head with one hand. She gasps, the sound pure want. My free hand

trails down her body, slow and deliberate, tracing every curve with a possessiveness that surprises even me.

“Is this what you want?” I ask, holding her wrists tight, my body covering hers.

“Yes,” she breathes, arching up to meet my touch. “God, yes.”

I claim her mouth again, the kiss deep and consuming, a promise of more to come. Her submission fuels my desire, makes me reckless. I release her wrists, the need to feel her hands on me overwhelming.

She responds immediately, fingers tangling in my hair, pulling me closer, urging me on. My hand slips beneath the waistband of her underwear, finding her wet and ready. She gasps into my mouth, the sound enough to make me forget the world beyond this room, beyond her.

Her hips move against my hand, seeking more, faster, but I keep the pace agonizingly slow, savoring the way she writhes beneath me before I pull back.

She makes a sound of protest as I withdraw my hand, but it turns to a moan when I cup her breast again, claiming her mouth with the same intensity. She pulls me closer, her need matching mine, her skin warm and flushed beneath my touch.

"Trish," I say against her lips, my voice a low rumble. "Do you trust me?"

She stills, eyes dark and unguarded as they meet mine. "Yes," she whispers. "I trust you. Completely."

I swallow hard, the weight of her words igniting something deep inside. "I'm going to try some things with you," I say, holding her gaze. "Things you might not expect. If it's too much, say the word 'blue,' and I'll stop."

She nods, breathless with anticipation. "Blue. Got it."

I kiss her again, slow and deliberate, before getting off the bed with reluctance. I retrieve a few items from the open closet, the sight of them making her breath catch. My two belts, two clothespins that I spy on a laundry bag, and her hairbrush.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" I ask, laying them beside her.

Her eyes are wide, her desire palpable. "Yes," she says, the word half moan, half plea. "Please."

I take the belt and loop it around her wrist, securing it to the headboard with a quick, practiced motion. The other follows, binding her in place, her body stretched beneath me in an offering I can't resist. Her chest rises and falls with each rapid breath, her skin flushed with anticipation.

I run my hand down her side, my touch gentle despite the hunger thrumming through me. "Tell me if you need to stop," I remind her.

"I won't," she says, her voice raw with want.

I reach for the clothespins, brushing them over her nipples before letting them bite down with perfect, calibrated pressure. Trish gasps, her back arching off the bed, a mix of pain and pleasure written across her face.

I soothe her with my hands, my mouth, following the paths of pleasure and heat across her skin until she trembles beneath me, her sounds growing more desperate with every pass. When she's on the edge, I reach for the brush, sliding it along her thigh, her belly, her breast.

She moans, the sound low and needy, as I draw back and swat her with the flat of it,

the sharp crack of wood on flesh making us both gasp. Her body jerks, pain blossoming into something more, something deeper, and I do it again, watching her face as she takes it, takes me, her body straining against the bonds.

"Yes," she gasps, the word electrifying. "More. Please."



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

The sight of her like this, open and wanting, is almost more than I can bear. I pull back, soothing her with my hands, my mouth, before swatting again, the rhythm of pain and relief driving us both to the brink. She shudders, the line between pleasure and pain blurring until I don't know where one ends and the other begins.

I stop, my own breath ragged, reaching for a condom and rolling it onto the handle of the hairbrush. Her eyes widen, her body arching in response as I slide it inside her, watching the way she moves against it, desperate and undone.

She fights her restraints, her sounds a symphony of need and surrender as I fuck her with it, each thrust pushing her closer, taking her higher, until she's begging for release.

"Jake," she cries, her voice breaking. "Please. I can't--"

I drop the brush, sliding on a condom before covering her body with mine, her legs wrapping around me as I finally, finally let myself go. I bury myself inside her, the heat and tightness of her pulling me under.

I thrust into her, the way she writhes her hips driving me beyond reason. The sight of the clothespins still on her erect nipples sends a further thrill through me as I move inside her, increasing speed and depth. Her moans rise to match my own, a harmony of need and surrender as my body covers hers, every sharp breath and desperate movement winding us tighter and tighter. She shudders, pushing back against me, the friction and heat almost too much to bear.

The belt around her wrists holds her in place, her body stretched beneath me,

trembling, open. Her legs wrap around me, pulling me deeper, the urgency between us building to a fever pitch. I grip her hips, driving into her, each thrust harder, more reckless, until her moans turn to cries and my own restraint shatters completely. She is everything, and I am lost to her, consumed by the raw, overwhelming intensity of us.

"Jake," she gasps, her voice breaking into a plea. "God, yes." Her head arches back, and I watch as she falls apart beneath me, her body clenching tight around mine as she comes, the sensation dragging me over the edge with her.

I bury myself inside her, the final thrusts wild and uncontrolled, her name on my lips as I explode, the release blinding in its intensity. We fracture together, the connection between us burning bright and fierce, until it dissolves into a haze of breathless wonder.

I collapse beside her, our bodies slick with sweat and heat, the world slipping back into focus as we come down from the high of each other. Her wrists are still bound, and I reach up to release the clothespins, then the belt, freeing her with gentle fingers. Her arms fall to her sides, and I pull her close, cradling her against my chest.

"Are you okay?" I ask, my voice rough with the aftermath of us.

She snuggles into me, her breathing still uneven. "More than okay," she murmurs, her words brushing warm against my skin. "That was... incredible."

I stroke her hair, the damp curls soft and wild beneath my fingers. "Did I hurt you?"

"Only in the best ways," she says, her mouth curving into a smile I can feel more than see. "I didn't know it could be like that."

The relief that floods through me is almost as overwhelming as the release itself.

"Neither did I," I admit, holding her tighter.

We lie together in the dim light of the motel room, the quiet settling around us like a cocoon. I never imagined I could feel this raw, this open, this exposed, and still be okay again. But with Trish, it feels right.

Her fingers play over my chest, tracing the lines of my tattoos, the curve of muscle, the thud of my heart. "I could get used to this," she says, her voice soft and sleepy. "Though I'm a little worried."

"About?"

"How I'm going to keep my hands off you once we reach the Heirloom Rose tomorrow."

I tighten my arm around her, understanding the concern all too well. "We'll figure it out. Discretion, not denial."

"Is that your professional security consultant assessment?" she teases.

"No," I admit, smiling into her hair. "It's my very personal desire to continue this for as long as possible."

She sighs contentedly, her body relaxing further against mine. "Good. Because one night won't be nearly enough."

As sleep begins to claim her, I remain awake, holding her close, my mind turning to tomorrow and all the complications that await us in Foxfire Valley. Whatever happens, one thing has become crystal clear in the aftermath of our shared passion.

I am no longer willing to settle for a life of careful isolation and rigid control. Not

when Trish Walker has shown me a different possibility, one where connection and risk might lead to something far more valuable than security.

For the first time since the incident with Valerie, I'm truly contemplating a future that includes not just physical pleasure, but the kind of trust that allows for true vulnerability. The kind that might let me fully embrace both sides of my nature again, the dominant and the submissive, the controller and the surrenderer.

Someone worth changing for. Someone worth trusting with all of me.

10

TRISH

The Heirloom Rose Hotel rises like a mirage from the Nevada desert, its gleaming glass and steel architecture a stark contrast to the rugged mountains behind it. As Jake pulls into the circular drive, I can't help but stare, impressed despite my attempts to remain blasé about our destination.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

"Wow," I breathe, taking in the elaborate fountain adorned with rose sculptures that dominates the entrance. "Jordyn wasn't kidding when she said Silas went all-out for the venue."

Jake pulls up to the valet stand, his expression shifting subtly into what I now recognize as his professional mode—alert, assessing, slightly detached. "The Heirloom Rose is one of the premier luxury destinations in this part of Nevada," he says, his tone neutral.

A uniformed valet approaches as we exit the truck. Jake hands over his keys with visible reluctance, his eyes scanning the entrance area with the casual-but-not-casual vigilance I've come to expect from him.

"Welcome to the Heirloom Rose," greets the valet with practiced charm. "Checking in today?"

"Yes," Jake confirms. "Under Winters and Walker. Separate reservations."

The emphasis on "separate" doesn't escape me, though I keep my expression neutral. We discussed this during the drive this morning—the need for professional boundaries once we reached the hotel. Jake's security contract requires his full focus, and my duties as maid of honor will keep me occupied with wedding preparations. Our developing relationship needs to remain discreet, at least until after the wedding.

It's logical. Practical. And yet, standing beside him in the hotel lobby, I already miss the intimacy of our journey, the cocoon of the truck where it was just the two of us against the world.

The lobby is a study in understated luxury—soaring ceilings, massive flower arrangements (prominently featuring roses, of course), tasteful artwork, and a subtle sparkle that hints at the casino beyond glass doors to the left. The check-in desk is staffed by impeccably dressed employees wearing identical welcoming smiles.

"Ms. Walker?" A petite woman in a tailored suit approaches, her smile genuine beneath oversized glasses that magnify her hazel eyes. "I'm Patty Calendar, the wedding coordinator for the Kane-McCrae ceremony. We've been expecting you!"

"Oh! Hi, yes, that's me," I confirm, slightly startled by the immediate recognition.

"Jordyn described you perfectly," Patty says with a bubbly enthusiasm that somehow doesn't feel forced. "She's going to be thrilled you've arrived safely. She's been checking with me every hour!"

Patty turns to Jake, extending her hand. "And you must be Mr. Winters, our security consultant. Riley Griffin from our events team has been coordinating with your staff. He should be—ah, there he is now!"

A clean-cut man in his early thirties approaches, his friendly smile balanced by the alert intelligence in his blue eyes. "Mr. Winters, welcome back to the Heirloom Rose. Everything's prepared according to your specifications."

Jake shakes his hand, his posture subtly straighter, his expression now fully in professional mode. "Thank you, Riley. I'll want to do a walkthrough of the security perimeter as soon as possible."

"Of course," Riley nods. "I've scheduled it for 3 PM, after you've had a chance to get settled. We can move it up if you prefer."

"3 PM works," Jake confirms. "Thank you."

"Wonderful!" Patty claps her hands together. "Now, Ms. Walker?—"

"Trish, please," I interrupt.

"Trish," she corrects with a warm smile. "Jordyn has asked me to bring you directly to her suite once you arrive. She's waiting with the other bridesmaids for the final dress fitting at 2 PM. But first, let's get you checked in and your luggage delivered to your room."

As Patty guides me toward the check-in desk, I glance back at Jake, who's already deep in conversation with Riley about security protocols. Our eyes meet briefly, a current of understanding passing between us before he returns his attention to the events coordinator.

And just like that, our roles shift. The connection that burned so brightly last night—that still hums beneath my skin with every breath—becomes background to the professional personas we must now adopt.

The check-in process is swift and efficient, with Patty handling most of the details as if I'm a VIP rather than just the maid of honor. My room, I discover, is on the same floor as the bridal suite, with a view of the mountains that would normally have me pressing my nose to the glass in appreciation.

"Your luggage will be brought up shortly," Patty informs me as she hands over my key card. "Would you like a few minutes to freshen up before I take you to Jordyn?"

After days on the road, I probably should take the opportunity to make myself more presentable. But the anticipation of seeing my best friend after weeks apart outweighs vanity.

"I'm good," I assure her. "Let's not keep the bride waiting."

Patty beams as if I've said something profoundly wise instead of merely expressing eagerness to see my friend. "Wonderful attitude! Follow me, please."

As we walk through the hotel toward the elevators, I can't help but notice the seamless blend of luxury and entertainment. The casino area glitters invitingly to our left, not overwhelming like Vegas mega-casinos but elegant and intimate. To our right, a corridor leads to what appears to be a high-end shopping arcade, featuring designer boutiques and jewelry stores.

"The Heirloom Rose is designed to be a complete destination experience," Patty explains, noticing my interest. "Casino, shopping, dining, spa services, wedding facilities, entertainment venues—our guests never need to leave the property if they don't want to."

"It's impressive," I admit. "I had no idea Jordyn and Silas had chosen such an upscale venue."

"Oh, the Kane-McCrae wedding is one of our most significant events this year," Patty confides as we enter an elevator. "Not our largest, but certainly among our most exclusive. The security requirements alone are quite extraordinary."



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

This piques my interest. "Security requirements?"

"Oh yes. Mr. McCrae has arranged for comprehensive security coverage throughout the event. Word has spread of his fiancée and her family's newfound wealth, and he refuses to take any chances. Your Mr. Winters has been extremely thorough in his preparations."

"He's not my Mr. Winters," I say automatically, then immediately regret the defensiveness in my tone when Patty gives me a knowing look.

"Of course not," she says, though her expression suggests she's drawn her own conclusions. "In any case, Jordyn and Silas have spared no expense to ensure their special day is perfect."

The elevator doors open onto a luxurious corridor with plush carpeting and elegant wallpaper. Patty leads me to a set of double doors at the end of the hall, knocking briskly before using a master key to open them.

"Special delivery!" she announces cheerfully as we enter.

The bridal suite is sumptuous—a large sitting room with floor-to-ceiling windows, elegant furniture, and multiple floral arrangements. But my attention is immediately drawn to the woman who leaps up from the sofa with a squeal of delight.

"TRISH!" Jordyn launches herself at me, enveloping me in a tight hug that nearly knocks me off my feet. "You made it! I was so worried when your flight got canceled!"

I return the hug with equal enthusiasm, realizing how much I've missed my best friend despite our regular phone and text communications. "Wild horses couldn't have kept me away," I assure her. "Or airline mechanical failures, apparently."

Jordyn pulls back to examine me, her dark eyes narrowed with friendly scrutiny. "You look different. Good different. The road trip agrees with you."

There's a knowing quality to her observation that makes me wonder just how transparent my feelings for Jake might be. Before I can respond, Jordyn turns to introduce the other women in the room—her future sisters-in-law and a couple of friends from college who make up the bridal party.

"Ladies, this is Trish, my best friend since freshman year and the reason I haven't completely lost my mind during wedding planning," Jordyn announces. "Trish, these are the women who've been keeping me sane while you were gallivanting across the country with your mysterious driver."

The introductions pass in a blur of names and faces, all of them welcoming but clearly curious about the maid of honor who arrived via cross-country ride share instead of the scheduled flight. I answer their questions with carefully edited versions of the journey, emphasizing the sights and stops rather than the developing relationship with my driver.

"So, this Jake," Jordyn says when we finally have a moment alone, the others distracted by a debate over shoe choices. "Is he as hot as you implied in your texts?"

I feel heat rise to my cheeks. "I did not imply he was hot."

"You called him 'Captain Control' and said he filled out his t-shirt in ways that should be illegal," Jordyn reminds me with a grin. "That's basically a five-alarm fire in Trish-speak."

"Fine, yes, he's attractive," I admit, keeping my voice low. "But it's complicated."

"Complicated how? You like him, he likes you, you spent days alone in a truck together—what's the complication?"

I hesitate, unsure how much to reveal. Jake asked me to keep our connection discreet, but Jordyn is my best friend. "He's here, actually," I say finally. "At the hotel."

Jordyn's eyebrows shoot up. "He's staying at the Heirloom Rose? Is he attending the wedding?"

"Not exactly." I bite my lip, then decide honesty is the best approach. "He's your security consultant. Jake Winters?"

Jordyn's eyes widen comically. "Wait, THE Jake Winters? The one Silas hired to handle security? The super-intense ex-military guy who Silas says is the best in the business? THAT'S your ride share driver?"

"He owns the app," I explain, wincing at her volume. "RoadRunner. He created it. He was already coming here for your wedding when I requested a ride."

"And you've been... what? Having a road trip romance with the head of our wedding security?" Her expression is more delighted than scandalized, which is a relief.

"It's not exactly a romance," I hedge, though the memories of last night suggest otherwise. "It's... evolving. And complicated by professional boundaries."

"Which is why he checked in separately and you're being cagey about it," Jordyn concludes, her quick mind connecting the dots. "Trish, this is fantastic! My best friend and Silas's security guru, falling for each other during a cross-country journey to my wedding. It's like a Hallmark movie but with better sex, I'm guessing?"

I smack her arm lightly, glancing around to make sure no one is listening. "Can you not broadcast this to the entire bridal party, please? Jake wants to keep things professional while he's working, and I respect that."

"Fine, fine," she agrees, though her eyes are still sparkling with amusement. "But you're giving me all the details later. And I mean ALL of them."

Before I can respond, Patty returns to the suite, followed by two assistants carrying garment bags. "Ladies! It's time for the final fitting!"

The next hour passes in a flurry of silk, tulle, and precise adjustments as we try on our bridesmaid dresses for final alterations. Jordyn's wedding gown is stunning—a sleek, modern design that perfectly suits her frame and personality, with subtle detailing that elevates it from beautiful to breathtaking.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

"You look incredible," I tell her as she stands on a small platform, the hotel's staff seamstress making a minor adjustment to the hem. "Silas is going to lose his mind when he sees you."

Jordyn smiles, though there's a hint of nervousness beneath her confidence. "You think so? It's not too simple?"

"It's perfect," I assure her. "Elegant, timeless, uniquely you. Just like your relationship with Silas."

Her expression softens at the mention of her fiancé. "He's pretty great, isn't he? Even with all the control-freak tendencies and the broody moments."

"The control-freak tendencies can be oddly appealing in the right context," I say before I can stop myself.

Jordyn's eyebrows shoot up again. "Oh really? Do tell, Trish. Has Captain Control been giving you orders outside of the driving schedule?"

I feel my face heat again. "This fitting is about you, not my complicated whatever-it-is with Jake."

"Fine, deflect all you want," she says with a knowing smile. "But I've never seen you this flustered over a man before. It's intriguing."

After the fitting, Jordyn insists I join her and the bridesmaids for a late lunch at the Holy Rolling Steakhouse, one of the hotel's signature restaurants. The space is

elegant but comfortable, with large windows offering mountain views and a menu that makes my mouth water after days of roadside diner food.

Throughout the meal, I find my attention wandering, wondering where Jake is, what security measures he's implementing, when I might see him again. Despite the luxury surroundings and the joy of reuniting with my best friend, I feel his absence like a physical ache.

"Earth to Trish," Jordyn says, waving a hand in front of my face. "You're a million miles away. Or maybe just wherever Jake Winters happens to be at the moment?"

I pull my focus back to the conversation, grateful that Jordyn has kept her voice low enough that the others can't hear. "Sorry. Just a bit tired from the drive."

"Mmhmm, 'tired,' sure," she teases. Then, more seriously, "He really got under your skin, didn't he?"

I consider denying it, but what's the point? Jordyn knows me too well. "Yes," I admit. "In ways I wasn't expecting."

"Good," she says firmly. "You deserve someone who challenges you. Someone who makes you feel things intensely enough that you get that dreamy look on your face in the middle of lunch."

"I do not have a dreamy look," I protest.

"You absolutely do. It's adorable and slightly nauseating."

After lunch, Jordyn is whisked away for a meeting with the wedding planner, and I finally have a chance to retreat to my own room and process the whirlwind of the morning. The suite is spacious and luxurious, with a king-sized bed, sitting area, and

a bathroom larger than some apartments I've lived in. My luggage has been delivered and unpacked, my clothes hanging neatly in the closet—a service I'm not used to but could definitely get accustomed to.

I'm just considering a long, hot bath when my phone buzzes with a text. Jake.

Jake:Free for dinner? 8 PM, Holy Rolling Steakhouse. Private dining room.

My heart does a ridiculous flutter at the simple message. I compose several responses, deleting each one before settling on:

Me: I'll be there. Dress code?

Jake:Whatever makes you comfortable. But there's a package being delivered to your room that you might consider.

Intriguing.I'm about to ask for clarification when a knock at the door interrupts. A hotel staff member stands outside with a large white box tied with a simple black ribbon.

"Delivery for Ms. Walker," he announces, handing over the box with a polite smile.

"Thank you," I say, slightly bewildered but excited.

Back inside, I place the box on the bed and carefully untie the ribbon. Inside, nested in tissue paper, is a dress, a deep emerald-green that shimmers subtly as I lift it out, the fabric flowing like water through my fingers. It's elegant without being overly formal, sexy without being revealing, and exactly the kind of style I'm drawn to.

Beneath the dress is a small card with Jake's neat handwriting:

No pressure to wear this. But green suits you. - J

The thoughtfulness of the gesture, the obvious care he took in selecting something that matches my taste rather than imposing his own preferences, brings unexpected tears to my eyes. This is not the action of a man seeking a casual fling or a road trip romance. This is something deeper, more considerate, more attuned to who I am as a person.



## Page 36

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

I text him back.

Me: The dress is perfect. Thank you. See you at 8.

Jake: Looking forward to it.

Four words that shouldn't make my pulse race but somehow do. I place the dress carefully on a hanger, already anticipating the evening ahead, already counting the hours until I see him again.

Whatever complexity awaits us in the coming days—professional boundaries, geographical challenges, uncertain futures—tonight is ours. One more piece of our journey together before the real world fully intrudes.

And I intend to make the most of every moment.

11

JAKE

I adjust the collar of my shirt for the third time, checking my reflection in the private dining room mirror. The Holy Rolling Steakhouse's exclusive space has been transformed according to my exacting specifications with soft lighting, a table in the center with the emerald green tablecloth that matches Trish's dress, white roses arranged precisely in crystal vases.

"Nervous, Mr. Winters?" asks the restaurant manager, appearing at my elbow with a

knowing smile.

"Focused," I correct, though he's not entirely wrong. For a man who's negotiated billion-dollar contracts and overseen security for heads of state, I shouldn't feel this unsettled about dinner with a woman I've spent the past week with in various motels.

But this isn't just dinner, and Trish Walker isn't just any woman.

I check my watch: 7:45 PM. Fifteen minutes until she arrives, assuming she's punctual, and based on my observations, Trish values timelines just as much as I do, even if she's more flexible about detours.

My phone buzzes with a text from Jordyn Kane:

We're in position. Operation Hopeless Romantic is a go.

I suppress a smile at her terminology. When I approached Jordyn earlier today about my plans, she'd embraced the idea with an enthusiasm that bordered on excessive, immediately pulling Talia and the other bridesmaids into what she insisted on calling a "conspiracy of love."

Understood. Proceed as discussed, I text back, because some habits die hard, even when coordinating surprise dinner guests rather than security operations.

Another glance at my watch: 7:52. The wait is excruciating in ways I hadn't anticipated. I've spent my entire adult life cultivating control, maintaining distance, building walls between myself and potential vulnerability. Yet in just a few days, Trish has systematically dismantled those defenses without even trying.

The frightening truth is that I'm in love with her.

The realization had hit me this morning during the security perimeter check. One moment I was reviewing camera placements with Riley, and the next, I was wondering if Trish would approve of the angle, if she'd notice the subtle attention to detail I'd insisted on. Every decision, every thought, had circled back to her. And when Riley asked a direct question about the rooftop surveillance, I'd been so lost in thoughts of Trish that I'd had to ask him to repeat himself.

That's when I knew. This wasn't just attraction or compatibility or even strong affection. It was the kind of disruptive, all-consuming love that changes the trajectory of a life. My life.

A soft knock at the private dining room door pulls me from my thoughts. The restaurant manager reappears, leading not Trish but Jordyn, Talia, and the bridesmaids into the room. They're all dressed for an elegant dinner, excitement evident in their expressions.

"Right on schedule," I note, checking my watch again.

"Of course," Jordyn says with a grin. "When the notoriously precise Jake Winters sets a timeline, one does not deviate."

"We have approximately seven minutes before Trish arrives," I remind them, ignoring the teasing.

Talia, whom I've only met briefly during security consultations, gives me an appraising look. "You clean up nice, Winters. No wonder Trish is smitten."

Before I can respond, my phone rings with a video call from my sister Ellie, right on time for her part in the evening. I answer and switch to video, positioning my phone on the special stand I'd arranged on the table.

"Jake!" Ellie's face appears on screen, her Seattle home visible in the background. "Is everything set? Is she there yet? Did you remember the music?"

"Yes, no, and yes," I answer methodically. "And thank you for doing this. I know it's last minute."

"Are you kidding? My control-freak brother falling head over heels for someone he met less than a week ago? I wouldn't miss this for the world." Her expression softens. "I can't wait to meet her."

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

We're interrupted by the restaurant manager appearing at the door again. "Ms. Walker is on her way up, sir."

My heart rate accelerates in a way that would concern me under different circumstances. "Everyone, places please. Remember--"

"We know, we know," Jordyn interrupts, guiding the women to their spots around the room's periphery. "Stay quiet until your signal, then 'act natural' as if this isn't the most romantic gesture we've ever witnessed."

There's no time to correct her exaggeration because the door opens, and Trish appears, stunning in the emerald dress I selected. She stops abruptly, confusion replacing the smile she'd worn upon entering.

"Jake?" Her eyes sweep the room, taking in Jordyn, the bridesmaids, my sister on the video call. "What's going on?"

I cross to her, taking both her hands in mine. "This isn't exactly what you were expecting for dinner."

"You could say that," she replies, her voice steady despite her obvious surprise. "I thought we were keeping things discreet. Professional boundaries and all that."

"I tried," I admit, aware of our audience but focusing solely on her. "I spent all day trying to maintain that professional distance. Reviewing security protocols, checking camera placements, coordinating staff assignments."

"And?" she prompts when I pause.

"And I couldn't focus on any of it because all I could think about was you." The admission comes easier than I expected. "Where you were, what you were doing, when I'd see you again. It was... disruptive."

A smile begins to form at the corners of her mouth. "Disruption can be good sometimes."

"So I'm learning." I squeeze her hands gently. "I realized something today, Trish. Something I need to tell you, regardless of professional boundaries or what happens after this wedding."

Her eyes widen slightly, a mix of hope and caution in her expression. "I'm listening."

"I've spent six years building walls, creating distance, maintaining control. After what happened with Valerie, after the breach of trust that nearly broke me, I convinced myself it was safer to stay disconnected." I take a deep breath, hyperaware of each word but determined to get through this. "And then you appeared in that airport terminal, annoyed and determined and so alive it almost hurt to look at you."

A soft sound escapes her, something between a laugh and a sigh.

"I've been fighting this from the moment we met, telling myself it was too fast, too complicated, too risky. But the truth is..." I pause, letting the walls come down completely. "The truth is, I'm in love with you, Trish Walker. Completely, inconveniently, wonderfully in love with you."

The room goes absolutely silent. Even Jordyn, never at a loss for words, is quiet as Trish stares at me, tears gathering in her eyes.

"That's quite a declaration from a man who wouldn't even share a bed with me in Basic Plaines," she says finally, her voice wavering slightly.

"I was trying to protect myself," I admit. "Not very successfully, as it turns out."

She brings one hand up to my face, her touch feather-light against my jaw. "And now? Are you still trying to protect yourself?"

"No." I turn my head slightly to press a kiss to her palm. "Now I'm just trying to tell the woman I love how I feel, even if it's too soon, even if she doesn't feel the same way yet."

"You billionaire tech moguls," she says with a watery laugh. "Always thinking you know everything."

I tense, uncertain of her meaning, but she continues before I can respond.

"Because if you knew everything, Jake Winters, you'd know that I've been falling in love with you since you first lectured me about proper hydration schedules in your ridiculously perfect truck." Her fingers curl against my cheek. "You'd know that I've never felt more myself than when I'm with you, even when you're being unreasonably controlling about rest stops and route planning."

Hope surges through me, powerful and unfamiliar. "Trish..."

"I love you too, Jake," she says clearly, without hesitation. "And I don't care about professional boundaries or geographical challenges or any other complication you might come up with. We'll figure it out."

For once in my life, I act without calculation, without weighing consequences or considering alternatives. I simply pull her to me and kiss her, pouring every ounce of

newfound emotion into the connection.

The room erupts into cheers and applause around us, Jordyn's voice the loudest among them. My sister's excited squeal comes through the phone speaker, but I barely register any of it, lost in the perfect rightness of Trish in my arms.

When we finally break apart, both breathless, the rest of the room comes back into focus. Jordyn is wiping away tears while simultaneously taking photos with her phone. Talia is smiling with open approval. The bridesmaids are exchanging looks that suggest they'll be discussing this for weeks.

"So much for professional discretion," Trish murmurs against my lips, though she's smiling.



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

"I can be professional tomorrow," I reply. "Tonight, I just need you to know how I feel."

"I know," she says softly. "I've known since you got my coffee order right at that last gas station."

I laugh, genuinely surprised. "Coffee was my tell?"

"That was you showing me you were paying attention," she corrects. "Just like this dress. Just like the mountain overlook. Just like a thousand little moments this week when you revealed the man behind the control freak façade."

"The control freak is still in here too," I warn her, only half joking.

"Good," she says with a mischievous gleam in her eye. "I've grown rather fond of him, especially when he's giving very specific instructions."

Heat flares between us at her implication, but before I can respond, Jordyn clears her throat dramatically.

"As much as I'm loving this rom-com moment, I believe there are introductions to be made," she says, gesturing toward my phone where Ellie is watching with obvious delight.

"Right." I keep one arm around Trish's waist as I guide her toward the table. "Trish, this is my sister Ellie. Ellie, this is Trish."

"The woman who finally broke through my brother's fortress of solitude," Ellie says with a wide smile. "I've been waiting to meet you for approximately... my entire life."

"Don't exaggerate," I say, but Trish is already leaning toward the screen.

"I've heard so much about you," she tells Ellie. "Jake talks about his niece and nephew all the time."

"He does?" Both Ellie and I speak simultaneously, equally surprised.

Trish glances between us. "Yes? He showed me pictures after breakfast in Heartstone. Said they were the only people he misses when he's on the road."

Something warm unfurls in my chest at her casual revelation. I hadn't realized she'd been paying such close attention during our conversations, filing away the small details I'd shared almost unconsciously.

"Well, they miss their Uncle Jake too," Ellie says, her expression softening. "And they're going to love their new Aunt Trish."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," I interject, though the thought sends an unexpected thrill through me.

"Please," Ellie scoffs. "You bought the woman a dress that perfectly matches her eyes and arranged a surprise dinner with all her friends present just to tell her you love her. I'm not the one getting ahead of myself here."

Trish laughs, the sound pure and unrestrained. "I like your sister already."

"You two joining forces is mildly terrifying," I admit, but I'm smiling.

The restaurant manager approaches discreetly. "Shall we serve dinner now, Mr. Winters?"

"Yes, thank you." I help Trish to her seat at the center of the table, taking the place beside her.

As the others arrange themselves around us, the first course is served and conversation flows. I study the woman who has captured my mind, body, and soul.

She catches me staring and leans close. "Everything okay?"

"Perfect," I reply honestly. "Just thinking about how lucky I am that your flight got canceled."

"Hmm, yes. Almost like it was meant to be." She gives me a considering look. "You didn't happen to hack into the airline system and manufacture a mechanical failure, did you? Given your tech background and obvious control issues?"

I laugh, genuinely amused by the accusation. "Even I have limits, Trish. That was pure chance."

"Good," she says, her hand finding mine under the table. "Because I like the idea that some things are just meant to happen, no control or planning required."

"Like falling in love with your ride share driver?" I suggest.

"Exactly like that." She squeezes my hand. "Though technically, I fell in love with a secret billionaire tech mogul with control issues and an unexpected romantic streak."

## Page 39

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

"And I fell in love with a stubborn, perceptive marketing specialist who challenges every boundary I set," I counter.

"Sounds like the perfect match," she says softly.

Looking at her, radiant in the dress I chose, surrounded by friends who clearly adore her, her hand warm in mine, I can only agree.

"The perfect match," I echo. "And the best detour I never planned to take."

## EPILOGUE

### TRISH

#### Two Years Later

"You're going to be late for your own party if you don't hurry up," Jake calls from the bedroom of our Crimson Hollow cabin.

"Fashionably late," I counter, applying a final touch of lipstick in the bathroom mirror. "It's expected of the guest of honor."

I hear his footsteps approach, then feel the solid warmth of him behind me, his reflection appearing in the mirror as his arms encircle my waist. "The bookstore owner might disagree," he says, pressing a kiss to the junction of my neck and shoulder. "First signing events tend to start on time."

I turn in his arms, careful not to smudge my makeup."Then stop distracting me with your... everything," I gesture vaguely at his tall form, impeccably dressed in a charcoal suit that emphasizes his broad shoulders and trim waist.

Jake's mouth quirks in that half-smile that still makes my heart skip."I'll be on my best behavior.For now."

The promise in those last two words sends a shiver of anticipation down my spine, but I push it aside for later.Tonight is about my book, the culmination of two years of research, writing, and a complete life transformation that began with a canceled flight and a mysterious ride share driver.

"How do I look?" I ask, stepping back so he can see the full effect of my outfit, a tailored jumpsuit in deep burgundy that manages to be both professional and striking.

"Beautiful," he says simply. "Confident.Ready."

The drive to Crimson Books is brief through the mountain roads that have become home over the past two years.After Jordyn and Silas's Nevada wedding, Jake surprised me with a proposition:relocate to Crimson Hollow, where the Kane brothers were expanding their business ventures to include a high-end wellness center with a secret, exclusive kink club on the premises.

"Noah Kane needs a security expert who understands discretion," Jake had explained."And Talia, their marketing genius, specifically asked if you might be interested in handling media relations and reputation management."

It was a risk, leaving Toronto, my established career, but now, with mountain views from every window and a community that's embraced us both, I can't imagine living anywhere else.

The bookstore is packed when we arrive, a crowd filling the chairs set up between bookshelves. I spot familiar faces immediately, Jordyn and Silas who've flown in from Nevada with their six-month-old daughter; Noah Kane standing protectively beside Talia, the other Kane brothers with their respective partners, and even Mrs. Sullivan from Jake's office, beaming with grandmotherly pride.

"You invited everyone," I whisper to Jake, emotion tightening my throat.

"They're family now," he says simply. "They should be here."

The signing passes in a blur, reading passages, answering questions, signing copies until my hand cramps. Through it all, Jake remains a steady presence, sometimes at my side, sometimes circulating through the crowd with the security professional's habit of monitoring a room, but always within sight.

"I have a question," Jordyn says when it's her turn at the signing table, her eyes twinkling. "When can we expect the sequel? You know, the one where the intrepid marketing CEO and the billionaire security consultant navigate small-town life, exclusive kink clubs, and building a home together?"

I laugh, signing her copy with a personal message. "That one might remain a private edition, just for us."

"Spoilsport," she teases, then lowers her voice. "Seriously though, Trish. I'm so proud of you. This book, this life you've built, it's everything you deserve."

"Thanks to a canceled flight and your wedding," I remind her. "If either of those things hadn't happened exactly when they did..."

"Fate," Jordyn says confidently, glancing over at Silas. "Some journeys are just meant to be."

Hours later, after the last book has been signed and the last guest has departed, Jake and I walk hand in hand through the quiet streets of Crimson Hollow toward our cabin. The night is clear, stars brilliantly visible against the mountain sky, a gentle breeze carrying the scent of pine.

"So," I say finally. "About that private celebration you mentioned earlier..."

Jake's pace subtly quickens. "I have several ideas on that front."

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 3:25 am*

"Care to share with the class?"

He glances down at me, his eyes darkening in a way that still sends heat coursing through me. "I was thinking something involving that special room we installed in the basement when we renovated."

"The one with the Saint Andrew's cross and suspension rig?" I clarify, my voice dropping to match his.

"Among other things," he confirms. "Unless you had something else in mind?"

I pretend to consider. "Well, I am the guest of honor. I should probably get to choose."

"Absolutely," he agrees easily. "Whatever the bestselling author desires."

I stop walking, turning to face him fully, my free hand rising to rest on his chest. "I desire you, Jake Winters. Same as I did two years ago in a truck driving down Route 14. Same as I will tomorrow and the next day and however many days we have together."

The simple declaration brings an expression to his face that I treasure, openness and vulnerability that he shows to no one else, a dropping of the controlled mask that still defines him in professional settings.

"Then you shall have me," he says, his voice roughened with emotion. "Tonight, and all those tomorrows."



Some journeys change you in ways you never anticipated. Some detours become destinations more perfect than anything you could have planned. And sometimes, the most direct route to happiness is the one you never intended to take at all.