



# Loving Hard on the Highway (Love Along Route 14)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Who doesn't love a road trip? They are filled with fun, conversation, and perhaps a little love on the way.

Summer sun and open road await these couples as they embark on fresh adventures.

Being in this kind of close proximity sparks intrigue and hearts.

Maps and destinations aren't the only things that will need to be navigated during this journey.

Secrets, soulmates, and hidden identities will be revealed along the way, along with past hurts and bright futures.

But when these couples reach the end, will they decide to explore life together or go their separate ways?

**Total Pages (Source):** 13

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am*

Gabbie

“To new beginnings!” Laurel sniffled, wiping a tear with one hand and raising her umbrella-decorated margarita with the other.

“And may that ass wipe Rick’s balls fall off!” Evie shouted over the pulsating music at Club Vida, holding up her glass of mojito to me.

“Aww, thanks, guys,” I cheered, clinking my daiquiri to my friends’ glasses as we stood around the neon cocktail table. “It almost doesn’t feel real that I’m finally leaving Florida.”

My two closest friends and I took long gulps from our drinks as the music vibrated through the crowd of club goers.

“Selfie time!” Laurel squeezed between me and Evie and snapped a few pictures. “I’ll post these on InView tomorrow night. That should help buy you some time before Rick knows you’re gone. He’s always stalking your social media.”

“That’s a good idea.” I sipped my daiquiri and took a quick peek over my shoulder at the club entrance.

“Gabbie, he’s not coming.” Evie placed a gentle hand on my shoulder.

“I know. It’s just that...” I started, but Laurel jumped in.

“Anya has confirmed that Rick is working security at the convention center’s main

entrance,” Laurel assured me. “If he leaves, she will text me. I promise. He doesn’t know anything.”

“We stick to the plan,” Evie said calmly, just loud enough for me to hear her over the music.

“I have a car rental reserved in my name waiting for you. Laurel will keep your phone, so there’s no chance Rick can track you.

Take Route 14 and pick up a burner phone in Saddleback, Tennessee.

In a few days, you’ll be in sunny California, and that ass wipe won’t be able to do a damn thing about it. ”

I took a deep breath and nodded. We had a plan. I just had to stick to it, and I’d be back with my sisters in a few days.

“Good.” Evie smirked as she grabbed my hand. “Now, let’s dance!”

“Okay.” I took a couple more swallows of my drink and barely got it placed on the table before Evie and Laurel dragged me onto the dance floor.

The nervous unease that squeezed through my body and made my skin prickle seemed to ease as we laughed and gyrated to the bass.

Evie’s gaze flicked over my shoulder, then back again.

“Well, okay.” She gave Laurel a nudge, then smirked at me. “There’s a guy in the middle of the dance floor. The one with the almost too perfect dark hair, chiseled jaw, and who looks like he lifts furniture for fun. He’s definitely looking at you.”

“Oh my god, Gabbie,” Laure’s eyes lit up, “he is totally checking you out!”

“He’s probably looking at Evie.” I shrugged. “She saw him first.”

“Gabbie, for real, he’s looking at you ,” Laurel grinned.

“Why do you think I got us bikini waxes for our last girls’ night?” Evie teased. “So, unless you want to miss out on your last chance to get some here in Florida, I seriously suggest you turn around.”

I hesitated before peeking over my shoulder. It was as if the strobing neon lights gleamed across the crowded dance floor and illuminated him. Hot guy glanced directly at me and raised his brows with the smallest, unmistakable chin raise for me to join him.

Laurel leaned in, her eyes wide. “Okay, that was a dance with me nod . Are you seriously not going to go?”

“I don’t know about dancing with a stranger. What if it’s some friend of Rick’s?” I winced, still worried that somehow my toxic cop ex would find out.

“No way.” Laurel shook her head. “Rick only hangs out with cop types.”

“This guy is too hot to be friends with Rick,” Evie added. “Key word here is hot !”

I glanced back one more time, and good mercy. The guy really was gorgeous. “If I come back and he’s the worst...”

“We’ll be right here to clown you about it for the rest of the night,” Evie laughed.

I shook my head, laughing, and turned toward the middle of the dance floor. Hot guy

met me halfway, a silent question in his outstretched hand. I took it as he looked me over and pulled me closer to him.

I was impressed that he did more than the basic dude shuffle. He was bringing it, so I started to grind against him as he pressed against me. I figured, why the hell not?

And then the beat shifted. The smooth, slow rhythm coupled with his sexy gaze drew me in.

“You are one hell of a dancer.” He leaned down into my ear, his voice low enough for me to hear over the music and feel the warmth of his breath against my neck.

I raised an eyebrow, amused. “Is that your line?”

“Nope. Just an observation. It’s nice to see such a free and pretty...smile on the dance floor.”

I laughed—genuinely—and relaxed a little. “I’m rusty. It’s been a while since I let myself do this.”

He grinned, and damn, if it didn’t look good on him. “Well, you’re doing fine. Not that I’m an expert.”

He spun me once, and when I landed back in front of him, something shifted—the air between us felt close in a good way. His hand steadied me, and his smile softened.

“You’ve got a great laugh,” he said. “More people should try to earn it.”

“Flattery from a stranger? Dangerous territory.” I peered up at him with a coy smirk.

“I’m taking my chances,” he smiled, appraising me. “You got a name?”

“Gabrielle. Gabbie.”

“Sean,” he said, leaning in even closer. There was little space between us, and he smelled delicious. “You from here?”

“Yeah. I’ve been here for a couple of years.”

My heart dropped a little. I can’t fall for this guy because I’m leaving. But I couldn’t tell him that. It nagged the back of my mind that Rick might find out.

“And you?” I asked awkwardly.

“I’m just up from Miami,” he said, his expression hinting that he knew I wasn’t relaxed anymore.

Thankfully, the slow song ended, and the beat picked back up to a rapid pulse.

“I’d better get back to my friends.” I pulled away from him. “We’re having a girls’ night.”

He looked confused as I quickly hurried back to the cocktail table where Laurel and Evie were waiting.

I glanced back to see him check his watch and then disappear into the crowd. Damn. I could have left Florida with a bang.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am*

Sean

“I called URyde, and a driver will be around to take you back to the hotel shortly. Let me know if you need anything else, boss,” Myra said from the other end of my phone.

“Don’t call me boss. I see us more as partners,” I said.

“When personal assistants have multi-million-dollar salaries and own a portion of the company, then maybe,” Myra teased.

“Fair enough. Again, I’m sorry to call you while you’re on vacation.” I paced outside of Marco’s High Performance Automotive.

“It’s my job to make sure you’re taken care of,” she replied before hanging up.

I went from having a great night at Club Vida, hoping to get lucky with a really gorgeous girl, to finding out that some drunk had hit my parked custom Ducati motorcycle, Reba. I was surprised that Myra got the shop owner up and running, but money talks.

The smell of oil and rubber met me as I made my way back into the garage. I paused, letting out a lamenting sigh when I saw my beautiful baby on the lift, its rear tire and part of the fiery red casing removed. “Oh, Reba.”

“She’s a sweet bike,” Marco said as he came around from the other side of the lift with a large wrench in his hand.

“Please tell me you can get her running by morning.”

Marco let out a laugh. “I can get her fixed up for sure, but no way by morning. If I had the parts, maybe. But for a limited-edition customized Ducati... I can order the parts first thing in the morning. With a rush, they’ll maybe be here in the evening, but still might take a day or so.”

“Shit,” I swore under my breath. “I really need to get on the road first thing in the morning, and it’s already 3 am.”

Marco looked at the clock hanging on the metal wall. “You may want to call the car rental at the airport. They’re open 24 hours a day, but there’s a convention in town, so there might not be much to choose from.”

“Thanks,” I said, placing a weary hand on the frame of my precious Reba. “Do whatever it takes to get her fixed. My assistant will have her shipped to me in California when you’re done. Cost is not an issue.”

Now came the tedious task of renting a car.

Calling Myra tempted me, but I already felt like a crappy boss for calling her while she was on vacation.

It’s just a car rental, so it should be easy.

I looked it up on my phone as I walked out of the garage and hopped into the back seat of the URyde car service.

After confirming with the driver, we were on our way.

Once I was comfortable, I pressed the call button.



“Vida Car Rentals,” came a stern voice on the other end. “How can I help you?”

“Yes, I need to rent a car for tomorrow.”

“I’m not sure we have anything available,” she said. “Myrtle, can you help this customer?”

I waited while another woman took over the call.

“Hi, my name is Myrtle, and I’d be happy to help you. Oh, I see you’re getting a car rental. Name?” said the bubbly elder voice.

“Sean Iverleigh. I’m trying to get a car for tomorrow.”

“Oh yes, I see you right here. Evie...Ivie, you said? Shane?”

“It’s Iverleigh, not Evie,” I corrected her.

“Oh, just let me make sure I have this correct in my system. Give me just a moment.”  
She clicked away on her computer.

“It’s a good thing you already have a reservation because we are completely booked for the convention this week.

Okay, now. First name Iverleigh, last name Shane?

Can you spell the first name for me, dear? ”

“First name Sean, S-E-A-N. And last name I-V-E-R-L-E-I-G-H,” I replied, confused.

“Alrighty then... It will be first-come, first-served on the vehicle, unless you have a

specific request. We have a Camry, a Focus, and a Lexus. It's a little more."

"I'll reserve the Lexus, please, ma'am." I laid on the charm.

"You're all set," she chirped, a bit too perky for this early in the morning.

Now, how I got up and dragged my ass to the airport at eight in the morning after just three hours of sleep was beyond me. But I managed.

As I stepped into the rental lobby, unsure of how busy they would be, the heavy glass door swished shut behind me. I removed my Ray-Ban sunglasses and let my eyes adjust to the interior light.

Pausing just past the entrance, I let my eyes wander. A customer with keys in hand wheeled a suitcase across the polished, slightly scuffed concrete tile floor as he was being escorted out another door. Soft instrumental Yacht Rock played from invisible speakers as I looked toward the help counter.

And then I saw her. I'd recognize those long bronze legs anywhere. Pretty unforgettable.

She was at the counter, speaking to a rental agent. Her voice was low, but the curve of her hips, the tilt of her head, and that tight ass were all unmistakable. Gabbie.

She wore denim shorts and a fitted white top with a short, cropped sweater. Her long, dark hair was swept up in an effortlessly messy ponytail. One hand rested on the counter, fingers drumming lightly. I could almost hear the rhythm from where I stood.

I froze for a second, almost entranced by her. She was hot last night in a mini cocktail dress, her thick hair down and swaying as she danced. And today she was, well,

beautiful, natural, breathtaking.

She hadn't seen me yet. She was half-turned, angled just enough for me to see her profile and the look of concern on her face. The agent nodded in response to something she said and began typing.

I wanted to say hi, maybe get her number. There was a chance I'd make my way back to Florida, but I wasn't sure she'd be interested. No harm in shooting my shot, right?

"Can I help you, sir?" another agent called to me as she approached her computer.

I stepped forward. "Um, yeah."

From the corner of my eye, I saw Gabbie glance my way, then turn as if hiding her face. Okay, she was definitely brushing me off.

"Yeah, I reserved a Lexus. Name's Sean Iverleigh."

She typed away. "Ah, yes, I see you worked with Myrtle. You got lucky to get a reservation. I'll be back with your key and some paperwork for you to sign."

"No, my name is Gabrielle Jones." I couldn't help but overhear Gabbie speaking to the agent. She was trying to keep her frustrated voice low.

My agent came back and showed me where to sign. I signed while listening to Gabbie, who was nearly pleading with the guy on the other side of the counter.

"My friend Evie Shane made the reservation. Maybe it's under Evelyn Shane. It should be in the notes that I'm picking it up."

Oh damn! My heart dropped. I stole her reservation.

“I am so sorry, miss.” The agent actually seemed remorseful. “There is nothing here under Evie or Evelyn Shane. And we don’t have any more available cars. We have two cars with reservations left. If they cancel, we can give you one. Or you can wait for a return.”

“I can’t wait. I have to leave now,” she said, planting both hands on her face as if holding in her emotions. “This cannot be happening.”

“You can try the rental company across town,” he suggested, “but with the convention...”

Gabbie let out a moan. “I don’t even have a phone.”

I finished signing my paperwork, and my agent handed me the keys.

“Can you do me a favor?” I asked, keeping my voice low. “Can you see if there are any notes on my reservation?”

“Sure.” She typed something. “Hmm...just that you have another pickup person and an alternate driver. Someone named G Jones.”

We both awkwardly glanced over to Gabbie and her agent, who awkwardly glanced right back at us.

“Did you take my reservation?” she huffed, near tears.

“No... no,” I said defensively. “I made my reservation. There must have been some kind of mix-up.”

“Unbelievable,” she groaned as she grabbed a rolling suitcase and a large backpack that I just noticed. She made a beeline for the door, looking like she might scream,

cry, or both.

“Hey, where are you going?” I called after her as she pulled the large glass door open and slung the rolling suitcase out.

She looked back at me, shooting daggers with her eyes. “I’m going to go figure out my fucking life!”

“Give me one second.” I waved to my agent, then followed Gabbie out the door.

She was moving surprisingly fast, given all she was carrying. I did a quick sprint to catch up to her.

“Gabbie, wait.” I called out to her several times, but she ignored me and stormed out of the parking lot. “Maybe you can just get a flight to wherever you’re going.”

“I can’t do that,” she spat and kept going.

“Well, maybe you can rent a car in another town.”

“I’d need a phone to call and have to use a credit card to rent a car,” she groaned, adjusting the backpack as we trekked along the side of the palm tree-lined road.

No phone and no credit card. Did I think that was weird? Sure, but I couldn’t stand to see her like this, walking down the side of the road.

“Gabbie, please, stop. Look, I’m heading to San Francisco. Maybe I can drop you off somewhere.” I was basically pleading with her, but she didn’t stop. “Where are you going?”

“Rosetta, California.”

I jumped in front of her, forcing her to stop. “What are you going to do? Walk to California?”

“Since you stole my reservation,” she panted. “I have no choice.”

How could she be even hotter when she was upset?

“I’m sorry, ok? I don’t know how that happened. But if you need to get to Cali, we can go... together.” I looked at her and gave her my softest, most charming smile.

She looked at me, eyes glaring, lips pursed, like she wanted to shove my sorry ass into traffic. But then, there it was. The look of realization that she didn’t have a lot of options. And of those options, walking across the country was the worst one. Her eyes and jaw relaxed, and I knew I had her.

Then she hurled her backpack at me and almost knocked me into traffic. I tossed her bag over my shoulder as she turned around and practically stomped back to the rental agency. I enjoyed the view, and I didn’t mean the sunny, palm tree-lined street view. This was going to be fun.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am*

Gabbie

There was a good chance I was about to be murdered by a serial killer.

I mean, no way a guy that good-looking was going to offer to take a complete stranger across the country with him.

I leaned against the car door, creating a huge gulf between us, just in case I had to jump out if I got serial killer vibes.

At least he smelled nice. The soft sandalwood with a hint of light musk was dreamy. I remembered that scent from our dance the night before. For some reason, I couldn't stop thinking about it.

"You have any music preference?" he asked.

I shook my head and kept my focus on the view outside my window.

He clicked through a few radio stations, which was weird. I thought he'd put on a playlist from his Lyrix app.

"99.6 coast to coast hits," chimed from the speaker.

"Let's give this a try," he said in an overly friendly voice.

I ignored him.

I was content to pay him no mind all the way to our first stop when I noticed he was staying on I-475.

“Take the Route 14 exit. It goes right to Cali,” I said flatly.

“What?” he scoffed. “Route 14 takes forever. We can hit I-20 in Atlanta.”

“I need to be in Saddleback, Tennessee, tonight, or my friends are going to send the cavalry out for me,” I snapped. “They have a room booked and everything. After that, I can figure out my next move, and you can go on without me.”

“Fine, I’ll drop you off in Saddleback if that’s what you want. But like I said, I’m going to Cali anyway.” He sighed. “Can you relax? You’re going to break the door if you hold on to the armrest any tighter.”

“It’s hard to relax when you might be a psycho serial killer,” I grumbled. “I feel like this is exactly how a slasher film begins. I have no idea who you are.”

“Well, I’m not a serial killer,” he said, looking me right in the eyes for a second before focusing back on the road. “I’m just a guy who works for a tech company in Silicon Valley.”

I peered suspiciously at him. “Last night, you said you were from Miami.”

“No, I said I was up from Miami.” Driving with one hand and waving the other with each word, he explained, “I was...on vacation. I had planned to ride my motorcycle, Reba, back to California, but some drunk had other plans.”

I frowned. “You named your bike Reba?”

“Yes. Which is a perfectly normal thing to do, by the way,” he continued.



“And if anything, I should be the one worried about picking you up. It’s a little odd that you have no cell phone, and you have rendezvous in random towns.

You won’t use your name or credit cards.

Are you running from the law or something? ”

He half laughed, but I sat frozen. In a way, that was exactly what I was doing. And I think my silence freaked him out.

“Oh, shit,” he gasped. “Are you running from the law?”

“I’m not a criminal, if that’s what you’re thinking. I’m running from my asshole ex, who has been a cop on the force for almost 20 years.” I turned my gaze back to the road outside my window. As I expected, a slew of questions came.

“Hold up. If he’s been a cop for twenty years, he’s like forty. How old are you?”

“He’s thirty-eight and I’m twenty-four. Don’t judge. I was going through some things when we got together. I didn’t know he would be a toxic, narcissistic, controlling jerk.”

“No judgment from me,” he said. “It’s just that a girl as fine as you could have any guy. Why a cop? And an old cop at that? I hate cops.”

“Um, my dad was a cop, and an amazing one at that.” I rolled my eyes. He probably thought I had daddy issues, which I probably did. I’d heard it before.

“Sorry, my bad. I meant to say I hate bad cops.”

“Better,” I huffed, folding my arms and relaxing a little.

“Not judging, but I have to ask, why don’t you have a phone or a credit card? It’s a little odd to be making a cross-country trek with no means of communication or way to pay. I mean, you’d have to stop for gas, right?”

“I have a phone, or I had one, and a credit card, but...” I paused, feeling unsure if I wanted to get into this with someone I didn’t know. But it was better to get it out of the way.

“My ex, Rick, doesn’t know I’ve left. If he knew, he’d try to stop me.

He did the last time I tried to leave. It was a total shit show.

He was basically stalking me this past year.

I turned off my location on my phone, but he still always seemed to know where I was.

So, when I decided to try to leave again, I ditched my phone.

I can’t catch a flight because I have to use my name, and he’d find out.

And the same with using a credit card. I don’t want him to be able to track me down.

He’s done some really messed-up stuff and uses his badge. ”

“Oh, wow.” He seemed to take a moment to let it sink in. “So, when the car rental got messed up...”

“I felt completely defeated,” I sighed. “This was months of planning, and I just can’t turn back now.”

“You won’t have to.” His brow furrowed, like he was working through something he wasn’t sure he had the right to say. “We’ll take Route 14, stick to your plan, and get you home.”

“You don’t have to,” I said, turning back. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not,” he said. “Not if you think I’d just walk away from this.”

I hesitated. “It’s not about walking away. I just... I’ve had guys say things they didn’t mean. I’ve believed them.”

He leaned closer, close enough that I could see the way the sun light hit his face, soft shadows under his eyes, a muscle tensing in his jaw.

“I’m not those guys, Gabbie,” he said. “If you need me to get you to California, I can do that. Let me help you.”

I blinked, my chest tightening as if something inside me had shifted just slightly and wasn’t quite ready to shift back.

His voice softened.

“I give you my word.”

I looked at him fully. He wasn’t trying to convince me with charm, nor with empty promises. He was just being honest, steady, and real.

I wanted to trust him, his words... I just wasn’t sure if I could.

“You have my word.”

I let his words sink in for a while and quietly listened to the low music and constant whizzing of traffic. Staring out the window, I tried to believe I was actually getting away.

As we were passing a semi, Sean signaled for the driver to honk the horn. The truck driver obliged, and I chuckled at the innocent childishness of it.

“Man, I love road trips,” he said after giving the truck driver a friendly wave.

I wasn’t sure what it would be like to make this trip with a total stranger. A drop-dead gorgeous stranger. Even so, I did not know this man. And I didn’t want to do it in complete silence.

“So do I,” I admitted, and he seemed relieved.

“They are some of my favorite memories from being a kid. Mom would pack my brother and me in the car, and we’d drive all over California, sometimes to Nevada and even Texas. My dad wasn’t always the greatest. So, when she’d need a break, we would hit the road.”

“My parents did the same, but not because they needed a break from each other. I think my dad sometimes just needed a break from the job. He saw and dealt with a lot. Our road trips were special.”

We spent the rest of the drive to Saddleback reminiscing about our favorite childhood trips and laughing at the travel mishaps along the way.

I breathed easier, feeling like this wouldn’t be so bad.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am*

Sean

We were focusing on looking for the hotel when the most glorious aroma of smoked meat wafted into the car. My mouth salivated, and I clearly heard Gabbie's stomach grumble.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" I asked.

"Hell yeah," Gabbie said, sitting up. "Let's hurry and check into the hotel. I'm starved!"

The hotel sat between a diner and a gift shop that sold scented candles and Route 14 key chains. It was a small, two-story building with brick siding and trendy flower boxes under the windows. Not too fancy, but it was nice and fit the town's ambiance.

Gabbie looked a little surprised, so I held the door open as she stepped inside. The faint dinging of an electric bell followed us, and we stepped into the lobby. A couple wearing I Got Sauced t-shirts were laughing with the receptionist, as their dog sniffed curiously at a brochure stand.

"Oh, he's so cute," Gabbie gushed as soon as she set eyes on the little corgi.

The couple smiled at Gabbie and said the little guy's name was Russel. They made a bit of small talk before heading to their room.

The young lady called back to us, "Oh, you guys have to try Roadside BBQ! Best brisket I've ever had."

The guy with her nodded in agreement. I grinned a little as I faintly heard the lady say, “They are such a cute couple.”

We walked to the front desk, Gabbie adjusting the strap of her backpack as I moved my duffle bag off my shoulder.

“You must be our late check-in,” the receptionist said with a smile.

“I am,” she said tiredly. “Gabrielle Jones. Laurel Young made the reservation.”

The receptionist looked at me. “And you must be Laurel?”

“Oh, no, we’re just riding together,” I corrected her. “I’ll take any room you have available.”

“Oh, you two aren’t together?” The clerk gave us a concerned but polite, blank look and started typing. “Unfortunately, we only have the reserved room available.”

“Oh, damn, I didn’t even think to call ahead. Do you have another hotel in town?” I asked.

“We do. The nicer one is all booked. Our last check-in came from there. There is a motel just outside of town.” She scrunched her face, trying to keep her smile. “They always have vacancies.”

“You know what?” Gabbie interrupted. “It’s fine. We can share.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, not wanting to impose, but I really didn’t want to sleep in the car. The grunge motel was not an option.

“Okay.” The receptionist perked back up. “I can’t use the card on file if the owner

isn't joining you."

"My friend was just using her card to book the room for me," Gabbie said, as she started fishing through her purse. "I have cash."

The receptionist seemed shocked at the mention of cash.

"I got it." I quickly whipped out my black card and handed it over in a way to keep it from Gabbie's view. Fortunately for me, the receptionist understood the assignment and slid it back to me under the printed receipt.

"Are you sure?" Gabbie half looked up from her bag. "I have the cash. And besides, you got gas on the last fill-up."

"Yeah, it's just easier if I use my card for the trip, and we can square up when we get to Cali."

"Oh." Gabbie blinked, as if my excuse made perfect sense. Which it did, by the way. But I had no intention of having her pay me back. This trip was costing me nothing, and it seemed like she could use that cash to get settled.

"One standard two queen bed suite," the receptionist chimed as she handed me the key cards.

I handed one to Gabbie, who looked relieved that there were two beds, as the receptionist relayed some activities we could do in Saddleback on a Saturday night.

Twenty minutes later, the hostess at Roadside 14 BBQ was sitting Gabbie and me at a private booth.

I inhaled a deep breath. "If this is what heaven smells like, then take me now."

“It smells good, but I think it’s presumptuous to think you’re getting into heaven, my guy,” Gabbie snickered.

“With these looks, I’m sure I could charm my way in.” I flashed her a smile.

“Oh, the confidence is strong,” she scoffed, then looked at the menu, but I swear I saw her crack a smile and blush hit her gorgeous copper cheeks.

To say the meal was fantastic would be an understatement. We lingered at the table longer than we needed to, the remains of rib bone, brisket crumbs, and sauce between us like a truce flag,

I told her about the state of disembodiment I left Reba in. My wording caused a passerby to gasp and go wide-eyed, which elicited a full laugh from Gabbie.

She daintily licked a dab of sauce from her thumb, and her dark brown eyes crinkled in that way that made it hard for me to look away.

“Don’t worry. I’m sure you and Reba will be reunited soon.”

“I’ll be counting the days.” I dabbed nonexistent tears as the waitress came to our table.

“Can I get you two anything for dessert?” she asked as she topped off our drinks.

Gabbie shook her head. “I am completely stuffed.”

“Same here,” I agreed. “You can bring me the check.”

She returned with the bill and a brochure listing various things to do in town.



“There’s this place nearby. Live music, good crowd. Thought maybe we could go hang out for a little,” I said as I handed Gabbie the brochure.

As she looked it over, I slipped my card into the billfold and handed it back to the waitress.

“I don’t know,” she sighed. “I’m sure my friends will try to call me at the hotel, and we have to get up early. I need to get a phone, and we need to get back on the road.”

“Come on, they’ve got karaoke.”

She blinked, surprised. Not in a bad way. More like she hadn’t expected that from me .

“You sing?” she said, one corner of her mouth lifting.

I shrugged, smiling. “Badly. But enthusiastically and with unwarranted confidence.”

She laughed, the sound soft and genuine. “That’s a dangerous combination.”

“Could be,” I said, holding her gaze. “But it’s more fun than going back to the hotel early.”

For a moment, she looked at me like she was measuring something and weighing it. Then she stood, grabbing her bag. “I need to go freshen up in the ladies’ room.”

“So, we’re on?” I asked.

“Only if you promise not to bail halfway through.”

My grin came without hesitation. “You have my word.”

As we stepped out into the night, shoulder to shoulder, the air felt breezier and more refreshing than it had an hour earlier. Or maybe that was just me.

The music hit like a heartbeat the second we stepped inside.

A group of friends was on a stage belting a popular tune; it wasn't bad at all.

Warm bodies packed the room, some dancing, while others sat and enjoyed the show under the colored lights.

The air was thick with laughter and the scent of citrusy drinks.

I wasn't sure what he expected, but Gabbie fit into it like she'd been here a hundred times. She grinned at me over her shoulder as we wove through the crowd, her fingers briefly brushing mine. I had no idea if it was intentional or not, but it left a mark either way.

We found a free table near the back, just close enough to the speakers to feel the music in our ribs. The friend group finished their song, and the DJ played something upbeat. More couples got up to dance.

Halfway through the song, the DJ announced, "First-time visitors who perform a song get one drink on the house!"

Gabbie lit up. "They had me at free drinks."

"You're really going to sing?" I asked.

"Uh, yeah...free drinks," she said, as if that was obvious.

I don't think I'd ever needed to do anything for a freebie, but she was impossible to

resist. So, I followed her to the stage, and we scanned the monitor for a song that we both could handle.

“I know they won’t have any of my favorites, but,” she pointed, “how about this one? You do know this song?”

“I’m wounded that you’d think otherwise.” I was vaguely familiar with the retro 90s tune and gave her a nod.

As the music began, she was already moving, hips swaying in time with the beat.

“My sisters and I used to do karaoke at home all the time. You have to just go with it,” she shouted over the instrumental, like she was daring me.

I laughed, letting myself loosen and sway a little alongside her.

She started singing, and not softly, not self-consciously, but full voice, laughing through the lyrics. And something about that made it easier. I joined in, a little off-key, a little breathless from how close she was, from the way her hair brushed my shoulder when she turned toward me.

She reached for my hand, and this time it was unmistakable, as we belted out the Truly, Madly, Deeply lyrics.

We kept singing.

Louder. Messier. Closer.

And then, without warning, the music faded.

The crowd cheered, and a few whistles rang out as we stepped off the stage, still

holding hands.

The music slowed as the DJ transitioned into a softer, moodier track.

It was a song that didn't ask you to dance so much as feel your way through it.

I turned to her, and we somehow just eased into each other's arms.

We swayed together as her hands moved lightly up my arms. Her smile dimmed into something quieter. She had a sweet, floral scent, like lavender or something similar. It was faint, which made me want to draw closer to her.

I watched her as her eyes drifted toward my lips and then back up, almost too fast to notice. Almost.

My throat felt dry. The air between us had changed, as if something were waiting, just on the edge.

"Hey," I said, not even sure what I was about to say.

She looked up. "Yeah?"

And suddenly, the words that came to my mind weren't about dancing or music or how fun the night was.

They were about her. About how I'd been thinking about her laugh since dinner.

How her hand felt like it belonged in mine.

How I think I fell in love with her the moment I saw her at the club the night before.

How I wanted to know what it would be like to kiss her.

Maybe not now. I wasn't sure if she was ready for that. But eventually, definitely.

But I didn't say any of that.

I just smiled softly, unguarded, and said, "I'm really glad you came out with me tonight."

And the way she looked at me in that moment, like maybe she'd been waiting for me to say something just like that, made it harder to keep everything else unsaid.

"So am I," she said, her soft smile radiant. "I can't remember the last time I was anywhere, especially with a guy, and felt free. Like I don't have to look over my shoulder."

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am*

Gabbie

My pulse hadn't quite returned to normal since we left. Not from the music. Not even from the dancing. It was him. I couldn't get over the way he'd looked at me during that slow song, like he'd wanted to say something but wasn't sure if he should.

The hotel came into view up ahead, its dull exterior softened by the amber porch lights and the glow of the vending machines by the entrance. I wish the walk had been longer.

We reached the front doors. He opened one for me without a word.

Inside, the lobby was mostly empty.

A bored but smiling receptionist behind the desk called out to me as we walked by. "Miss Jones. There is a message for you."

I hesitated.

"From a Laurel Young." The receptionist held up a piece of stationery.

"Oh." I smiled as I took the note. The note said she would call the hotel room at midnight if I didn't have a phone yet. "Thank you. Please put her through when she calls back."

I hurried, and Sean picked up the pace to keep up with me. The mood immediately shifted from blossoming possibilities to getting back on task.

“Everything ok?” he asked.

“Yeah. It’s almost midnight, and I don’t want to miss her call. She’s probably worried.”

The phone was already ringing by the time we got into the room. I waved for Sean to shower first as I picked up the phone.

“Hey.” I barely got that out of my mouth before Laurel chimed in.

“Oh my gosh, where were you?” Laurel jumped in.

“We thought maybe you’d had an accident or had been kidnapped. I was ready to get in my car and go after you,” Evie said over the club music playing in the background. They were probably outside the club on the beach.

“Nothing like that,” I said, flopping my whole body back onto the queen-sized bed.

“It was so late when we got here. We were desperate to get some food.”

“We?” my two friends questioned in unison.

“The guy I’m riding with to California,” I attempted to explain.

“What?” Laurel sounded as if she were about to hyperventilate.

Evie took a deep breath before taking over the conversation. “Okay. Start from the beginning. You met him where?”

“Actually,” I smiled, staring up at the popcorn ceiling of the hotel room. “I first met him last night at Club Vida, after you two convinced me to dance with him.”

I explained the mix-up at the car rental service and the compromise we made. And at some point, I must have gushed a bit.

“Oh, my gosh! You have a crush on him,” Laurel squealed.

“His Connect-ID says he’s an Associate at Holsten Industries. And his InView is just a ton of pics with him and a motorcycle.”

“That’s Reba, and are you two stalking his socials?” I asked.

“We have to make sure he’s not a serial killer,” Evie laughed, unapologetically and a little too loudly. She probably had a drink in her hand, too, hundreds of miles away in Florida.

“That is so on brand for you,” I smiled.

“Just looking out for you.” Evie’s laughter softened.

“Yeah, he may not be a kidnapper, but he’s a tech bro type,” Laurel chimed in. “They can be full of themselves.”

“Yeah, but he’s not like that. At least not so far.

” I shrugged as I heard the shower turn off.

“He’s smart and really nice. Not performative.

Just like he really listens. He offered to let me use his phone, but I felt weird about that, and I wanted to explain everything to you so you wouldn’t worry.

It’s actually nice to have the company and feel like there are possibilities now. ”



“I love that for you,” Evie said eventually. “I do. It’s just...”

I sighed. “Say it.”

“You’ve been hurt before. And we’re not there to have your back if this goes sideways. I’m worried. We both are. You’ve got that sound in your voice. The one you get when you’re halfway in already.”

I closed my eyes. “I know. I hate that you’re not here. It’s weird—feeling something new and not having you two right beside me to help make sense of it.”

“I miss you already,” Evie said, quieter now.

Laurel was sniffing in the background.

“Tell Laurel I’m fine and don’t cry,” I whispered, staring up at the ceiling. “I’ll get a cell phone tomorrow, and we can talk while I’m on the road. You guys are a huge part of this new chapter of my life.”

Sean emerged from the bathroom area wearing a pair of designer sweatpants and a sleeveless T-shirt.

God, his arms were ripped, and those sweats looked glorious on him.

I had to avert my eyes. He held up his phone and pointed to the balcony before stepping out.

I was sure he had phone calls to make, people who were eager to hear from him.

“I have to get a shower and get to bed.” I yawned as I sat up. “Can you guys scrub the photo data before posting the pics on your socials? Sean suggested that, just in case

Rick snoops.”

“That’s a good idea,” Evie said. “Call us as soon as you get your burner phone.”

“I promise.”

?

The hot water came softly and steadily, a hush that wrapped around me like a blanket. Drops pattered against the white tile, tapping a rhythm gentle enough not to disturb my thoughts.

My hair was up in a tight bun, keeping it from getting wet.

It was easier to avoid dealing with curls while on the road.

As the steam surrounded me, my thoughts spun gently around the dance and around him.

The warmth of his hand finding mine, fingers lacing together like it was always meant to happen that way.

The way he looked at me, as if he knew I was trying not to smile too much, and he was doing the same.

For a moment, it felt as if the rest of the world had pressed pause. Feeling his breath against my cheek. That brief, almost accidental meeting of eyes.

I turned and let my head fall back, so the water rushed across my face. My eyes closed, as a smile tugged at my lips despite myself.

It was ridiculous. I didn't know him. Not really.

But there had been something in that moment.

There was something in the way he had leaned just a little closer when I talked.

In the silence, it hadn't been awkward. I closed my eyes, replaying it again.

The way his thumb had moved absently along my wrist—the sound of his laugh.

I stepped out of the shower, quickly dried off, and tucked the towel tightly around my body. Between being away from Rick and spending time with Sean, I was feeling free and excited.

I didn't know what it meant yet. Maybe nothing. Maybe everything. But it was thrilling and warm, and my heart felt like it had been lit from the inside.

And for now, that was enough.

I slipped into a T-shirt and short shorts and went back into the room. Sean was on the balcony talking to someone named Gemma and calling her... sweetie?

I couldn't hear everything, but I was sure he said, "I miss you too, baby girl. Love you, bye."

Well, that was that. He never said if he was seeing anyone, and I hadn't asked. Maybe he was just being friendly. I crawled into my bed, expecting him to come back into the room, but no. He made another call.

"Hey, Myra, baby. You'll never guess where I am." He was oozing charm.

I crawled under the covers and pulled the pillow over my head.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am*

Sean

“Too soon,” I groaned as the alarm on my watch chimed.

Thoughts of Gabbie in my arms, her sweet scent and soft, deep honey skin pressed against me as we danced. All interrupted by time. I reached for the watch on the nightstand to turn it off and glanced over to where Gabbie should have been sleeping, but she was not there.

I sat up, rubbing my face, and scanned the room. Her bag was packed and sat neatly on the bed. Then, I saw the note on my watch.

Gone for breakfast and to buy a phone. I’ll be back before check-out.

What was that about?

?

There was definitely a chill in the car.

There was something about the way she angled her body away from me, her arms folded tight against her chest like armor.

It was reminiscent of yesterday when we first began our journey, and she didn’t know me.

To be fair, she still didn’t know me. She had no idea my father was the powerhouse

behind Holsten Industries, and I was his chosen child.

Well, chosen since my older brother turned him down, anyway. Could she sense I kept that from her?

Last night, Gabbie opened up to me. She had this way of looking at me when we sang together, as if I'd surprised her, as if she liked being surprised.

But now she stared straight ahead, chin tilted slightly up, her lips pressed together like she was holding back words.

Or worse, like there were no words left.

As we drove along Route 14, I stole a glance at her.

Her thick, dark hair was in a coarse braid over her smooth copper shoulder.

She hadn't worn it like that before. I wondered if she ever wore it curled.

The thought made my chest tighten. How was I noticing all those little things about her?

I never paid this much attention to the women who constantly threw themselves at me.

She pulled a new phone out of a bag and managed to get it from the packaging. It was probably the cheapest phone at the SuperMart.

"Can you text with that?" I asked, voice low, testing the air between us.

"It says I can send SMS," she said without looking at me. "And it's what I can

afford.”

“Right.” I nodded slowly, not knowing what else to say.

I tapped on the steering wheel as we sat in silence until she was done with the phone. I expected her to call her friends, but she slipped the phone into her bag.

“Hey,” I tried again, gently brushing her shoulder. “You okay?”

“I don’t think baby girl would appreciate you being all flirty and touchy-feely with me.” She shrugged her shoulder away from me.

“Wait, what?” I paused for a minute, knowing there was only one person I called ‘baby girl’. “You heard that?”

“Yeah, I did, and I don’t think Gemma would appreciate you being all flirty with me. And neither would Myra.”

“If by Gemma you mean my 5-year-old niece, I think she would like you when you’re not being paranoid and jumping to conclusions.”

“Gemma is your niece? Are you trying to gaslight me?”

“No, I swear. Check my phone, go to photos.” I picked up my phone, let the face ID unlock it, and handed it to her. “And Myra works with me at Holsten. She is ? of a very happy throuple.”

Gabbie laughed and shook her head. “Gemma is very cute.”

“Were you jealous?” I teased.

“No,” she protested, but with a sheepish grin. “Maybe I just need to know a little more about you. All I know is that you’re maybe not a highway serial killer.”

“Um.” I paused, unsure if being worth millions would alter things between us. “There’s not much to tell. I’m from San Francisco. I work in Silicon Valley, and my brother is a rancher in Rosetta County.”

“I thought all you tech bros made decent money. Why not just fly back to California?”

I attempted to deflect. “That’s another story.”

“Oh no, you don’t.” She turned to me and pursed her lips. “Fess up.”

I thought about it for a moment and then let it out. “I was on vacation in Miami, and I got a call from my grandfather, my mom’s dad. He wanted to let me know he was terminally ill with six months to live.”

“Oh, my gosh.” Gabbie stroked my arm. “I am so sorry.”

“I told him I was going to cut my vacation short and head home, and he suggested I stay on vacation. Things with my family are pretty complicated. And when I get back, everything is going to change for me. Staying in Miami didn’t feel right, so he suggested the long road trip to get myself together before seeing him.

I love my grandfather, and I want to do whatever I can to help him, but my dad is hard to deal with. They’ve always clashed.”

“I hope I’m not getting in your way,” she said sincerely.

“You’re kidding.” I glanced over and smiled at her. “You are the best part of the road



trip.”

She shook her head and smiled in this adorable way that was completely endearing. She was making it hard for me to keep my eyes on the road.

“How about some music?” I said, turning the radio on.

“Yes!” Gabbie agreed eagerly.

A song was ending, and the radio chimed, “ 99.6 coast to coast hits ,” and then a commercial break started.

“I have some decent playlists on my phone if you want to put something on,” I offered, then gave her my password.

“Okay.” She seemed surprised. “What music app do you use?”

“It’s the Lyrix app,” I said, without mentioning that I basically owned it.

“Okay, not bad,” she said, musing over my playlist before hitting play and letting the Bluetooth connect.

She started humming and lightly singing along, and I swear her voice was enchanting.

“So, what’s your favorite song?” I asked. “Last night you said your favorite song wasn’t on the karaoke playlist.”

“It’s a song from this singer from Water’s Edge. Mateo Solis. He’s one of my twin sister’s husband.”

“You have a twin?” I asked, unsure I had heard her right over the music.

“No,” she laughed. “My older sisters are twins. One of them is married to Mateo, and he sings a song called ‘Holdin On’ . He originally wrote it for my sister, but he dedicated it to my parents when they died.”

I hadn’t realized she lost both her parents. I was curious about what happened to them, but I wasn’t sure she wanted to talk about it.

“Sean! Stop the car!” Gabbie screamed out of nowhere.

I swerved, a bit startled as she repeated in a begging tone. I quickly pulled onto the side of the road, and she had the door unlocked and jumped out before I had even brought the car to a stop.

“Gabbie, what is it?” I called after her, but she didn’t stop. Vehicles whizzed by down the highway as I made my way out of the car.

“I saw something.”

“You jumped out of the car because you saw something ?” I followed the road’s edge to where Gabbie was. Somewhere beneath the rustling leaves and the roar of the occasional vehicle passing by, a thin, whimpering sound emerged, almost like a whine, but weaker.

That’s when I noticed what Gabbie was reaching for.

Near the edge of the road, where the curb met a patch of tall, untrimmed grass, something small moved.

She had pulled off her sweater and grabbed the little creature.

It was all ribs and oversized ears, with one eye crusted shut and fur matted with dust. It looked up at her with wary desperation, whimpering again.

“It’s a puppy,” Gabbie said in the cutest little voice.

“Are you sure?” I raised a brow.

“Yes.” She peered up at me as if I’d insulted the thing.

“Is it hurt?” I asked.

“I don’t think so, but we need to get it to a vet,” she said, letting the little pup collapse into her arms.

“Okay.” I took a deep breath and followed her back to the car. “I guess we have a dog now.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am*

Gabbie

The late-afternoon sun draped the park in a golden haze, a light that made even the cracked pavement look warm and soft. The puppy sat curled up in my lap as we arrived at a little town called Heartstone, Missouri.

Earlier, we pulled into a rest area and gave the little guy a quick wash, and Sean called a vet in an upcoming town who agreed to stay open on a Sunday afternoon and see Ollie.

Sean had also been kind enough to spray a bit of his cologne in the car to offset the slight, dirty dog smell that had taken over after I found the poor little guy.

I avoided discussing dropping him off at a shelter by immediately calling Laurel and telling her what had happened.

Leaving him at the vet was hard, but he was dehydrated and needed to stay overnight.

“Thank you for doing all this,” I said to Sean as we left the veterinary clinic. “I feel like I’m just throwing all kinds of wrenches into your plans.”

“It’s fine, really,” Sean said, but it wasn’t totally convincing.

“I hate leaving him.” I hesitated as we approached the car. “He’s already been abandoned.”

“You literally saved him from the side of the road. I think Ollie knows he can trust

you.”

“You don’t like dogs?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “My brother and I wanted one when we were kids, but my dad was against it. He convinced us that dogs were dirty, they shed everywhere, and that they bite and tear up things.”

“Oh, he really didn’t want you guys to want a dog,” I grumbled. I really didn’t like Sean’s dad, even though I never met the guy. “Those things are true sometimes. But dogs are sweet and loving. A dog will be your best friend. I miss having a dog.”

“Well, now you have Ollie.” Sean gave me a half smile. “Don’t worry. He’ll be fine. I called the Nighty Night B&B, and they had one room available for tonight, if you don’t mind sharing again.”

“That’s fine with me,” I said, looking back at the clinic. “But I know I’m going to be stressing out about Ollie all night.

Sean raised a brow, then gestured for me to get in the car. “I think I have a way to distract you for a little while.”

?

The sky still wore the dusky hues of sunset when we arrived, with soft purples bleeding into navy above the blinking lights of Dream Adventures Amusement Park. The sweet scent of funnel cake and kettle corn hit us the moment we stepped through the gate, and for a second, I almost smiled.

Almost.

Sean noticed. He always seemed to notice when something was on my mind.

“How did you know about this place?” I asked.

“I saw it as we were driving into town,” he shrugged. “Looked like it could be fun.”

“I totally missed it.”

“You were a little preoccupied with taking care of Ollie and being a phenomenal human being.”

“Thanks for saying that. I really was worried you were annoyed.”

“With Ollie? Nah. With you? Impossible.”

He gazed at me with those soft light brown eyes, and I swear a warmth rushed over me.

“Now, let’s win you a stuffed animal,” he said, nudging me with his shoulder, his voice deep and upbeat.

I glanced at him sideways but nodded.

We wandered through the amusement park, with neon lights and noise all around us. Bells ringing, kids screaming on a roller coaster, a mascot performing beside a popcorn stand. He kept me close, guiding us away from the crowd’s sharp edges, until we reached a bag tossing game.

Sean threw bean bags at moving mascot bobbleheads with excessive intensity, either trying to impress me or perhaps to distract me from worrying about Ollie. His spectacular miss made me laugh, and the carnie raised an unimpressed eyebrow.

“I thought you said you were going to win me a stuffed animal.”

“I lied,” he admitted. “I’ll lie about anything if it gets you to laugh like that again.”

I looked at him then, really looked at him, and for a heartbeat, I felt something more than wow, this guy is hot. I felt something more than maybe a crush.

We found ourselves on the Ferris wheel just before closing time. The air felt cooler, and I snuggled into his side without saying a word. From the top, the park looked like a dazzling little world, distant from everything else. I rested my head on his shoulder, exhaling slowly.

“Thank you,” I sighed softly, wondering if he heard me over the creaking of the wheel.

He didn’t say “for what?” He just wrapped his arm around me and held me close.

?

The door clicked shut behind us with a soft finality. I dropped my bag by the dresser and glanced around the room, feeling my stomach tighten. One bed. Queen-sized. Crisp white sheets and two identical pillows. An awkward silence formed like fog around us.

Sean scratched the back of his neck. “I didn’t realize they meant only one bed in the one available room.”

“We can make do,” I said, trying to sound casual. I turned toward the window and gazed out at the night sky—anything to keep my face from betraying the naughty thoughts that briefly ran through my head.

The problem was that I was really starting to like Sean way too much. It was hard to hide the blossoming feelings while on the Ferris wheel. Much harder now, in a room where the only bed had a decorative towel swan and chocolates on the pillows.

“I can sleep on the reclining chair,” he offered, voice too casual.

“And risk waking up with your neck all jacked up? No way. I like having you do most of the driving.” I laughed too quickly, then waved my hand. “It’s fine. We’re adults. It’s just a bed. I won’t kick you.”

Sean looked at me for a beat too long. “You sure?”

I met his eyes. They were darker in the low light. “Left side or right?”



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am*

Sean

What a morning. Slowly waking to the feel of Gabbie's soft skin against mine as she snuggled up into my arms was amazing. She smelled incredible, like lavender and coconut.

Wait a minute.

I eased out of my dreamy haze as I realized Gabbie and I were sleeping in each other's arms. Last night she had been on the right, and I was on the left. Hopefully, I could pull my arm from beneath her before she felt my morning wood.

I gently pulled my arm, only to have her snuggle closer to me. It felt fucking amazing until I felt her suddenly tense and jolt back.

"Good morning, beautiful." I gave her a groggy smile as I shook my arm, which was completely numb.

She rubbed her face. "Sorry."

Fortunately, my watch alarm went off, ending the very awkward moment. It was time to get Ollie.

?

The clinic was abuzz this morning, unlike last night, with just one vet and an assistant. A half dozen pet owners waited for their early morning appointments, and

the smell of antiseptic and fur filled the air. Light filtered through frosted windows, painting soft stripes on the checker tile floor.

Gabbie glanced at me, my hand brushing hers as the assistant approached us with Ollie in her arms. She didn't take my hand, not yet, but the nearness felt deliberate and pleasantly familiar.

Gabbie stepped forward, and the woman transferred the now clean and fluffy puppy gently into her arms. Ollie gave a faint bark, much improved from the soft whine he had yesterday. His tiny head and ears perked at the sight of her.

"He was dehydrated and a little underweight, but he's going to be fine," the vet said. "We gave him his rabies shot and started him on his vaccines. You'll need to continue when you get home."

Gabbie's eyes brimmed. "How much do I owe you?"

"It's all taken care of," the vet said. "We get some pretty generous donations for these things."

I was relieved that the vet hadn't said it was me. I didn't want Gabbie to feel any obligation.

"That's amazing," she murmured, as though that meant everything. Maybe it did. "Faith in humanity restored."

I reached out then, one hand steadily rubbing Ollie's head, the other inadvertently brushing against Gabbie's arm. She didn't move away but moved in closer.

"You've got yourself a labradoodle," the assistant chimed in.

“I can’t believe someone abandoned him.” Gabbie shook her head.

“Their loss,” I said as Ollie licked my finger. “He’s got us now.”

Gabbie looked at me and smiled. It was a soft, surprised smile that made her cheeks flush.

And just like that, in a clinic surrounded by pets, their owners, and quiet worry, something small and specific settled between us.

We left the vet clinic with a small carrying kennel, a stash of puppy food, a couple of chew toys, and a puppy collar with a tag that read “Ollie” on the front and my phone number on the back.

We went to Kathy’s Diner for some much needed breakfast before hitting the road. Gabbie had Ollie tucked in her bag, with his little head poking out, as if this were the most natural thing for the two of them.

“Now this is something,” I said as we stepped into the 50s style diner, with its red retro seats and checkerboard floor, complete with old vinyl hanging on the wall.

“How’s life treating you, sugar?” a waitress with Kathy on the tag asked shortly after we found our seats. The pink 50s style outfit was perfectly on brand.

“I hope it’s okay to have him in here,” Gabbie said.

“Oh, he’s fine,” Kathy smiled. “If anyone complains, just tell them the owner said to come see her. Now what’s good?”

Gabbie was relieved. “I’ll have anything with blueberries—muffins or pancakes. I need my fix.”

“I can fix you up a short stack of blueberry pancakes, sugar. Anything else?” Kathy asked.

“Bacon and a side of hash browns.”

“And I’ll take the Hearty Breakfast,” I added. “And an unseasoned chicken breast for Ollie.”

“Don’t you all make the perfect little family?” She grinned at Ollie before heading off to the counter.

I wasn’t about to dispute what she said, because I low-key liked the idea. A crazy thought since I’d only known Gabbie for one weekend. But she really was enchanting.

We were halfway through our breakfast when I brought something up that I had found fascinating.

“I found something last night after you fell asleep,” I said, handing her my phone.

Her jaw dropped, and she smiled when she saw the InView video of Water’s Edge playing live at the Rosetta Valley WIFE Festival last summer. She hit play, and there was the song Holding On , being sung by her brother-in-law, Mateo. It wasn’t the best recording, but it was the entire song.

“Oh, my gosh!” Gabbie lit up. “I hadn’t realized the band uploaded to social media. My sister never mentioned it.”

She listened to the entire song, humming and partially singing along, with the most peaceful smile on her face. “I can’t wait to get back home. They have festivals like this in Rosetta all the time.”

“I know. My brother is always trying to get me to go with him and his daughter. I would have if I’d known the music was this good.”

Gabbie handed me back the phone when the song ended. I scrolled, then hit play, handing it back to her.

“I also found this after going down a rabbit hole.” I gave her a sly smile.

She returned a curious glance, then went wide-eyed when she saw an even rougher video from five years ago. She was singing with none other than a rising star named Faye Quinn.

“No, you did not!” Gabbie’s dark copper cheeks lit with a hint of red.

“You can sing, sing,” I gushed. “I could tell from karaoke night. Your vocals were too good.”

It was priceless to see the brightness in her face and eyes as the song played.

?

The ride to our next destination was different.

Gabbie and I talked, like really talked.

She told me about how difficult things were for her with her ‘borderline abusive’ ex after they broke up.

To me, grabbing, shaking, and pushing was full-on abuse.

Not to mention the toxic shit he would say to her.

I was glad she got the courage to break things off before it escalated even further.

“That must have been hard with him being a cop.”

“It was. And I honestly should have gone back to California then, but I was so embarrassed. Thankfully, I had Laurel and Evie. They let me move in with them. When I was ready to date again, he chased everyone away, randomly pulling them over and handing out bogus tickets. One guy I dated who didn’t back down was almost run off the road in the Everglades by an unmarked car.

We broke up after that. I realized I would never have a life with Rick showing up wherever I was and chasing off anyone I wanted to date. ”

“He sounds like a nut job,” I said, wanting to say more, but I didn’t want her to feel some kind of way, since she chose him. I chose my words carefully, kind of. “So, how’d an ass wipe like that get someone as awesome as you?”

“Evie calls him that, too. I like that energy.” She chuckled a little.

“Well, he joined my dad’s department a couple of weeks before my parents died.

My dad came home from a night shift, and my mom was still asleep, or so he thought.

He took a shower and felt lightheaded. That’s when I guess he realized something was wrong.

He pulled my mom out of the house before he passed out from Carbon Monoxide poisoning, but she didn’t make it.

When my dad woke up in the hospital and found out about my mom, he had a heart attack. ”

“Oh god, Gabbie. I am so sorry,” was all I could think to say.

“My sisters and I were in shock, and beyond devastated,” she continued.

“And that’s when Rick weaseled his way into my life.

He saw 19-year-old me and knew I was ripe for the picking.

My sisters hated him, and it put a great strain on my relationship with them.

Rick applied to a department in Florida two weeks after we started seeing each other and convinced me that everything in Rosetta was sad and depressing, and I could have a fun, fresh start in La Vida Beach. I was such a gullible idiot.”

“No, you weren’t,” I insisted. “He was a predator, and you were grieving.”

“That’s the same thing my sisters and my besties tell me,” she sighed. “I can’t imagine what you must think of me.”

That physically made my heart hurt to hear her say that. I pulled into the rest stop that was just ahead of me. “Let’s take a walk.”

?

The early afternoon Colorado sun peeked from behind a spattering of soft white clouds. We started down one of the walking trails, and the echoes of cars and people had quieted to a gentle hush. Only the rhythmic crunch of their footsteps on the gravel path broke the silence.

We walked slowly, side by side, close but not touching each other.

Gabbie's words still hung in the air between us, fragile and triggering.

She kept her eyes ahead, hands tucked deep into her sweater pockets.

I held tight to Ollie's leash as he pranced around us, exploring.

My heart thudded loud enough that I was sure she could hear it.

"You know," I said, breaking the silence.

"The last time I heard those words was from my mom. My dad was so verbally abusive to her. He cheated and then would gaslight her. And it would piss me off so bad. One day, I came home and found her drinking and crying. I knew it was about dad, and I yelled at her for putting up with him."

Gabbie slowed, and I could feel her tense beside me without us even touching.

"My mom looked up at me and said, 'I can't imagine what you must think of me'.

And it broke my heart. She'd never looked at me like that before.

" I sighed. "So, at twelve years old, I learned I can't judge what someone else is going through.

I hugged her and told her I thought she was an amazing person who loved me. "

Gabbie stopped and looked at me.

I paused, too, one foot half-raised off the ground, before I turned to face her fully. Her eyes searched mine, not startled, not upset, just wide open as if she was seeing me, really seeing me.



“You were twelve?” she asked.

I nodded, throat tight. “Yup.”

She didn’t move for a moment, didn’t speak. She just watched me, as if she were processing something delicate and important. I resisted the urge to talk again, to fill the space. I wanted her to feel and know that there would be no judgment from me about her past choices.

“So, what do you think of me?” she asked frankly.

“I think you, Gabrielle Jones, are kind, brave, stubborn, and all around the most beautiful person I’ve ever met. Inside and out.”

Then she smiled, a small and unsure smile, yet soft. Something in me eased.

I took a step closer. “I didn’t say it expecting anything,” I added quietly. “It’s just honestly what I think about you.”

Her gaze dropped to the ground for a second, then back up to mine as she stepped closer. There was no space between us.

Her hand found mine, the one not being tugged by the rambunctious labradoodle puppy. Her fingers were warm, with a slight trembling, too.

“I knew there was something special about you, Sean.”

My breath caught. The world narrowed to the cool summer breeze, the warmth of her hand in mine, and the look on her face that made me feel like maybe love could happen between two strangers.

I leaned in slowly, tentatively, almost reverently. She didn't pull away. Her lips met mine like an answer.

The kiss was quiet and steady. Fireworks burst within my core. It was the kind that makes me feel like this girl could ask me to swim in lava for her, and I would do it without question.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am*

Gabbie

The blacktop was a steady rumble beneath us as the sign reading Rustic Junction, next exit, came into view.

The sun was setting over the distant mountains, painting the sky in soft streaks of amber and violet.

We were singing to whatever song was on Sean's playlist, but I wasn't really paying attention to any of it.

Our kiss kept playing over and over in my mind.

The hiking trail. The way the light had softened around us, the feeling like the whole world was holding its breath for that moment between us.

The way he'd looked at me. It didn't feel like he was making a move, but like he was opening a door he'd been guarding for too long.

I could still feel the warmth of his hand in mine, the gentle press of his mouth against my lips.

The way I was coming apart so beautifully inside.

My fingers wandered aimlessly through Ollie's soft, light brown curls as we drove, only a console between us. From the corner of my eye, I watched the way his chiseled jawline moved while he sang, and the fluid motion of his mouth. That same mouth

had kissed me as if it meant everything.

I looked back down at Ollie, then out the window, and smiled, barely.

I could feel the echo of the kiss still humming in my chest. And it wasn't the kiss that had softened my heart, making it open to the possibility; it was what came before it.

The confession. That soft, faltering vulnerability in his voice. The way we had opened up to each other.

He'd risked something.

And now, here we were, in the quiet hum of reality again as we pulled into the hotel in Rustic Junction, on the cusp of another night together. The thought crossed my mind: What if there was only one bed tonight?

I glanced sideways again. He was looking at me as he put the car in park.

Our eyes met, and for a second, nothing moved except Ollie. I wondered if Sean was thinking the same thing I was.

"This is...different," Sean said, glancing around.

That was when I noticed this town was something out of an old western. I literally felt like we'd stepped back in time. The stagecoach by the hotel front door was the showstopper.

"The Rustic Love Hotel? Really?" I asked. "And is that a saloon?"

We both shook our heads and laughed.

“Let’s see if this place has a room,” Sean said as he hopped out of the car.

I was tucking Ollie back into my bag when my car door opened. Sean held out his hand for me, and I took it. My mind raced. He had also gotten the car door for me after our walk earlier, and I didn’t mind one bit.

“Welcome to the Rustic Love Hotel. I’m Wynona, but everyone calls me Wy,” chimed the friendly receptionist, an older woman with short blond hair and diva looks.

“I’m hoping you have a room available. And is the place pet friendly?” Sean asked.

“We are pet friendly, and you are in luck. I have the perfect room for you. How many nights?”

“Just tonight. We have to get to California,” I said as I looked around. The place was a strange Rustic Victorian cross that oozed of western charm.

She signed us in and handed us the keys. “Your room is up the stairs on the left. It’s a shame you’re not staying for a few days. You’ll miss the High Noon Gun Fights. It’s quite a show. But the entertainers will be working at the saloon tonight. It’s a hoot of a time.”

I looked at Sean, then at my puppy. “As fun as that sounds, we have Ollie to look after.”

“Oh, you can leave the precious dear with me,” Wy offered. “How often do you come to a town like this?”

“Never,” I admitted.

“I’m game if you are,” Sean said.

“I guess we’ll take you up on your offer.”

Ollie let out a cheerful yip, and Ms. Wy was tickled.

?

When I stepped from behind the changing screen in the room, Sean’s jaw nearly dropped.

The yellow milkmaid-style mini dress, paired with my only pair of boots, was the only outfit I had that I thought would fit the night’s theme.

Rick hated it when I wore dresses like this, and judging from Sean’s reaction, I could see why.

“You are so damn hot,” was all he could say.

I looked him over in his dark jeans and short-sleeved designer shirt. The man had great fashion sense.

“You too.” I gave him a cheeky smile.

I wasn’t sure what to expect from a western bar, but the Guns Blazing Saloon did not disappoint.

We passed through the swinging saloon doors to the restaurant side of the bar and were met with the aroma of whiskey and roasted meat.

The red velvet curtains, wood-beamed ceiling, and piano man tinkering away set the

mood.

The waitresses were dressed like saloon girls, and dancers kicked up their ruffled skirts on stage. Heck, even the bartender dressed the part in suspenders and a curled mustache.

Between the food, the booze, and the dancing, I had to admit it was a really fun time. A somewhat familiar song came on, and I grabbed Sean by the hand for a live dance. We joined the actors and several patrons as the dance kicked off.

Sean raised a brow. “This is your idea of romantic?”

I smirked, adding a spin to the simple sidestep. “Only if you survive the mechanical bull after this.”

“I will if you will,” he teased.

“Oh, I would totally ride the bull.” I gave him a wink.

His laugh came easily, surprised. “God help me.”

Boots were stomping and ruffled skirts flying as we swirled around the sawdust covered dance floor. The whole room buzzed with staged rowdiness as the actors ginned up the immersive experience.

I leaned in close to Sean and whispered, “I think one of the saloon girls just winked at you.”

He turned to her, eyes glinting. “Jealous?”

I slipped my hand into his as the line dance ended and went into a slower, bluesy

song. “Maybe.”

He pulled me in close, and we eased into a sway to the rhythm. I rested my head on his chest as he sang along to the man professing his devotion to his love. I hummed along. When I glanced up, our lips met.

I wasn't sure when the nerves I'd felt earlier, after seeing the one bed in the room, had faded. Somewhere between the dinner, the whisky shot, and now the dancing, I'd relaxed, laughed, and allowed myself to enjoy the moment completely.

Outside, under the soft glow of the antique street lantern lights, I felt a swirl of excitement for what might happen tonight. And there was no hesitation. Rick no longer held my life hostage, and I really wanted to get some.

“Look.” Sean handed me his phone. “Miss Wy says Ollie is doing fine, and he's sound asleep. Enjoy the night and pick him up in the morning.”

“Aww,” I cooed at the pic and handed him back the phone. I looked up at him, feeling the night thrum under my skin.

“So...” I said slowly, trying to be casual. “Nightcap in the room?”

His eyes softened. His thumb traced a slow, absent circle on my wrist as we walked back to the hotel.

I smiled, slow and sure.

The room door clicked shut behind us, and the silence that followed felt louder than any music in the saloon. It felt as though something that had been heating all night was now seconds from bubbling over.



I turned on the lamp by the Victorian leather chaise, bathing the room in amber light. He stood by the door for a second, eyes on me, jaw tight like he was holding himself still.

I said nothing. Just stepped out of my ankle boot, slowly, deliberately. Let him watch me.

“They’ve got those little liquor bottles in the mini fridge,” I said, voice lower than I meant it to be. “If you still want a nightcap.”

He moved closer, not answering right away, close enough for me to see the shift in his eyes, and how the careful, easygoing version of him had given way to something hungrier.

“I want something,” he said. “But maybe before we have anything else to drink, we should see if we’re on the same page.”

My pulse jumped. “I am all about consent. And I think we want the same thing.”

I reached for his collar, fingers curling in the fabric, and kissed him, because that line demanded it, and because I couldn’t not.

This kiss was deeper. Hotter. He kissed me like he’d been waiting for permission all night, like he’d barely kept himself in check through saloon girls and slow-burning glances.

Our earlier kisses on the hiking trail and then at the saloon had been intense but sweet, testing the waters. This was different. There was no testing anymore.

His hands slid to my waist, grounding me, pulling me closer until my chest met his and I could feel how badly he wanted me.

I moaned softly into his mouth, losing myself for a second in the press of his body, the way his hand found the small of my back like he already knew how I liked to be touched.

I broke the kiss first, just enough to breathe. My forehead rested against his.

“I just wanted you to know that it’s been a while for me,” I said, voice catching. “But I really want this.”

His hand came up to brush my cheek. “We can take our time and stop at any point. This is real for me, Gabbie.”

That undid me. It wasn’t how sexy his body was, or that he was an incredible kisser, but the way his words resonated with me. Like he meant it. This thing between us was real.

As I searched his face, still holding onto him, I felt a sense of clarity.

I wanted this man, not just in my bed, but in my life.

As he kissed me again, slower, I wondered if real meant the same thing to him as it did to me.

But my body was in no mood for a sit-down conversation. It was inviting him in.

He hastily pulled out of his shirt before our bodies magnetized back to each other. With ease, he slid my little yellow dress off my shoulders, and it fell to the ground around my feet. I stood vulnerable and exposed in just a lacy pair of panties as his gaze ran up and down my body.

I felt the urge to look away, but he gently caressed my chin, drawing me back to him.

“You are so perfect, Gabbie.” He kissed me tenderly, gently brushing his fingers down my back. “Every inch of you is perfection.”

Girl down!

He kissed me again, hard this time. Our tongues mingled, sending a thrilling tingle surging through my body. My legs parted as I ground into him. His large hands palmed my ass, pressing me into him as if wanting me to know, to feel how hard he was for me.

His kisses trailed down my neck as I ran my fingers through his slick, dark hair. My legs trembled, ready to give way as this man was slowly undoing me. And then he hoisted me up, my legs around his waist as he carried me to the bed and laid me down.

His hands and lips both found my breasts. His tongue curled around one nipple as his fingers played with the other. I moaned softly as he enjoyed me. His hands slid down to my slit and slid my panties to the side before inserting two fingers.

Damn, every part of me he touched felt good, and my body was reacting, pulsing into his hand, needing more and more.

Then he stood, pulling off his jeans and letting me see exactly what I was about to get. The tingle beneath my belly was heavy as his thick, hard dick sprung up. My heart pounded, racing with anticipation as he pulled off my panties and spread my legs.

His tongue darted, licking his lips as he came down, pressing his face between my thighs. His tongue flicked across my bud, then sucked. I moaned loudly. His fingers were back inside, working together, bringing me over the edge. He moved his hands to my hips, letting his tongue work me.

“Sean!” I cried out between moans as my body reached its peak and dripped with pleasure. “I need you inside me.”

Sean slipped on a condom and brought his body up onto me. He parted me with his tip, then slid his length deep into me, stretching me. I moaned into his mouth as our lips and tongues clashed together.

I clenched his muscular back as he rocked into me.

It was slow and intense, then gradually built to a faster rhythm.

He felt so good, and my walls clenched, welcoming the motion.

His pace quickened, and I pressed into him.

We rocked together harder and faster, moaning, our damp skin pressing together.

My legs quivered as the thrill of ecstasy overcame us both.

He collapsed beside me, discarding the condom before pulling me into his arms. My body was still reeling from the pleasure. But all I could think about was doing it again.

And as we moved together toward the bedroom, I knew this wasn’t just about tonight.

It was the start of something I was finally ready for.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am*

Sean

“This has been one of the best nights of my life,” I confessed as Gabbie lay in my arms.

“Who knew saloons could be so exciting?” Gabbie teased.

I let out a soft laugh. “You are incredible.”

She was quiet, but I hoped she knew how true my words were. She was amazing, and I knew I would do anything for her, for her love. I thought I should tell her, but before I could say another word, my phone rang. I could tell from the ring that it was my brother.

“That’s Max,” I mumbled.

“Your brother?” Gabbie sat up and pulled the bedcover over her body.

“Yeah.” I was tired and confused. “He wouldn’t call at 4 am unless it was serious.”

I answered the phone while pulling on my boxers. “Hey, Max, what’s up?”

“Sorry to call you so late,” Max said. I heard the stress and tiredness in his voice. “I tried to call you sooner, but things were crazy.”

“Bro, what’s going on?”

“It’s Grandpa. He lost consciousness and was rushed to the hospital about an hour ago.”

“Is he...” I was afraid to ask.

“He’s alive, but we don’t know what’s going on. When do you get back?” Max asked.

“I had planned to be back in two days, but...” I ran my hands through my hair, thinking. “I can be home tomorrow evening.”

“Dad isn’t going to let you use the jet. Maybe Myra can get you a flight,” Max suggested.

“No, I’m in the middle of nowhere. By the time I get to an airport and make a flight, I’ll be halfway home.”

“Are you still traveling with your friend?” Max asked, with an implied question behind it.

I turned to Gabbie, sitting on the bed, concern in her big brown eyes. “Yeah, but that’s not why.”

“It was just a question,” Max said. “Get some sleep and get back as soon as you can.”

?

The morning light slipped reluctantly through the cracks in the curtains, pale and warm. I opened my eyes, despite sleep arriving in thin, broken threads that unraveled with every shift of thought.

Over the last couple of hours, my thoughts jolted between Gabbie and my grandpa. I'd drift to near sleep with the blissful memories of making love to her, touching her, tasting her, being inside her, only to be rocked by the dread of never seeing Grandpa again.

I placed a kiss on Gabbie's shoulder. The warmth of her body against mine soothed me.

She stirred. Her hand found mine beneath the blankets, warm and instinctively caressing her breast.

"You didn't sleep," she whispered, not quite a question.

I shook my head, taking a breath of her sweet scent. "I kept thinking about him. About what my brother said. I should've gone last night."

"You needed rest," she said.

"I didn't get it."

I sat up, rubbing the sleep, or lack of it, from my eyes. The room was quiet except for the hush of early morning and the creak of the bed frame. Gabbie sat up with me, her hand sliding to my back.

"You'll be there tonight," she said. "You'll see him. That's what matters."

I nodded, then turned to Gabbie. A gentle kiss from her gave me some comfort. The distance between now and the hospital visit felt immense, not measured in miles but in uncertainty. I swung my legs over the edge of the bed, my jaw tight as I paused there, shoulders slumped.

Gabbie wrapped her arms around me from behind and rested her chin on my shoulder. “You’re not alone in this,” she whispered.

I closed my eyes, allowing the simple weight of her to ground me. “Let’s get our little Ollie and hit the road.”

Gabbie was sweet enough to take the first shift driving. It was nice. Between holding Ollie and the low music, I drifted to sleep.

I only woke when I heard Gabbie’s phone ring. I opened my eyes to see a worried look on Gabbie’s face.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“No.” Gabbie swallowed hard. “Nobody has this number but Laurel and Evie. And they wouldn’t call. Do you mind answering it?”

I picked up the phone and put it on speaker. “Hello.”

“Oh, hi. I must have the wrong number. I’m looking for Gabrielle.”

“Mich.” Gabbie was relieved to hear her sister’s voice. “How’d you get this number?”

“Laurel gave it to me. Look, Gabs, when are you going to be here?”

“Umm, tonight, in like five hours,” Gabbie answered.

“I have bad news,” Michelle sighed. “Rick was here earlier. I don’t know how he found out you left, but he got a flight here and was being an ass. Lis and Mateo were here, and Mateo chased him off. I’m sure he’s probably watching us.”



“Mich, I am so sorry. I never meant to bring you any trouble.”

“We’re fine. But we had to find a place for you to stay. My friend Jess has a friend who is remodeling a B&B. Because she’s not operating yet, I don’t think Rick will know to look there.”

?

It was late when we pulled into the bed-and-breakfast. We apologized for bringing Ollie, but the owner, Skye, didn’t mind at all.

I was dreading saying goodbye to Gabbie when I finally got a call back from my brother.

“Are you here yet?” Max asked.

“I just got into town a few minutes ago,” I yawned. “I’m just going to grab a coffee and head to the hospital.”

“Grandpa was released an hour ago. He’s staying with me and Gemma for now. He’s sleeping in the spare room.”

“Can I see him?” I asked.

“Not until morning. The doctors only released him if we promised he’d get some sleep,” Max said. “Do you have a place to stay for tonight?”

“I’ll manage.” I smiled at Gabbie, relieved, and hung up the phone.

“How’s your grandfather?” she asked.

“Better. He’s home with my brother and resting. I can see him in the morning.”

“Oh,” Gabbie smiled. “So, what are your plans for tonight?”

The room was cute and cozy. Although there was still more remodeling to be done, this room was perfect. Gabbie put Ollie in his carrier, and the pup went right to sleep.

Skye made us some sandwiches with fresh grapes from the vineyard on the side, along with lemonade. It wasn’t much, but she promised breakfast would be better.

“So, what happens after tonight?” Gabbie asked as she twirled a grape between her fingers.

“Well.” I sat back and gazed at her with a smile. “I hope that once you get settled in, you’ll let me take you out on a proper date.”

“I’d like that.”

Eventually, I’d have to tell her the whole story about my dad, the company, and my inheritance and obligations, including the wilderness retreat I’d have to go on to receive my inheritance. Maybe that was an official first date conversation.

“I need a shower,” Gabbie said, hopping up and twisting her hair up into a bun.

I sat back in the chair, popping a grape into my mouth as I heard the water start. I couldn’t help but imagine what it would be like to have a shower with her, and all the things I would do to her.

“Are you coming?” she called.

“Hell yeah.” Looks like I wouldn’t be imagining.

I rushed behind her, wrapping my arms around her and playfully kissing her neck.

She let out a squeal as we peeled each other out of our clothes.

I paused. The sight of her gorgeous naked body had me stiff and throbbing.

Her lips brushed mine. Not a kiss yet, more like a promise as we stepped into the standing shower.

“I think I owe you,” Gabbie breathed against my mouth as steam gathered around us.

She licked her lips as her hands trailed down my pecks and abs, then wrapped around my dick. Her hands on my body felt glorious.

“That feels so good. But you don’t owe me anything. It would be my pleasure to eat you out for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and multiple snacks.”

She grinned. “I might take you up on that.”

“Please do,” I teased, kissing her harder as she stroked my shaft.

She kissed down my body and took me in her mouth.

I looked down to see big brown eyes looking up at me, and I nearly lost my mind.

Her perfect full lips, mouth, and tongue worked from the head, taking as much of me as she could.

My hips slowly rocked into her as I fought the urge to thrust. I caressed her cheek, appreciating every second of this pure bliss, until she brought me a little too close.

“Gabbie,” I groaned, heavy with pleasure.

She understood and pulled me from her mouth, letting the head pop as she gave me one final long suck.

Oh, that was so fucking good. I knew if I fucked her now, I would cum in a minute.

I pressed her back against the shower wall, kissing down her body, playfully kissing and sucking her nipples before continuing down and planting my face between her thighs.

Her breath hitched as I part her lips with my tongue, indulging myself before taking her bud into my mouth.

She ground against my mouth, her body tightening and quivering, wanting more.

She was so close. I stood pressing my mouth to hers, our tongues tangled and danced in a fury, and our wet bodies rocked together.

I turned her back to me, bending her over. Her tight, round ass tilted up as her hands pressed into the shower wall.

“Fuck me, Sean,” she whimpered, desperation in her faint voice.

I groaned as I thrust hard and deep inside her, and she let out a deep moan.

Her walls tightened around my dick as I grabbed her hips.

I pumped hard as she pushed back into me.

She didn’t hold back, thrusting right back into me until she came.

Her legs quivered, and I held her steady, not stopping.

I wanted her to enjoy it. She regained her composure and was right back at it.

And I was about to blow. I pulled out just before, and Gabbie grabbed my shaft to help me finish.

An hour later in bed, Gabbie was on top, riding me, and her perfect breasts bobbing up and down before me were a sight I would never forget.

?

The room was pitch-black at 5 am. I should be exhausted after the night Gabbie and I just had, but I was way too excited. I was in love, and I needed to tell someone. Taking my phone into the bathroom, I called Max, knowing he'd be just waking up as cattle farmers did.

"Hey little bro, what are you doing up this early? Grandpa is still asleep."

"I'm actually calling to talk to you."

"Oh, sounds serious," Max paused. "If it's about the business. I am completely fine with you taking Grandpa's shares of Holsten. I don't want it, and he wants you to take his place. And we can split Iverleigh Farms. That stuff's not important to me."

"No, it's not that, I promise. Iverleigh Farms is for you, Melany, and Gemma," I said. "I wanted to ask you, how soon is too soon to be in love?"

"Oh." Max paused again. "I don't think I ever expected to hear anything like this from you. I take it we're talking about Gabrielle."

“Yeah.” I ran my fingers through my hair. “I’m pretty sure I am in love with her. She is so damned beautiful. And everything Gabbie does, I swear it’s perfect. I told you how she saved Ollie.”

“Yes, and now Gemma is a fan of Gabbie for that reason alone,” Max laughed softly. “So, I have to ask, are you sure she’s not in it for the money? We’ve both been there before.”

“She doesn’t know yet.”

Max paused again. “What do you mean, she doesn’t know?”

“It’s just never come up.” I tried to be casual.

“Well, please tell her before you sleep together. If you really like her, she might want to know what she’s getting into. Because we are a lot.”

“It’s kind of too late for that,” I confessed.

Max let out an exasperated sigh. “Bro...it hasn’t even been a week.”

“So, you think it’s too soon?” I was questioning everything.

“I’m not saying that,” Max said. “I’m saying I don’t know. You deserve to be happy. But I’m divorced after dating for two years and married for one. So, I might not be the best source.”

“She and Dad did you dirty.” Thinking about how my dad was fucking my brother’s wife made me hate him even more. “You didn’t deserve that.”

“I know,” Max sighed. “We didn’t deserve any of the bullshit Dad put us through.

You should ask Grandpa when you see him later today. He made his marriage to Grandma work in this craziness that is our family.”

“That’s probably the best advice. Thanks, Max.”

I hung up and crawled back into bed with Gabbie. She curled into me and pressed a kiss on my chest.

“What time is it?” Her voice was barely audible.

“It’s a little after five,” I said, pressing a tender kiss on her lips. “Too early to wake up.”

“Mmm.” She wrapped her arms around me, guiding me between her thighs. “Not too early for this.

My dick twitched and sprung to attention, ready and eager to be inside her again. The warmth of her walls engulfed me as we kissed and fell into a slow, deep rhythm. This woman could have me anyway, anytime. I was hers.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am*

Gabbie

The morning light filtered in slowly, casting soft golden lines across the rumpled sheets. I stirred first to the scent of him, not fully waking, just enough to shift closer, my cheek brushing the bare skin of his chest. His arm tightened around me without thinking.

My eyes fluttered open, squinting against the spill of morning light, and there he was, hair a mess, our bare legs tangled together.

God, he was beautiful in the morning. Rumpled and real. Mine for a bit longer. I was hoping for forever.

I shifted closer, my bare leg rubbing his, just to see if he'd stir. He didn't, not yet. So, I rested my chin lightly on his chest and whispered, "Are you asleep, or just pretending so I don't make you get up?"

His lips twitched, the faintest grin. "If I say sleep, do I get ten more minutes to lie naked with you?"

"I wish. But you have to go see your grandfather."

He cracked one eye open, slipping his hand up my thigh. "Cruel woman. Can I at least get a little something to eat first?"

"Maybe just a little," I said, smiling as he began pecking little kisses slowly and lazily down my body. "I know how much you like it."



He groaned, pleased, attempting to fully get between my thighs.

“No, I’m kidding. You need to go,” I whined. He was so hard to resist. After the night we had, our bodies just craved being together. He rested his head on my bare belly, and the quiet moment between us was grounding and real.

“Seriously, though,” I said, voice softer now, “what time do you have to leave?”

“Now,” he muttered, pressing a tiny kiss on my nipple before getting up and kissing me.

That should not have made my heart flip the way it did, but it did. I kissed his collarbone, lightly, then looked up at him. “You’ll be back, right?”

“What?” he asked, raising a brow. “Gabbie, in case you haven’t figured it out. I’m in love with you.”

I was stunned speechless.

“You’ll save me some breakfast,” Sean said as he got up and dressed.

“If you like blueberries,” I smiled, trying to recover. My heart was beating like crazy.

He looked appropriately scandalized. “You’re really going to make me addicted to those things?”

After pulling a t-shirt on, he fussed with his hair in the mirror.

“You know you look good without even trying,” I teased.

He laughed, a deep, quiet sound that rumbled in his chest. He went to wake Ollie,

giving him a quick goodbye cuddle before handing him to me. And then he kissed me like he might miss me already.

“I love you,” he said and turned to walk away.

I grabbed his hand, and he turned back. “I love you, too.”

His eyes lit up, and he kissed me again. I pretended not to melt. As he left, I just smiled and lay back on the bed. This was as real as it gets.

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I had nearly forgotten how spectacular California’s weather was in early summer.

The air smelled of rosemary, fresh linen, and the soft sweetness of nearby magnolia trees.

In the distance, the gentle rush of the Magnolia River hummed in the air.

The view of the vineyard with the river behind it was simply breathtaking.

I couldn’t help but laugh as Ollie leaped and played rambunctiously with the much older golden retriever that lived in the vineyard.

Even with the construction, it was a stunning house, a mansion, really.

The decor was updated in a traditional style, with authentic and modern touches.

Very cozy. It was the kind of place people dreamed of living in.

“Breakfast is served,” Rosa, a woman in her late forties who I assumed was Skye’s

partner, called from behind me.

“Oh wow,” I breathed in deeply. “Everything smells divine.”

“Compliments of the Bundt & Grind Cafe,” Rosa said as she laid everything on the patio table. “They had blueberry muffins and blueberry parfait. If Kayla and I could actually cook, we would have made you blueberry pancakes.”

“Oh, no, this is perfect.” My eyes widened as I sat down to my feast. “Blueberry muffins are my absolute favorite. But doesn’t one of you need to know how to cook to do the breakfast part of the B&B?”

“We haven’t quite figured that out yet.”

We both laughed. Rosa was an absolute delight.

“Did you have a good night?” Rosa asked. “You are glowing.”

“Can you tell?” I must have been beaming. “The room is perfect, and this place is a dream.”

“And the company?” Rosa raised a brow.

I blushed. “The company was fire.”

“Glad to hear it.” Rosa smiled before heading back inside.

I gobbled down my first muffin like a starved hyena. Then remembered I had calls to make. With Rick showing up at my sister’s, I knew Evie and Laurel would be worried. I tried Evie, since Laurel should be at work.

“Hey, are you there? Are you safe?” Evie jumped right in.

“Hi, Evie.” I shook my head. “I’m here at the bed-and-breakfast, and I’m fine. Better than fine. Everything is perfect.”

“Oh my god, you two fucked, didn’t you?” Evie gushed.

“So many times,” I sighed dreamily. “I have never come so hard in my life.”

“Get out!” Evie squealed. “When did this happen?”

“A couple nights ago in Saddleback, and then last night here all night.”

“Oh my gosh, Laurel is calling. Let me put her on with us.” Evie didn’t ask and disappeared for a couple of seconds. “Hey, Laurel, I’ve got Gabbie on the phone.”

“Hey, are you okay?” Laurel asked.

“I’m fine.” I barely answered before Laurel rushed with her next question.

“Are you still traveling with that guy Sean?” she asked.

“Traveling with him,” Evie chuckled. “They are full on having sex. And lots of it.”

“Oh...” was all Laurel said.

“I know it’s fast, but he told me this morning that he loves me. He needed to see his grandfather and his brother. His grandfather has been pretty sick and just got out of the hospital.”

“His grandfather, George Iverleigh?” Laurel asked.

“I don’t know his name,” I said. “Sean just calls him grandpa. But I don’t think it’s Iverleigh because it’s his mom’s dad.”

“No, I’m telling you his grandfather is George Iverleigh of Iverleigh Farms. They supply our meat and dairy at the restaurant. They are all over the U.S.,” Laurel said. “I saw the packaging and looked it up just out of curiosity.”

“Oh okay,” This surprised me, but it wasn’t as if I had asked. “It would be weird to talk about his grandfather’s business when the man is dying.”

“Oh, the grandfather is just the tip of the iceberg,” Laurel continued. “I went on a deep dive this morning. That’s why I was calling Evie.”

“What are you getting at, Laurel?” Evie asked.

“So Iverleigh Farms is an old family business, but the real hot gossip is that George Iverleigh started a tech business in the 80s called Iveteck. George’s daughter married Max Holsten...”

“Of Holsten Industries!” Evie shouted. “Holy shit. They own the InView social media platform and the Lyrix music app.”

“That’s what I’m getting at,” Laurel explained. “Max took over Iveteck and changed the name like twenty years ago. There is a lot of bad blood from what I can find out. Maybe it’s why Sean goes by Iverleigh and not Holsten.”

I sat listening, just taking it all in. It all made sense, though it felt unbelievable. This side of the story was blowing my mind and left me with a sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach. Why wouldn’t Sean tell me? And what else was he keeping from me?

“Gabbie, you’re being pretty quiet,” Evie chimed in. “Did he ask you not to tell us?”

Because we aren't gold diggers. I don't care how rich he is. If he's an ass wipe, I don't want you with him."

"He didn't ask me to keep it from you. We just didn't talk about it," I managed, trying to fight the hurt in my gut and convince myself as much as to convince them. "I knew he had money and was maybe rich." That was a stretch.

"But he's not just rich," Laurel said. "He is rich rich."

"Yeah, it's not a big deal." I attempted to brush away the feeling. "Anyway, girls, I have to go feed Ollie and call my sisters."

We said our goodbyes, and I hung up as fast as I could. Why was this happening? Had I rushed into another relationship, only to find out the guy was not who I thought he was? Did he think I was a gold digger? Was he just playing games with the poor black girl he picked up on the side of the road?

I lay in my room, my stomach in knots as every moment of my time with Sean ran through my mind. He told me what he thought of me, but I found that hard to believe.

When I heard the door click, my heart dropped. I was so nervous about what to say and how to bring it up. I desperately tried to convince myself that maybe it wasn't a big deal.

Ollie jumped up and leaped into Sean's arms before he had the door shut.

"Hey, little guy." Sean gave Ollie a rub. "Did you miss me?"

He carried him to the bed where I sat up. I could see the stress on his face, especially around his eyes.

“God, I missed you.” Sean kissed me so tenderly, I believed it.

“How is your grandfather?” I asked.

“He’s better,” Sean sighed. “It’s just hard to see him so fragile. But we talked about so many things. I told him all about you.”

“You did?” I was surprised.

“I did.” Sean gave me a soft smile. “And I think he gave me some really good advice. So, I was thinking we should probably talk.”

“Good.” I took a deep breath. “Because I need to talk about some things with you, too.”

“You can talk to me about anything. Tell me whatever is on your mind.”

“Well.” I took a deep breath. “I want to know what you really think of me.”

I could tell Sean was taken aback. “Gabbie, I think you are amazing and beautiful.”

“Do you trust me?”

His expression went from confused to oh shit in 2.1 seconds. “Gabbie. I do trust you now, but when we first started on this journey, we didn’t know each other.”

“But we got to know each other, or I thought we did. It just feels like there’s a whole side of you I know nothing about. And you didn’t even give me a hint. Do you think I’m a gold digger?”

“No,” he insisted. “If this trip proved anything, it’s that you’re not.”

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am*

“The crazy thing is that I get that, but at some point, you should have clued me in. I felt like such an idiot having my friends tell me all this stuff about Iverleigh Farms, Holsten Industries, and you.”

“I’m sorry.” Sean looked me in the eye with such sincerity. “I never meant to make you feel that way. You are not an idiot at all.”

“I left California with a man I thought I knew who said he loved me, and as soon as we got to Florida, he flipped the switch and became someone I didn’t know. And now I leave Florida with a man and think I have fallen in love... But I don’t know you.”

“You do know me,” he said. “You know the real me without the money, flashy bike, or jet...”

“Jet!” I gasped. Of course, he had a jet. “And here I am, walking around with cash, counting every dollar.” I turned my back on him. “What are my sisters and my friends going to think of me?”

“Gabbie, please don’t say that.” He came around to face me, hands caressing my arms as he leaned to look me in the eye. “If they love you, they’ll understand you. And they can blame me. It’s my fault for keeping this from you. You did nothing wrong. I love you.”

“You love me because you know me,” I snapped.

He stepped back. “You love me, Gabbie. You told me so. That doesn’t just vanish.”



“I love the guy I traveled across the country with, who kindly does most of the driving, and sings off key, and did something kind for a stranger that was pissed off with him. I only know that guy.” I threw my hands up.

“I don’t know Sean, the billionaire company owner with jets who keeps secrets.

And I think I need some time to figure out if I want to know that guy after he lied to me. ”

I picked up Ollie and went to the door.

“I don’t want to end this, Gabbie. I really do love you.”

“I just need some time, Sean. And I have to stay here, so...”

“You want me to go?”

I nodded. “I’ll call you when I’m ready.”

I put Ollie on his leash and walked him around the property. When I returned to the house, I saw another car approaching the driveway. I ignored it at first and continued walking with Ollie.

“Hey, Gabbie baby. There you are.”

Pure dread rushed through my body, and I froze. Fucking Rick.

It took me a moment to realize he was coming towards me, and I needed to move.

“Why did you think you could leave me, and I wasn’t going to find you?” he said so casually that it made the hairs on my arm stand.

“How did you find me?” I asked, trying to hurry my way back to the door of the bed-and-breakfast.

“I realized you were gone and that your friends, Dumb and Dumber, were giving me the run around.”

“Don’t talk about my friends like that!” I snapped.

“You know better than to raise your fucking voice at me, Gabbie.” Rick was turning red.

“How did you find me here?” I was stalling, trying to keep him talking and not reacting until I could get myself and Ollie inside.

“I was having breakfast at this dump in town and some sexy little milf came in talking about how the girl staying at their little B&B just loved anything with blueberries. How lucky am I?”

“Is everything okay out here?” Skye came rushing out of the house.

“I’m here on official police business,” Rick lied, flashing his badge.

Skye looked at me for confirmation.

“Call the police,” I said to her.

“Okay.” Skye ran back inside for a phone.

“You need to come with me,” Rick insisted.

“I’m not going back to Florida with you.”

“Not Florida, baby. I applied for my old job back, right here.”

“Fuck you,” I snapped, picking up Ollie and running for the door.

The next thing I knew, Rick ripped Ollie away from me, tossing him to the ground, and grabbed my arm.

“I said, you’re coming with me!”

I was 2.1 seconds away from kicking him in the nuts when Rick vanished.

I don’t know what in the Jiu-Jitsu Taekwondo just happened, but Sean came out of nowhere and had Rick flipped flat on his back.

Then he punched him in the face, knocking him out cold for good measure.

To top it off, Ollie came over and peed on his head while he was down.

“Good boy,” Sean picked up Ollie, and we stared at each other. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I managed.

“I’m gonna have you... fucking arrested... assaulting a police officer,” Rick mumbled, unable to get up off the ground.

“It’s a good thing I have cameras,” Skye said. “And the cops are on their way.”

“Shit.” Rick lay his head back down, defeated.

“You came back,” I said, still quite stunned.

“I called my brother and my grandpa while I was driving. They said I should come back and try groveling on my knees if I have to.” Sean pointed to Rick. “I don’t know if this qualifies.”

“Were you crying?” I asked, noticing how red his eyes were.

He wiped his cheek. “I will only admit to that if it helps me get you back.”

I didn’t know whether I wanted to laugh or cry. I reached for him, one hand at his collarbone, fingers brushing his jaw. He stood like a man bracing for something he’d nearly stopped believing in.

Then I kissed him slowly, searching, sure, letting him know the decision had been made after almost letting go.

“Of course, I still love you.” I smiled, our lips still close.

He exhaled against my mouth, and then his hand was at my waist, stilling us both in the moment...and Ollie.

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am*

The beach was full of life as the sun set across the Pacific, painting the sky a dark violet and amber. Couples danced barefoot across the sand as waves crashed along the shore.

Sean stood near the edge of the crowd, making his way to the stage, hands in his pockets, his eyes barely moved from the woman on stage.

Gabbie.

There she was, front and center on the pop-up stage, the mic in her hand, and Water's Edge jamming to a beachy rhythm and blues number behind her. She wore that little yellow linen dress with a slouchy sweater and those worn ankle boots he loved.

Her voice found something inside him and set it alight. It wasn't just the sound—it was her . The way her body moved in rhythm, the way she closed her eyes when she hit certain notes, as if the words meant something new every time.

He watched and felt that strange swell in his chest again, the one that reminded him he was utterly in love with her.

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The sky stretched wide and endless, scattered with stars, their light faint but steady, over the darkened ocean. A warm breeze moved through the night, carrying the scent of salt and crisp air over the yacht.

“You were incredible tonight,” Sean whispered in her ear.

He stood behind her, arms wrapped around her waist as they stared into the night.

“You have to say that because I’m your girlfriend, and because I’m still sad,” she pouted.

“I don’t want you to be sad or upset. This isn’t your fault.”

“It feels like your dad is punishing you for loving me,” Gabbie sighed.

“He hates that the gossip rags ran the story Billionaire Bad Boy Assaults Cop . It’s bad for the brand. Even though it was cleared up months ago,” Sean admitted. “But this wilderness retreat is a family tradition I have to do if I want my inheritance.”

“It sounds more like a boot camp mixed with Survivor than a retreat,” she grumbled.

“It’s only for a month and then I’ll be back.” Sean gave her a reassuring squeeze.

“I know, but I love seeing you every day and us being together,” Gabbie sighed. “I love you.”

“Then how about I make you a deal?” Sean turned her around and placed a tender kiss on her lips.

When they parted from the kiss, Gabbie looked down to see him holding up a small box with a whopper of a diamond shimmering in the moonlight.

“I love you so much, Gabbie. When I get back, we can spend the rest of our lives together.” Sean got down on one knee. “If you will marry me.”

She stared at him, her eyes glassy, her smile breaking slowly, like dawn. She knelt in front of him, cupped his face in her hands, and kissed him, soft and deliberate.

Gabbie pulled back, their foreheads resting against each other.

“Of course I’ll marry you,” she whispered.