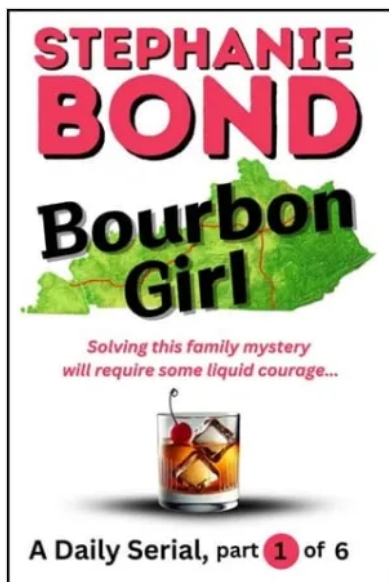




Bourbon Girl, part 1 of 6

Author: Stephanie Bond

Category: Romance

Description: In the romantic mystery BOURBON GIRL, a young woman takes a job as a tour guide on the trail of bourbon distilleries in Kentucky to search for her biological father, and finds so much more along the way.

This BOURBON GIRL, Part 1 novella is a months worth of daily episodes: JULY

The Part 1 novella is JULY, Part 2 is AUGUST, Part 3 is SEPTEMBER, Part 4 is OCTOBER, Part 5 is NOVEMBER, part 6 is DECEMBER.

(In total there are 6 parts to BOURBON GIRL.)

Total Pages (Source): 31

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:28 am

I'D BEEN driving for three days, stopping to sleep in Walmart parking lots, which are welcoming of transient RV owners and long-haul truckers.

Drafting off the retailer's tolerance, I parked my ancient Chevy van in far corners to stretch out on a roll-up mattress on top of boxes that held my meager belongings.

The nights were unnerving—I acknowledged I was making myself a target for any serial killer with a Slim Jim tool—but ultimately fatigue won out and I slept.

When the store's doors opened in the morning, I bolted for the restrooms to relieve my aching bladder and splash my face and arms with sink water.

I repaid the hospitality by stocking up on snacks before setting off again.

At long last, an exuberant "Welcome to Kentucky!" sign loomed ahead on the rural interstate like a promise. Come in and put your feet up! Good things happen here!

I hoped so. I didn't have much of a plan for finding my father, but I trusted the job I'd landed over the phone with Birdwhistle Bourbon Tours would be a springboard for my search.

I consoled myself with the reminder that I was used to winging it.

My earliest memory was of packing toys in boxes and moving somewhere different.

My entire life had prepared me for this scavenger hunt.

The orange van wheezed and rattled like a chain-smoker climbing stairs, but it was still rolling.

The late afternoon sun streamed through my bug-splattered windshield, cooking the interior.

Sweat dripped between my shoulder blades.

I didn't dare turn the air conditioner up past the lowest setting because I didn't want to tax the engine—or my gas budget.

I lowered the driver side window a few inches in hopes of creating a breeze.

The air that whooshed in was hot and sticky but scented with something sweet.

Honeysuckle, maybe? I supposed I would find out.

Kentucky was nothing like I'd expected. Sure, I'd done my research—bourbon capital of the world, birthplace of KFC, home to the Derby—but I wasn't prepared for the sheer, ridiculous beauty of this place.

The landscape couldn't be more opposite the parched brown backdrop of Arizona.

Rolling hills stretched out like a lush carpet, dotted with horses that looked as if they'd been placed there by a tourism board.

The grass wasn't actually blue, which was mildly disappointing, but it was so green it practically vibrated with life.

I fiddled with the radio dial, hoping to find something that wasn't twangy guitars and heartbreak, but apparently Kentucky had made a collective decision that only country

music would be permitted within state lines.

A woman was currently singing about her man leaving her for his truck, and I couldn't help but think at least she'd known him long enough to be hurt by his betrayal. That was more than I could say.

Romantic relationships weren't my strong suit.

Truthfully, relationships in general weren't my strong suit.

My hands tightened on the steering wheel as a wave of doubt crashed over me.

What exactly was I doing here? I'd packed my entire life—which, let's be honest, wasn't much—into a van that predated the Obama administration and driven two thousand miles on the strength of a dying woman's whispered confession.

The memory of my sweet mother on her deathbed brought scalding tears to my eyes and took my thoughts to a darker place.

This wasn't hope; this was lunacy with a GPS.

I might make a spectacular fool of myself.

What if I actually found him? What if, against all odds, my amateur detective work paid off and I tracked down the mysterious bourbon man who'd contributed half my DNA?

The optimistic part of me—the part that was clearly suffering from heat stroke—imagined a tearful reunion, explanations, maybe even a father-daughter bonding montage set to uplifting music.

The realistic part of me, the part that had spent twenty-seven years observing the world's general indifference to my existence, whispered a more likely outcome.

What if he took one look at me and wished I'd stayed lost?

What if he had a real family now, complete with legitimate children who knew their father's middle name and had never lived in a van?

In the rear-view mirror, I caught sight of my lank dark blond hair and nondescript brown eyes, eyes that reflected apprehension. I could end up lonelier than I already was, which seemed mathematically impossible but emotionally terrifying.

I turned up the radio and kept driving, soaking in the sights.

Black rail fence lined expansive pastures broken up with picturesque barns.

Fields of corn and other plants I didn't recognize stretched on for days.

The rail fence sometimes gave way to gorgeous stacked stone fences.

I passed a few crowded roadside produce stands.

Homes ranged from sprawling to spare. Traffic thinned as I turned onto progressively smaller roads leading to my destination, a campground on the outskirts of Lexington.

In the waning daylight, a wooden sign announced "Happy Trails Campground - Your Home Away From Home.

" I flinched. Home was wherever I parked this rust bucket, which made everywhere and nowhere home simultaneously.

But my reservation was paid through December, and the nice lady on the phone had promised full hookups and Wi-Fi, which was more than I'd had in some actual apartments.

I turned into the gravel driveway, my tires crunching pleasantly over the rocks as tents and RVs came into view, situated among soaring hardwood trees.

Whatever happened next, at least I was here. Kentucky stretched out before me, beautiful and intimidating and full of secrets I was determined to uncover.

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"HELLO!" a young voice shouted through the side window I had left cracked open.
"Rise and shine!"

I forced open one crusty eye from where I lay on my roll-up mattress. My plans to sleep in had been thoroughly dashed. "Who's there?" I croaked.

"Poppy!"

"Poppy who?"

"Poppy Oney! My parents run the campground!"

I sat up. I'd met Lou and Tracy Oney the night before and they'd mentioned a daughter. They hadn't mentioned she was a human bullhorn. "Is something wrong?" I called.

"No! I'm supposed to show you around!"

I squashed a groan. "Give me a minute or three."

"Okay!"

I'd slept in shorts and a T-shirt, so I ran my fingers through my hair, then looked around for a pair of sneakers to push my feet into. I lifted my arm for a sniff, then winced. But uninvited visitors got what they got. I unlocked the side door and slid it open. Sunshine poured in, blinding me.

"You must be Bernadette!" she shouted.

I squinted through my fingers to see a skinny red-headed girl with big glasses grinning at me. "And you're Poppy."

"Sure am! Mom said I should give you the grand tour because Dad's fixing the broken toilet in cabin seven and she's dealing with Mr. Henderson who says the raccoons stole his donuts."

I rubbed my eyes. "Raccoons? Are they dangerous?"

"Not usually. I've named all of them. There's Chigger and Digger—"

"How old are you?"

"Twelve!"

She was refreshing, if intrusive. In Arizona, twelve-year-olds sulked in air conditioning and complained about the heat.

She peered into my van. "Did you drive here all by yourself?"

"Uh-huh."

"That's so cool! I can't wait to drive. Mom says I have to wait until I'm sixteen but that's like, forever. Are you from Arizona? Your license plate says Arizona. Why did you leave Arizona? Do you miss the desert? Have you ever seen a real cactus?"

Poppy was all sharp angles and boundless energy, like someone had taken a bundle of coat hangers and taught them to talk.

Her auburn hair had clearly started the day in some sort of organized style but was now escaping in every direction, and she had the kind of freckles that suggested she spent most of her time outdoors, probably posing questions to unsuspecting wildlife.

"Coffee," I managed. "I need coffee first."

"Oh! We have coffee in the camp store! It's not very good but it's caffeinated. Dad says caffeine is the only reason civilization exists. Come on!"

She was already heading toward a rustic building with "Happy Trails General Store" painted in cheerful yellow letters across the front. I stumbled after her, wondering how someone so small could move so fast.

The coffee was, as advertised, terrible. But it was cheap and hot and fortifying. Feeling more awake, I followed Poppy on what she grandly called "The Official Happy Trails Experience."

"This is the shower house," she announced, gesturing toward a neat wooden building that looked relatively new. "The water is hot if you get here early. Mrs. Garcia from site twelve takes like, hour-long showers. Why do grown-ups take such long showers? What do you even do in there for that long?"

I didn't respond and it didn't matter. She was already moving on.

The tour continued at breakneck speed. Poppy showed me the small sandy beach at the edge of a lake that looked like something from a postcard, complete with a wooden dock and what she called "the good swimming hole."

"She pointed out walking trails that disappeared into thick woods, chattering about the waterfall I absolutely had to see and the amphitheater where they showed movies."

"Do you like volleyball?" she asked, stopping abruptly at a sand court surrounded by trees.

"We have tournaments when we have enough people to play.

Last week it was me and the Johnsons from Michigan against three college guys who thought they were super cool until Mrs. Johnson spiked the ball right in Brad's face.

That's the tall one, not the cute one. Are you athletic?

You look athletic. And you're pretty. Do you have a boyfriend? "

I swallowed a mouthful of coffee. "Are you like this all the time?"

She grinned wider. "Mom says I ask too many questions but Dad says curiosity is what makes life interesting. What do you think? Are you here for work? Adventure? Your reservation is for six months. That's a long time."

The kid was relentless. And oddly charming, in the way that complete honesty usually is. "I'm starting a job as a bourbon tour guide."

Her eyes lit up. "That's cool! You must know a lot about bourbon."

"Um, not yet."

"My uncle works at one of the distilleries in Louisville."

It was never too soon to start making connections. "Which one?"

"Angel's Envy. His name is Clinton Oney. He's my favorite uncle. He brings me books, but no bourbon."

"That's good."

"Have you always lived in your van?"

"Not always. This is temporary... and I thought it might be fun."

"Are your folks back in Arizona?"

I shook my head. "My mom died, and I never knew my father."

Her grin disappeared. "Do you have brothers and sisters?"

"Nope." None that I knew of anyway.

She looked stricken. "You're all alone?"

I nodded, then smiled. "It's not that bad. I get to do whatever I want."

She worked her mouth back and forth. "That's one good thing."

But apparently, she couldn't think of more than one good thing about being alone, because she resumed my tour, showing me where the firewood was stored, how to secure the garbage cans to keep out "varmints," and where to stand to get the best cell reception (next to the picnic shelter).

She finished back at my campsite where my faded orange van looked pathetic next to the gleaming RVs and pull-behind trailers of my neighbors. But Poppy proclaimed it "awesome."

I laughed. "Thanks. It belonged to my mom."

"Does she have a name?"

"My mom?"

"The van."

"No, but that's a good idea. Want to help me come up with a name?"

She thought for a minute. "What was your mom's name?"

"Ginger."

She grinned. "That's perfect!"

I grinned back. "You're right. From now on, I'll call her Ginger."

Poppy bounced up and down on her toes. "Bernadette, this is going to be the best summer ever! I can just tell!"

I was less optimistic, but I appreciated her enthusiasm.

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mashing grains—corn, plus rye, wheat, and/or malted barley—are ground and cooked with limestone-filtered water to release sugars

MY GPS led me to a strip mall that looked like it had given up sometime in the nineties.

Birdwhistle Bourbon Tours was sandwiched between a nail salon and a place that offered payday loans, which didn't exactly scream "professional operation.

" The company's sign hung crookedly in the window like a drunk leaning against a lamppost.

Inside, the office was barely bigger than a walk-in closet and jammed with filing cabinets, boxes, a shabby desk, and motivational posters that had clearly lost their punch. The air conditioner sounded like it was having an asthma attack.

"Bernadette!" Marv Birdwhistle popped up from his desk like a jack-in-the-box, dabbing his sweaty forehead with what looked like a fast-food napkin. He was exactly as I pictured from our phone call—fidgety, damp, and talking like he'd mainlined espresso.

I shook the moist hand he offered and conjured up a smile. "Mr. Birdwhistle."

"Call me Marv," he said, pumping my hand.

"Okay... Marv."

"Sit, sit." He pointed to a folding chair whose seat was stacked with mail.

At a loss, I scooped up the pile of mail and held it awkwardly as I lowered myself into the rickety chair. I averted my eyes from the envelope on top, but not before I noticed FINAL NOTICE was stamped on the front.

Yikes, was I boarding a sinking ship?

Marv sighed and steepled his hands. "Now, before we get started, Bernadette, I need to ask you something, and please don't be offended."

"Okay." Where was this going?

"Do you have any problems with alcohol?"

"No, I really don't drink much."

"Define 'not much.'"

I shrugged. "A beer or glass of wine here and there."

"Define 'here and there.'"

He was serious. "Once a week or so."

He looked relieved. "I had to ask because I've had to terminate three tour guides in the past month alone.

One showed up hammered before lunch. Another was sneaking swigs from a hip flask between stops.

And the incident at Woodford Reserve..." He shuddered.

"Let's just say I had to make an apology tour. "

"I don't have a drinking problem," I assured him.

"No family history of addiction? No genetic predisposition that might rear its ugly head once you're surrounded by bourbon all day?"

"I promise you, alcohol isn't an issue for me."

He studied my face as if he was trying to read my soul, then nodded rapidly. "Okay, good, I believe you. Had to ask, you understand. This industry attracts people who sometimes enjoy the product a little too much, if you catch my drift."

Looking around the chaotic office, I wondered if the business was hanging on by a thread. Everything screamed "barely solvent"—the peeling floor tiles, the secondhand furniture, the way he'd emphasized the modest pay during our phone interview.

"So here's how we operate," he continued, pulling out a plastic folder.

"Three distinct tours. The Lexington experience hits Woodford Reserve, Wild Turkey, Four Roses, and Buffalo Trace.

Louisville tour covers Angel's Envy, Old Forester, Michter's, and Peerless.

Then we've got the Bardstown run—Willett, Heaven Hill, Barton, and My Old Kentucky Home. "

"How many tours a week?"

"One a day, four days a week—Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday."

"And my salary?"

"Seventy-five bucks a day plus you split gratuities with Jett. Tips can be substantial if you know how to work a crowd. Happy customers are generous customers."

I was doing the math in my head. It was enough to cover my campground rent with some left over to eat ramen noodles and buy a little gas. Barely. But I could sell my blood plasma if I had to. I'd done it before. "Who's Jett?"

"Your driver. Solid guy, been with me almost since day one. Knows every shortcut and back road in the state."

"Where should I meet the tour bus?"

"Jet'll come get you in the bus. What's your address?"

I hesitated. "I'm staying at Happy Trails Campground."

His eyebrows shot toward his receding hairline. "Campground? You're living in a tent?"

"I have a van. It's, um, temporary."

"Don't seem safe for a young woman, but what do I know about women? Nothing, apparently."

I squinted at him as he frowned deeper and scribbled something on a scrap of paper. Since Marv looked to be around my mother's age, I felt compelled to ask the question I would have to get used to asking men of a certain age who worked in the bourbon

industry. "How long have you been in Kentucky?"

"Four years—no, five. My wife and I moved here from Ohio to start this venture.

" His expression soured like milk left on the counter.

"Ex wife. She ran off with a customer last spring—a dentist from Michigan.

" He let out a harsh laugh. "Twenty-three years together, and she throws it all away for some guy with big choppers and a nice car. " To my horror, he teared up.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I murmured, although internally I was busy celebrating that Marv was not my father.

He swiped at his eyes, then sniffed. "Yeah, well, her mistake.

This business is going places. Bourbon tourism is exploding right now.

We get visitors from Japan, Germany, all over the world.

" His manic energy returned. "And tomorrow, you're gonna see it firsthand.

You'll shadow me on the Fourth of July tour, learn the ropes, see how it's done.

I'm a pretty good guide, if I say so myself.

But someone's gotta be the brains, am I right? "

I nodded. "Right."

The phone sitting on the desk rang. Marv glanced at the caller ID screen, then picked

up the receiver and set it back down with a bang, effectively hanging up on the person. He gave me a flat smile. "Telemarketer."

A collections agency, more likely. But I kept my mouth shut.

He opened a desk drawer, rummaged a bit, then pulled out a couple of forms. "Fill these out and give them back to me tomorrow."

I stood and clumsily deposited his mail on a bare spot on the desk, then took the employment forms. "Okay, what time should I expect to be picked up?"

"Around nine-thirty. Tours start at ten." He got up and lumbered over to a cardboard box, reached in and withdrew a burgundy polo-style shirt, then walked it back and held it up to me.

The shirt read "Birdwhistle Bourbon Tours" on the front. On the back was an unidentifiable logo.

At my questioning expression, Marv said, "It's a bird sitting on a barrel. Get it?"

"Oh. Yeah, I see it now." I didn't see it. And the shirt was a dress on me.

"Sorry about the size. I got a good deal on double X's."

"I'll make it work," I assured him.

Marv smiled wide. "I think you're going to fit in just fine here, Bernadette." The phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID screen, picked up the receiver, then set it back down with a bang, all while maintaining his smile.

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mash bill the specific recipe or ratio of grains used in bourbon production

I WOKE up with butterflies doing acrobatics in my stomach.

First day jitters hit me harder than I'd expected as I pulled on my nicest jeans and the company polo shirt Marv had given me.

I studied my reflection in the cloudy mirror in the shower house.

The burgundy color made me look jaundiced—great.

The extra volume was too much to tuck into my jeans, so I tied a knot at the hem on one side.

I fluffed my fine hair as much as I could and pinched my cheeks to add some color to my face.

It would have to do. After filling a mug with hot water, I shouldered my duffel bag and walked back to my van to make instant coffee.

I dropped my bag, then headed to the entrance of the campground.

It was already warm and muggy. I hoped I'd applied enough deodorant.

I'd barely taken two drinks of my liquid breakfast when I heard the rumble of a big engine.

The short white bus sported "Birdwhistle Bourbon Tours" painted on the side in burgundy letters that didn't quite line up.

The bus stopped and the door opened, revealing a man behind the wheel who surpassed Marv's brief "great guy" assessment.

Jett Flannery looked to be in his early thirties, with dark hair that defied whatever product he'd used to smooth it down and the kind of rugged good looks featured on the covers of romance novels my mother used to read.

He was solidly built, with broad shoulders and strong arms that suggested actual physical work versus a gym membership.

He wore dark jeans, a red company shirt that fit him considerably better than mine fit me, and low-heeled black boots that had seen some miles.

"You must be the new victim," he said as I climbed aboard, his voice carrying a hint of amusement that immediately rubbed me wrong.

"Bernadette Waters," I replied.

"Jett Flannery. Hope you last longer than the previous three casualties." He closed the door and shifted into gear. "Though honestly, the odds aren't in your favor."

I swung into the seat behind him. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

He glanced at me in the rearview mirror, one eyebrow raised. "Just being realistic. Fair warning though—you better be a fast learner because Marv couldn't guide tourists to a bathroom if it had neon signs and a marching band."

I wanted to defend Marv, but something in Jett's tone suggested he wasn't

exaggerating.

On the short drive to the strip mall office, we maintained a silence that confirmed Jett's estimation that I wouldn't last long enough to make it worth getting to know me.

I surveyed him under my lashes as he drummed his fingers to the beat of a country song on the radio. As if a guy who looked like that would want to get to know me .

We pulled up to the strip mall office where ten customers were already gathered—a mix of family and friends celebrating Independence Day. Marv emerged from the office looking hot and bothered, clutching a clipboard and a microphone.

Ugh, I would have to use a microphone?

I should've mentioned earlier that I have three phobias—heights, bees, and public speaking. (I know, I know.)

Marv shepherded everyone onto the bus, then sat down next to me.

"Ready to see a pro in action?"

"Ready," I said.

Jett caught my gaze in the mirror, then pulled his hand across his mouth and shifted the bus into gear.

Five minutes into our trip, I understood exactly what Jett had meant.

Marv was painful to watch as he stood to engage the tourists in small talk and pass the time to our first destination.

He stumbled through his welcome and his spiel about the growth of the bourbon industry, constantly backtracking to correct himself.

His attempts at humor didn't land at all .

When he tried to explain the difference between bourbon and whiskey, he got so tangled up in his own words that customers started talking amongst themselves.

The worst moment came when Marv asked a woman for her name.

"Teresa," she replied cheerfully.

Marv's face crumpled. "That's my wife's name. I mean, ex wife." His eyes filled with tears and the entire bus fell silent except for the awkward clearing of throats.

I caught Jett's eye in the mirror. He gave a little head shake.

Taking a deep breath, I stood up and gently extracted the microphone from Marv's trembling grip.

"Well, Teresa, you picked a beautiful day for bourbon tasting," I said, surprised by how steady my voice sounded. "Is this your first time?"

She admitted it was, that she wasn't really much of a bourbon drinker.

"So you're bourbon curious?" I asked, and everyone laughed.

I rambled through what I remembered from my hasty research on my phone the night before, about the difference between bourbon and whiskey and the legal requirement for calling a product "bourbon" and how Kentucky had capitalized on the making of bourbon much like the area of Champagne, France had capitalized on the exclusive

production of champagne.

The customers seemed engaged, and I found myself relaxing.

When I ran out of things to talk about, I invited two veteran bourbon drinkers to fill in with their experiences.

At the distilleries and tasting rooms, the bulk of the job seemed to be herding everyone to the right place and keeping them on schedule—each stop had its own guide to ensure the experience was entertaining.

I spent my time soaking up all the history I could and taking in the free displays.

Marv greeted people working at the different places we visited, but he seemed subdued. Jett stayed with the bus.

By the time we were heading home, Marv had yielded the tour to me completely. He sat in his seat looking defeated, occasionally nodding when I glanced his way for confirmation of a detail.

When we dropped Marv and the customers at the office, the tip jar was full. Marv turned to me. "I can ride along again tomorrow if you think you need another lesson or two."

Jett coughed.

"That's up to you, Marv," I said. "But I think I'm getting the hang of it."

He nodded. "Like I said, you're gonna fit in just fine around here."

On the short drive back to the campground, I could feel Jett's eyes on me as I counted

the tip money. He probably thought I was going to cheat him out of his half.

When he pulled the bus to a stop just inside the campground, I pushed to my feet and handed him his cut. "Same time tomorrow?"

He took the cash, then nodded and opened the door.

I jumped down the steps.

"Hey... Bernadette."

I stopped and turned back to find him surveying me. "You might actually survive this job."

"Gee, thanks."

"Most people would've let Marv crash and burn. You stepped up." He paused.

"Course, that might just mean you're too nice for your own good."

The door closed before I could respond.

As the bus pulled away, I walked to my van wondering what to make of Jett Flannery. Was he friend... or foe?

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THE BACHELORETTE party invaded our bus like a glittery tornado.

Seven women in matching hot pink tank tops emblazoned with "Bride Squad" in silver sequins, armed with mimosas in travel mugs and enough enthusiasm to power a small city.

Their ringleader was the bride-to-be, a stunning brunette named Chelsea who looked as if she'd stepped off the cover of a bridal magazine—all glossy hair, perfect teeth, and curves that made my baggy polo shirt feel like a burlap sack.

"This is going to be epic!" Chelsea shouted as she sashayed up the bus steps. When her gaze landed on Jett behind the wheel, she gave him a smile that could melt steel. "Well, hello there, handsome."

Jett nodded politely. "Morning, ladies. Congratulations on your upcoming wedding."

"Why thank you," Chelsea purred, making no move to find a seat. "I'm Chelsea. And you are?"

"Jett. I'll be your driver today."

"Lucky us." She tilted her head, studying him like he was the last piece of chocolate in the box. "Are you married, Jett?"

"I'm not," Jett replied, his tone neutral but not unfriendly.

The other women giggled and found their seats, but Chelsea remained planted in the

aisle, clearly in no hurry to end this conversation.

"I'm not either—yet."

I cleared my throat loudly. "Ladies, if everyone could take a seat, we'll get this bourbon adventure started."

Chelsea finally moved, but not before trailing her fingers along the back of Jett's seat. "We'll have to continue this conversation later," she said with a wink.

As I launched into my welcome spiel, I caught Jett's reflection in the side mirror. He wasn't exactly encouraging Chelsea's flirtation, but he wasn't running away screaming either. A small smile played at the corners of his mouth whenever she called out flirty comments during my tour narration.

At Woodford Reserve, Chelsea somehow managed to position herself next to Jett during the barrel warehouse tour, laughing at everything he said and finding excuses to touch his arm.

"You know so much about this place," she gushed to Jett as we walked between towering racks of aging barrels. "Do you come here often?"

"Part of the job," he said simply. But he didn't step away when she leaned closer.

During the tasting at Wild Turkey, Chelsea insisted Jett try a sip of her bourbon flight. "Just a tiny taste," she cooed, holding the glass to his lips. "I need a man's opinion."

"Sorry, ma'am, but I'm driving, so I can't."

She pouted, then took a messy drink from her glass, leaving bourbon on her lips.

Then she kissed Jett on the mouth. "There," she said. "Just a taste."

Her friends howled and cheered.

Jett licked his lips, then nodded and smiled. My cheeks burned as I watched the intimate gesture. The other women giggled and snapped photos while I stood there holding my clipboard like a shield, feeling invisible and ridiculous.

By the time we reached Four Roses, I'd developed a tension headache that pulsed behind my eyes.

Chelsea's laughter rang out constantly, musical and confident in a way mine had never been.

She was the kind of woman who commanded attention simply by existing, while I was the kind who blended into wallpaper.

On the drive back to the campground after dropping off the bride squad—who tipped generously despite barely acknowledging my existence—Jett glanced at me in the mirror.

"You're quiet tonight."

I shrugged, counting the tip money with more focus than necessary. "Long day."

"So what's your story?" he asked as we turned onto the winding road leading to Happy Trails.

"You're interested in my story?"

He gave a shrug. "Just wondering what brings a girl from Arizona to Kentucky to

give bourbon tours?"

"Needed a change of scenery."

"That's it? You drove two thousand miles for scenery?"

I met his gaze in the mirror briefly, then looked away. "Sometimes people need a fresh start."

"Running from something or running to something?"

The question hit too close to home. "Does it matter?"

He was quiet for a moment. "Guess not. We all got our reasons for ending up where we do."

When he pulled into the campground, I hurried to gather my things. "See you tomorrow."

"Bernadette." His voice stopped me at the door. "You did good today. Don't let girls like the bride squad throw you off your game."

I nodded, not trusting my voice, and stepped off the bus into the gathering dusk.

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rye a grain that adds spice and dryness to the mash

THE GROUP of Japanese tourists was a refreshing change from yesterday's chaos.

Seven polite, well-dressed customers who listened intently and asked thoughtful questions instead of shrieking about photo opportunities.

Most had ties to the Toyota plant in Georgetown, their families having relocated from Japan for the automotive industry.

I marveled at what culture shock they must have experienced moving from Japan to this wild region in the foothills of the Appalachia Mountains.

They moved through our Bardstown stops with quiet reverence, treating each distillery like a sacred space.

At Willett, while the group sampled their small-batch releases, I noticed one woman hanging back, scribbling notes in a leather journal instead of participating in the tasting.

She was probably my age, with a waterfall of black hair and intelligent dark eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses that somehow made her more striking.

Unlike the others who wore business casual attire, she'd dressed in dark jeans and a cream-colored blouse that looked expensive but understated.

She was stunning in an effortless way that made me conscious of my oversized polo

shirt.

"Not a bourbon fan?" I asked, approaching her near the gift shop display.

She looked up and smiled, revealing perfect teeth. "Actually, I love bourbon. But I'm working." She gestured to her notebook with graceful hands. "I'm documenting everything for an article."

"Are you a journalist?"

"Freelance writer. Naomi Sook." She extended her hand with a firm grip.

"I'm writing a feature for Whisky Magazine Japan about Kentucky's bourbon tourism industry.

My editor wants to understand how Kentucky transformed whiskey production into a cultural experience that draws millions of visitors annually. "

"Is bourbon popular in Japan?"

"Incredibly popular. Japanese whiskey has exploded internationally, but we're still learning how to build the kind of tourism infrastructure Kentucky has mastered." She was polite, professional, but I could sense her attention wasn't entirely focused on our conversation.

When we boarded the bus for the next stop, I noticed she chose a seat near the front—close to Jett. I caught her studying his profile and when he adjusted the mirror to check on passengers, their eyes met briefly. She smiled, and I saw him smile back.

At Heaven Hill, during the rickhouse tour, Naomi positioned herself where she could observe both the aging barrels and Jett as he waited with the bus.

When our guide explained the angel's share—the bourbon lost to evaporation during aging—she asked thoughtful questions, but I noticed her gaze drifting toward the parking area.

"Your driver seems very knowledgeable," she mentioned to me as we walked between towering racks of barrels. "Has he been doing this long?"

"A few years, I think."

"And he's from here originally?"

The question seemed casual, but there was something pointed about it. "I'm not sure. We don't really talk much about personal things."

During the break at Barton 1792, I watched Naomi approach Jett by the bus.

She'd removed her glasses, and her hair fell in a sleek curtain as she leaned against the vehicle.

Even from a distance, I could see Jett's posture change—he was more attentive, more engaged.

They talked for several minutes. Naomi laughed at something he said, her hand briefly touching his arm.

My stomach pinged with an emotion I couldn't identify.

At My Old Kentucky Home, Naomi stuck closer to me during the tasting, asking questions about my research methods and how I'd learned so much so quickly. I assured her I had much more to learn.

During the ride back to Lexington, Naomi sat in the front seat again, this time engaging Jett in conversation about local restaurants and hidden gems around the state.

"I'll definitely be back," she announced as we pulled into the strip mall parking lot. "This story is going to require multiple visits over the next few months." She glanced toward Jett as she said it, and I caught the subtle exchange of smiles between them.

She pressed a generous tip into my hand along with her business card. "Thank you for a wonderful tour, Bernadette. You're very good at this."

The words were kind, but they felt like a polite dismissal. As she gathered her things, I heard her ask Jett about the best time to book future tours.

On the drive back to the campground, the bus felt oddly quiet after the day's energy.

"Good group today," Jett said, catching my eye in the mirror.

"Very respectful. The journalist seemed particularly interested in the industry."

"Yeah, she mentioned that. Smart woman."

"Pretty too," I added.

"So what are your plans for your days off?" he asked as we turned onto the campground entrance.

The question caught me off guard. "Oh, I have... things to do."

"Things?"

"Just, you know, settling in. Exploring the area." When he pulled in, I grabbed my bag quickly and jogged down the steps. "See you Wednesday." When he didn't open the bus door, I looked back with eyebrows raised.

Jett hesitated, then opened the bus door. "See you Wednesday."

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wheat used as a secondary grain to add softness and sweetness to the mash

THE LAUNDRY facility at Happy Trails smelled like a combination of fabric softener and pine disinfectant, with underlying notes of someone's forgotten tuna sandwich.

I dumped my accumulated dirty clothes into the ancient washing machine and fed it quarters from the stash I kept in an old peanut butter jar.

A man emerged from behind one of the dryers, arms full of dark-colored clothing. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, with sandy hair that stuck up in places and an easy smile that transformed his ordinary features into something almost handsome.

"Afternoon," he said, nodding as he passed. "You must be new. I'm Teddy Reeves, site fourteen."

"Bernadette Waters. Site nine."

"Welcome to the neighborhood." He gestured toward his pile of laundry. "Fair warning—the spin cycle on that washer sounds like a helicopter landing, but it gets the job done."

"Thanks for the heads up."

He lingered by the folding table, sorting through what appeared to be an unusual amount of outdoor gear. "You staying long?"

"Through December, probably. You?"

"Same, maybe longer. Depends on how the hunting season goes." He held up a mud-stained shirt. "Not deer hunting—arrowheads and ginseng. This area's prime territory if you know where to look."

I'd never met anyone who hunted for arrowheads. "Is that... profitable?"

"Ginseng can be, if you find the right patches. Arrowheads are more of a passion project." His eyes lit up with genuine enthusiasm. "Found a Paleo point last week that's probably eight thousand years old. Makes you think about all the people who walked these hills before us, you know?"

There was something endearing about his excitement over ancient artifacts. "That's really cool."

"If you're ever interested in tagging along, I could show you what to look for. Most people walk right over amazing stuff without realizing it."

He seemed harmless enough. "I might take you up on that."

Teddy smiled wider. "Great. I usually head out around dawn, back by noon. See you around, Bernadette." He left with a wave.

I mused that when it came right down to it, we were all looking for something.

After folding a load of clothes, I walked back to my van then decided it could use a wash, too. As I gathered a bucket, some rags, and the bottle of all-purpose cleaner I'd picked up at the camp store, Poppy materialized.

"Whatcha doing?"

"I'm going to wash Ginger."

"Can I help?"

"It's going to take a while. I'm washing it inside and out."

She grinned. "I'm a good cleaner."

For the next hour, we scrubbed away road grime and the sticky residue of countless bug encounters.

Poppy proved surprisingly helpful, tackling the lower sections I couldn't reach while lying on her stomach.

She kept up a steady stream of commentary about everything we discovered—a fossilized french fry under the passenger seat, a mysterious stain on the ceiling that looked vaguely like Texas, and my collection of gas station coffee cups.

"You really live in here?" she asked, poking her head through the side door as I organized the interior.

"Yep. Bedroom, kitchen, office, all in one convenient package."

"Where do you keep your computer?"

"I don't have one. Just my phone."

"How do you do research without a computer?"

Good question. I'd been winging it with my phone and whatever free Wi-Fi I could find, but if I was serious about tracking down my father, I needed a better system.

As the afternoon wore on, I found myself really looking at the space for the first time.

The van was bigger than I'd given it credit for—about eight feet wide and twelve feet long in the back area.

Currently, it was a chaotic jumble of boxes, my roll-up mattress, and random items shoved wherever they fit.

I pulled out a notebook and pencil, sketching rough measurements of the interior walls. "What are you drawing?" Poppy asked, leaning over my shoulder.

"Ideas. If I'm staying here for six months, I need better organization."

"Like what?"

I pointed to the back corner. "Maybe built-in cabinets there for clothes and supplies. And here"—I indicated the side wall—"a fold-down desk where I can spread out papers and actually think."

"Papers for what?"

I hesitated. "Research. For my job."

"Cool! Like a detective!"

Closer than she knew. I sketched a narrow cabinet that could hold hanging clothes, with drawers underneath for smaller items. The desk would need to be sturdy enough to hold books and notebooks, but compact enough to fold flat when I needed the space for sleeping.

"You could put little lights under the cabinets," Poppy suggested. "And maybe a

bulletin board above the desk for pictures and important stuff."

"Those are good ideas."

As the sun began to set, painting the sky in shades of orange and pink, I stared at my rough sketches.

The improvements would cost money I didn't have, but they'd also give me a real base of operations.

Somewhere I could organize my thoughts, map out connections, and systematically work through the puzzle of finding a man whose only identifying characteristic was his connection to the bourbon industry.

"This is going to be awesome," Poppy declared, flopping down on the picnic table bench. "It'll be like having a tiny house on wheels."

I looked at my faded orange van with its rust spots and dented bumper, then at my sketches. Maybe she was right. Maybe I could turn this mobile disaster into something that actually felt like home.

For the first time since arriving in Kentucky, that didn't seem impossible.

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barley typically malted to provide enzymes needed for starch conversion

I WAS backing Ginger out of my campsite when a blur of red hair and freckles appeared in my side mirror, waving frantically.

"Wait! Where are you going?" Poppy called, jogging alongside the van as I slowed to a stop.

I rolled down the window. "Library. I need to do some research."

Her eyes lit up like I'd announced a trip to Disney World. "Can I come? Please? I love the library! They have this whole section of graphic novels and Miss DeeDee always lets me help her with the book displays."

"You'd have to ask your parents."

"I'll be right back!" She sprinted toward the camp office before I could say another word.

True to form, she reappeared within minutes, slightly out of breath but grinning triumphantly. "They said yes! Mom says I'm a free-range kid and the library is good for my intellectual development."

"Free-range kid?"

"You know, like free-range chickens. Mom read this article about how kids need more independence and less helicopter parenting."

So as long as I'm not doing anything dangerous or illegal, I get to explore and learn through experience.

" She climbed into the passenger seat and buckled her seatbelt with practiced efficiency.

"Dad says it's either that or they'll go crazy from all my questions. "

I felt a pang of sympathy for the girl's parents.

The nearest branch of the Lexington Public Library was a squatty brick building that smelled of old paper and furniture polish, with that particular library hush. Fluorescent lights hummed overhead, casting everything in a cool, academic glow.

At the circulation desk, I filled out an application for a library card while Poppy bounced on her toes beside me, rattling off information about their summer reading program and the upcoming poetry slam for teens.

"The research desk is over there if you need help finding anything specific," the clerk said, handing me my temporary card. "Ms. Conner is our reference librarian—she's amazing at tracking down obscure information."

Poppy immediately bolted toward the young adult section, leaving me to navigate alone. I approached the research desk where a woman with silver-streaked hair and kind eyes sat surrounded by towering stacks of books.

"Ms. Conner? I'm wondering if you might help me identify some items that belonged to my mother. She used to live in this area."

She looked up from her computer screen with interest. "I can try. What kind of items?"

I pulled out the small wooden jewelry box that held my mother's few treasures—a tarnished silver bracelet, a set of miniature salt and pepper shakers that looked to be hand painted, an amber colored shot glass, various unmarked rings, an ornate tassel, a pair of stained glass earrings, a red enamel collar pin in the shape of a Pegasus.

She examined each piece carefully, turning them over in her hands.

"These earrings look handmade. Very pretty.

And the shot glass looks mouth-blown—see the tiny bubbles in the glass?

And it doesn't sit perfectly level. But it isn't signed.

" When she reached the collar pin, she paused, holding it closer to the desk lamp.

"This is interesting," she murmured, adjusting her reading glasses.

"A red Pegasus... that seems familiar somehow.

" She studied it for a long moment, her brow furrowed in concentration.

"I can't place it. There are so many corporate logos and club emblems with horses—they all start to blur together after a while. Did you do an image search online?"

I nodded. "Too many hits to look through, and none of the ones I did look through were an exact match." I wrote down my phone number. "In case you think of something that might lead me to someone who knew her."

She gave me a sympathetic look. "Of course."

I thanked her and made my way to the local history section, gathering armfuls of books about Kentucky's bourbon heritage. I found a quiet table near a window where afternoon sunlight streamed through dusty glass and began to read.

The scope of the bourbon industry was staggering.

Hundreds of distilleries, thousands of employees, generations of families whose livelihoods depended on corn mash.

Master distillers, warehouse workers, sales representatives, tour guides, marketing executives, farmers, truckers—the web of connections spread far beyond what I'd imagined.

I stared at a map showing bourbon distilleries across Kentucky, tiny dots scattered like stars across the state. Each dot represented dozens, maybe hundreds of people whose work touched the bourbon industry in some way. My father could be any one of them.

Or none of them.

The magnitude of my task hit me like a physical weight pressing down on my chest. I wasn't looking for a needle in a haystack—I was looking for a needle in a field of haystacks.

"Find anything good?" Poppy appeared beside my table, arms loaded with graphic novels and a thick book on marine biology.

I gestured to the books spread before me. "Just realizing how big this industry really is."

"That's a lot of books about whiskey," she observed, settling into the chair across

from me. "Are you writing a report or something?"

"Something like that."

As I checked out my stack of books, the weight of the research ahead felt daunting. But somewhere in these pages might be a clue, a connection, a thread that would lead me closer to the man who'd left my mother—and me—behind.

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cooker a large vessel used to heat the mash and turn starches into gelatins

The Wednesday tour felt like performing for an empty theater. Only three customers had signed up—a retired couple from Indiana and their friend. The bus felt cavernous and quiet as we rolled through the countryside, my voice echoing strangely in the mostly empty space.

"Is it usually this slow?" I asked Jett.

He nodded. "Marv let things go after the divorce. Bookings are way down. Our online reviews are terrible. I keep hoping he'll bounce back."

I hoped so too. I was counting on customer tips to get by.

At Woodford Reserve, our small group got lost among the larger tour crowds. At Wild Turkey, we finished the tasting in half the usual time. By the time we reached Goldenrod, a boutique distillery tucked into a converted tobacco barn, I was ready for the day to end.

The tasting room at Goldenrod buzzed with energy despite the intimate size. Exposed wooden beams stretched overhead, and mason jar lights cast a warm amber glow over reclaimed wood tables. The bar dominated one wall, crafted from a single massive oak slab that gleamed with layers of careful finish.

Behind the bar stood a young man who looked like he'd stepped out of a craft cocktail magazine—dark blond hair swept back, crisp white button-down with the sleeves rolled up, tanned forearms. He moved with the fluid confidence of someone who'd

found his calling, shaking a cocktail with theatrical flair for a group of women at the far end of the bar.

"Welcome to Goldenrod," he said as my small group approached. His smile was genuine, reaching green eyes that sparkled with mischief. "I'm Dylan. What can I start you folks with?"

While he guided my tourists through their flight selections, I hung back, pretending to study the framed photographs lining the walls—images of the distillery's transformation.

"And what about you?" Dylan's voice made me turn. He was looking directly at me, one eyebrow raised expectantly.

"Oh, I'm working. Tour guide."

"Even tour guides need refreshment." He was already reaching for a glass. "How about some fresh lemonade?"

I relented with a nod. The lemonade was tart and sweet.

"Better?" Dylan asked, leaning against the bar with casual grace.

"Much. Thank you."

"What's your name?"

"Bernadette."

"Nice name."

He was flirting... and I liked it. "So how long have you been bartending?"

"A couple of years. I'm studying for my bourbon certification, working toward becoming a brand ambassador someday.

Maybe even master distiller if I'm lucky.

" He strained the golden liquid into a coupe glass and garnished it with an orange peel before passing it to a waiting customer.

"What about you? How'd you end up giving bourbon tours? "

"Needed a job. Ended up here."

"That simple?"

"That simple."

He studied my face like he was reading ingredients on a bottle label. "I don't buy it. Nobody just 'ends up' in Kentucky giving bourbon tours. There's always a story."

Before I could respond, the Indiana couple approached the bar, ready to head back to the bus. I drained my lemonade and stood. "Thanks for the drink."

"Hey," Dylan called. "I'm taking my break. Mind if I walk you out?"

Outside, the late afternoon air hung thick with humidity and the sweet smell of fermenting grain from the nearby rickhouses. Dylan walked beside me to where Jett waited with the bus, hands in his pockets.

"Hey, Jett," Dylan said.

"Dylan," Jett responded with a nod.

"Stop by again sometime," Dylan said to me as I climbed the bus steps. "I'll make you a proper bourbon cocktail when you're not working."

"I might do that."

Jett climbed in behind me, closed the door, and set the bus into motion.

"Making friends?" he asked dryly.

I settled into my seat and ignored the question, watching Goldenrod disappear behind us as we headed toward our final stop. The memory of Dylan's easy smile lingered, along with the unexpected warmth of finding someone who seemed genuinely interested in conversation... and in me.

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liquefaction initial step where water and heat are applied to raw grains to create the mash

I JOLTED awake. Thunder crashed overhead like freight trains colliding. Rain hammered against Ginger's metal roof with the fury of a thousand drumsticks, and somewhere above my head, a steady drip-drip-drip announced that my mobile home had sprung a leak.

I fumbled for my phone's flashlight and aimed it upward. A dark water stain spread across the ceiling like a bruise, and droplets fell rhythmically onto my sleeping bag. I groaned and rolled away from the growing puddle, pulling my pillow over my head.

This was a mistake. All of it.

The storm raged outside while I lay there cataloging my poor life choices.

I should have stayed in Arizona, gotten a job at a call center or restaurant, saved every penny until I could finish my associate degree in hospitality management.

At least then I'd have marketable skills and a plan that made sense.

Instead, I was camping in a leaky van in Kentucky, chasing ghosts based on a dying woman's whispered confession.

What if my mother had been confused? What if she'd made it up entirely, some fever dream born of medication and grief? What if there was no bourbon-industry father to find?

My phone buzzed against the sleeping bag. Unknown number, probably a spam call, but I answered anyway.

"Bernadette? This is Eve Conner from the library."

I was suddenly alert. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry to call so early, but I couldn't sleep. That collar pin you showed me yesterday—I finally remembered where I'd seen it." Her voice carried excitement despite the early hour. "Workers at the Winged Horse pub wear them on their uniforms. The red Pegasus is their logo."

My heart hammered against my ribs. "The Winged Horse pub? Is it still in business?"

"Oh yes, been there for decades. It's on Versailles Road, near the university."

I was already scrambling for clothes, the van's leak forgotten. "Ms. Conner, thank you so much."

"I hope it helps. Good luck."

Two hours later, I stood outside the Winged Horse in the pouring rain, watching an older man unlock the heavy wooden doors. The pub's exterior was weathered brick with forest green trim, and sure enough, a red Pegasus with outstretched wings adorned the sign swaying in the wind.

"We don't open until eleven," the man called.

"Are you the owner?"

"Yes. Frank Goetz."

"Please, I just need to ask about someone who might've worked here years ago. It's important."

He studied my soaked appearance and softened. "Come in before you catch pneumonia."

Inside, the pub smelled of old wood and stale beer, with undertones of furniture polish. Dim lighting revealed dark paneling, vintage liquor ad posters, and red vinyl booths. Frank flipped switches behind the bar, bringing the space to life with warm light.

"Coffee?" he offered, already moving toward an industrial machine.

"That would be wonderful."

He pushed a few buttons, waited for a glass pot to fill, then poured two full cups and brought them over. "Now what's this all about?"

"I'm wondering if Ginger Waters worked here, maybe thirty years ago." I pulled out my phone and showed him the best photo I had of my mother—a snapshot from her fortieth birthday, her smile radiant despite the cheap restaurant lighting.

Frank adjusted his reading glasses and studied the screen carefully. Recognition dawned slowly across his weathered features.

"Yes, I remember her. Sweetheart of a girl, worked here maybe two years. Good waitress, popular with the customers." He handed back my phone. "How do you know Ginger?"

"She was my mother. She passed away recently."

His expression shifted. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you. I'm looking for people who might've known her. Do you remember any of her boyfriends?"

Frank scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Ginger dated, sure, but I didn't pay much attention to her personal life. But she was best friends with another waitress—Suzy something. Those two were thick as thieves."

My pulse quickened. "Do you remember Suzy's last name?"

"Lord, that was a long time ago. It was unusual, I remember that. Rhymed with her first name, which we all thought was funny."

"Rhymed with Suzy?" I wracked my brain. "Schmoozie? Doozy?"

Frank chuckled. "Nothing that silly. What else rhymes with Suzy?"

"Boozy? Choosy? Snoozy?"

"Closer to that last one." His eyes lit up. "Klooz! That was it—Suzy Klooz. K-L-O-O-Z. Funny spelling."

I felt like I'd struck gold. "Do you know what happened to her?"

"No, sorry. But if anyone would know about Ginger's love life, it'd be Suzy."

I thanked the man and carried my coffee back to my van through the lessening rain. My sneakers were soaked, but my steps felt lighter. I had an actual lead.

Suzy Klooz. My mother's best friend who knew all her secrets.

Now I just had to find her.

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slurry a thick mixture of water and ground grain at the start of the mashing process

I WAS still buzzing the next morning when Jett pulled up to the entrance of the campground. I hadn't yet located Suzy Klooz, but for the first time in months, I felt genuinely hopeful about the future.

"Someone's chipper this morning," Jett observed as I climbed aboard.

The comment irritated me more than it should have. "Is that a problem?"

"Not at all. Just noting the change." He shifted into gear with his usual efficiency. "Good news?"

"Something like that." I didn't owe him explanations about my personal life.

At the strip mall office, customers milled around in the morning heat, fanning themselves with tour brochures. My pulse blipped when I spotted Naomi among them, looking cool and elegant in a flowing sundress.

Marv materialized beside me, sweating more than usual in his wrinkled khakis. "Bernadette, that Japanese writer is back—the one doing the magazine article."

"I see her."

"Be extra nice to her, would you? If she mentions us in her piece, it could bring in serious business. International exposure like that..." He dabbed his forehead with a napkin from his pocket. "Could turn this whole operation around."

So as Jett and I suspected, business was on a downhill slide.

As we loaded the bus, I watched Naomi gravitate toward the front again, settling into the seat directly behind Jett. The other passengers, a mix of bourbon enthusiasts from Chicago and a young couple celebrating their anniversary, seemed eager to get to the drinking part of the tour.

"Good morning, everyone," I began once we were underway, my voice carrying more energy than usual. "Welcome to the Louisville bourbon experience. Today we're exploring four distilleries that represent the heart and soul of Kentucky's liquid gold."

I threw myself into the tour with renewed vigor, weaving stories and historical facts with theatrical flair.

The passengers responded to my energy, asking more questions and engaging with each other.

Even the shy anniversary couple opened up, sharing that they'd met at a bourbon tasting in Milwaukee.

But throughout the day, I remained acutely aware of Naomi's proximity to Jett. During stops, she lingered by the bus. At Peerless, I caught them sharing a private laugh about something while the rest of us toured the grain-to-glass operation.

Her notebook remained mostly closed, I noticed. For someone writing an in-depth article, she seemed more interested in observing our driver than documenting the business of bourbon tourism.

The afternoon sun beat down mercilessly as we made our final stop, and the humidity was equally unforgiving. Sweat beaded on my forehead despite the bus's air conditioning, but my energy never flagged. I was determined to give Marv the kind of

tour that would earn positive coverage.

As we headed back to the office, the tip jar was nearly full.

"Outstanding tour today," called out one of the Chicago men as passengers filed off the bus.

Naomi was among the last to leave. After the customers dispersed, I counted out Jett's half of the tips and handed it over. "Making friends?" I asked, echoing his words from earlier in the week.

He pocketed the cash and smirked. "Touché."

But Jett's acknowledgement of his attraction to Naomi couldn't dampen my spirits. Besides, if I found my father in the next few days, there wouldn't be a reason to stay with Birdwhistle Bourbon Tours.

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sour mash a method where some of the previous mash is added to maintain pH and consistency

THE RED Hat Society ladies descended on our bus like a scarlet tornado, their crimson headwear ranging from modest berets to elaborate feathered creations.

Ten women in their fifties and sixties, all dressed in purple outfits topped with those signature red hats, chattering with the excitement of schoolgirls on a field trip.

And Naomi was back. She claimed her usual seat behind Jett, and the two were immediately engaged in an intimate conversation. Her notebook lay unopened on her lap.

"Bernadette," called out a woman named Marge, "what are those white flowers blooming along the fence line?"

I squinted through the window at the clusters of white blossoms dotting the roadside. "I'm... not sure. Let me check." I moved toward the front. "Jett? The ladies are asking about the white flowers along the fences."

He glanced at me in the rearview mirror with thinly veiled irritation at the interruption. "Dutchman's Breeches," he offered, then immediately resumed his conversation with Naomi.

I covered my own irritation and rejoined the ladies, asking about their organization and where each of them were visiting from.

At Woodford Reserve, while the group embarked on their guided tour, I found myself with an hour to kill.

The visitor center buzzed with activity, tourists sampling bourbon flights and browsing gift shops filled with logo merchandise.

I settled into a corner chair with decent Wi-Fi reception and pulled out my phone.

Searching for " Suzy Klooz" on social media felt like looking for buried treasure.

The unusual spelling worked in my favor—there weren't many results.

I found a Susan Klooz in Portland who sold handmade jewelry, and another in Miami who worked as a dental hygienist. Both looked to be the right age to have been my mother's friend.

I crafted careful messages to each, explaining that I was trying to locate someone who might have known my mother in Kentucky thirty years ago. I hit send on both messages and exhaled. Now I just had to wait and hope one of them would respond with something useful.

"You don't strike me as someone who doom scrolls social media."

Jett's voice made me look up. He stood nearby with a coffee cup in hand. There was no sign of Naomi.

"I'm not doom scrolling," I snapped, more harshly than intended. "I'm researching."

"Researching what?"

"Personal stuff." I locked my phone screen and shoved it into my pocket. "Where's

your shadow?"

"My what?"

"Naomi. You two seemed pretty cozy on the bus."

His eyebrows rose. "She's asking questions about local culture for her article. I'm being helpful."

"Right. Helpful." I stood up, smoothing wrinkles from my polo shirt. "Very community-minded of you."

The corners of his mouth twitched like he was fighting a smile. "You sound jealous."

"I'm not jealous. I'm annoyed that you act put out when I ask you legitimate tour-related questions but you're happy to chat with her about... whatever you were chatting about."

"Sorry. Interrupt anytime you or a customer has a question."

"I will."

"Good."

"Good."

The red hat ladies began filtering back into the visitor center.

I plastered on my tour guide smile and gathered my group.

Adrenaline pumped through my chest. Any minute the right Suzy Klooz could reply

with details about my father.

And stepping on the heels of my excitement was a wall of dread.

Because I was keenly aware the details might not be to my liking.

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backset the acidic liquid left over from a previous distillation, used in sour mashing

"Remember when Mr. Peterson caught Jake sleeping in AP Chemistry?" asked a woman named Christina.

"You mean every day?" Jake shot back, grinning. "That man's voice was like a lullaby."

Their easy camaraderie made my chest tighten with something that felt like homesickness for a place I'd never really had.

High school for me had been a blur of new schools, new faces, new attempts to fit in before my mother inevitably announced we were moving again.

Phoenix, Flagstaff, Tucson—each move meant starting over, trying to crack the code of established friend groups and social hierarchies.

I'd graduated from a school in Tempe where I'd spent exactly eighteen months.

Long enough to earn decent grades, not long enough to form lasting connections.

There had been Anna, who shared my love of mystery novels, and Lenore, whose sharp wit and purple-streaked hair made her seem fearless.

We'd eaten lunch together, studied for finals, made plans for after graduation that hadn't materialized.

At least, not for me.

When was the last time I'd even thought about them?

"Bernadette, could you take our picture by the distillery sign?" Christina called out when we stopped at Willett.

I obliged, watching through the camera screen as they arranged themselves with practiced ease—arms draped over shoulders, genuine smiles that spoke of shared history.

I nursed a pang of envy. Would my own class of 2015 have a ten-year reunion?

Would anyone even notice if I didn't show up?

The girl who'd transferred in junior year and kept to herself, whose yearbook quote was probably something forgettable about following dreams.

From the front of the bus came Naomi's distinctive laugh—musical and uninhibited.

I'd grown accustomed to her presence, like accepting a persistent headache.

Today she wore a flowing linen dress that made her look like she was gliding rather than walking.

Whatever story she was telling Jett had him smiling.

At Heaven Hill, while the reunion group toured the barrel warehouse, I found myself thinking about Dylan, the bartender from Goldenrod.

His easy smile, his genuine enthusiasm for bourbon craftsmanship.

But I reasoned he was probably like that with everyone—charming and attentive because tips depended on it.

How many women had he walked to their tour buses, suggesting they stop by again sometime?

"The rickhouse smells amazing," someone said.

"That's the char from the barrel," I explained, grateful for the distraction. "The heat draws out compounds from the wood that give bourbon its color and flavor."

As we loaded back onto the bus for the final leg, I watched the reunion group settle into their seats, still animated by shared discoveries and memories. Their connection was effortless, built on a foundation of shared experiences I'd never had.

Maybe I'd look up Anna and Lenore on social media. Maybe I'd send them messages to bridge the gap of years and silence, find out if their dreams had manifested more fully than mine.

Yes, maybe I'd do that... sometime.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:28 am

lauter tun a vessel used to separate spent grain from the sweet liquid after mashing

THE WASHING machine churned through its cycles with mechanical persistence while I sat cross-legged on the linoleum floor, scrolling through my phone.

I clicked "purchase" on the cabinet order, watching my checking account balance plummet by two hundred dollars.

The compact storage system would fit perfectly along Ginger's back wall, with fold-down shelves and a narrow wardrobe section.

Worth every penny, I told myself, though my mother's voice echoed in my head with warnings about unnecessary expenses.

One of the library books lay open beside me— Hidden Distilleries of Kentucky: A Comprehensive Guide .

The author had clearly done his homework, documenting not just the famous names but dozens of smaller operations scattered across the state like hidden treasure.

I'd been reading for twenty minutes and already felt overwhelmed by the scope.

The laundry room door squeaked open, admitting Tracy Oney with an armload of fresh trash bags and a spray bottle of cleaner.

Poppy's mother moved with the same boundless energy as her daughter, though tempered by adult responsibility.

Her graying hair was twisted into a messy bun, and she wore a flowing tie-dyed tunic over faded jeans.

Silver bangles clinked softly on her wrists as she worked.

"How are you settling in, honey?" she asked, yanking the full bag from the waste basket with practiced efficiency.

"Things are fine, thanks. The campground is nice."

Tracy paused in her cleaning to study me with the same direct gaze her daughter had inherited. "Poppy mentioned you don't have any family. That must be difficult."

"It is what it is."

"Well, you've got us now." She tied off the trash bag with decisive movements. "Lou and I believe in taking care of our extended family here. You need anything—anything at all—you come find us, okay?"

The unexpected kindness made my throat tight. "Thank you. That means a lot."

"I hope our little chatterbox isn't making a pest of herself. She's taken quite a shine to you."

"Not at all. I enjoy her company. She's... refreshing."

Tracy's face softened with maternal pride.

"She is that. Sometimes I worry we're raising her too wild, but Lou says better wild than timid."

" She sprayed disinfectant on the folding table, the sharp chemical scent cutting through the fabric softener-scented air.

"You remind me a little of myself at your age—that look of someone trying to figure out where they belong. "

"Did you figure it out?"

"Still working on it," Tracy laughed, the sound warm and genuine. "But I learned that home isn't always a place. Sometimes it's the people who accept you as you are."

After she left, I reopened the book with renewed focus.

But the more I read, the more discouraged I became.

The guide listed distilleries I'd never heard of tucked into remote hollows and forgotten valleys—places like Wilderness Trail, Old Ezra Brooks Heritage, Preservation Distillery.

Small operations that might employ a handful of people, or family-run businesses that had been operating for generations without fanfare.

My finger traced the map on the book's inside cover, marking location after location scattered across Kentucky's hundred and twenty counties.

The famous bourbon trail only scratched the surface.

There were micro-distilleries in converted barns, craft operations in repurposed tobacco warehouses, and family recipes being revived in places that didn't even have websites.

My father could be anywhere—a master distiller at a prestigious operation, a warehouse worker at a forgotten facility, a grain supplier to multiple distilleries, or a retiree who'd left the industry entirely. He might work at a place so small it didn't even warrant mention in guidebooks.

The enormity of Kentucky stretched before me in my mind—thirty-seven thousand square miles of possibility and dead ends.

Six months felt simultaneously too long and nowhere near enough time.

What if I spent every day of the next half year riding bourbon tours and never got within fifty miles of the man I was seeking?

What if he'd moved out of the state? Out of the country? What if he'd died?

I slammed the book shut, the sharp sound echoing in the small space. The washing machine sat silent and patient, waiting for me to transfer my clothes to the dryer, to continue with the mundane tasks of living while my larger purpose felt increasingly impossible.

The sounds of campers settling in for the night floated in through open windows—distant laughter, screen doors banging, the hiss of propane grills. Life going on around me while I sat paralyzed by the vastness of my search.

Maybe Poppy's mother was right. Maybe home wasn't a place but the people who accepted you.

The question was: would I ever find either?

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:28 am

strike water the hot water added to grain to begin the mashing process

THE CORK bulletin board stretched across the weathered picnic table like an empty canvas.

I'd bought it at a hardware store along with a laminated map of Kentucky, colored push pins, and a pack of fine-tip markers.

The afternoon sun beat down on my shoulders as I carefully positioned the map, smoothing out air bubbles with the side of my hand.

"What are all those little circles?" Poppy asked, perched on the bench beside me with her elbows propped on the table. She'd appeared the moment I'd started spreading materials around, drawn by curiosity like a moth to flame.

"Distilleries. Each dot represents a place where they make bourbon." I pushed a red pin into the map at Woodford Reserve's location, the metal point sliding through the laminate with a satisfying pop.

"There are so many!" She counted silently, her finger tracing across the map. "Like, way more than we visit on tours."

"Exactly. That's why I'm making this." I switched to a blue pin for Wild Turkey, then green for Four Roses. "Different colors for different types of operations—big commercial distilleries, craft operations, historic sites."

The rhythmic crunch of gravel announced someone approaching. Teddy Reeves

walked past carrying a metal rake over his shoulder like a rifle, his sandy hair damp with perspiration. He'd changed from his usual camouflage into khaki shorts and a faded t-shirt.

"Afternoon, ladies," he called out, slowing his pace. "That looks like serious business."

"Hi, Teddy," I replied.

"Are you going to hunt for ginseng?" Poppy asked with her characteristic bluntness.

"Too early in the season for that. Won't be ready until fall." He shifted the rake to his other shoulder. "Today I'm scouting for arrowheads. Creek beds are perfect after yesterday's rain—washes away the sediment."

"Find anything good lately?" I asked, more to fill the silence than from genuine interest.

"Few pottery shards, nothing special. Maybe I'll get lucky today." He waved and continued toward the wooded trail.

"He's kind of weird," Poppy observed with her usual candor.

"A little." I turned back to the map, pushing yellow pins into locations I'd researched but never visited—New Riff, Rabbit Hole, Copper & Kings.

"So you're going to visit all of these places?"

"That's the plan. Learn everything I can about their operations, who works there, how long they've been in business."

Poppy studied the growing constellation of colored pins. "Are you going to be a tour guide forever?"

The question caught me off guard. "Probably not."

"What do you want to do?"

I paused with a purple pin halfway to the map. What did I want to do? The question felt foreign, like someone asking me to translate a language I'd never learned. "I don't know."

"You don't know?" Her voice pitched higher with disbelief. "But you're a grown-up. Grown-ups always know what they want to do."

I laughed, though it came out hollow. "Not this grown-up. I spent so long taking care of my mom that I never really thought about what came after."

Even before the cancer diagnosis, my mother had needed me—to navigate rental agreements, to handle phone calls with utility companies, to be the steady presence when her own anxiety overwhelmed her.

Now, at twenty-seven, the truth was starker than I wanted to admit, even to myself.

Finding my father wasn't just a quest for answers—it was the only plan I had.

Beyond locating him, beyond whatever reunion or confrontation awaited, my life stretched ahead like an unmarked map.

No pins, no destinations, no clear path forward.

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mash tun a vessel where the mash is turned to gelatin and sweetened

THE BUS sat idling at the campground entrance like a patient animal. I hurried down the gravel path, my tour guide shirt already sticking to my back in the humid air.

"Morning," Jett said as I climbed aboard. His jaw looked tighter than normal, and he avoided eye contact as I fumbled for my balance.

"Sorry I'm—" I stopped mid-sentence.

Naomi sat in the front seat, perfectly composed despite the early hour. Since it seemed unlikely Jett had picked her up at the tour office, it appeared they'd had breakfast.

At Jett's place.

Which their body language confirmed.

"You live here at the campground?" Naomi asked with a shocked expression. "Do you sleep in a tent?"

I lifted my chin. "In my van, actually." The words came out more defensively than I'd intended.

Jett's eyes met mine, reflecting surprise. "I thought you were staying here with family."

"Nope. Just me." I made my way toward the back of the bus. "No family."

The corporate group that joined us was pleasant but unremarkable—nine employees from a local insurance company. They asked standard questions about aging processes and production volumes while I went through the motions of my tour narrative, my mind elsewhere.

At Goldenrod, while the corporate group followed their guided tour through the production floor, I found myself drifting toward the tasting room bar.

Dylan looked up from polishing glasses, his face brightening when he saw me. "Well, if it isn't my favorite tour guide."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," I said, settling onto a barstool that creaked softly under my weight.

"Lemonade?" He was already reaching for a glass, ice cubes clinking as he filled it from a pitcher beaded with condensation.

"You remembered."

"Hard to forget someone who appreciates proper lemonade." He slid the glass across the bar, our fingers brushing briefly as I took it. "How's the tour business treating you?"

"Can't complain. What about you? Still working toward that bourbon empire?"

Dylan laughed, the sound warm and unguarded. "Getting there. I'm actually in an MBA program at U of L—trying to combine my chemistry background with business skills."

"Chemistry? That's impressive."

"My undergrad degree. Figured if I'm going to work in distilling, I should understand the science behind it." He leaned against the bar, rolling his sleeves higher. "This industry runs in my family. My grandfather on my mother's side was one of Goldenrod's original founders."

"Really?"

"Started working in the warehouse when I was sixteen, summers and weekends. Learned the business from the ground up." His eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. "What about you? What's your background?"

I squirmed. "Just a few community college credits. Had to drop out because of family commitments."

"What kind of commitments?"

I traced patterns in the condensation on my glass. "My mother was sick. Cancer. I took care of her until..." I trailed off.

Dylan's expression softened immediately. "I'm so sorry. That must have been incredibly difficult."

"It was." The simple acknowledgment touched something raw in my chest. "But she was all I had, so..."

"That's why you're here? Starting over?"

I nodded, not trusting my voice. For a moment, the weight of the past year—the grief, the loneliness, the desperate search for connection—felt shared rather than carried

alone as we continued to chat.

"Bernadette."

Jett's voice cut through the moment like a blade. I turned to find him standing at the bar entrance, his expression unreadable but his posture tense. He pointed to his watch.

My eyes flew to my own watch—I'd lost track of time.

"Everyone's waiting," Jett said.

I jumped up so quickly the barstool scraped against the floor. "I'm so sorry, I—" I looked back to Dylan as a rushed toward the exit. "Thanks for the lemonade."

Jett fell into step beside me, his long strides forcing me to hurry. "Don't make me come fetch you again."

I frowned. "Don't worry."

We reached the bus in brittle silence. The corporate group chatted obliviously while tension crackled in the space between the driver's seat and the back row where I'd taken refuge.

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temperature rest holding the mash at specific temperatures to optimize enzymatic activity

THE SHOWER spray hit my skin like liquid ice, jolting me fully awake with a gasp that echoed off the tiled walls. I'd miscalculated again—Mrs. Garcia had beaten me to the shower house again.

"Come on, come on," I muttered through chattering teeth, squeezing shampoo into my palm with numb fingers. The floral-scented soap dispenser on the wall had been refilled with something that smelled aggressively like fake jasmine.

I scrubbed and rinsed with military efficiency, my skin prickling with goosebumps as I hurried through the routine.

In the adjoining dressing room, I toweled off and pulled on clean clothes—jeans and the least wrinkled of my t-shirts.

I plugged my hair dryer into the outlet mounted next to the mirror and flipped the switch, grateful for the blast of warm air.

My reflection stared back at me under the harsh fluorescent lighting, pale and ordinary.

My mother used to say I had an "interesting" face—which I'd always interpreted as a polite way of saying I wasn't conventionally pretty.

My eyes were too large for my face, my nose had a slight bump from a childhood

accident, and my mouth seemed to exist in a perpetual state of uncertainty.

"You have a unique look," a photography teacher had told me once during a brief stint at community college. "Very expressive features."

Unique. Another word that felt like consolation prize.

I thought about Dylan's easy smile yesterday, the way his eyes had crinkled at the corners when he laughed. There had been something genuine in his attention, something that made my stomach flutter with possibility. When he'd looked at me, I'd felt seen.

Then Jett's face intruded on the memory. Irritated. Impatient. Like I was an inconvenience he had to manage.

My phone buzzed against the wooden bench where I'd set it, the vibration amplified by the hollow space underneath. The notification banner showed a message from someone named Susan Klooz. I held my breath as I read the words.

Hi Bernadette! I don't think I'm the Suzy you're looking for.

I've never been to Kentucky. But this is weird.

.. I actually know another Suzy Klooz! Our zip codes are similar, so I got a package meant for her once from Amazon.

She lives in Cincinnati, Ohio. Not sure if that helps, but thought I'd mention it just in case! Good luck with your search!

My hands trembled as I typed back: That helps tremendously! Thank you so much for taking the time to respond.

Cincinnati. Less than two hours from here, practically next door in the context of my nationwide search. I opened a new browser tab and searched for " Suzy Klooz Cincinnati Ohio," my heart hammering against my ribs.

The results loaded slowly on the campground's Wi-Fi, but there it was—Susan Klooz, age 52, associated with an address on Easter Street. The address felt solid, the woman felt real. A woman who might've been my mother's best friend, who might know the name of the man who'd contributed half my DNA.

I couldn't make the trip today because I'd promised Poppy we'd go to the library, and this afternoon was an all-hands meeting at the campground to talk about a rash of petty thievery.

Plus I needed to wait until after I got paid tomorrow to splurge for the extra gas. But I could make the trip Monday.

Which couldn't come soon enough.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:28 am

fermentable sugar sugars that yeast can convert to alcohol

THE MORNING air carried the earthy scent of recent rain as I approached the bus, my sneakers squelching slightly in the damp gravel. Jett sat behind the wheel reading something on his phone, coffee steam rising from a travel mug wedged in the cup holder.

"No shadow today?" I asked as I climbed aboard, making a show of looking around the empty bus.

"Shadow?"

"Your faithful journalist. She must not have spent the night—I mean, she must not be joining us today."

Jett's jaw twitched almost imperceptibly. "She's on another assignment. But she'll be back."

"No doubt." I couldn't keep the smirk out of my voice as I settled into a seat behind him.

My mind kept circling back to my planned trip to talk to Suzy Klooz. Possibilities thrummed through me like caffeine, making it impossible to sit still.

"You're suspiciously cheerful this morning," Jett observed as we pulled away from the campground. His eyes found mine in the rearview mirror. "Win the lottery or something?"

"Or something." I smiled to myself.

The tour group was already assembled outside the strip mall office—three middle-aged couples from Nashville. They filed onto the bus with the relaxed energy of people who'd started their vacation early, several clutching coffee cups and pastries from the nearby diner.

As we merged onto the interstate, Jett adjusted the mirror and caught my eye again. "Can I ask you something?"

"Shoot."

"Living in your van at the campground—is it safe? I mean, for a woman alone?"

The unexpected concern in his voice surprised me. "I've never felt threatened. There have been some small thefts lately, but the couple who run the place seem to be on top of it.

"But you're essentially homeless."

The word hit me like a slap. My cheeks burned and my good mood evaporated. "I have a home. It just happens to have wheels."

"Come on, Bernadette. Living in a van isn't a choice, it's desperation."

I leaned closer to murmur, "Don't you dare pity me."

"I'm not—"

"Yes, you are. You're looking at me like I'm some tragic case that wandered in from the streets." I could feel the retirement group's attention shifting toward our

conversation and lowered my voice. "This is temporary. A means to an end."

"What end?"

"That's my business."

His mouth tightened, but he relented with a nod.

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unfermentable sugar sugars that remain in the mash and affect body and sweetness

I'D BEEN looking forward to the day's unusual tour that few people signed up for—the Ghost Stories tour—until I met the group of six women who had shown up for the early evening tour.

We hadn't gotten to celebrate. And I remembered coming home from the hospital feeling so alone and finding that big ice cream cake in the fridge, mocking me.

I'd thrown it out.

"Our friend Candy just turned 50!" one the woman crowed.

I forced a smile. "Congratulations. That's... that's wonderful. Really."

"We decided to do something different this year instead of the usual dinner," another friend explained. "Candy's always been obsessed with ghost stories, so when we saw your haunted tours online—"

"We thought this is perfect!" Candy interrupted. "I want to hear about every ghost, every legend."

The women continued to chat with animated energy, exchanging barbs as only good friends could.

I settled in a seat on the bus and tried to shake the sudden gloom.

My mother had lived a sad life filled with rejection and mental illness.

And she'd died a sad death filled with pain.

She didn't have a posse of friends around her to say goodbye.

No one missed her but me.

From the driver's seat, Jett cleared his throat. "Maybe now would be a good time to tell a story."

I blinked. "Right. Of course." I launched into one of the stories I'd learned for the tour, but it wasn't my finest delivery. But I stretched it out until we made the first stop at a distillery with a haunted legacy.

I pointed to an aged brick structure. "This building dates back to 1847," I began, my voice sounding hollow in my own ears. "The original owner was a sea captain named—" I paused, my rehearsed words suddenly feeling foreign on my tongue. The silence stretched on.

"A sea captain?" Sarah prompted eagerly.

I gave myself a mental shake. "Yes, he... he sailed merchant vessels to the Caribbean. His wife died young, and he became obsessed with contacting her spirit through séances held in the upper floors."

The women murmured appreciatively, but my delivery felt mechanical, lifeless. I kept seeing my mother's face, wan and tired in those final hospital days. Forty-nine years, eleven months, thirty days. So close to this milestone that Candy wore like a celebration crown. It just didn't seem fair.

"What happened to the captain?" Candy asked, but my mind had drifted again.

"The captain eventually—" My voice cracked slightly. I cleared my throat, but the words wouldn't come.

"Eventually went mad from grief," Jett's voice filled the silence smoothly.

He'd appeared beside the group as if summoned, his presence both surprising and oddly comforting.

"Local records show he died in 1863, found in the attic room where he'd conducted his séances.

Some say you can still hear his voice calling her name on foggy nights. "

The women shivered deliciously, completely absorbed in the story as dusk descended.

I glanced at Jett, grateful for his intervention but unable to form the words to acknowledge it. He caught my eye briefly, a question in his expression that I couldn't bring myself to answer.

"The next stop is just around the corner," he continued seamlessly. "The old apothecary where they say the bottles still rearrange themselves..."

As we walked, I remained quiet, letting the rhythm of footsteps on pavement fill the space where words should have been, acutely aware of Jett walking just behind the group, his presence a constant gentle pressure against my consciousness.

That's the thing about grief. Just when you think you've gotten past it, it reappears... like a ghost.

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grain cracker equipment used to crush grains before mashing

THE CHURCH bells chimed eleven o'clock as I gathered my group outside the visitors' center.

Three couples in their sixties and seventies clustered together with the easy familiarity of people who'd shared decades of marriage.

They wore retirement garb and comfortable walking shoes and joked about rubbing bourbon on sore knees.

"Forty-three years of marriage, and this is our first real vacation without worrying about getting back to work Monday morning."

The other couples murmured agreement, sharing stories of recent retirements from teaching, accounting, postal service.

Normal people. Happy people. Their contentment felt warm and genuine, like sunshine through a window, but I found myself struggling to match their energy.

Yesterday's melancholy clung to me like morning fog.

And tomorrow's trip weighed heavily on my mind.

"The first stop on our route is the old courthouse," I began, my voice lacking its usual theatrical flair. I rallied and shared as many tidbits about the historic building as I could recall. The group was attentive, but seemed more interested in my background

and Jett's.

"Are you from around here?" one of the women asked me.

"No... Arizona."

"And do you like Kentucky?"

I didn't know how to respond, so I opted for the polite answer. "Yes."

"Enough to stay?" Jett asked.

I turned to look at him in surprise. "I... don't know."

"How about you, young man?" the woman asked. "Are you from here?"

"Yes, ma'am, I was raised on a cattle farm. My family's been working the same land for three generations. Five kids, all of us learned to work with our hands from the time we could walk."

I found myself listening intently, filing away these small revelations. I'd wondered about his background, the easy way he handled mechanical things, his comfort with physical labor.

"But now you drive a tour bus?" one of the men remarked.

"I still farm," Jett said. "And I do this four days a week. The driving's fine, but it's really about the people. You get to meet all kinds of interesting—"

His gaze shifted to me as he spoke, lingering there for a moment that felt charged.

"—people," he finished.

The couples looked back and forth between us.

My cheeks warmed. Was I imagining things? Had something changed?

"Like you folks," Jett continued with a big smile. "Please note the large, empty tip jar as you reboard the bus."

The group laughed and I was glad for the return to equilibrium. The man was just turning on the charm for the customers.

Wasn't he?

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:28 am

adjunct grains grains used in small amounts to alter flavor or texture

THE HIGHWAY stretched ahead, heat waves shimmering off the asphalt in the July sun. The van's air conditioning struggled against the oppressive humidity. My cotton dress stuck to my back.

Cincinnati rose from the horizon like a mirage, its skyline reflecting off the Ohio River. I'd memorized Suzy's address in a modest neighborhood of post-war bungalows with neat lawns and mature oak trees. My heart hammered against my ribs as I pulled into the driveway.

The house stood silent, its windows dark behind drawn curtains. I pressed the doorbell, hearing its melodic chime echo inside, then knocked when no footsteps approached. The scent of roses drifted from a neighboring yard, sweet and cloying in the thick air.

My disappointment was acute when I realized no one was home.

I was fumbling in my purse for paper and pen when the sound of a car made me turn.

A silver Honda Civic pulled into the driveway, and a woman emerged.

She wore a navy flight attendant uniform with crisp edges.

Here silver-blond hair was pulled back into a practical ponytail.

"Can I help you?" The woman's voice carried the practiced politeness of someone

accustomed to dealing with strangers, but her eyes were wary.

"I'm looking for Suzy Klooz," I said, my mouth suddenly dry. "I'm... my name is Bernadette Waters. I think you might have known my mother."

The woman's expression didn't change. "I'm Suzy. Who was your mother?"

"Ginger Waters. She worked at a bar in Lexington back in the nineties—"

"Ginger!" The woman's face transformed instantly, suspicion melting into delight. "Oh my God, little Ginger! How is she? I haven't seen her in forever!"

The words hit me like a physical blow. I steadied myself against the car door, feeling the metal warm beneath my palm. "She... she passed away. About five months ago."

Suzy's smile crumbled. "Oh, honey. Oh, I'm so sorry." She moved closer, her hand reaching out instinctively. "Please, come inside. You must have driven a long way."

The house's stunning interior was a testament to her success. Everything smelled faintly of lavender and lemon. Suzy poured iced tea from a crystal pitcher and urged me into a chair in her sun-drenched living room.

"I've thought about Ginger so many times over the years," Suzy said, settling into an armchair across from me.

"I tried to reach out a couple of times, sent letters to her old address, but she never responded.

" She paused, studying my face. "I knew she had.

.. emotional struggles when we worked together. I suspect that continued?"

I nodded, my throat tight. "Anxiety, depression. It was... it was hard for her. She depended on me to take care of things."

"She was lucky to have you," Suzy said gently. "Wait here—I have something for you."

She stood and disappeared into another room, then returned with a worn photo album. She flipped through carefully until she found what she was looking for. "Here," she said, pointing to a snapshot of two young women in waitress uniforms, arms linked, laughing at something outside the frame.

My breath caught. My mother looked impossibly young, her face unlined by the worry that would come later. Her smile was genuine, reaching her eyes in a way I rarely remembered seeing.

"And this one," Suzy continued, turning the page. "This was a group of us going out after work. We used to hit the bars downtown, blow off steam."

The photograph showed six or seven men and women clustered around a table, drinks raised in a toast. My mother sat in the center, radiant and carefree.

"I'm looking for my biological father," I said quietly. "I was hoping you might know who he was."

Her expression grew thoughtful. "I didn't even know Ginger was pregnant when she left Lexington.

Actually, I left first—got a job with the airline and moved here.

But I remember she had lots of boyfriends.

She was so pretty, you know? We used to give them nicknames.

" She laughed softly. "There was Church Man, because he was always talking about God.

And Motorcycle Man, because he rode an old Harley. "

"This man worked in the bourbon industry."

She paused, concentration creasing her brow. "Yeah, we called one of them Bourbon Man because he always ordered the same drink at the bar."

I leaned forward, my pulse quickening. "Do you remember his real name?"

"I'm sorry, honey. It's been so long." Suzy flipped more pages, then stopped. "Wait, I think... yes, here." She pointed to another group photo, this one slightly blurred. "I think this was Bourbon Man, but I can't be sure. The lighting was terrible that night."

The man in question stood at the edge of the group, his features indistinct but his build tall and lean. I stared at the out-of-focus figure, willing the image to become clearer.

"Here," Suzy said, carefully removing the photographs from their plastic sleeves. "Take these. They belong with you more than me."

I accepted the pictures with trembling hands, holding them as if they might dissolve. These fragments of my mother's lost happiness felt precious beyond measure, windows into a world I'd never known existed.

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grain mill a machine that grinds grains to the proper size for mashing

THE WOODEN picnic table was rough beneath my fingers as I spread out my notes and opened "The History of Kentucky Bourbon" to where I'd left off.

The campground's morning quiet wrapped around me like a comfortable blanket, broken only by the distant sound of children's laughter and the rustle of leaves.

The coffee from the camp store was bracingly strong, but the caffeine was exactly what I needed after yesterday's emotional journey to Cincinnati.

I'd been reading for maybe twenty minutes when voices drifted toward me from the nearby tent sites. A woman's voice, sharp with irritation, cut through the peaceful air.

"I still don't understand why we couldn't just get a hotel room like normal people, Linda. There are bugs in that tent."

"It's an adventure, Octavia," came the gentler response. "The kids love it."

"Aunt Octavia, look what I found!" It was a girl's voice, bright with excitement.

I glanced up to see a family approaching the picnic shelter.

Two women who were clearly sisters despite their differences—one fair-haired, the other brunette.

The blonde carried herself with casual grace, while the brunette moved with the

barely contained impatience of someone who'd rather be anywhere else.

Behind them trailed two children. The boy, around nine, held the leash of an aged dog. The little girl, maybe five, bounced between them like a rubber ball, her pigtailed flying as she chattered nonstop. She was chubby and wore a tutu over a bathing suit. And a tiara.

"Mom, can we have pancakes for breakfast? The kind with blueberries? And can we make them over the fire like they do in the movies?" The girl spun in circles, her arms outstretched.

"Camping food isn't supposed to be fancy, Maggie," the boy, Jared, said seriously. "It's supposed to be simple. Like beans and hot dogs."

"But I want it to be fancy," Maggie protested, stopping mid-spin to face him. "I want camping to be like those pictures in the magazines, with the pretty white tents and the chandeliers hanging from the trees."

"Glamping," the brunette supplied. "And I agree. Sleeping in a pop-up tent and showering in flip-flops is for the birds."

I couldn't help but smile at their interaction. The family had claimed the picnic table next to mine, and their conversation provided a welcome distraction from the swirling thoughts about yesterday's discoveries.

"Sorry," the blonde offered. "I hope we're not disturbing you. The kids can get a little loud."

"Not at all," I assured her, closing my book.

The girl came out and curtsied. "I'm Maggie, do you like my tutu?"

"I do," I assured her.

"What's your name?"

"Bernadette."

She giggled. "That's a great name. That's my brother Jarrod, and Max. And that's my mom, Linda," she said, pointing to the blonde. "And that's my Aunt Octavia. She lives with us and she complains about everything, all the time."

"Hey," Octavia said with a frown. "I do not. And I was taking your side, Miss Priss."

Maggie ignored her, pointing to my book. "Whacha reading?"

I held it up so she could see the cover. "It's about bourbon. I'm a tour guide on the trail."

"What's bourbon?" Jared asked, settling onto the bench beside his mother.

"It's a type of whiskey," I explained. "Made right here in Kentucky. People come from all over the world to learn about how it's made."

"It goes well with vodka," Octavia offered.

Linda sent her a withering look.

"What?" Octavia asked. "I'm just saying."

Linda turned back to me. "I'll bet you meet all kinds of interesting people."

"I do. What do you do?"

"We run a private investigation agency," Linda said.

My lips parted in surprise. "Really?"

"Two Guys Detective Agency," Octavia added. "We're based in Lexington."

I squinted. "Two guys?"

"Our last name," Octavia said.

"Ah." Linda was busy unpacking food from a cooler, but Octavia's sharp eyes caught my expression immediately. She leaned forward, her interest clearly piqued.

"Know anyone who might need our services? We're always looking for cases."

My mind raced. The photographs from yesterday were still tucked safely in my purse, along with the tantalizing clues about Church Man, Motorcycle Man, and Bourbon Man.

These women might be exactly what I needed to solve the mystery that had haunted me my entire life. But I couldn't afford to hire them.

"I—" I began, then stopped, my throat suddenly dry.

"Aunt Octavia, come look at this butterfly!" Maggie's voice interrupted, high and excited. "It's orange and black and it's huge!"

The moment shattered. I stood abruptly, gathering my book and notes. "I should get going. Nice meeting you all."

As I walked away, I could feel Octavia's curious gaze following me.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:28 am

mash cooker a specific heated vessel where grains and water are mixed and cooked

THE AFTERNOON sun beat down as I guided my group of twelve toward Goldenrod Distillery.

The sweet, yeasty smell of fermenting grain hung heavy around us.

My tour group—mostly middle-aged couples—chatted excitedly about the tasting room ahead, their voices mixing with the distant rumble of machinery from the production facility.

As we approached the main building, my steps slowed involuntarily. Through the large windows, I could see the familiar interior of the tasting room—exposed brick walls, copper pipes running along the ceiling, and the long oak bar where samples were poured. Behind that bar, unmistakably, was Dylan.

My stomach did a little flip. I'd been hoping he wouldn't be working today, that I could simply shepherd my group through the standard tour without the complication of seeing him again.

But there he was, his fair hair catching the light from the overhead fixtures as he polished glasses with practiced efficiency.

"Are we going inside?" asked one of the tourists, fanning herself with a brochure. "I'm about to melt out here."

"Of course," I said, forcing myself forward. "The tasting room is beautifully air-

conditioned."

The cool air hit us like a blessing as we entered, and I hung back near the entrance while my group spread out along the bar. The familiar scents enveloped me—aged wood, vanilla from the bourbon barrels, and something indefinably warm that I'd come to associate with these old distilleries.

Dylan's head turned at the sound of our entrance, and when his eyes found mine across the room, his face broke into that easy grin of his. He raised his hand in a wave, beckoning me over.

I approached the bar with what I hoped looked like casual confidence, though I could feel heat rising in my cheeks that had nothing to do with the summer weather outside.

"Bernadette! Good to see you again." He gestured to an attractive woman seated at the bar—probably in her mid-fifties, with white-blonde hair and wearing a crisp white blouse that somehow managed to look fresh despite the heat.

"Mom, I'd like you to meet Bernadette. She's the tour guide I told you about. Bernadette, this is my mom, Jessica."

I was instantly anxious, but Jessica offered a welcoming smile that reminded me of her son.

"How nice to meet you," she said, extending her hand.

I put my hand in hers. "Nice to meet you," I murmured. Her grip was firm and confident.

"How are you finding the tour guide work?"

"I'm still learning," I admitted, grateful for her genuine interest. "But so far, it's interesting and challenging."

"I used to give tours myself when I was learning the business," she said.

"I understand your father cofounded Goldenrod," I said.

She smiled. "That's right. And if everything goes as planned, Dylan will someday be the master distiller."

He smiled at his mother with genuine affection.

When one of my customers waved to get my attention, I excused myself to answer questions.

But my gaze kept going back to Dylan and his mother.

I was fascinated by this family dynamic of power and wealth being handed down.

It was the kind of parent-child relationship I'd never had, but I longed to experience, if only by association.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:28 am

mash out the final stage of mashing, raising temperature to stop enzyme activity

THE EVENING air carried the scents of charcoal and grilling meat from campsites scattered throughout the grounds.

I was heading back to my cabin after a long day when I spotted the familiar figure sitting on a picnic table bench, a thin stream of smoke curling up from her fingers.

Octavia Guy sat alone in the gathering dusk, looking out of place and out of sorts.

The no-smoking signs were posted clearly around the campground, but I found myself not caring as I approached. There was something about her biting wit that drew me in, even as it made me nervous.

"Hey there," I called softly, not wanting to startle her.

She turned, and I caught the quick movement as she shifted the cigarette to partially hide it behind her back—a gesture more automatic than truly secretive.

"The mysterious tour guide," she said with a wry smile. "Don't report me to the camp rangers."

"Your secret's safe with me," I said, settling onto the opposite bench. The wood still held the day's warmth against my legs.

Octavia took another drag, the ember glowing orange in the deepening twilight. "I thought I might see you again."

"Why do you say that?"

"Years of reading people," she said simply. "Plus, you've got that look people get when they're carrying around a big question they can't answer on their own."

The words tumbled out before I could stop them. "I'm looking for my biological father. I came here, took this job, hoping somehow I'd find him. He allegedly works—worked—in the bourbon industry."

Octavia's eyebrows rose slightly, but her expression remained neutral. "That's a hell of a long shot. What do you have to go on?"

I told her everything—about my mother's death, the lack of information, my trip to Cincinnati to find Suzy, the photographs with the mysterious Bourbon Man.

As I spoke, the sounds of the campground faded around us: children's laughter from a distant tent, the crackle of campfires, someone playing a guitar badly but enthusiastically.

When I finished, Octavia nodded slowly. "You've done good detective work." She flicked ash onto the ground. "If I were in your shoes, I'd have one of those photographs of your mother made into jewelry. A necklace, maybe, or a pin. Wear it when you're giving tours."

"You think someone might recognize her?"

"It's possible. People remember faces, especially pretty ones."

And if she was as social as this Suzy woman described, chances are good she left an impression on people.

" Octavia took a final drag and stubbed the cigarette out against the table leg.

"Of course, there's always the risk that if your father does recognize her, he might not say anything. Might even avoid you."

The thought sent a chill through me despite the warm evening. "I know. That's what scares me."

"Yeah, well, fathers can be complicated," Octavia said, her voice taking on a harder edge. "Linda and I know a little something about having a troublesome father ourselves."

Something in her tone told me not to push for details, so I simply nodded.

She reached into her back pocket and pulled out a business card, the white rectangle crisp against the gathering darkness.

"Look, we're getting out of this place—thank God—tomorrow morning.

No offense to you nature lovers, but the only stars I want to sleep under are in five-star hotels.

" She handed me the card. "Call anytime.

Whether you need professional help or just want to talk to someone who gets it. "

I took the card, feeling the smooth cardstock between my fingers. "Thank you," I said, meaning it more than she could know.

"Don't mention it," she said, standing and brushing dirt off her jeans. "Good luck, Bernadette. I have a feeling you're going to need it."

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:28 am

mash cook prepares the mash by cooking grains with water and enzymes; monitors temperatures, timing, and consistency

THE OFFICE door squeaked on its hinges as I pushed it open.

I expected to find Marv behind his cluttered desk as usual.

Instead, I was greeted by the sharp smell of cleaning solution and the sight of him bent over, wiping down the coffee-stained surface with paper towels.

The late afternoon light streaming through the windows caught the dust motes he'd stirred up.

"Marv?" I called, genuinely surprised. I'd never seen him clean anything more than the lenses of his reading glasses.

He straightened up, his face flushed from the effort, and I noticed he'd even attempted to tame his disheveled hair. There was something different about his posture too—less of the defeated slump I'd grown accustomed to seeing.

"Bernadette!" His voice carried an energy I hadn't heard before. "I was just sprucing things up a bit."

"I can see that," I said, glancing around the office. He'd actually cleared papers off the extra chair and emptied the overflowing wastebasket. "Special occasion?"

His eyes shone. "I heard from Theresa today. We talked for over an hour." He set

down the paper towels and rubbed his hands together nervously. "I think... I think she might want to come back."

A genuine smile spread across my face. Despite Marv's quirks and scattered management style, I'd grown fond of him. "I'm really happy for you."

"She's coming by next week," he continued, practically bouncing on his heels. "Can't have her thinking I've completely fallen apart without her."

I laughed softly. "Well, the place definitely looks better. She'll be impressed."

Marv beamed, then seemed to remember why I was there.

"Oh, your paycheck!" He rummaged through the newly organized desk drawer and pulled out an envelope.

"You know, Bernadette, I've been meaning to tell you—you're doing an excellent job.

Our online reviews have gone up significantly since you started. "

The words hit me with unexpected force, and I felt a warm flush of pride mixed with guilt.

I'd taken this job purely for selfish reasons, as a means to an end in my search for answers.

But hearing that I was actually good at it, that I was making a difference for Marv's struggling business, stirred something in me I hadn't expected.

"Thank you," I said, my voice softer than I intended. "That... that means a lot."

Marv stepped forward suddenly and wrapped his arms around me in an awkward but heartfelt hug. I could smell his aftershave—something woody and old-fashioned that he'd probably worn for decades—mixed with the lingering scent of cleaning products.

"Sorry," he mumbled, stepping back quickly. "I'm just... grateful, you know? And happy."

"It's okay," I assured him, smoothing down my shirt and trying to ease the moment's awkwardness. "Really."

As I walked back to my car, paycheck tucked safely in my purse, I found myself reflecting on how much my life had changed in just a few short weeks.

Back in Arizona, I'd spoken to maybe three people regularly—my landlord, the grocery store clerk, and the woman at the gas station who always commented on the weather.

My world had been small, insular, defined by routine and the careful avoidance of meaningful connection.

But here in Kentucky, it was as if I'd awakened from some kind of social hibernation.

There were the Oneys at the campground. Jett with his quiet presence and thoughtful observations.

Dylan and his easy charm, and now his mother Jessica with her warmth.

The Guy sisters, each compelling in their own way.

Even Marv, with his scattered energy and genuine heart.

For the first time in years, I felt like I was part of something larger than my own careful, contained existence. Whether or not I found my father, Kentucky had already given me something I hadn't realized I'd been missing—a sense of belonging to a community, however temporary it might be.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:28 am

hydrometer an instrument used to measure sugar content in mash

THE TOUR bus rumbled to a stop in the parking lot of the strip mall outside the tour office, its engine diesel engine ticking as it cooled in the humid evening air.

My last group of the day—a boisterous bunch from Maryland celebrating a lottery win, of all things—filed off with satisfied grins and promises to post good reviews online.

"It was a good day," Jett said when he closed the door and it was just me and him.

"Yes, it was a good group."

"You were on your game."

"Thanks. I want to do a good job for Marv."

"That's good of you," he said. "I hope it's enough."

"Did he mention he and Teresa might get back together?"

"Only a hundred times," he said with a chuckle. "I hope he doesn't get his big dumb heart broke again."

I nodded, then we lapsed into silence. To break the quiet, I asked a question that have been in the back of my mind.

Okay, the front of my mind.

"Is Naomi coming back soon?"

"Not soon enough," he said easily.

Okay, then. When the campground entrance came into view, I gathered my notes and water bottle. When the door opened, I practically jumped out. "See ya!"

"Have a good night," Jett called.

When I reached my campsite, I spotted the large boxes that had been stacked at the rear of my van. I frowned because they didn't look big enough to hold the cabinets I'd ordered. When I tore open one of the boxes, I realized with dismay that they would need to be assembled.

And there were many, many, many pieces.

The instructions, printed in six languages with tiny diagrams that looked like hieroglyphics, were tucked into a plastic sleeve on the side. I pulled them out and unfolded an accordion of paper covered in numbered steps and incomprehensible sketches of screws, dowels, and cam locks.

"Tools required," I read aloud to myself, my voice flat with disappointment. "Phillips head screwdriver, hex key set, drill with wood bits..." The list went on and on.

I sank onto the picnic bench, surrounded by my unopened boxes, feeling defeated.

My grand plans for van life suddenly seemed incredibly naive. I'd imagined myself as some kind of capable nomad, but here I sat, stumped by the most basic requirement of furniture assembly. I didn't even own a screwdriver, let alone a hex hammer or

whatever.

It felt like a reminder from the universe of how much I still had to learn about taking care of myself.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:28 am

brix a scale measuring sugar content in a liquid

THE SUNDAY tour had been smaller than usual—just six people, a quiet group from Tennessee who asked thoughtful questions and took careful notes.

As we pulled back into the lot, the late afternoon shadows stretched long across the pavement, and I could hear the distant sound of church bells chiming the hour from somewhere in town.

My passengers filed off with their usual thank-yous and promises to recommend the tour to friends, leaving me alone with Jett in the sudden quiet of the empty bus.

He was going through his end-of-day routine, checking gauges and making notes on his clipboard, the mechanical sounds of his work filling the space between us.

I lingered in my seat, my bag clutched in my lap, working up the courage to ask the question that had been gnawing at me since yesterday.

The cardboard boxes were still sitting unopened on my picnic table, taunting me with their promises of organized storage and the reality of my complete lack of tools or expertise.

The Oneys had offered up their tool bag, but it was only a few screwdrivers and a saw.

"Jett?" My voice sounded smaller than I intended in the confined space of the bus.

He looked up from his clipboard, his expression open and patient. "Yeah?"

I fidgeted with the strap of my bag, feeling heat creep up my neck. "I was wondering... do you happen to have any tools I could borrow? Just for a day or two?"

His eyebrows rose slightly with interest. "What are you working on?"

"I ordered cabinets for my van, but they need to be assembled, and I don't have..." I gestured vaguely, embarrassed by my own lack of preparation. "Anything, really. Screwdrivers, drill, whatever hex keys are."

A slow smile spread across his face, and I caught a glimpse of something that looked almost like relief in his expression. "You're converting your van? That's ambitious."

"Trying to," I admitted. "Though right now it feels more like wishful thinking."

He was quiet for a moment, drumming his fingers against the steering wheel. "Tell you what," he said finally, "why don't you come by my place tomorrow? I've got a full workshop, and I can help you put them together. Cabinet assembly isn't too complicated once you know what you're doing."

The offer hung in the air between us, and I felt my pulse quicken.

The practical part of me knew it was exactly what I needed—help from someone who actually knew what he was doing.

But the invitation felt like more than just neighborly assistance, and that made me nervous in ways I wasn't ready to examine.

"I don't want to impose," I said, my voice catching slightly.

"It's not an imposition," he said simply. "I like working with my hands, and it's been a while since I've had a good project. Besides," he added with a grin, "I'd like to see what you're planning."

I sat there for a long moment, weighing the offer against my instinct to handle things on my own. "Okay," I said, surprised by my own decision. "That would be... really helpful. Thank you."

"Great." He pulled a pen from his shirt pocket and tore a corner off one of his forms. "Here's my address. Come by around ten tomorrow morning? We should be able to get it done in a few hours."

I took the scrap of paper and tucked it carefully into my bag. "I'll bring coffee," I offered.

"I hope something better than that instant dreck you drink."

I laughed, glad to see the old Jett reappear.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:28 am

gravity reading measurement of sugar concentration in the mash

THE GRAVEL road wound through rolling hills dotted with wildflowers before opening into a valley where Jett's farm spread out like something from a postcard.

But it was the wooden sign at the entrance that stopped me cold: "Flannery Apiaries - Pure Kentucky Honey.

" My hands tightened on the steering wheel as the implications sank in. Jett was a beekeeper?

Jett was a beekeeper.

Did I mention one of my phobias is bees?

I parked near the farmhouse, a white clapboard structure with a wraparound porch and hanging baskets of green ferns. In the distance, I could see him working among what looked like white wooden boxes scattered across a meadow, wearing the distinctive white suit and veiled hood of a beekeeper.

My stomach clenched with dread. Bees had terrified me since childhood, an irrational fear that made my pulse race and my palms sweat just thinking about them. I stayed in my van, watching through the windshield as he moved calmly among the hives, smoke drifting from a metal canister in his hand.

After what felt like an eternity, he noticed my van and began walking toward me, pulling off his hood as he approached. His hair was damp with perspiration, and there

was something almost medieval about the way he moved in the bulky protective suit.

"Welcome," he called out with a grin, stopping a respectful distance from my van. "Sorry about the getup. Monday's inspection day."

I rolled down my window but didn't get out. "I didn't know you kept bees," I said, trying to keep the tremor out of my voice.

His expression shifted as he read my face. "You're scared of them."

"Terrified," I admitted, embarrassed by the admission. "It's completely irrational, but—"

"Not irrational at all," he said kindly, waving away my explanation. "Most people are nervous around bees until they understand them better. But we can save the bee education for another day. Come on, let's get those cabinets built."

He led me to a large metal garage behind the farmhouse, its interior cool and shadowed after the bright morning sun.

The space was organized with the precision of someone who actually used his tools—pegboards lined with implements, a workbench scarred from years of projects, and the lingering scent of sawdust and paste wax.

I watched, somewhat mesmerized, as he began peeling off layers of the beekeeper suit.

First the outer white jacket, then the pants, revealing jeans and a gray t-shirt that clung to his torso with perspiration.

The shirt was soaked through, outlining the muscles of his shoulders and back as he

pulled it over his head in one fluid motion.

For a moment, he stood there bare-chested, reaching for a clean shirt hanging on a nearby hook, and I found myself staring at the play of light across his skin, the way his chest rose and fell as he caught his breath from the morning's work.

When he pulled on the fresh shirt, I quickly looked away, heat flooding my cheeks.

"Alright," he said, seemingly oblivious to my momentary distraction. "Let's see what we're working with."

He helped me unload the boxes from my van, and what followed was a master class in efficiency.

His hands moved with practiced confidence as he sorted hardware, read diagrams, and began assembly.

The sound of his drill filled the garage as he worked, occasionally asking for my help holding pieces in place or looking for a particular piece of hardware.

"You've got a good eye for layout," he commented, studying the measurements I'd sketched out. "These are going to fit perfectly."

Within two hours, we had three sturdy cabinets assembled and installed in my van. The transformation was remarkable—what had been empty space now offered organized storage and even a small workspace where I could sit and write.

"This is incredible," I said, running my hands over the smooth wood surfaces. "I can't believe how different it looks."

"You've got yourself a real home on wheels now," he said, wiping his hands on a rag.

I fumbled in my purse. "Let me pay you for your time. This was way more than just borrowing tools."

He shook his head firmly. "Absolutely not. This was fun for me."

"At least let me buy you dinner," I offered, then immediately regretted the forward suggestion.

"I was actually going to invite you to stay," he said with a smile. "But I can see you're still thinking about those bees out there."

He was right. Even inside the garage, I could hear the distant hum from the hives, a sound that made my skin crawl despite its probably harmless nature.

"Rain check?" I said, backing toward my van.

"Of course. I'll see you tomorrow at work."

"Yes," I said, climbing into the driver's seat. "At work."

"Because we work together," he said, as if to remind himself.

"Right," I confirmed with a wave.

As I drove away, I caught sight of him in my rearview mirror, standing in the garage doorway watching me.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:28 am

wort the sugar-rich liquid extracted from mash before fermentation

THE JEWELRY shop occupied a narrow storefront on East Chinoe Street, its windows filled with estate pieces I admired but could never afford.

A brass bell chimed as I entered, and the elderly craftsman behind the counter looked up from his work through thick magnifying glasses perched on the end of his nose.

"Yes?" he asked simply.

"I need a photograph mounted in a pendant," I explained, carefully removing one of the pictures Suzy had given me from its protective envelope. "Something large enough to see clearly, but not too flashy."

His weathered hands examined the photo with practiced care.

In it, my mother stood laughing beside a group of friends, her face bright with the kind of unguarded joy I'd rarely seen in her later years.

The image was crisp enough to show the freckles across her nose and the way her eyes crinkled when she smiled.

"Beautiful girl," he murmured, adjusting his glasses.

"Thank you. She's my mother." I swallowed. " Was my mother."

He grunted. "I can mount this in a silver bezel with a sturdy chain."

"How much will it cost?" I asked nervously.

"Don't worry," he said. "Come back in an hour."

I wandered the streets of downtown Lexington while I waited, eventually finding myself in the neighborhood where Suzy said my mother had rented an apartment.

The aged buildings had probably looked much the same thirty years ago.

The sidewalks were cracked and uneven, weeds pushing through the concrete joints, and I tried to imagine my young mother walking these same paths.

Had she hurried along these sidewalks on her way to work at the bar, her waitress shoes clicking against the pavement?

Had she strolled hand-in-hand with the mysterious Bourbon Man past the corner grocery store that now sold lottery tickets and energy drinks?

The air smelled of hot asphalt and frying food from a nearby restaurant, urban scents that might have been familiar to her.

I paused outside a small apartment building with peeling paint and window air conditioners that dripped steadily onto the walkway below.

The building had the tired look of a place where young people lived temporarily, saving money and figuring out their lives.

Had she climbed these stairs every night, her tips jingling in her pocket, dreaming of something better?

Standing there in the humid afternoon heat, I tried to imagine the moment she

discovered she was pregnant with me.

Had she been alone in a cramped bathroom, staring at a pregnancy test with growing panic?

Or had she suspected for weeks, noticing the changes in her body with a mixture of wonder and fear?

Most importantly, had she told him—my father, whoever he was?

Had she called him with trembling fingers, practiced the words in her mirror before knocking on his door?

Had he been someone she could trust with such momentous news, or had she already known he was the kind of man who would disappear at the first sign of responsibility?

The questions swirled through my mind as I walked block after block until my feet began to ache in my sandals.

Every storefront, every bench, every street corner could have been part of her story.

The laundromat where she might have washed her uniforms. The pharmacy where she could have bought prenatal vitamins.

The bus stop where she might have waited, hand unconsciously protecting the life growing inside her.

When I returned to the jewelry shop, the pendant was ready—a perfect oval of silver that held my mother's laughing face like a window to the past. The craftsman had chosen a substantial chain that wouldn't break easily, and as I fastened it around my

neck, I could feel the weight of it resting against my chest.

"I love it," I breathed, then braced myself for the price.

"Wear it in good health and my blessing," he said, waving away my worn wallet. I thanked him profusely and left before he could change his mind.

Back in my car, I adjusted the rearview mirror to look at the necklace.

My mother's young face smiled back at me, and for the first time, I felt like I was carrying her with me in more than just memory.

The pendant caught the afternoon light, and I could almost imagine I felt her approval warming against my skin.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:28 am

viscosity thickness of the mash, affecting flow and mixing

THE AFTERNOON sun slanted through the tall windows of Goldenrod Distillery as I pushed through the heavy wooden doors, the familiar scents of aged oak and vanilla washing over me like a warm embrace.

The tasting room was quieter than usual for a Wednesday, with only a handful of tourists clustered around the far end of the bar, their voices a low murmur against the backdrop of soft blues music playing overhead.

My mother's pendant rested against my chest, the silver catching the light as I moved. I'd worn it deliberately today, hoping someone might recognize her face, though I hadn't expected to feel quite so nervous about it.

Dylan looked up from polishing a row of tasting glasses, his face brightening with genuine pleasure when he spotted me. "Bernadette! This is a nice surprise. No tour group today?"

"Just finished," I said, settling onto one of the leather-topped bar stools. The worn surface was smooth beneath my hands, polished by countless visitors over the years. "Thought I'd stop by and say hello."

"I'm glad you did." He set down his polishing cloth and leaned against the bar, his eyes shining. "Actually, I have a message for you from my mother. She wanted me to tell you how much she enjoyed meeting you the other day."

A flutter of warmth spread through my chest. "She was lovely. I enjoyed talking with

her too."

As he poured me a glass of lemonade, his gaze dropped to the pendant at my throat, and his expression shifted to one of gentle curiosity. "That's a beautiful necklace. Is that a photograph?"

My hand moved instinctively to touch the pendant, feeling the smooth silver beneath my fingers. "Yes, it's... it's my mother."

He leaned slightly closer, studying the image with respectful interest. "She's very pretty. You have her eyes."

The observation sent an unexpected wave of emotion through me. "Thank you," I managed, accepting the glass of lemonade he slid across the bar.

"Was it taken recently?" he asked, his tone gentle.

"No, this was... this was from before I was born." The words came easier than I'd expected, perhaps because his expression held such genuine kindness.

"She looks like she was full of life."

"She was, when she was younger." I took a sip of the lemonade, the tartness making me pucker slightly before the perfect balance of sweetness followed. "Your mother seems to know quite a bit about the industry."

"She grew up in it, really." He paused, studying my face with an intensity that made my pulse quicken. "You know, I was thinking... would you be interested in a real behind-the-scenes tour sometime? I mean, beyond what the regular groups see?"

I felt my breath catch slightly. "What do you mean?"

"Monday's my day off, and I sometimes come in anyway to help with maintenance and inventory.

I could show you parts of the operation most people never get to see.

The aging warehouses, the mash rooms, maybe even the master distiller's private tasting area.

"His voice carried an enthusiasm that seemed to go beyond professional pride. "If you're interested, that is."

"I'd love that," I heard myself say, surprised by how quickly the words tumbled out. "Are you sure it wouldn't be too much trouble?"

"No trouble at all." His smile widened, and I noticed the way it reached his eyes, crinkling them at the corners. "I enjoy sharing what I know about this place. Most people just want to drink and move on, but you actually listen to the stories."

My cheeks warmed at the compliment. "What time should I come by?"

"How about ten in the morning? That'll give us plenty of time before it gets too hot in the warehouses." He pulled a business card from behind the register and wrote something on the back. "Here's my cell number, in case you need to reach me."

Our fingers brushed as I took the card, a brief contact that sent an unexpected jolt through me. "Thank you, Dylan. I'm really looking forward to it."

"Me too," he said softly, and something in his tone made me believe he meant it.

As I finished my lemonade and prepared to leave, I was acutely aware of the pendant resting against my chest, my mother's young face now witnessed by someone else.

For a moment, I wondered what she would think of this development—her daughter meeting a charming bartender in the very world where she'd once searched for love herself.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:28 am

scalding overheating mash, which can deactivate enzymes or affect flavor

THE NEON sign of the Red Pegasus bar flickered sporadically in the gathering dusk.

The exterior brick was stained with decades of city grime, and the small windows were so dark I couldn't see inside.

As I pushed through the heavy door, I was assailed with musky aromas—cigar smoke, spilled whiskey, and something indefinably masculine that spoke of countless nights and countless stories.

The interior was dimly lit by amber-tinted fixtures that cast everything in sepia tones.

Red vinyl booths lined the walls, their surfaces cracked and patched with duct tape, while a handful of regulars hunched over their drinks at the scarred wooden bar, while young hipsters crowded around the billiards tables.

The jukebox in the corner played something slow and mournful, the kind of song that matched the atmosphere perfectly.

I slid onto a barstool and ordered a glass of white wine from the bartender—a heavysset man with graying hair and tired eyes who looked like he'd been here since the place opened.

"Haven't seen you before," he said, setting down a glass that had seen better days. The wine was warm and slightly sour, but I sipped it anyway, trying to imagine my mother in this space thirty years ago.

On the other side of the bar, a well-dressed man stood by a table of customers, laughing and glad-handing. He sent a hand signal to the bartender who pulled a bottle of bourbon from beneath the bar and proceeded to pour four drinks, neat. The bartender winked at me.

"Gotta love a guy who works for the biggest liquor distributor in town."

The man walked over and handed the bartender a credit card. "Thanks, Sam. These are on me. And pour one for yourself."

"Appreciate it, Keith."

While the bartender ran his card, the man looked in my direction and gave me a passing smile. He was handsome, probably mid-fifties. Then his gaze landed on my necklace and he squinted.

My pulse rocketed up. "Do you recognize her?"

He angled his head. "Who is she?"

"Her name is Ginger Waters. She used to work here."

Keith's expression shifted from polite interest to genuine surprise, his eyes widening as he looked at me more carefully. "Ginger Waters? Jesus, I haven't heard that name in... it's got to be thirty years."

"You knew her?" I asked, my pulse hammering so hard I was sure he could hear it.

"Yeah, I knew Ginger." Keith's face broke into a grin that transformed his features completely. "In fact, we might've dated a few times."

The world seemed to tilt around me. My hands gripped the edge of the bar so tightly

my knuckles went white, and I felt like all the air had been sucked out of the room.

This man—this well-dressed handsome stranger who sold liquor and schmoozed with customers—had dated my mother.

He could be the mysterious Bourbon Man that Suzy remembered.

This man could be my father.