







# Road Trip With the Ghost Hunter (Love Along Route 14 #10)

**Author:** Des Lorre

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Two people struggling with grief are forced together on Route 14.

Will they let love heal what feels broken?

I never believed in ghosts.

Until my car died on my way out of town, and I broke down in the middle of the gas station over sour candy and a loss I wasn't ready to deal with.

How that turned into this tall, gorgeous, Viking god of a man being my unexpected road trip partner, I couldn't begin to say.

This is how women end up in crime podcasts.

Yet Lucas Johansen isn't like most men.

Starting with those winter blue eyes that I can't seem to resist and ending with him having ghost-hunting equipment in his trunk.

I don't have time to fall for a guy.

It doesn't matter how good his strong frame feels against me in the one-bed we find ourselves sharing, or how he makes the pain of loss ache a little less.

This was only supposed to be a quick trip to a new life, a new home.

Yet everything about Lucas feels like home and that is scarier than any ghostly encounter we happen to find.

**Total Pages (Source):** 16

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:08 am*

Li

My hands shook, gripping the steering wheel as I backed my old, chipped beige Nissan onto the street of my childhood.

Lining up the car to go, I kept my foot on the brake, feeling incapable of leaving.

My vision blurred with hot tears, but even without clear vision, I knew every detail of my l?o lao's home.

The yellow siding with pale blue window shutters that once housed homemade flower boxes we planted every spring and summer.

The third front porch step up that always creaked, no matter how many times I carefully snuck back home after curfew.

Even the scent of l?o lao's lotus mooncakes, she tried helping me perfect every fall since I was a teen, but for the life of me, I always managed to not clean out all the lotus seeds.

I swear, I picked out every green center.

But once baked, I couldn't deny that I missed some of the bitterness from the aftertaste.

The warm streams on my cheeks ran down my chin, splashing on my worn, oversized sweater.

My eyes shifted to the red letters: SOLD .

Losing both parents at seventeen was a formative experience that led to moving in with my grandmother, my l?o lao.

Losing paw paw to the war, I only ever knew her.

Now, at twenty-nine, life threw me into the dark once more.

“Love you,” I whispered, lifting my foot from the pedal and letting the car roll away, knowing I’ll never return here again.

My breath stuttered as I sucked back the sobs that threatened to wrack my body.

I had a twenty-hour drive to Rustic Junction, Colorado.

It was going to be long, lonely, and rural, meaning I couldn’t break down.

I needed to focus and safely leave Tennessee toward—I immediately stopped that train of thought.

My hands squeezed the steering wheel even tighter, causing the leather to give a dull squeak.

I had nowhere to go.

I had to sell the only home I’d known since losing my parents to cover l?o lao’s medical bills which the insurance wouldn’t cover.

I couldn’t even save her antique shop, which I passed just then.

No longer hers, but now a comic book shop.

How easily a life gets snuffed from this earth, and the world moves on.

Should I have tried harder to keep the shop and her house?

I tried. Damn it, I freaking tried.

Once my grandmother got sick, she needed round the clock care for those last two years. I thought...I thought if I took good care of her, gave her my best, she'd stay.

At the stoplight before the gas station on the corner of Maple Street, I closed my eyes at the red and tried to slow the rhythm of my breath.

"Get it together, Li," I whispered a forceful chastise.

Swiping at my cheeks and eyes, I inhaled deeply and turned left once the light turned green, pulling into Benny's station and mechanic garage. I parked on pump three but took a minute to look out the windshield as another memory took over.

"What's the rule?" l?o lao Fang asked my fourteen year old self. When my parents' traveled—which was often for business—I'd stay a week or two here.

"Just one," I answered, skipping over to the aisles inside the gas station.

My l?o lao closed her antique shop the first three days of every week.

Her business mostly attracted the weekend tourists.

So, for those three days off, she'd pack up the car and take us on a road trip.

It was never extravagant, and it never had to be too long a distance.

She loved exploring new spots, be it an hour from home or five.

She'd spend all Sunday cooking and prepping Chinese foods and snacks that traveled well while Lindy, the freshman in college, worked the last shift at the shop.

Once set to hit the road, we'd always stop at Benny's gas station, and she'd say, "You're allowed one American treat.

Just one," she pointed her finger at me.

Her tone was stern, but the softness around her warm, brown eyes made me grin as I gave a resolute nod and ran inside to dance in the aisles, grazing my fingertips over the endless options I wasn't usually allowed to indulge in.

"You're Chinese American, my Li Li but if I don't help you stay true to your roots, the American part of you will snuff out thousands of years of history and ancestors that are one with your soul.

" I?o lao only moved to America when my mother got pregnant with me at twenty.

My dad worked, and as they say, it takes a village.

L?o lao Fang was a proud Chinese woman, but a modern one at that. I admired the hell out of her.

I missed the hell out of her.

My body jolted at a loud horn from a car in the mechanic bay.

“Just one,” I whispered as I got out of my car and slung my crossbody bag she crocheted over my sweater.

Knowing I wanted sour gummies and exactly where they were—back aisle by the sodas—I headed straight there, taking in the familiar smells of stale coffee brewing, fried foods rotating on the hot top, and motor oil drifting from next door, Benny’s attached garage.

“Yeah, man. I’m in Tennessee, two hours from Missouri. Gonna drive through the night.”

The voice was deep but smooth. Why this man’s particular voice practically stopped me in my tracks, I couldn’t say, but somehow, some-freaking-how, I knew he was going to be gorgeous.

Turning the corner, I almost rolled my eyes.

First, of course, he was standing exactly where I needed to go for my sour fix.

And two? My breath caught at the massive, beautiful Viking of a man.

Focused on the candies before him, he continued his conversation on his cell.

“Bjorn, I hear you. I do. But,” he paused, his brow furrowing. “I gotta do this,” he finished softly, almost as if he hated admitting that to whoever this Bjorn person was.

His eyes flicked right, catching my wide ones because, of course, I was just standing in the middle of the aisle like a goober who totally got caught eavesdropping on his phone call.

Wow. Those frosted blue eyes were hypnotizing.



Tennessee was saturated with cowboys. This man was not a country boy.

He was so tall, and holy hell, his body had to be a work of art.

Firm muscles painted in tattoos up his arms. That naturally pale blonde beard and hair made him look like a Nordic warrior.

And, oh my heck on a shit stick! I realized instantly what I looked like.

Red rimmed eyes from crying, no makeup, bedhead, I didn't bother running a brush through—at least it was clean—and my worn, oversized college hoodie with leggings.

I didn't even go to whatever college was on this sweatshirt I was rocking.

Please, God, let there not be any food stains on it.

“I wrapped everything with the lawyers before the weekend. Everything should be fine. Just text or call me if something comes up,” this gorgeous man said into the cell as he studied me, because yes, I was still standing in the same spot, staring.

To be fair, he was literally in front of my quest for sour gummies.

I didn't want to be rude and reach around his body.

We know how that would go. I'd accidentally man-chest graze him and engage in an awkward ping pong of apologies, cause my elbow copped a feel, and that would be rude to his buddy Bjorn on the phone. So, naturally, I stood and waited.

“Oh,” I exhaled. He was done with his call and now staring back.

“Um,” I stammered, “You were busy and I didn’t want to interrupt.

I just, you know, if I reached over, you’d probably wonder, ‘whoa! What’s this random chick doing?

’ Right? So, I figured, I’d let you finish.

” I cleared my throat while my much cooler inner Li wanted to throat punch me so I’d shut up.

The state of utter confusion morphed on this man’s face, which forced an involuntary laugh to burst from my lips. I immediately slapped my hand over my mouth.

“Are you okay?” he asked, and ain’t that just the way?

Luckily, I was too much of a mess heading toward nowhere to even contemplate men. So, while he was nice to look at and that voice could seriously lull me to the sweetest sleep, I shook off this encounter and exhaled. The hand at my mouth went and pointed at the gummies.

“Sour Gummy Drops,” I said as if that explained everything.

Viking man turned and clocked the name on the bright pink, yellow, and purple package. “Sorry,” he said. “Was I in the way?”

“Like I said. Didn’t want to be rude and just reach in and grab them.”

A strong and large hand grabbed one bag but paused. “One or two?” he asked.

I blinked. Huh. Actually, that was a practical question.

Yes, Lao's rule was one American treat, but now that I was an adult, I could amend the rule.

It was still one brand but multiple of the one.

This twenty-hour drive was going to take me at least two days.

Might as well have enough to cover the trip.

"Hey," his voice softened. "You okay?"

Shit. I blinked back the moisture building in my eyes. Avoiding his, I reached for the candy. "Two should suffice," I replied with a steadier voice.

I felt his curious gaze, but kept my hand out waiting. He grabbed two bags and handed them over. Now feeling embarrassed, I took them and quickly glanced up. "Thank you." My voice was less steady.

Rushing, I paid for both and thirty dollars for fuel. I gassed up and hopped in, ready to blast music and drive.

And drive.

Drive?

The click, click, click the car made as I turned the key in the ignition accelerated my heart. "No, no, no," I whispered, trying to start the car over and over.

You have to be freaking kidding me .

Leaning over, I banged my forehead on the steering wheel. Scoffing at my luck, I

straightened up, yanked the key out, grabbed my bag, pushed the door open and got out.

Time to put on the charm.

Shoulders back, I strutted with purpose.

“Hey, Benny! ”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:08 am*

### CHAPTER ONE

Li

My hands shook, gripping the steering wheel as I backed my old, chipped beige Nissan onto the street of my childhood.

Lining up the car to go, I kept my foot on the brake, feeling incapable of leaving.

My vision blurred with hot tears, but even without clear vision, I knew every detail of my l?o lao's home.

The yellow siding with pale blue window shutters that once housed homemade flower boxes we planted every spring and summer.

The third front porch step up that always creaked, no matter how many times I carefully snuck back home after curfew.

Even the scent of l?o lao's lotus mooncakes, she tried helping me perfect every fall since I was a teen, but for the life of me, I always managed to not clean out all the lotus seeds.

I swear, I picked out every green center.

But once baked, I couldn't deny that I missed some of the bitterness from the aftertaste.

The warm streams on my cheeks ran down my chin, splashing on my worn, oversized sweater.

My eyes shifted to the red letters: SOLD .

Losing both parents at seventeen was a formative experience that led to moving in with my grandmother, my l?o lao.

Losing paw paw to the war, I only ever knew her.

Now, at twenty-nine, life threw me into the dark once more.

“Love you,” I whispered, lifting my foot from the pedal and letting the car roll away, knowing I’ll never return here again.

My breath stuttered as I sucked back the sobs that threatened to wrack my body.

I had a twenty-hour drive to Rustic Junction, Colorado.

It was going to be long, lonely, and rural, meaning I couldn’t break down.

I needed to focus and safely leave Tennessee toward—I immediately stopped that train of thought.

My hands squeezed the steering wheel even tighter, causing the leather to give a dull squeak.

I had nowhere to go.

I had to sell the only home I’d known since losing my parents to cover l?o lao’s medical bills which the insurance wouldn’t cover.

I couldn't even save her antique shop, which I passed just then.

No longer hers, but now a comic book shop.

How easily a life gets snuffed from this earth, and the world moves on.

Should I have tried harder to keep the shop and her house?

I tried. Damn it, I freaking tried.

Once my grandmother got sick, she needed round the clock care for those last two years. I thought...I thought if I took good care of her, gave her my best, she'd stay.

At the stoplight before the gas station on the corner of Maple Street, I closed my eyes at the red and tried to slow the rhythm of my breath.

"Get it together, Li," I whispered a forceful chastise.

Swiping at my cheeks and eyes, I inhaled deeply and turned left once the light turned green, pulling into Benny's station and mechanic garage. I parked on pump three but took a minute to look out the windshield as another memory took over.

"What's the rule?" l?o lao Fang asked my fourteen year old self. When my parents' traveled—which was often for business—I'd stay a week or two here.

"Just one," I answered, skipping over to the aisles inside the gas station.

My l?o lao closed her antique shop the first three days of every week.

Her business mostly attracted the weekend tourists.

So, for those three days off, she'd pack up the car and take us on a road trip.

It was never extravagant, and it never had to be too long a distance.

She loved exploring new spots, be it an hour from home or five.

She'd spend all Sunday cooking and prepping Chinese foods and snacks that traveled well while Lindy, the freshman in college, worked the last shift at the shop.

Once set to hit the road, we'd always stop at Benny's gas station, and she'd say, "You're allowed one American treat.

Just one," she pointed her finger at me.

Her tone was stern, but the softness around her warm, brown eyes made me grin as I gave a resolute nod and ran inside to dance in the aisles, grazing my fingertips over the endless options I wasn't usually allowed to indulge in.

"You're Chinese American, my Li Li but if I don't help you stay true to your roots, the American part of you will snuff out thousands of years of history and ancestors that are one with your soul.

" I?o lao only moved to America when my mother got pregnant with me at twenty.

My dad worked, and as they say, it takes a village.

L?o lao Fang was a proud Chinese woman, but a modern one at that. I admired the hell out of her.

I missed the hell out of her.



My body jolted at a loud horn from a car in the mechanic bay.

“Just one,” I whispered as I got out of my car and slung my crossbody bag she crocheted over my sweater.

Knowing I wanted sour gummies and exactly where they were—back aisle by the sodas—I headed straight there, taking in the familiar smells of stale coffee brewing, fried foods rotating on the hot top, and motor oil drifting from next door, Benny’s attached garage.

“Yeah, man. I’m in Tennessee, two hours from Missouri. Gonna drive through the night.”

The voice was deep but smooth. Why this man’s particular voice practically stopped me in my tracks, I couldn’t say, but somehow, some-freaking-how, I knew he was going to be gorgeous.

Turning the corner, I almost rolled my eyes.

First, of course, he was standing exactly where I needed to go for my sour fix.

And two? My breath caught at the massive, beautiful Viking of a man.

Focused on the candies before him, he continued his conversation on his cell.

“Bjorn, I hear you. I do. But,” he paused, his brow furrowing. “I gotta do this,” he finished softly, almost as if he hated admitting that to whoever this Bjorn person was.

His eyes flicked right, catching my wide ones because, of course, I was just standing in the middle of the aisle like a goober who totally got caught eavesdropping on his phone call.

Wow. Those frosted blue eyes were hypnotizing.

Tennessee was saturated with cowboys. This man was not a country boy.

He was so tall, and holy hell, his body had to be a work of art.

Firm muscles painted in tattoos up his arms. That naturally pale blonde beard and hair made him look like a Nordic warrior.

And, oh my heck on a shit stick! I realized instantly what I looked like.

Red rimmed eyes from crying, no makeup, bedhead, I didn't bother running a brush through—at least it was clean—and my worn, oversized college hoodie with leggings.

I didn't even go to whatever college was on this sweatshirt I was rocking.

Please, God, let there not be any food stains on it.

“I wrapped everything with the lawyers before the weekend. Everything should be fine. Just text or call me if something comes up,” this gorgeous man said into the cell as he studied me, because yes, I was still standing in the same spot, staring.

To be fair, he was literally in front of my quest for sour gummies.

I didn't want to be rude and reach around his body.

We know how that would go. I'd accidentally man-chest graze him and engage in an awkward ping pong of apologies, cause my elbow copped a feel, and that would be rude to his buddy Bjorn on the phone. So, naturally, I stood and waited.

“Oh,” I exhaled. He was done with his call and now staring back.

“Um,” I stammered, “You were busy and I didn’t want to interrupt.

I just, you know, if I reached over, you’d probably wonder, ‘whoa! What’s this random chick doing?

’ Right? So, I figured, I’d let you finish.

” I cleared my throat while my much cooler inner Li wanted to throat punch me so I’d shut up.

The state of utter confusion morphed on this man’s face, which forced an involuntary laugh to burst from my lips. I immediately slapped my hand over my mouth.

“Are you okay?” he asked, and ain’t that just the way?

Luckily, I was too much of a mess heading toward nowhere to even contemplate men. So, while he was nice to look at and that voice could seriously lull me to the sweetest sleep, I shook off this encounter and exhaled. The hand at my mouth went and pointed at the gummies.

“Sour Gummy Drops,” I said as if that explained everything.

Viking man turned and clocked the name on the bright pink, yellow, and purple package. “Sorry,” he said. “Was I in the way?”

“Like I said. Didn’t want to be rude and just reach in and grab them.”

A strong and large hand grabbed one bag but paused. “One or two?” he asked.

I blinked. Huh. Actually, that was a practical question.

Yes, 1?o lao's rule was one American treat, but now that I was an adult, I could amend the rule.

It was still one brand but multiple of the one.

This twenty-hour drive was going to take me at least two days.

Might as well have enough to cover the trip.

“Hey,” his voice softened. “You okay?”

Shit. I blinked back the moisture building in my eyes. Avoiding his, I reached for the candy. “Two should suffice,” I replied with a steadier voice.

I felt his curious gaze, but kept my hand out waiting. He grabbed two bags and handed them over. Now feeling embarrassed, I took them and quickly glanced up. “Thank you.” My voice was less steady.

Rushing, I paid for both and thirty dollars for fuel. I gassed up and hopped in, ready to blast music and drive.

And drive.

Drive?

The click, click, click the car made as I turned the key in the ignition accelerated my heart. “No, no, no,” I whispered, trying to start the car over and over.

You have to be freaking kidding me .

Leaning over, I banged my forehead on the steering wheel. Scoffing at my luck, I straightened up, yanked the key out, grabbed my bag, pushed the door open and got out.

Time to put on the charm.

Shoulders back, I strutted with purpose.

“Hey, Benny! ”

### CHAPTER TWO

Lucas

Both the mechanic and I turned when someone called out his name.

It was the same brunette from the candy aisle.

She looked a little more steady now than she had with her smokey dark eyes brimming with tears over some sour, fruity shit no one should be ingesting.

Not that I didn't love a good candy binge, but really?

Sour gummies? She might as well take some lemon juice, pour it on sugar and suck it down.

"Hey Li." Benny seemed to know her. At least he knew her well enough to walk over and give her a hug. "You all packed up?" She didn't say anything, just nodded, and once more looked like she was about to cry.

I wasn't the kind of jackass that asked a girl if it was that time of the month whenever she got emotional, but this one made me question if that was what was going on.

Then again, for all I knew, maybe this was her normal expression.

If so, it was too bad. Because despite crying every five seconds, she was beautiful.

Her wavy hair was pulled in a high ponytail that made it look like the ends might touch her butt if it was hanging loose.

She didn't have one of those hourglass shapes with a lot of tits and ass, but what she had was worth taking notice of. It probably helped that her pants were so tight that I could probably make out the name on her underwear if her college sweetheart wasn't covering it up.

Her skin looked like she had brushed some sort of shimmer on it, which didn't make any sense considering how she was dressed.

If I had to guess, she was just out running errands or something, but the glow of her cheeks made me think she had something big she was headed for.

That had been why I was unable to stop staring at her while Bjorn was busting my ass about this road trip.

He didn't understand. No one did, no one could.

"Did you get your gummies?" Benny smiled as he held onto her arms.

What was with the gummies? Were these some sort of special gummies? Did they have something in them that I wasn't aware of? Could they grant wishes like those magic beans Jack found?

"Yes." She nodded. "I even got two bags."

Benny chuckled. "Good girl." He patted her arm before letting her go. "I think Ms. Fang would be alright with that given the occasion."

"From your lips to God's..." She cut herself off and swallowed again. She closed her

eyes and shook her head. When she opened them again, the shutters that held back every emotion stirred something inside. I knew that look. I had worn that look.

I drew in a slow breath, and everything I thought about her changed in an instant.

"Anyway, that isn't why I came in." She tried for a smile, but this look was too broken to be anything jovial. "I filled up, but my car won't start."

Benny pulled his brows together. "I changed the oil and filters, checked the battery, and rotated your tires the last time you were in." He scratched at the long sideburns he insisted on wearing.

"The only other thing I mentioned you might want to get checked was the ignition switch, cause I didn't have one in stock. "

She bit her lip, and both Benny and I knew what the problem was.

"Are you sure that you mentioned it?"

"I might have mentioned it a month or so ago," Benny told her.

"Oh." It looked as if the weight of his words rested on her shoulders. "That would explain it." Another long pause and closed eyes. This time, I saw her hand brush at the side of her face. The emotion she had been holding back finally found release.

"Can you fix it?" She didn't belabor whatever she was feeling. She simply moved on.

Benny shook his head. "I could if I had the part, but I still don't. If you had mentioned you needed it, I could have put in an order, but I know for sure I can't get it today. I may not even be able to get it before the end of next week."



"No, Benny, you have to be able to do this." She grabbed onto his hands. Her eyes went from tear-stained to borderline hysteria in seconds. "You don't understand. If you don't do this then I have no place to stay. Everything is gone." Her voice broke.

"I have to get to Rustic Junction. I can't stay here. I just can't. It's too hard, and if I don't leave now I'm going to miss this opportunity." She held tighter. "Please Benny, for I?o lao, there has to be something you can do."

Her words reached inside and broke a piece of me that I thought was already shattered. She didn't have to say the words for me to know what she was going through. I should have caught on when she was crying over fucking gummies.

"Where's Rustic Junction?" Benny asked. "I thought you were going to Colorado."

"It's in Colorado." She explained. "It's a small tourist town and I need to be there in four days or everything is going to fall apart."

"Four days?" His eyes went from comforting her to questioning me.

I shook my head slowly. The question was written all over his face in big, bold letters.

I didn't have to move my lips for him to get my response.

There was a reason I planned this trip alone.

Well, mostly alone. I didn't need some emotionally wounded tag-along who would probably be worse than my cousin.

Bjorn had offered to come with me, but I knew exactly what he would say. I didn't need his skepticism. Especially if this had a chance of working. He would ruin

everything.

"Lucas, my man." Benny acted as if he didn't know what I was going to say. "Aren't you headed to Colorado?"

"Missouri."

"But after Missouri?" he pushed. "Aren't you continuing on into the mountains? I could have sworn you said you were going that way."

Li, at least I assumed that was her name since Benny hadn't bothered to introduce us, looked over at me.

Those smoky eyes had a touch of storm clouds and misery that canceled any argument I was about to make.

"I can give you a ride if you need one." The reluctance was clear in each word.

She bit at her bottom lip and damned if I didn't think of a totally different ride. I could see her on top of me. Her hands glued to my chest, her long hair brushing my thighs as she held her head back. Where the hell did that come from?

"Um, I don't know you," she whispered. It was the softest I had heard her voice, and the sound of it went right where I didn't need it to go.

Any good thoughts or ideas I had completely left. The wrong head demanded that I not accept her refusal. He wouldn't let her stay here, and he for sure wasn't about to let her ride with anyone else.

"I have plenty of room and I'm on a tight schedule as well," I informed her. "I can get you there." In more ways than one, I thought.

"I can vouch for Lucas here." Benny put his hand on my shoulder. He had to reach up some to do it, but he did it with a smile. "You won't find a better guy, and he will make sure you get where you need to go safely. The guy drives like a grandma," Benny joked.

"Screw you." I almost used the f-word, but I didn't know where Li stood with that, and I didn't want to offend her.

"What about my car?" she asked. "I can't just leave it here."

"I could buy it off you," Benny offered. "That way, you can have a fresh, clean start when you get to Colorado."

"I can't sell it." She looked more stricken at the thought of selling the car than missing whatever she had waiting for her in Rustic Junction.

Whatever was going on, Benny seemed to understand. He went back to her and took her hands.

"What if I hold on to it until you can come back?" His smile was sad. "I promise to make sure it's as good as new when you get here."

"I can't ask you to do that."

"Just think about it as a belated thank you for all the antiques I know I never paid full price for." He winked, and Li laughed.

"Are you sure?" She didn't look convinced when her eyes came back to me.

"I'm sure," Benny answered. I didn't know if he was reassuring her about the car or me.

”Alright.” She pulled a deep breath. “Let’s go.” Once more, her smile didn’t seem right, but I took it for what it was. The best she could do .

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:08 am*

Lucas

I counted to three but waited for Li to open her cooler first. This girl was a whirlwind of emotions, and they all played right across her face.

From thinking I was going to take her someplace and chop her into pieces to the loss and loneliness that caused what I assume was a panic attack. It was all there.

She looked inside, and her lost girl expression was back. “On second thought, snacks aren’t that important.”

”What are you talking about? They are hugely important.” I pulled out my carrot sticks and hummus. “These will make sure that I don’t fill myself with overprocessed and unnatural sugars.”

She looked from my healthy option to my face and back three times before her lips shook. At first, I thought she was about to cry again, but when her shoulders began to move I realized she was laughing.

”What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.” She actually snorted, trying to keep her giggles in. “It just hit me really hard that I’m perfectly safe with you.” Her body doubled over as she laughed so hard she had to put her cooler on the floor.

Her hand curled around her waist and her eyes were screwed shut. Her cute little mouth was wide open, letting streams of laughter pour out. For a second, I could

swear I saw tears glistening on her cheeks, but she wiped them away.

"Oh, dear me." It was like she couldn't stop. Her whole body was one big funny bone.

"I fail to see what is funny about taking care of your body," I scolded. Somehow, that made her laugh harder, which I wouldn't have thought was possible. "Will you stop that?"

"Sorry." I could see her trying to make herself stop, but it wasn't working. Every time she swallowed down a giggle, it would explode even bigger when she couldn't hold it in.

I dropped my food back in the cooler and reached behind her to put it back.

I checked the traffic and swerved back on the road.

I didn't have time to sit here watching her cackle at my food choices when she probably had plenty of overprocessed, dehydrated, sugar and artificial flavored crap in her cooler. At least I was taking care of myself.

"Hey." She wasn't laughing now. Her small hand reached out and touched my arm. The heat of it surprised me. I jerked away and immediately felt like an ass.

"Slow down," she yelled.

"What are you talking about? I don't speed. I'm only going..." Shit. I was driving eighty-five miles an hour.

What the fuck?

I never sped. Yet, here I was going ten miles over the speed limit because she laughed at my fucking snacks.

"Son of a..." I eased my foot off the gas until I was back to the speed limit.

I looked over. Li had pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and was back to staring at me like a crazy person. So much for my brilliant snack idea to get her to relax.

"Will you stop that?" I almost screamed. "I am not driving all the way to Colorado with you looking at me like I'm going to dump your broken body where it can never be found again."

That probably wasn't the best thing to say. Especially given how big her eyes got. Eyes that I didn't notice had small slivers of gold around the dark irises, or how expressive they were. If her face were an open book, then her eyes were the words on each page.

"Damn it." I let out a long, loud breath that filled the car. "I'm not going to hurt you," I said as softly as I could. I didn't need her mood swings going back to hysteria.

"I know." Her voice barely registered over the music. I turned it down so I could hear her better. "That's why I was laughing."

"What?" That made absolutely no sense.

"Anyone who's worried enough about his body to bring hummus on a road trip wouldn't possibly cut someone up and roast them on a fire for dinner," she said, like those types of things happen all the time.

"This isn't some sort of horror movie," I scoffed.

“Dude, don’t you watch investigative television or listen to crime podcasts?”

“No,” I shook my head. “Only crazy people and wannabe killers make time for that kind of crap.”

”Watch it.” There was a bit of fire to her tone. I looked over, and she looked really offended.

”My grandmother loved those shows.” She stared right at me. “They were the only reason we had cable television, and they gave her hours of entertainment.” She turned to face the window. “It was one of the things we used to do together.” Her voice was back to a whisper.

I was really fucking this up. “I’m sorry.” I lowered my voice to match hers.

”It’s alright.” But I could tell it wasn’t.

That had to be who she lost. It was the only thing that made sense with how she reacted. It must be recent, too, but if it was, why wasn’t she with her family? Shouldn’t she be helping her parents or her siblings? Someone? Anyone? Why was she here with me? Unless there was no one else.

Well, damn. Double damn.

Was she all alone? If so, why the hell would she get in a car with a stranger? If she watched all those shows, she should know better than to trust someone to take her hundreds of miles to Colorado on the word of some mechanic.

I mean, I was trustworthy, and I would get her there, but what happens after I drop her off? Is she just going to trust the next stranger who offers to help her? If she didn’t have anyone, who was going to look out for her?



I turned to see her still facing the window.

She looked so fragile, curled up with her legs on the seat and her arm wrapped around them.

She wasn't wrong. Anyone could carry her off somewhere, and she would never be heard from again.

Especially if there was no one to raise suspicion.

A sudden need to make sure she was taken care of pulled at my chest.

She's not my responsibility. I have enough problems of my own, and taking care of some random woman was not what this trip was supposed to be about.

Yet, when I glanced over again, I couldn't help the responsibility that I felt.

I needed to know more about her to make sure there was someone she was meeting in this new town.

For all I knew, maybe she already had someone to look out for her.

Maybe I was wrong and her grandmother wasn't gone.

Maybe her parents were just distant but still available.

I mean, it wasn't as if I knew anything about her.

"So, you and your grandmother watched these crime shows together?"

"Yes," she answered, but didn't turn.

"Tell me about her?" That seemed like a good way to break the ice and find out more about her family.

She turned then. "My grandmother?"

"Yes." I gave her the best smile I had. "We have at least three more hours before our first scheduled break. Tell me about your grandmother and about you. We're in this car together, so we might as well get to know one another."

She took a deep breath and held it. I saw a lone tear fall. Just when I was sure she wouldn't say anything, she turned to face me with a sad smile.

"My grandmother was the most amazing woman."

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:08 am*

Li

“The sour gummies,” he murmured.

I chuckled. “The sour gummies,” I confirmed. “What do you have against sour gummies?”

I thought the mere mention of her would be like piercing my chest with a hot iron rod, but unexpectedly, the moment I started retelling my favorite childhood memories to Lucas, a lightness settled, making it easier to breathe. He was a good listener. For a potential serial killer.

He didn’t interrupt much, other than when he had genuine follow-up questions. When I got to l?o lao’s and my road trip traditions, the corner of his mouth softly lifted in such a subtle way that if I weren’t studying his profile as he drove, I’d have missed it.

He glanced over, then shrugged. “I’m not some health nut,” he started, catching my skeptical raised brow.

He released a soft, deep chuckle that came more from his chest than his mouth.

“I indulge,” he defended. “I’ve learned what works for my body.

What’ll give it energy? And if I’m traveling on the road for days on end, I like to be conscious of what I’m putting in my body since I’m sitting the whole time. ”

“Ok. Fair.” I brought my feet up to rest on the dashboard and braced, wondering if

that would drive him crazy.

His eyes shifted to my legs, but he continued driving without a word.

“And though my l?o lao’s road trip foods couldn’t all be classified as healthy,” I emphasized with quotations, “Since it was home-cooked food, she considered it to be healthier.”

“Agreed,” he said.

“But, I can’t help it. The contrast of sour and sweet plus the gummy texture is my kryptonite.” I popped two different flavored sour gummies in my mouth, then I picked out my favorite, the blue and red gummy, and held it out to Lucas’s mouth.

“Absolutely not.”

“Oh, come on,” I cajoled. “Have you ever even tried one?”

“I don’t need to.”

Gaping at him, I sat frozen, then instantly shifted to bring my legs up and crossed them under me to face him. “Uh uh. No. Tell me you’re not one of those?”

“One of those?” he questioned, still focusing on the road.

“Please, tell me you believe the world is round.” My insides clenched, waiting. Wouldn’t that just be a hoot? Trapped in a car with not only a potential killer who’s planning on dumping my lifeless body in middle America somewhere, but a flat-earther too. And just when I was starting to like him.

Lucas’s frosted blue eyes narrowed in my direction.

Uh-oh.

“Was that a serious question?” he asked.

“Dead serious.” Oops. “I mean, not dead. You know. We don’t want to think of such things. Happy things. Two people breathing at the end of this, things.”

His gaze flicked back to me. I couldn’t get what he was thinking. Oh, no. Did I remind him of his murder-y plans?

Looking back on the road, he started, “Are we still there?”

“There?”

“At the place where you fear I’m collecting hitchhikers and offing them?”

“Offing them?” I asked, incredulously.

“Sounds better than murdering,” he answered matter-of-factly.

“I’m a single woman who got in a car with a stranger for a twenty-hour road trip. I’d be worried if I wasn’t thinking about the possibility.”

“Fair,” he replied. After we both sat in silence for a minute, he continued.

“I’m sorry I didn’t coordinate this from the beginning.

Do you have someone you can share your location with?

Also, you can take my picture and also my license and send it to them so someone knows where and who you’re with. ”

Wow. Okay. That's actually a really smart idea. And sweet too. Damn it.

Also...I didn't really have anyone. I could maybe text my ex-coworker, Sasha but she gave up getting unanswered texts three months ago.

I opened my mouth to mention someone, but closed it again.

Not wanting to sound alone and pathetic, I offered, "Benny already knows I'm with you.

He knows what you look like and your name. That takes care of that."

I turned in my seat to face the front again and continued to stress-eat my sour gummies.

I felt Lucas's stare studying me, but refused to look.

In the couple of hours I've known him, I already knew he was smart.

He was attentive. He listened and saw behind the lines.

And he was graciously ignoring the clear signs I poorly tried to conceal that I, in fact, did not have anyone to call and let know where and who I was with.

A deep sadness settled in my gut. Instinctively, my hand pressed into my stomach as I took a slow, deep breath.

The last six months played in my mind. The last three months, I was by her side when I wasn't working, ignoring the world, keeping my head down, counting the mindless hours before I could rush home and take care of her, to the past three months after losing her.

I'd been bombarded with funeral arrangements, working with the state for the official death certificate, the insurance for end- of-life paperwork, insurance claims, needing to sell the house—all the dotted I's and crossed T's.

And then nights. My least favorite; when everything grew too still, too quiet.

Ironically, that was when the house was the loudest, creaking, shifting, groaning in the dead of my insomnia.

The few acquaintances I had, I pushed away. I was too busy, which made it easy enough. Then, two weeks ago, it all just stopped. Everything that needed taking care of was done. I was left to move on with life. So, naturally, I chose to run away.

“Hungry?” Lucas said after minutes of silence. Not even the radio was on.

Yes, my tummy was dancing with sour gummies, but hot, salty food sounded really good right now.

“I could eat,” I said, casually.

“First stop,” he said, pulling into a place called Kathy's Diner.

“Where are we?” I asked as Lucas pulled into a spot around the corner. I looked around, noticing we were in some small town but damn, this place was packed.

Once parked, Lucas pulled out the large paper map, which was wild to me. We'd already had this debate earlier. It seemed archaic considering technology. I mean, hello, cell phone and map apps. But I relented when he made a good point.

“Li, reception is spotty in most of these rural spots and highways. GPS won't always be reliable. And the last thing you want is to be lost and trapped on a dark highway in

the middle of nowhere.”

It was annoying that not only was he ridiculously gorgeous, like, a Viking god type presence gorgeous, he was smart, and practical. And he found my reluctant acceptance of this with a roll of my eyes cute, apparently. Like, flat out, mumbled, cute with a chuckle.

Trouble.

“Heartstone, Missouri,” Lucas grumbled as he marked something on the map. “Checked online, and reviews seem great.”

I looked at the old Americana diner on the outside.

Through the window, I could already tell we were about to be transported to the past. The moment we stepped inside, the deep-fried savory scents hit, but not in that gross, greasy way.

It trapped your senses and pulled you in, making my stomach riot in demand for whatever lingered in the air.

Cherry red accent wall, checkered floors, and even a classic working jukebox painted this 1950s blast from the past. Even the waitresses' pink outfits and white aprons were adorably of the era, and they all played their part well.

“Hello, darlin’s, would y’all like a booth or the counter?” A stunning older woman, with blonde wavy hair and striking seafoam green eyes, smiled wide, holding two menus.

I glanced at Lucas, who looked at me in question. “Booth?”



“Yes.” I looked back at the woman who wasn't dressed like the other waitresses but still rocking a pink shirt and blazer combo. “We'll take a booth, thank you.”

“Excellent. Right this way,” she said, heading toward the back right side of the diner.

“Name’s Kathy. This is my place. Been in my family for generations.

” She gestured for us to sit at a booth against the windows.

Removing a pencil from behind her ear, she adjusted her perfectly styled hair and pointed at a man in the kitchen. “That there is my husband, Bill.”

I waved as his eyes were set on us, a soft, mischievous smile as he watched his wife.

“Now, I love me some out-of-towners. Where y’all headed?

” She waved over a young woman who practically skipped over, her naturally copper red ponytail bouncing.

“This here is Beatrice. She’ll be your waitress. What can she start you on, drink-wise?”

When I hesitated, Lucas chimed in. “Black coffee and water for me. Thank you. You need a minute?” he asked me.

“What do you recommend?” I turned and asked Kathy.

“Oh, hun, woman after my own heart.” Her entire face which was beautifully made up, lit bright.

The young waitress, Beatrice, tried hiding her smile as she looked down at her

notepad, prepared to write our order.

“Are you health conscious cause I’ll have to break your heart if you’re one of those city folks wanting oat this and skim that.

Here, we believe in hearty and healthy for the soul. ”

I couldn’t help shifting my eyes over at Lucas, holding back my laugh. His eyes narrowed, and I just knew he understood what would happen next. The attempted warning didn’t keep me from the tease.

“Uh oh, Lucas. Are you going to be okay with allowing some grease and good ol’ fat to enter that body of yours?” He slowly shook his head, and I smirked, thrilled with this challenge.

“Say it isn’t so?” Kathy clutched her pearls.

Yes. The woman literally had pearls around her neck.

“Listen, darlin’, I get a body like yours, respectfully, takes discipline and work.

I mean, look over there at my husband. He may be sixty-eight, but that man can chop and carry stacks of wood with the best of them. ”

“Stop sexualizing my body, Kitten,” the man she introduced as Bill called from the counter while writing something down.

“Don’t you go pretending you don’t love every minute of it, Bill. I’m just sharing with this young man that he can keep that body of his as a temple while still indulging in the moments that life hands you. This is one of those moments.”

“If the man wants to eat grilled chicken and kale, let him.”

“Bite your tongue,” she gasped. “It’s like you want me to send you to sleep with the chickens tonight.”

It was like watching a ping-pong match. Light-hearted laughter escaped me as I glanced over, and even Lucas couldn’t help but smile. Kathy faced us again and gave us a cheeky smile. “Tough nuggets, hun, cause we don’t carry kale,” she said to Lucas, and I busted out laughing this time.

“You think that’s funny, huh?” He tried sounding offended, but I didn’t think anyone could hold a grudge around Kathy. Her energy was infectious.

I ordered her recommended strawberry pie shake before Kathy ran off to greet newcomers.

Beatrice came back with our drinks, and by recommendation, I ordered the Club Special, which had ham, turkey, pastrami, American cheese, and Swiss cheese and was served with homemade chips.

Shockingly, Lucas ordered the same but with the homemade fries.

“Like I said, I indulge.” He winked, took a sip of his coffee, and looked out the window. My body shivered, which I berated myself for.

It was a wink, Li. Normally, that’s an ick. What the hell, Viking man?

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:08 am*

Lucas

“I called ahead, and Dawn’s expecting y’all.

” Kathy walked us out after I paid, which Li argued with.

I compromised and said that breakfast tomorrow was her treat.

That appeased her. “Just down that main street, right on Stanford, and you can’t miss it.

Gorgeous, large estate on the lakefront.

And can I say, y’all make a very handsome couple. ”

Li’s body went rigid beside mine at the door. “Oh no, Kathy,” Li nervously chuckled. “We are just road trip buddies—strangers, really.”

“We’re headed the same way, is all,” I said, holding the door open for Li.

“Well,” Kathy smirked, her bright green eyes bouncing back and forth between Li and me.

“My mistake.” She did not seem bothered whatsoever by her “mistake”.

Li walked out, and Kathy winked at me. “You two take care of each other, now. Hope I see you again before you head out tomorrow. Remember, the Hearty Breakfast will

keep you energetic for the long drive.”

“Or put me to sleep,” I quipped, heading out. Kathy laughed behind me.

“We can’t have that now,” she said, hand on hip, shaking her head.

We got in the car and made our way to the Nighty Night bed and breakfast. The name had me skeptical because, honestly, what kind of childish name for a business was the Nighty Night?

But, once Kathy suggested it, I looked it up on my phone and it was actually really nice and the reviews were high and complimentary.

Li grabbed my phone and squealed when she saw the pictures. “Yes. Absolutely, yes,” she said, wiggling in her seat. “Most definitely. That place has a magical bath, and I desperately need one.”

Ignoring the idea of Li, naked in a bath with bubbles, Kathy insisted she’d call ahead to reserve our rooms with the owner, Dawn. We pulled up to the large white house with blue-green trim. Not knowing where to park, I pulled up to the side of the house.

“Wow,” Li breathed out. “Have you ever stayed in a place like this before?”

We left our luggage in the car for now until we finalized our rooms. “Hotels, some Airbnbs, but never a Bed and Breakfast like this. My uncle,” I paused when my chest instantly tightened. Clearing my throat, I continued, “We would go camping a lot.”

I opened the front door, and the foyer led to a front desk. The place felt cool, and the scents were crisp and floral. Surprisingly, they decorated it with a mixture of small-town charm and modern touches. A curvy woman who looked about my age smiled brightly as we walked up.

“Are you two Li and Lucas?” she asked, coming around the front desk to greet us.

Li looked startled by her guess, but recovered quickly and smiled politely. “Yes. Kathy sent us?”

“I’m Dawn,” she reached out to shake our hands.

Her natural, tight curls largely framed her face, and she had a gorgeous, big smile.

“Welcome to Heartstone. Just one night? Can we convince you to stay longer?” She walked back around the front desk, opened a ledger, and started writing in it with a fountain pen.

“We have a tight timeline to Colorado. Can’t stay past tonight, I’m afraid,” I said.

“That’s a shame.” She looked up and studied me with eyes too assessing. “I have a feeling you and my husband would get along great. Are you a whiskey man?”

“I am.”

“Brilliant. Tonight, you two will have to sit out on the veranda and have some of his buddy’s family’s whiskey. Three generations. How about you?” she asked Li.

“I’m a whiskey gal,” she replied.

I looked down at her in surprise. “Really?”

“What? You didn’t take me for a whiskey drinker?”

“I figured you’d like some sugary abomination with candy in it.”

The indignation on her face made it so hard to keep a straight face. She poked my side. I jumped and almost doubled over. Her face glowed with excitement.

“No way. You’re ticklish?”

“Don’t even think about it,” I kept my voice firm.

“Oh. I’m thinking about it,” she laughed. “I have a weapon now.”

“You two are cute. I have your room ready,” Dawn smiled, grabbing a pair of keys and showing us up the stairs.

“I should grab our bags,” I offered.

“Oh, hun, wait till Jeremy comes out to help. Also, I can’t have you rob me the satisfaction of seeing your face when I show you your room. Come, come,” she insisted, walking up the stairs.

“You heard the woman,” Li smiled, nudging my side.

“Woman,” I warn, mock glaring.

She wiggled her fingers like weapons. “Oh, this is going to be too much fun.” Hooking her finger into my belt loop, she tugged me up the stairs before letting go to follow Dawn.

Was this flirting? It felt like we skipped over some polite barrier into a comfort that I was enjoying too damn much.

Li was tiny, her frame also small, but her slight curves fit her body.

Her ass was right in my face going up the stairs.

I couldn't freaking help admiring the heart shape of it in those too tight leggings.

At the top of the stairs, Li turned and looked over her shoulder, raising a brow.

Shit. Caught.

Clearing my throat, I nudged us the rest of the way. I didn't miss the smirk she tried hiding.

Dawn unlocked the door to a room labeled, Lover's Dream and pushed it open, presenting her arm for us to enter. Something picked at my brain. Did she say downstairs, "room," as in singular?

"Welcome. You have no idea how lucky you both are that this room was available when Kathy called. With the Upstage Dinner Theatre event this week, everything is booked solid."

This room seemed to be in the back and had a wide window with a porch that had a view of the lake below. I just realized, we didn't know how much this room would cost for a night. Much less, two of these?

"Kathy didn't mention how much for each room for one night?" I asked.

Li turned from gawking out of the porch window to wait for Dawn's reply. "I hadn't even thought of that. Oh my goodness. This place is stunning, but might be out of our budget."

"Oh, hush. Kathy requested that I apply her discount. The room is \$70 for the night."



“That’s it?” Li asked, looking around at the modern suite with sage green paneling against the wall, the king-sized bed was against the wall. Everything was artistically decorated. The room had a large en-suite bathroom. In Tennessee, this room would’ve been a hundred dollars more a night, easily.

“You can take this one,” I said to Li. “I’ll take the other.”

“The other?” Dawn questioned. “Oh, there is no other. This is it. Kathy told me y’all wanted one room for the night.”

The energy in the space froze.

“Wait,” Li glanced at me, then back at Dawn. “We need two separate rooms.”

Dawn’s smile fell some. “Oh. Did Kathy not inform you that we were all booked? It was lucky we even had the Lover’s Dream suite available due to a cancellation.”

Li’s almond, deep brown eyes widened at me.

Shit.

“This is such a cliché,” she whispered. Then, after a brief pause, her face split with laughter. Dawn’s smile brightened again.

“Um,” I looked over at Dawn, but before I could ask, she already knew.

“Before you ask,” she started. “All other motels in the area are booked solid. I’ve already had to turn down several people before this cancellation came literally minutes before Kathy called. I’m sorry to say, this room is your only option in town.”

“Starlight,” a tall man with reddish hair, popped his head in. “Should I grab the

bags?”

Dawn’s expression instantly went from bright and polite to hearts in her eyes.

“Jeremy, come meet Li and Lucas. Kathy’s friends.

” My eyebrows raised. Kathy was a stranger two hours ago.

The man was tall—not as tall as me, but broad-shouldered and carried a strong presence.

He wrapped an arm around Dawn’s waist, his other hand in his jean pocket.

“Welcome. Dawn was excited to meet you two. We hope you enjoy your night here with us.”

“Honey, there seems to have been a misunderstanding. They’re not a couple,” Dawn informed him.

Jeremy looked between Li, who recovered from her laughing fit and was back to her previous wide-eyed expression, and me. Then his eyes went to the bed in the middle of the room.

“Ah,” he said. “Right. Well,” he spoke to me. “I can bring up a co—“ Dawn cleared her throat. He glanced down at her as they had a secret conversation with their eyes. “Dawn,” he admonished.

“We can bring some extra blankets,” Dawn said instead.

Li was now staring at me, then scoffed. “Okay. We’re adults. Neither of us are sleeping on the floor.”

“I would never have you take the floor,” I said more firmly than intended, but the idea was insulting.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Dawn’s smirk, but I ignored that.

“Then it’s settled. It’s just one night.” Li faced the couple. “Thank you for accommodating us and for such a low price.”

“Of course,” Dawn said, handing Li the keys.

“Honey,” she looked up at Jeremy.

“Got it, Starlight.” He leaned down and kissed her chastely before addressing me. “Mind showing me your car? I’ll help with the bags.”

“Sure. We didn’t know where to park.” I walked up to Li and instinctively touched her lower back. “You sure you’re okay with this?” I asked quietly.

Her body stiffened at first contact, then relaxed into my hand. “It’s a typical movie or book plot, but we’ll be fine.”

Confused at what she was referencing, I nodded and followed Jeremy downstairs.

I was sharing a bed with a woman I met this morning. She was making light of the situation, but the nagging feeling in my gut warned me it was going to be a long night.

A very long night.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:08 am*

Li

I literally just read a romance with the whole one-bed trope three nights ago.

This could not be real life. Dawn was spectacular, and I wanted to be her when I grew up.

She was probably only five or so years older than me, but she was great.

Once she left the room, it all sank in. The space was gorgeous.

Everything was more modernly decorated than I expected a small town bed and breakfast to be.

I almost didn't want to sit on the well-made bed and wrinkle it.

I opened the balcony door next to the large, wide window showcasing the lake below and stepped outside.

The air was balmy with that signature of Summer, but at least there was a light breeze making the heat bearable.

Leaning on the railing, I looked out at the vast lake that twinkled from the sun's rays bouncing off.

I couldn't remember the last time I slept in the same bed with another man.

The last few guys I dated for longer than a month tried to get me to stay sometimes, but I always went back home.

It's definitely been years. Looking over my shoulder, I studied the king-sized bed. At least it was big enough. Surely, I could put a pillow fort down the middle. Would that be too childish? Sighing, I headed back inside just as Jeremy, Dawn's husband, and Lucas came back carrying our bags.

"Thank you so much for this," I mentioned to Jeremy as he laid Lucas's duffel bag on the beautiful, sleek wooden bench at the end of the bed.

"You're welcome." His voice was deep and quiet.

He had a calming presence. Respectfully, as soon as the bags were set, Jeremy stepped back between the frame of the door.

"Dawn wanted to know if you two would be interested in our kitchen providing dinner tonight? We have a dining hall, or we could deliver it to the room."

"Oh. That's so nice," I looked at Lucas. His eyes asked, so I nodded.

"That would be great. I'll be out a bit late tonight, but bring mine to the room. I'll heat it up when I return," Lucas said, opening his backpack and rifling through it.

"Oh, nonsense," Dawn entered. I tried to keep my curiosity neutral, though a hundred questions buzzed in my head. Where was he going tonight? Was he leaving me here alone?

"You call down when you get back, and we'll be sure to bring you up a fresh plate," Dawn continued. Lucas opened his mouth, but she interrupted. "No, sir. I will not have you going to bed without a proper meal in your belly. You two have a long drive

tomorrow.”

“Trust me when I say, just accept with a smile. There’s no winning with Starlight,” Jeremy said in his quiet way.

Lucas glanced over but quickly focused back on Dawn. “That’s kind of you. Thank you.”

“Starlight,” Jeremy almost whispered.

“Right,” Dawn perked up. “Well, you two get settled. There’re some cute shops within walking distance if you’d like to go for a walk. If you two need anything else, please let us know.”

“Thank you, we will,” I said, my smile a bit forced. My mind was still racing with questions.

Once they left, an awkward hush settled. Lucas continued going through his bag. I didn’t know what to do with my hands or anything, really. Oh, just ask already, Li.

“You’re going somewhere?” Was that nonchalant? Casual?

He paused, not looking at me, then continued to remove things from the backpack and set them on the bed. “Uh. Yeah. I actually chose this stop because it was nearby somewhere I have to check out tonight.”

“Oh.” I tucked my hands in my sweatshirt pockets. “So,” I started, slightly rocking back on my heels. “Want company?” I mean, what else was I going to do here alone?

He froze again, keeping his head down. I could tell my essentially inviting myself made him uncomfortable, but in addition to not wanting to be bored and alone, I was

very curious about this mysterious errand.

Clearing his throat, which seemed to be something he did when he was thrown off, he said, “It’s kind of personal. Where I need to go. I don’t think you’d be comfortable either.”

“You know me well enough to make that conclusion?” I challenged. I mean, I was going to respect the whole “it’s personal” thing, but then he went and assumed I would be uncomfortable?

“It’s unusual. Most people would be uncomfortable,” he said, switching some things from his duffel bag to his backpack. That’s when I focused on the weird tools on the bed.

“What’s this?” I got closer to the bed and reached for one of them.

“No, wait—“ he tried to take it before I could, but I got there first.

I turned the rectangular box. “Radio?”

“No,” he said, trying to gently take it back, but I pulled it out of reach.

I studied the buttons. Turned it over. “What’s it do then?”

“It’s complicated,” he said, his voice tight, finally taking it from my hands. So, I reached for another thing. “Don’t—“ he sighed.

This was a thinner rectangular object with five colored lights at the top and some buttons. Holding it up, I raised my brows in question.

“You’re not going to let this go, are you?” he asked.

Smiling, I said, “Nope.”

Sighing, he replied, “Right.” He took it back and set it down. Pointing at each one, he named them. “EMF reader. Spirit box. Thermometer.”

I repeated them in my head, trying to decipher. Then, one of them made some sense. “Spirit box? As in, to talk to ghosts?” He just looked at me, not responding. “Is all this for ghost...hunting?” He exhaled again, still not clarifying. “Lucas! Are you going somewhere to use these? Tonight?”

He took in my wide-eyed disbelief. Facing the bed, he started packing everything. “I’ll be back before midnight, but don’t wait up for me. Get your rest.”

I pushed in front of him, blocking him. “Wait a second. You’re seriously not going to talk about this?”

“What’s there to talk about? This is my business.”

“Sure,” I argued, “But I’m the one stuck with you for the next forty-eight hours at least. So, what?”

You’re going off to piss off some spirits, get one to latch onto you in anger, then come back here to me where they’re going to torment me in my sleep and next you know, we’ll be in desperate need of a church, priest, holy water, and an exorcist! This isn’t funny!” I slapped his chest.

Grabbing my shoulders, he tried reigning in his laughter. “It’s a little funny.”

And, damn him for giving me this rare smile I hadn’t seen yet while I was having a panic attack. “Deep breath,” he said calmly while demonstrating.



I synced our breathing. My butt was against the bed, our bodies almost pressed together.

His thumbs were softly caressing my shoulders as we breathed together.

I stared up into those frosted blue eyes that held my warm brown ones prisoner.

At some point, my hands had a mind of their own and grabbed hold of his waist. Every inhale had my chest brush his torso.

On an exhale that parted my lips, Lucas's gaze went straight to them.

My breath caught involuntarily as my eyes also went to his full lips.

His hands tightened as did mine, pulling each other closer.

My body swelled. My eyes became heavy. I looked back into his eyes that seemed closer now that his head was slowly descending closer.

Chirp.

We both jumped at the alert from one of our phones.

Lucas's eyes closed as he harshly exhaled. "Shit," he said softly before letting go and reaching in his pocket for his phone. Frozen in place, I tried regulating my breathing. I scooted out from between Lucas and the bed, putting some much-needed distance between us.

Lucas was checking a text, but I caught his eyes flicking back to me. "I gotta make a call," he said before turning and heading to the attached balcony. He closed the door behind him, gave the room his back, and made his call.

I stared, but my mind was replaying what just happened.

What just happen? Yes, the man is attractive.

I'd have to be an idiot not to recognize that.

But I don't do this. I don't get all stupid when a hot guy touches me.

It was completely innocent. He wasn't even trying to make a move. My eyes went to his bag.

And he's leaving to go hunt ghosts? Is this man for real?

Did I believe in ghosts?

I didn't know. I believed my l?o lao was happy, free of pain, watching from a place better than this. I doubted she was lingering around, floating through our old home. I'd hate that. I didn't want her in limbo.

There was that tightness in my chest again. My hand rubbed at it, hoping to ease the tension. Lucas ended his call and came back inside.

"I'll be heading out now," he said, grabbing his backpack.

"Seriously?" I asked. Were we just going to ignore the last ten minutes?

"I have to go, Li," he said, gently.

"And you don't want me to go with you," I said, not asked.

"I need to do this alone."

Staring at each other across the room, we held, challenging, neither willing to break.

I knew I wouldn't win this one. I hated not winning.

Mouth twisted, I sighed and broke eye contact.

"Fine," I said, going to the en suite bathroom.

I didn't want to watch him leave. I closed the door and leaned against it, listening for him to go.

It was silent for a minute. Then, I heard footsteps and the room door shut. Closing my eyes, I slid down and settled on the tile floor, trapped with thoughts about life and death, I wanted nothing to do with.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:08 am*

Lucas

The “living ghost town” of Missouri was a bust. Sure, the place looked creepy as fuck, but if there were ghosts, they were either sleeping or on vacation. I felt stupid every time I spoke into the spirit box, asking, “Is somebody there?”

It was eleven eighteen. I was out later than planned.

Lies. I knew exactly why I lingered. The cute, pint-sized, gorgeous Asian spitfire sleeping in the same bed I’m supposed to just lie on and pretend I wasn’t tempted to pull her close against me.

I kept dreaming of running my hands through all that long, wavy, ebony hair.

That mouth. Fuck, that mouth. So full, yet perfectly fit her face and features.

She drove me crazy every time she rubbed that blackberry chapstick on them.

The scent lingered after. Only reason I knew the damn flavor was because she repeated what it was every time she offered and I refused.

It was a running joke for her at this point.

Yeah, I wanted some, but from her lips not the damn stick.

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel.

Eighteen months since I got rid of Amanda's cheating ass.

Five months since I lost Uncle Filip. I was not in the headspace to fuck around.

And the last person I'd mess with was Li.

I saw the pain and darkness that pulled at her when she didn't think anyone was watching.

But I always was. I couldn't help it. How else did you explain me taking her, a complete stranger, along for this crazy road trip?

Getting out of the car, I grabbed my pack and circled around to the front. A shadow caused me to jerk when I recognized it was Jeremy sitting on one of the rocking chairs on the front porch.

"Whiskey?" He raised his own glass, offering.

"Yeah," my voice croaked. Clearing it, I sat in the adjacent rocking chair. Jeremy poured me a glass and handed it over.

"Cheers," he said, raising his to meet mine.

"Cheers," I replied.

I sipped slowly as the caramelized liquor coated my tongue. I raised my brows in appreciation when the smoothness of the whiskey went down nicely.

"I know," he said with a smirk. "Mark's family makes some damn good whiskey."

"That they do," I agreed, taking another sip. "Damn."

Jeremy's deep chuckle blended with the chirp of the crickets while fireflies flew around the veranda, as Dawn called it.

"Late night," Jeremy observed. I took him for a no bullshit kind of man. I preferred that.

"Had something I had to do." I took a bigger sip this time.

"Worth the trip?" he asked.

I sat with the question for a second. Was it? "Takes patience," I justified against my own emotions saying, screw this ghost hunting nonsense.

"Better man than me," he weirdly replied.

"Come again?"

Jeremy glanced over after drinking. "Beautiful woman in my bed, waiting all night for me, having dinner in your room alone. Hard to drag me away. Especially if my trip wasn't even fruitful." He stared out at the driveway. "But, that's just me."

"It's not like that," I defended. "We're acquaintances, at best. Met this morning."

"Never would've guessed," was his response.

"We hadn't meant to share a room at all. You were all booked up." My body grew more tense with every need to make him see. Li and I were strangers who were headed in the same direction and would never see each other again after this trip.

"You're thinking awfully hard over there. Want to talk about it?" Jeremy asked.

“I just met her, man. I can’t go there.”

“You know, it’s funny, thinking back to how I met Dawn,” he started.

“She had just moved here from Chicago to help out a friend. They had come out to watch the baseball game at Let’s Score.

It’s a sports bar here in town. Foolish girl came dressed down in Sox gear like she was still back home.

Had no clue they were our biggest rival. ” He laughed at the memory.

“I’ve been a baseball fan my whole life, and I might be the only person in Missouri who loves the Royals and Cards equally. But damned if she didn’t make me want to cheer for that stupid team.”

“We got into a debate about history and sports.” He pulled his ball cap lower.

“At some point, I made her laugh and damn, that’s when I knew.

That woman was going to wreck my world and bring so much damn light into it.

Didn’t even take twenty-four hours. Hell, I hadn’t even known her one night.

” Jeremy looked me in the eye. “When that happens, you don’t waste time with logic.

Fuck what society, family, people say. I knew I’d marry that woman before I left the bar.

” He took another sip. “Best ten years of my life.”

We finished our whiskeys in silence after that.

It was comfortable sitting there with him, but inside, my mind and body were tumbling around.

I knew what he meant with that story. I didn't feel the need to explain.

While that was sweet, it was also rare. And just because I was attracted and yes, drawn to Li as well, didn't mean it was or ever would be anything more.

"Not sure you're still hungry, but Dawn left you a slice of her best down-home pie.

It's lemon velvet cream, and believe me, you don't want to leave Heartstone without having a slice.

It's in the kitchen." Jeremy got up, took his bottle of whiskey, and headed for the front door. "Have a good night, Lucas."

"You too, Jeremy."

I sat out there a bit longer. It was officially after midnight.

Call me a coward, but I hoped Li would be in such a deep sleep that she wouldn't hear me settle in for the night.

I grabbed the pie, which Dawn wrapped up like a homemade gift for a neighbor.

Twine ribbon and all. Shaking my head, I went upstairs and entered the dark room, except for the bathroom light, which Li left on so I could see when I came in.

That tugged on my heart. I walked quietly to her side of the bed, where she slept on



her stomach, holding a pillow under her head.

Damn, she was beautiful. Her skin looked like soft porcelain.

Her hair tumbled all over the bed, even over on my side.

The covers rested at her waist, revealing a light gray, thin-sleeved PJ top.

All that soft skin. The temptation to run the back of my fingers down her arm.

I closed my eyes, berating my thoughts. I got ready for bed and slowly eased into my side. My mind still wired, I sat against the headboard and unwrapped my pie. I left the bathroom light on so I could see without waking Li.

I took my first bite and hell. I accidentally groaned out loud. That shit was good. Lemon-filled and tart but balanced with sweetness. So creamy. And her crust was buttery and flaky.

“I know, right?” Li’s sleep-soaked voice caused me to startle. That sleepy chuckle went straight to my dick. “Sorry,” she smiled up from her pillow. I hadn’t even noticed that she had turned over at some point, facing me. “What time is it?” her groggy voice asked.

“I’m sorry I woke you,” I said quietly.

“It’s okay. I was having a weird dream anyway.” She settled deeper into her pillow.

“It’s past midnight,” I answered. “And what was the dream?” She was eyeing my pie. “Didn’t you already have your own?” I teased.

The smile she flashed could’ve stopped my damn heart.

She pushed herself up and I held in my groan this time because that damn cotton PJ tank gaped open and gave me a full view of her firm petite breasts.

I focused on my pie. Next thing I knew, her finger was dipping into the cream on top and bringing it to her mouth.

I looked at her, offended, which caused a musical laugh of pure joy to come out.

Fuck, I was in trouble.

Leaning against the headboard, we were shoulder to shoulder. “My grandmother,” she quietly offered.

I looked over, her warm brown eyes focused on my shoulder.

I forked a bit of the pie and brought it closer to her.

Her eyes met mine with a smile in them. Li leaned forward and wrapped those full lips around my fork.

Swallowing, I watched every move with intense focus.

She moaned quietly, which did not help my body from behaving.

Fucker, stay down.

“I almost forgot how good that is. I convinced myself I must have dreamed it,” she said.

“Jeremy warned me not to leave town without a slice.”

“You saw Jeremy?” she asked.

I nodded while taking another bite. “Had that whiskey Dawn told me about. He was hanging out front when I got in.”

“And how did everything go? With your errand?” Her voice was soft, a little cautious.

“Not what I hoped.” I scooped another forkful and offered it to her.

She had no qualms taking it, which gave me a chuckle. She smiled around her bite. “What was the dream?” I asked.

Sighing, she leaned her head on my shoulder. “She was teaching me to make her hot and sour soup?” Lifting her head to look at me, she asked, “Ever had it?” I shook my head. “Are you good with spice?”

“Didn’t grow up on a ton of spicy food. Grew a better tolerance when I got older, but I doubt I could match whatever level you might be used to.”

Smiling, she leaned her head back on my shoulder. Her long hair draped over it. A faint floral scent filled me on my next inhale.

“It’s so good. We were in our kitchen. Kind of.

It was our kitchen, but different somehow.

Dreams never get it right. She was,” she stopped to laugh.

“She was chopping the largest mushroom in the world. Normally, we use wood ear and dried shiitake mushrooms, so no, they shouldn’t have been huge.

I mean, like, bigger than our heads, huge. ”

I chuckled. “What else?”

She sighed and stayed quiet for a minute. “I miss her,” she whispered.

I looked down at the top of her head. Her nose scrunched. I moved my arm to wrap it around her. Her head came up to face me, and even in the darkness, I saw her eyes water. “I know,” I said, my voice scratchy. Because I did. I knew exactly what she was feeling.

Her breath hiccupped before she broke. I pulled her in closer.

Li wrapped her arm around my chest and let herself cry.

There was a safety in letting go in a dimly lit room while the world was asleep.

Holding tightly as Li released, I let a few of my own tears I’d been holding back fall.

Remembering my uncle’s broken body in that hospital bed.

His head was swollen from the trauma after the fall.

The squeeze of his hand in mind before he took his last breath.

My chest stuttered as Li whimpered and held me tighter. We both released pain, still raw, and every moment we walked around pretending we were not wounded and bleeding felt like salt being rubbed in, waiting to be confronted later.

Two lost souls on a road trip.

Where will we end up?

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:08 am*

Li

Warmth.

I nuzzled my face deeper into the delicious masculine scent I seemed to be enveloped in.

Fine hairs tickled my nose. Then, multiple things registered.

The hand tightly wrapped around my back practically cupped my side boob.

As those fingers curled in, my breath hitched from the shivers that traveled down my side.

My leg, which seemed to be hooked around another larger, stronger one, pressed closer involuntarily until my thigh bumped something.

Something warm, thick like a log, and faintly pulsing. Oh my God.

I was terrified to open my eyes.

Last night flashed in succession. Crying all over Lucas. Feeling the warm, wet drops fall against my shoulder and arm. He was crying. We held each other for, I couldn't tell you how long, and I'm pretty sure we fell asleep that way.

Now, I'm still in this man's arms and we're like, really freaking close. We're practically fused together. And my core is tightening, heat is spreading in my entire

lower half, and what the hell is wrong with me that I want to lick the bare chest I'm lying on?

When did he take his shirt off?

The sexiest, most inconvenient sleepy groan came from the Viking beast under me.

Hello, lady bits. Calm the hell down.

His nose brushed the top of my head as he pulled me deeper into his body and, oh, my word, that felt so damn good.

Maybe I'm momentarily insane, you know. I was struck with grief last night.

This reaction is just heightened emotions playing with my libido.

My libido which had been dormant for over a year, decided now was the time to wake up?

It was like my body was ignoring my mental freak out because my arm wrapped around his torso and held on tightly. Traitor.

Lucas's other hand found the thigh curled up against his—well, very awake, you know—and slowly caressed up my bare skin.

Those softly calloused fingers fired every nerve ending in my lower half.

I couldn't help my back from arching, my lips brushing up against his jaw, then his neck.

My breath panted, and his body really seemed to be on board with that.

His hold on my upper thigh, under my PJ t-shirt dress, gripped on, and that's it.

My vocal cords betrayed me. I whimpered.

Lucas was breathing heavily. Somehow, I knew he was awake. Like, before this moment, I think he was only half awake and not fully aware. Oh, but he was fully aware now. I could feel it. We both turned into immovable statues. Both panting.

Who the hell was going to break first?

A sharp knock on the door caused both of us to jerk hard.

"This is your scheduled wake-up call," Dawn's voice called from behind the door. "Good morning, you two! See you downstairs soon."

Then her footsteps grew further away.

Welp. No lying to each other now. We officially couldn't pretend we didn't know the other was awake.

Clearing his throat, Lucas slowly unlatched every body part of his that was one with mine. Eyes open, I rolled off onto my back and stared at the ceiling, which felt safer. I could see him fall back on his back from the corner of my eye.

My treacherous lady bits were swollen and begging to be filled, clenching for something long and hard. Well, too bad. Suck it up! I mean, no. Don't suck anything. We're not doing any sucking. Frik. Now I was picturing—nope. Stop that.

"Morning." He broke the silence first.

"Morning," I croaked, then rolled my eyes. Nice, Li. Way to be cool.



“Gonna take a shower,” he said, rolling off the bed.

“Mm-hm,” was all I managed, only peeking at his glorious ass in the sleep pants that did nothing to hide how spectacular that view was. I sighed when it disappeared through the bathroom door.

“Yup,” I said to myself. “Okay.” I got out of bed and prepped my clothes and toiletries for when he got out, and I could hop in.

It was a fun, awkward little dance, avoiding touching each other when he finished, and I rushed in, closing the door a bit too hard.

We both got ready, packed, and Jeremy was already in the room when I came out from doing my hair and makeup to help take the bags to the car.

We said our goodbyes to Dawn. She gave the best hugs.

“You two take good care of each other, you hear?” She told us as she hugged a reluctant Lucas.

Jeremy and him seemed to have this telepathic male conversation with their eyes. We headed to Kathy’s for breakfast, and surprisingly, it was a companionable silence. We ate, looked out the window as the day came alive, and relaxed into the next part of our trip.

About fifteen minutes on the highway, I asked, “What’s our next stop?”

Lucas glanced over before answering. “Basic Plaines. It’s about eight, eight and a half hours out.”

I nodded, tapping an anxious rhythm on my knee, which I had propped up on the seat.

“We stopping before that?”

“We’ll probably need to gas up halfway there. We can gear up, and use the bathroom then. Unless you have to before,” he added.

“Sounds good. I’m fine for now.”

He grunted and nodded, focused on the road.

Connecting my phone to his car, I took control of the road music. I was ready for it before it happened. Lucas’s eyes slowly met mine in agonized disbelief, and my smile was a mile wide.

“You’re kidding, right?”

Laughing, I sang along as I’m Every Woman by Whitney Houston played loud through his speakers. Paying attention to the road, Lucas shook his head, but I could see his lips twitch. The man was trying not to smile. Suddenly, it was my sole duty to get that man to crack a smile. Dancing in my seat, I swayed my shoulders back and forth, singing passionately off-key. His lips tightened into a straight line. Smiling huge, I leaned over and sang at his profile. Lucas turned his face, narrowing his eyes at me, but we both froze when his lips practically grazed mine. I sucked in a sharp breath, but my body didn’t pull away.

Our noses were touching while Whitney sang to us in the background.

His eyes flicked down to my lips, which were parted.

So low, I almost missed it, Lucas groaned, tightening his grip on the steering wheel.

I could hear the whine of the leather before he sharply turned his attention back to the

road.

Exhaling the breath lodged in my throat, I straighten back into my seat, lowering the song from my phone.

We rode in that tension through three of my road trip playlist songs. No reaction from him. I was painstakingly playing out conversations that I could start to break this thick wall in the car when he surprised the hell out of me.

“What do you,” he started, but collected his thoughts first. “Where do you think your grandmother is now?”

Gasping in air, my body locked from the sudden assault.

“Shit,” he said, looking over. “I’m sorry. Forget I asked. That was insensitive.” He shook his head, his brow tightly furrowed.

Watching his reaction, I wanted to soothe him, even against my own denial of emotions I’d preferred keeping locked away. Searching my mind, I asked myself the same question. I didn’t want to bullshit him. After last night, something honest passed between us. It felt sacred.

“It’s tricky,” I started softly. Lucas’s body became very still.

I knew I had his undivided attention.” For us, at least, in Chinese culture, it’s considered bad luck or a disrupter to the harmony of living to speak directly about death.

” I chuckled, remembering. “Of course, as traditional as l?o lao was,” I glanced at Lucas, “my grandmother.” He nodded, still looking ahead.

“She loved being a secret-not-so-secret rebel. Those last few months,” I paused, my throat tightening.

I startled at the tender touch from his hand that settled on my hand that was on my lap.

He gently squeezed in support. I turned my palm to hold his in return, like my anchor.

“We talked about how in tradition, we have altars and rituals done to honor elders and ancestors who have passed.” I shook my head, more to dislodge the emotion.

My eyes welled up, wanting to release. “She told me, “Li. Don’t dwell on keeping me alive.” His hand tensed in mine.

“Nothing you do or don’t do will ever change how much I love you.

How proud I am of you.” My chest hitched, holding back the sob.

“Live, she said. I had my time. It’s your turn now. ”

Our fingers intertwined. I couldn’t say who initiated that.

It almost felt inevitable. Inhaling deeply to compose myself, I carried on.

“For us, we grow up believing they go on to face their own unique journey in the afterlife. Growing up more Americanized, it’s something you just accept as is when you’re little. ”

“And now?” he asked, his voice rough and quiet.

“Now?” I sighed. “I want to believe in this ethereal paradise where she continues on.

Where being human is so far out of reach, but wherever she is, I hope her memories of us are still with her, in some way. Her love is still eternal.”

After a few minutes of us lost in thought, Starship’s Nothing’s Gonna Stop Us Now played from my playlist in the background. His hand was still one with mine. Neither initiated letting go.

“What about you?” I asked. “You lost someone too, right?” It was a guess. Could have been recent. Could have been years ago. But I recognized that lost look of grief in his eyes because it’s the same one I saw in the mirror these days.

He nodded, still focusing on the road. “Five months ago,” is all he said.

My hand squeezed, as did my heart. L?o lao went three months ago.

Holy shit. We were both still raw from recent death.

“You hide it better than me,” I said softly, staring at his profile.

That strong jaw was surrounded by an ash-pale blonde beard.

I wanted to run the tips of my fingernails through it, smooth the hard expression between his brows.

“I don’t know what I believe,” he finally said, shaking his head.

“Growing up, you hear the Christian stories of God and heaven. But, as an adult, no one was really religious that I knew. Uncle Filip believed this was it. We lived on this earth; we went back into the earth when it was all said and done.”

“And what do you believe?” I’m so curious to know because even speaking of his

Uncle, I could see him wrestling.

“I don’t know.” I barely heard it. He cleared his throat. “But, I want to talk to him again.” His hand twitched, the one holding mine.

He wanted to talk to him again? “Who?” I asked.

“Uncle Filip,” he answered, still not looking at me.

“How would you—“ then it hit me. The ghost hunting.

That’s when I finally got his eyes. He looked almost desperate, wanting me to understand. I nodded. “Okay,” I said.

A breath later, he nodded back. “Okay,” he said, then faced the road again.

It was a silent agreement. Did I know what all entailed in this agreement? Nope. But I knew I would hold up my end. I would be there for Lucas as he was there for me.

As we drove, music playing, hands holding, I looked over my shoulder at the vase I’d painted.

The one I made for her. The only thing of hers I chose to honor and keep with me.

I wasn’t going against her wishes. I wouldn’t set up an altar for her.

I just felt her essence still carried within every brush stroke she made.

Lucas’s expression, while more relaxed than before, still held tension. I lightly ran my thumb back and forth over his hand. He looked down at them. I didn’t stop. After a few moments, he brushed mine with his thumb and kept driving.

I guess I was going ghost hunting.

Lucas

Li stayed quiet during our gas break and for the next hour after that. She kept flipping through her horrendous music, but she didn't ask any more questions or share any more about her grandmother.

I thought of fifty different questions I wanted to ask, but I couldn't make myself say the words.

Why had I told her the truth? I should have just kept my mouth closed about wanting to talk to Uncle Filip again.

I knew most people wouldn't understand the need that drove me, but I guess I figured she would.

Her loss was just as recent and as deep as mine.

Wouldn't she want to talk to her grandmother again if she could?

Wouldn't she give anything for one more day with someone who was obviously so important to her?

I listened to the quiet songs that filled the car.

Most of the songs she had chosen were more somber than what was playing this morning.



I figured that had more to do with our conversation and the mindset I left her in than anything else.

I wanted to break her out of her mood, but I had no idea how to make her smile again.

Another upbeat song started, and I expected her to change it, but she didn't. I glanced over, and a gentle smile rested on her lips. Desperate to turn it into one of the ones I have seen before, I let out a playful groan.

"Please tell me you don't love this song." I didn't mind it. I had a quick memory of a grade school dance, and my fifth-grade teacher swaying in the corner.

"You can say whatever you want about my music taste, but you do not disrespect Lionel Riche." She got serious.

"Are you kidding?" I didn't expect that reaction.

"L?o lao loved Lionel," she informed me. "He was her hall pass."

I looked over, expecting her to be smiling, but the same serious look was on her face. Hilarious laughter took over my body as I tried to picture an older version of Li crushing on the singer.

"Stop laughing." She pushed at my shoulder.

"I can't." I remembered yesterday when she had her own laughing fit, and now I completely understood.

"So, who's your hall pass?" I wanted to know what kind of competition I had.

That thought knocked the laughter right out of me. Was I fucking serious? There was

no way I was about to get jealous of some random celebrity. I had to be losing my mind.

“I’d have to have a husband or a boyfriend in order to have a hall pass.” She shook her head.

I decided to let the conversation go. There was no need for me to push the subject.

“I don’t think my uncle had a hall pass.” At least that wasn’t something we talked about.

She was back to being quiet as I drove past the sign letting us know we only had about ten more miles to Basic Plaines.

“Is that one of the questions you would ask your Uncle if you could?” Her voice was just above the music.

“No.” I actually wasn’t sure what I’d ask. “I don’t think there’s anything specific. He knew so much about life, and I think I’d just want him to share whatever advice he could give.”

“Didn’t he do that when he was with you?”

“Not enough.” I didn’t think it would ever feel like enough. “Did your grandmother share everything with you?”

She had a contemplative expression that made me think she was really giving my question some thought.

“She shared the important things.” She smiled. “Family recipes I still can’t master. Jokes she found funny, whether I laughed or didn’t. Big regrets and the moments that

made her the happiest. How she fell in love with my grandfather and how hard it was to keep going after my parents died.”

“So, there’s nothing more you’d ask her?” I felt a hint of jealousy. “Nothing more you’d want to know?”

“I’m sure there is, but at some point, I have to learn how to let her go.” She shrugged. “Nothing is going to bring her back, and I want her to be at peace. I have to believe that she is at peace. At some point, it has to be enough.”

Her words stayed with me all the way into Basic Plains and through checking into our hotel.

I hated the idea of leaving her alone again tonight, but I wasn’t ready to let go. Not yet. Not until I knew my uncle was still with me. After all, wasn’t that what all the platitudes said?

Your loved ones will never leave you. They will always be watching over you. Whenever you need them, you will feel their presence.

Well, I didn’t feel shit and I was looking. I was desperate to feel something, anything.

I took Li to dinner as a way of alleviating my guilt. I made sure our conversation wasn’t as heavy. I wanted her to be in a better mood before I left.

When we got back to the hotel, she surprised me. “What time are we leaving tonight?”

“Excuse me?”

“I know why you’re here.” She sat on the edge of the bed. I didn’t put too much

thought into the fact that I didn't even bother thinking about getting two rooms tonight.

"I did some research after you left last night, and I learned the history of the legend of Parker Ranch. How it is supposed to be one of the top ten haunted places in the United States." She leaned back on her hands.

"I figured that was why you wanted to stop here. I mean, it isn't like there's anything else in this town except the Route 14 souvenir shops. "

She had a point. Basic Plaines was maybe the most perfectly named place in the world. Everything about this town was Basic as fuck.

"You don't have to go with me."

"I want to."

"Are you sure?" She was the one who said we needed to let the dead go.

"Sure." She sounded anything but.

I debated telling her no, but in the end agreed. An hour later, we were back on the road.

Parker Ranch was twenty minutes outside of town.

The history was that over a hundred years ago, a fire broke out in one of the barns.

A lot of animals died, along with three of the ranch hands.

Rumor had it that the owner of the ranch set the fire on purpose because he wanted to

collect the insurance.

Ever since then, nothing has been able to grow on the land, and the few people who bought the property swore they saw the ranch hands still out in the field working with the animals that died in the fire.

People from all over had come out to check the place. Most had reported hearing strange noises, feeling a presence, or hearing the whine of the horse and the crackle of the wood as it burned. If there was any place I was going to be able to make contact with a spirit, it had to be here.

“This place is spooky.” Li shivered as we drove up to the ranch. They did tours every night for the ghost enthusiasts, and I had booked my spot a month ago.

“You can stay in the car,” I offered.

She shook her head back and forth. “Yeah, cause that would be less spooky.” I knew I shouldn’t have let her come with me.

Li held onto my arm as we walked into the main house.

It was hard to believe it was still standing, but apparently no other family had wanted to live in it.

The tour guide encouraged us to use our equipment.

They understood that this was a ghost hunter's dream, and they knew where their bread was buttered.

I pulled out my readers and went to work.

I kept an eye on Li just in case this all became too much for her, but I'd also be lying if I said I wasn't happy she was here.

A part of me wanted her to understand why this was so important to me.

I also kind of wanted to prove to her there was nothing wrong with making contact.

To let her know it was okay to want answers.

We walked through the house on our own guided tour. I kept listening for any disturbance. Any change in temperature. Any sign that we were on the right track.

Someone yelled out that they saw something, and I ran from our room into the back covered porch looking for what they saw, but there was nothing.

"I don't like this." Li shook her head. She was standing in the doorway, looking over the back field. "We shouldn't be here." She shivered and put her arms around her waist.

"Do you see something?" The way her eyes were moving, I needed to know.

"We shouldn't be here, Lucas." Her voice rose. "All of this is wrong."

"Li."

"Why can't you let it go?" She brought her eyes to mine. "Is this really what your uncle would want?"

"I...he—"

Something crashed behind us, and everyone on the porch jumped. I looked past Li to

see a broken blue vase on the floor. The small markings looked familiar, but I couldn't place them.

"That was—" Li wasn't looking at the vase. Her eyes were still on the field. "Li?"

She didn't say anything. She turned as fast as she could and almost knocked over a lamp in her haste to leave. I followed behind her as she ran through the house and right out the front door.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:08 am*

Li

Voices.

I didn't know how to describe them, but they felt familiar. I know that sounds wild, but I'd never been more sure of anything as I was in that moment when what felt like a warning flooded my entire body with chills.

"Li," Lucas called out, close behind me.

No, no, no. I needed to stay away.

Rushing to the car, I yanked on the handle, but the door was locked. A closed-mouth scream escaped, feeling helpless and desperate to find peace and safety.

"Li," Lucas turned me to face him.

"No," I cried and moved away.

Shock held him in place. "What happened?"

I shook my head frantically. I could still hear the echo of them. I could feel the wrongness of that place.

"Li. Talk to me."

My eyes welled up with heat. This is why you don't talk about the dead. This is why



you leave that alone. I felt Lucas approach cautiously. I had to heed the warning. I needed to stay away. I didn't want to disturb l?o lao in her peace.

"Li," his voice broke.

Finally, I looked him in the eye. "I can't."

"What did you see?" he asked, gently.

I shook my head. I swore there were animals out in that field. I could see dark silhouettes. And the eerie chokehold of fear suffocated me and turned my insides cold. And in my head, familiar voices, my parents, my l?o lao, other Chinese-speaking voices. I felt them warn me to leave.

"I'll take us back," Lucas said, carefully walking around me to open the car door. He waited for me to get inside. I needed to be away from him. His curious need seeped out of his pores. I couldn't risk disturbing my ancestors' spirits. I felt mad with confusion and fear.

"Come on, Li. I'm sorry I brought you. Let's get back," he tried coaxing.

Reason finally broke in. I couldn't get back on my own. And this was the last place I wanted to be for another minute. I rushed around him to get into the passenger seat.

The drive back was dead silent except for the soft purr of the engine, the bumps along the road, and the occasional night sounds buzzing by. The inside of his car was thick with uncomfortable tension. My body was wound so tight.

The moment we got back to the hotel, Lucas had barely put the car in park when I jumped out and rushed to get my shit and go. Where? I didn't know. I wasn't thinking clearly. I shoved the few things I took out of my bag and packed them back up.

“Please. Talk to me. What happened out there?”

I shook my head and grabbed my suitcase and bags, then pushed past him outside to drop them at the side of the door. I was acting insane, I knew, but pure instinct was driving me in that moment.

“What are you doing?” he asked, following my every move while being careful not to get too close. Finally, he snapped as I tried to make it past him. “Talk to me!”

“No,” I yelled back. “I’m not supposed to talk about it,” I yelled. “I never should have talked about it.”

His expression was a mixture of anger and sympathy. “I shouldn’t have let you come. It was too much. You didn’t want to.”

“And you should have?” I challenged.

He flinched as if I’d struck him. “What?”

”Is that really what you wanted to experience? You want to face dark, haunting things in the night? For what? What is that supposed to accomplish?”

“I thought you understood,” he forced out, trying to keep from breaking.

“What would speaking with them one more time do? What would it fix, Lucas?”

He turned away from me, but I was too charged up not to have this confrontation. I chased him till he was forced to face me again. He huffed in annoyance.

“I had to get out of there,” I told him, my voice breaking again.

“They warned me. I had to get far away. Why? Because stirring up that shit in hopes of finding l?o lao won’t change that she’s dead.

” My throat closed, but I pushed through.

“They’re dead, Lucas. We can’t change it. We can’t bring them back.”

His face twisted, fighting emotions.

“We have to learn to live with it. This is reality.”

“ I can’t accept that,” he cried out in my face. But his anger, I knew, wasn’t at me.

“We have to.”

“No. There are answers out there. I need to find them.” He turned around to get into the car.

“No,” I yelled. If we were going back to that God-awful place, I wanted my stuff out. I ripped open the trunk of his SUV.

“Li,” he reprimanded.

“No! I want my stuff. You can go run off chasing ghosts—literally!—I’m honoring her soul. I’m letting her rest in peace.” I was sobbing through my speech. “She suffered enough on earth. She deserves to rest.”

I took hold of the pottery vase I made her. Her intricate blue designs, painted so delicately, instantly flooded me with peace. Pulling it out from the back, I felt Lucas behind me.

“Li, please. Let me,” he started.

“Stop, Lucas. I’m leaving.” I wrestled away from his hold.

Swinging my body out of the trunk, I turned too quickly, bumping against Lucas, causing the vase to fly out of my hands.

Crash.

Shatter.

No, no, no, no. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t...

breathe. My name echoed around me, but I couldn’t take my eyes off the shards of clay scattered on the dirty hotel parking lot floor.

I wailed, loud, high-pitched, animal-like.

My knees gave out, and I crashed to the hard, cracked pavement floor.

I heard multiple crunching sounds. I felt pain, but I blocked it all out.

Hands touched me, but I just screamed and pushed them away, reaching to collect all the pieces. So many pieces.

I frantically looked around for something, anything to put the pieces into. My shirt was too tight to use as a basket, which just made the wailing sobs uncontrollable. My vision blurred as I scraped my palms along the concrete, scooping every broken shard closer to me.

“Stop. Li. Stop,” Lucas gently but firmly took my wrists and brought them to my

chest. I fought. I tried. “Shh. I know. I’m so fucking sorry,” he whispered as my body pitched forward and I used his chest to release a scream that came from the depths of my soul.

We rocked, back and forth, on our knees, in the dead of night, in the middle of this parking lot. I didn’t remember much of what happened next. I knew I felt pain in my knees, my hands, and my soul.

That was the only thing I had left of her.

Her jewelry, trinkets, things she sewed or knitted, I sold at a garage sale.

I had to pay off the insurance. I made peace with giving them away.

Eventually. But this vase was not just hers, it was ours.

It had both of us intertwined with its creation.

I’d run my fingers over the grooves the paint left behind when it dried just to feel close to her.

It’s ironic that me telling Lucas we had to learn to let go. Yet, here I was, holding on with a death grip to a piece of her.

I couldn’t move.

Lucas carried me inside, cleaned my wounds, then left me in bed. It all felt like a fever dream. I stared at the wall, unseeing. Was this my punishment for going to the ghost place? Did I disturb her honor, and as a balancing of scales, I lost what I had left of her?

At some point, sleep came. I thought I stayed awake all night, but between feeling Lucas get into bed and turn off the light, me staying stock still, staring at that hotel wall, and counting the chips in the paint, the room wasn't draped in darkness anymore.

I was scared to go to sleep. I didn't want to dream about that field or the creepy undead animals, or remember that tentacle chill that grabbed my body.

The room, when I blinked, had a faint hint of dawn coming through a broken sliver from the curtains. Turning over, I felt the tug and ache of broken skin. Sharp stabs of pain shot up my arm when I used my hand to hold up my weight. The bed was empty.

Fear of a different kind hit me.

Did he leave me?

My eyes darted around, looking for evidence.

Then I saw it. His backpack was still here.

The relief that washed over my body almost brought a sob.

Sitting up, something else caught my eye.

On the round table by the window was a large sports sweatshirt with all of my l?o lao's vase shards collected in the middle.

My bandaged hand covered my mouth as I whimpered, and instant tears fell.

He gathered them for me. He mended my scars and brought me back something precious, though broken.

In the light of a new day, I realized he and I needed to talk. It was me who insisted on going last night. I couldn't blame him. He was grieving in his own way, too. Just as lost and desperate to move on.

I just wasn't prepared to read too much into the fear I felt when I thought he'd left me. I couldn't be falling for this equally broken man. We were strangers. He had a life he would go back to, while I was a nomad with nowhere to call home anymore. We couldn't be more doomed to fail.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:08 am*

Lucas

I held the ticket in my hand, but I couldn't make myself open the door. I knew once I walked in, it would only be a matter of minutes before Li would be gone.

This was for the best. After last night, I couldn't keep her with me.

As worried as I was about her having someone to look after her, I was more worried about what being around me was doing to her.

I missed the smile that used to cover her face.

If I had to let her go in order to bring it back, then that was what I was going to do.

I took a long breath and let it out slowly. Time wasn't my friend right now. I needed to get inside.

I opened the door and found her sitting on the bed.

She was dressed and ready, which was good, but I could see a piece of the broken vase in her hand.

The color was so similar to the vase that broke at the ranch, I got a chill.

Maybe this was why she broke down last night. All the more reason to send her away.

"I thought you left me." Her voice was so light and sad, I almost reconsidered the



ticket.

“I wouldn’t do that.” I closed the door behind me.

“We need to talk.” She ran her thumb over the grooves embedded in the vase.

“We do.” I took another breath and held out the ticket toward her.

“What’s this?” She didn’t take it.

“A bus ticket to Rustic Junction.” She looked up at me. “It leaves in forty-five minutes.”

“Excuse me?” She stood up and faced me. “I thought you were going to Rustic too.”

“I was.” There was no way I could stop there now. It was better for her if I put as much distance between us as possible.

“What’s going on, Lucas?”

“You can’t stay.” The words hurt. “Not after last night.”

“What?” She rocked back on her heels.

“I should never have let you come with me to the ranch. Never put yourself in that kind of position. I told you that I would take care of you, and I failed. I always fail.” If I had been with Uncle Filip that day, he never would have been on that roof.

He wouldn’t have had to lie there until one of the neighbors came home and called an ambulance. He’d still be with us now.

“Lucas.”

“I know you don’t believe in any of this, but I can’t stop. I need answers.” I wanted to tell her everything, but after last night, I wasn’t going to burden her with anything else, including my presence.

“What if you never get them?” I could see her eyes glistening and damn it, I wanted to be the man I was before I got that call. Before I rushed to the hospital, only to have a few short minutes with the man who had always been my hero.

That Lucas wouldn’t let her go. He would have stayed up late and made his own playlist of songs to surprise her and make her laugh. He wouldn’t have left her in Heartstone, and he for damn sure would have kissed her by now.

God, I missed him almost as much as I missed Uncle Filip.

“We should get going.” I couldn’t answer her question. Not when I didn’t know what the answer would be.

“So, this is it?” She didn’t mask the hurt.

“This is it.” I walked around her to pick up her bags.

Part of me wanted her to fight me. To tell me that she wouldn’t leave. That she wanted to stay, but she didn’t. Instead, she walked over and started picking up the broken pieces of her vase on my sweatshirt.

“Keep it.” I liked the idea of her having something of mine. Something to remember me by. God knew I wouldn’t forget her.

“Thank you.” She put all the pieces back down and wrapped them up. The sweatshirt

was held close to her chest.

I put her bags in the backseat and held the door for her to get in, and drove us to the bus depot. The whole time questioning if I was doing the right thing.

We sat there waiting for them to start letting people on. “Will you be alright?”

“Do you care?” Li didn’t look in my direction. She was still holding my sweatshirt.

“Of course I care.” How could she ask that? If I didn’t care so much, I wouldn’t be able to do this.

“I’ll be fine.” Her voice choked on the last word.

“Li—”

“Attention. Now boarding for Rustic Junction, Colorado.” The announcement cut me off.

“That’s me.” She stood, and I went with her. I walked her to the line of passengers waiting.

“Thank you for getting me this far.” She still wasn’t looking at me.

“You don’t have to thank me.” Not when I felt like I had done more harm than good.

“I do.” She finally met my eyes. “You aren’t the only one who was running or searching for something.

I needed to leave home, and you allowed me to do that.

I'd still be there if you hadn't agreed to let me come with you.

"She raised up and placed a small kiss on my cheek.

"I hope you find what you're looking for. "

The line moved up, and I realized this was it. After she got on this bus, she would be gone. I'd never see her again.

I turned her toward me. My hands were on her face. "Take care of yourself." My chest tightened at the thought of her all alone. "Don't get in any more cars with strangers. Make some friends. Laugh and please, smile." I missed her smile. "Promise me you'll smile all the time."

"I'll try."

It was now or never. I leaned forward and pressed my lips to hers. Had I ever kissed anyone before in my life? The feel of her mouth tentatively moving against mine was amazing. Her hands went around my waist, and I deepened the kiss.

I could have stayed there for the rest of the day just kissing her, but the woman behind us cleared her throat, and I knew I had to let Li go.

"I'll miss you." I gave her one more quick kiss.

"I'll miss you too." She let me go and stepped up into the bus, but turned right as she got to the top. "Promise you'll find a reason to smile."

"I already have." I turned my lips up. I'd smile every time I thought of her.

I stayed until the bus drove out of sight, and then I found the first person I could and

asked where the closest bar was. Getting drunk wouldn't solve anything, but right now, it didn't feel like there was anything that could make my life better.

I dropped the car back off at the hotel and extended my stay another night.

The last thing I was going to be able to do was drive tomorrow, and if I wasn't going to Rustic then I needed to find another place where I could test out my equipment.

Maybe even go back to the ranch one more time and see if I could make contact.

Or you could just walk away and go after Li.

The voice in the back of my head was tempting, but if I didn't keep trying, I'd always wonder. I had to find a way to reach the other side. How could I expect my uncle to rest in peace if I couldn't apologize? If he didn't know how sorry I was that his death was my fault?

The bar I found was dark and dirty and perfect for what I wanted.

I settled in and opened a tab. I started with a shot of whiskey and followed that up with my first beer.

Two more later, and I still wasn't close to the oblivion I wanted.

I could still see the tears in Li's eyes. The hurt on her face.

"Hey there, Roy." Some random dude said one stool over from me. "Set me up."

"Sure thing." The bartender put a glass under the tap and filled it up. "How's the day treating you?"

“Can’t complain and it wouldn’t do shit for me if I did,” he laughed.

“Ain’t that the truth?”

I wished they’d both shut the hell up. I wasn’t in the mood to hear about some local’s issues. Was he nursing a broken heart? Had he sent the girl he was falling in love with away?

Falling in love? I had to be closer to drunk than I originally thought.

There was no way that I was falling in love.

I hadn’t known Li long enough. I didn’t know her well enough.

We weren’t close enough. Sure, I felt protective of her and a connection that I couldn’t explain, but that didn’t mean anything, right?

When that happens, you don’t waste time with logic. Fuck what society, family, people say. Jeremy’s words came back.

“How’s your uncle doing?” My head snapped toward the guy sitting by me. How did he know about my uncle?

“Broken leg and high blood pressure.” The bartender shook his head. “He’s gonna have to learn to stay off ladders and take his meds.”

“At least it wasn’t anything serious.”

“Don’t I know?” The bartender laughed. “My aunt put him on punishment. Told him he isn’t allowed to do any more housework.”

Both men laughed. “I always liked your aunt. She’ll make sure he gets better.”

“For sure.” He nodded. “Nothing a strong drink and a good woman can’t cure.”

“What did you say?” I barely got the words out.

“Just an expression my family likes to say.” Both men were looking at me funny.

“But what did you say exactly?”

“Nothing a strong drink and a good woman can’t cure,” he repeated.

I smiled. “My uncle used to say, there’s nothing a large beer and a good woman can’t fix.” A slow warmth filled my chest. “He loved to say that.” I let out a laugh.

“Sounds like your uncle was a smart man,” The bartender said.

“Sounds like you should give him a call.” The other guy followed up.

“He died.” My laughter stopped. “It was my fault. He fell, and I wasn’t there. I should have been there. It should have been me on the roof.”

“You can’t control what happens.” The bartender refilled my drink. “You could have been there, and he might have still fallen.”

“Or you both might have fallen.”

“Life is strange.” The bartender put his hands on the top of the bar. “My uncle was cutting branches and fell off a three-step ladder. Three steps. That’s barely off the ground, and broke his leg. The man was in the military. Did two tours in the Middle East and never got a scratch on him.”

“What happened to your uncle wasn’t your fault, and if he was anything like mine, he wouldn’t want you carrying that kind of guilt around. He’d want you to be happy.”

“Hell Roy, your uncle would probably go out of his way to make sure you were happy even from the beyond.” The guy laughed. “He’d haunt you until you were.”

“Oh yeah,” Roy laughed. “Probably send people left and right to tell me to get on with it and let him go.”

The beer in my belly turned. Had Uncle Filip been talking to me this whole time, and I missed it?

I ran through the things Benny had said. The drink I had with Jeremy. Everything that Li said about letting the dead rest in peace, and now Roy and a complete stranger. Were they all the voices of Uncle Filip? Had he sent Li to me to make sure I was happy? Or even as a way to let him go?

“I fucked up.” I tried to stand, but I swayed on my feet.

“Woah there.” The guy beside me helped steady me. “Maybe you better sit back down.”

“I need to get to Rustic Junction.”

“In Colorado?” Roy asked.

“Yep. I have to make things right.” I couldn’t let Li get off that bus without me. She had been right all along.

“I don’t think you’re driving anywhere tonight.” Roy shook his head. “Definitely not to another state.”



I sat back down. I had to get to her. I wasn't sure how long the bus ride would take. I should have never put her on that thing alone.

"You got coffee?" That would help.

Roy shook his head. "Not here, but let me make a call. My aunt's just down the street and I'm sure she'll bring some right over."

"Thanks."

"What's in Rustic Junction?"

I felt more like my old self than I had in months. "A good woman."

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:08 am*

Li

The rattling of the bus engine vibrated against my head, that's leaning against the window.

I didn't know how many hours had passed.

I was stuck in the loop of his goodbye. And that kiss.

Every now and then, tears streamed quietly down my face.

It was too much. My breakdown last night was too much.

I scared him away, and worse, I think he felt guilty about it.

I hated that he felt any of that was his fault.

But what was I supposed to do? Beg him to let me stay with him?

We were strangers mere days ago. Only that didn't feel right to say anymore.

How in just a handful of days could you feel like you knew someone to their soul?

That's ridiculous. I'm not even a model of commitment.

Every job, I quit after a year. Every guy who wanted to commit, I ghosted.

Friends, I let slip through my fingers, one missed text at a time. Lucas deserved better.

I knocked my head against the window as red rock mountains came into view.

But damn it! He just let me go. He had to have felt it.

I knew he did. That kiss wasn't like any first kiss I'd ever experienced.

Sure, it was the most heartbreaking, but it was also the most enlightening, bring-you-back-to-life kisses—not even just first kisses—I'd ever had.

Which made me irrationally mad. I could've gone without knowing what that felt like, only to have it taken away.

“Next stop,” called the bus driver. “Rustic Junction.”

The next half hour felt like swimming through water.

We arrived. I cradled his sweatshirt with l?o lao's shards against my chest, trying to juggle my suitcase and bags.

They actually weren't expecting me till tomorrow, but hey, arriving early should speak favorably as an employee.

Was I really going to be a playacting saloon girl in this cosplaying western town?

Oh wow. This town takes the theme very seriously. I felt transported to America's Gold Rush era. The saloon stood big and proud, almost in the center of town. There were wagons, horses, antique shops, and men and women dressed in western garb.

Sighing, I dragged my stuff as best I could to the Rustic Love Hotel, where I'd be staying until we finalized everything and found me an apartment. I made no plans. I just picked an online ad that sounded fun and road tripped my ass over here. And that lack of preparation was giving me hives.

A gorgeous older woman, entirely done up, greeted me at the front desk. "Hello, darling. Welcome to Rustic Junction. Can we get you a room?"

"Hi," I dropped my stuff, carefully laying the bundled up sweatshirt on the counter. "Yeah. I have an interview tomorrow at Gun Blazing Saloon. I'm here a day early."

"Oh," she remarked, writing in the ledger. "Your name, Dear?"

"Li Cheng."

She wrote my name down next to a room number, then looked up to study me. Her bright smile dimmed. "Oh, darling. What's with the red eyes? Is that sadness you're bringing with you?"

I gave her a tight smile. "It's been a long few days. Months, really."

"Well, this town might just be the remedy you're needing. Once settled, head over and have a drink at the saloon. My daughter Melody is there. She's great when you need an ear."

I recognized that name. "Actually, I think that's who I'm meeting tomorrow."

"Oh! Perfect. Come, come." She floated around the desk—no other way to describe it—her gauzy white dress danced behind her. "I'll have someone take everything to your room. You leave all these heavy things here. Let me show you where you're staying, darling."

Still feeling like I was swimming through water, I barely noticed the details of the room. I nodded politely as Wynona spoke. She shooed me out the front and pointed me in the direction of the saloon. As if one could miss it.

Not going to lie, entering that place felt trippy.

Sure, some tourists were dressed in modern clothes, but most people were leaning hard into the Western vibe.

I found a corner seat tucked away under the stairs.

Grabbing my phone, I swiped through pictures.

Of course, I took pictures of him. Him driving.

His strong profile was grumpy because he didn't want me taking his picture.

Driving, his hand holding mine on my lap.

I snuck that one without him knowing. Another image was Dawn and me taking a selfie. I took another at Kathy's diner.

Did any of that even happen? Felt like a different life, and it was just days ago.

"Hey, Doll! What can we get you?"

A young woman with brown hair and jade eyes that sparkled with mischief stood with her hand on her corset cinched hip. "Oh. Um," I thought. My first instinct was to ask for a whiskey. Only reason I hesitated was because it made me think of Lucas. "Whiskey sour and a shot on the side," I ordered.

“Girl after my own heart,” my western waitress smiled. “I’m Melody Shoehorn. If you need anything, make sure to holler.”

“Wait. I met your mother.”

“Rustic Love Hotel. Indeed. She sent you over, I’m sure.”

“Actually, I’m supposed to meet with you tomorrow about a job here?”

Melody’s smile fell. “Oh, hun. Where did you come here from?”

I didn’t have a good feeling about where this was going. “Tennessee.”

“What’s your name?” she asked, sitting across from me.

“Li. Li Cheng.”

“Oh! Li. I sent you an email. You didn’t get it, I assume. The position was filled the day before yesterday.” She tried to maintain a bright demeanor, but I felt her sympathy.

My chest felt as if a cascade of bricks had fallen on it. In true Li fashion, I’d been avoiding my emails. I dreaded hearing one more thing from lawyers, insurance companies, funeral homes, and real estate agents. Fuck my life.

I knocked my head on the table and groaned. Of course. This was my luck. I truly was homeless now.

“Oh, hun. I’m so sorry,” Melody said, squeezing my hand. “I’m gonna get you that whiskey. Be right back.”

I heard her shuffle away in her big skirt.

This was it. I didn't have a backup plan.

I naively came so assured I'd have this job and a place waiting for me.

I had enough saved to hold me over until I started getting paid.

My eyes welled up. A desperate hopelessness rushed over me. The thunk of a glass hit the table.

"Alright," I heard Melody say as her skirt rustled as she sat. "Come on. Let's do a shot to wash the emotions down first."

I raised my head and stared at her.

"Oh, hun," she cooed, scooting my whiskey shot toward me. "Together," she said softly while picking up her own shot.

Nodding, I straightened up, wiped my face, and raised my shot. "To unfucking my life," I said.

A surprised laugh bubbled out of Melody before she nodded. "To unfucking our lives," she said, then clinked her shot glass to mine.

An hour, hell, could have been five hours, we sat, and I spilled everything.

One whiskey shot at a time. At first, I just talked about meeting Lucas, but once the liquor settled in my empty stomach nicely, I talked about losing I?o lao and the ghost hunting trip that obliterated any chance of seeing if something could happen between Lucas and me.

Thankfully, I didn't turn into a sobbing mess.

Melody held my hand, listening. "That gorgeous man misses you. I guarantee it," she said. I showed her his picture. "Listen, Li. The saloon isn't hiring, but I'm sure I can ask around and we'll find you something."

Did I even want to stay in Rustic Junction? The novelty of playing a saloon girl faded fast. I tipped back the last dregs of my whiskey sour. In the time I poured my heart, Melody brought over a whiskey bottle and poured me two more shots. I wasn't drunk—thank goodness, but I was definitely tipsy.

"That kiss," I said, resting my head on my outstretched arm, which was the one Melody was holding.

"I've had one of those kisses before," she said, sighing. "He'd been passing through town. It was his last night. The best and saddest goodbye kiss ever."

"Yes," I raised my head and hissed. "The mixed emotions and memory of it will haunt me forever." Melody's eyes focused on something over my shoulder.

"You want to hear something entirely bat-shit crazy?" She hummed affirmatively while still watching whatever she was watching.

"I think I fell in love with him? How? It was only a few days. That's not real!"

Who falls in love with someone they met just days ago? "

I was outraged at my own stupid emotions. I've never been the type to fall for a guy easily. I'm the one who could walk away and not even think of them a week later.

Melody's face broke into a smile. My brow furrowed. "What are you," I started,



turning to look at what she was focused on while I rambled and bled my emotions. My heart stuttered and my breath caught as my eyes widened.

“I had some crazy revelations, too.”

“Lucas,” I whispered.

I whipped my head to Melody. “Am I that drunk, or do you see him too?”

Laughing, Melody released my hand, patted it, then stood. “I’m gonna take this.” She took the whiskey bottle, stacked our shot glasses, and headed back to the bar, smiling.

Before he could take the seat Melody just vacated, I abruptly stood. “No,” I demanded. “You don’t get to—what are you doing here? How are you here?”

There was that irrational anger from before.

“Li—“ he started.

“You left me!”

“I know.”

“It was so easy for you to just say goodbye,” I cried.

He shook his head. “It was the hardest thing I’ve had to do next to saying goodbye to Uncle Filip.”

“Don’t you dare say that and not mean it.” I shook my head, and stupid tears returned.

Lucas pulled my body into his, holding me as my arms folded and became trapped against his chest. “I’m sorry I let you go,” he said quietly. “I thought you needed me to.”

My head shook back and forth, tears dripping off my chin. Lucas delicately brushed them off my cheeks. “How are you here?” I whispered.

“I came as soon as I could. I just had to sober up first.” When my expression questioned, he smiled. “Are you staying anywhere? Can we talk? Without,” he tipped his head toward the saloon.

I turned my head and saw we had an audience. Well, shit. I tucked my head against his chest to hide. It vibrated with the deep chuckle he released, and I almost whimpered because hearing it felt so good. I missed him so much. I breathed him in. My hands, at his chest, gripped his shirt.

While his arm wrapped tightly around my waist, Lucas’s lips pressed on my head. “Let’s get out of here.”

I nodded and let him lead us out. I caught Melody’s smiling face.

She gave me a very enthusiastic thumbs up, which made me laugh.

I couldn’t believe he was here. His firm body holding mine felt like a dream.

The sun beamed as we stepped outside. My tipsy brain hissed, but I just used the excuse to press my face closer into Lucas’s body.

I knew the likelihood of finding forever with this man was slim to none, but please, Universe, God, whoever, whatever was listening...let me keep him.

Lucas

The room was pretty great and not what I expected from a Western hotel called Rustic Love. Dark wood beams lined the ceiling. A stone arch framed the large bed with an ornate wooden headboard. The tones were very neutral, warm, and cozy.

Li sat on the edge of the bed, facing me in the corner chair I dragged over so we were face to face.

I hated seeing her red-rimmed eyes. Right now, she couldn't seem to meet my eyes.

Li focused on her hands as she picked at the skin on her left thumb.

I wanted to reach over and hold that hand, calm her anxiety, but I felt I owed her an apology first. I had to earn her.

"You were right," I started, which got her attention.

"We shouldn't have gone there." I didn't need to clarify where I meant.

She knew. "After his fall, the guilt that I wasn't there was this parasite that just grew.

Here," I gripped my chest. "He was never coherent in the hospital. He was in that coma, and I begged him to come back." My throat closed up.

Clearing it, I continued. "My co-worker went off one night, we were all having a beer about these famous ghost hunting routes." Scoffing, I shook my head.

“I’ve never been one to care or believe much in the supernatural.

I can’t explain it. It was this sudden need that came over me. ”

When I looked up, Li watched me intently, her breathing was steady and calm. I watched her chest rise and fall like a meditative ballad, giving me strength. The sun streaked in through the window behind me, branding her porcelain skin. I wanted to rest my open palm on it.

“Being there that night, it didn’t feel right, but I ignored it. I wanted so desperately to talk to him, apologies for not being there,” I hiccupped.

Li moved instantly. She came over and sat on my lap, taking my face in her hands and running her fingers softly up and down my bearded cheek.

“It wasn’t your fault,” she whispered.

“It felt like my fault,” I whispered back.

She kissed my forehead before facing me and continuing to soothe me with her gentle touches.

“I fell in love with you too,” I confessed, still nervous even though I heard her confess at the saloon the same thing when I stood behind her.

Her breath hitched, and she remained still.

“I know,” I continued. “It seems wild and unrealistic, but you know what?” She watched me, holding her breath.

“Unless you’ve fallen, you could never get it.

Before you, I would have argued it wasn't real.

I would have laughed it off as fiction. But until it happens to you, someone wouldn't get it.

Does it make any sense? No. That doesn't make it any less real. ”

Those warm eyes that hid nothing were filled with tears. She still wasn't breathing. I brought my face close to hers until our noses touched and whispered, “Breathe, love.”

She inhaled deeply and sharply as those welled-up tears drew a river down her soft cheeks.

Pulling my face in with her hands, she kissed me.

Fuck, I almost forgot how soft and full her lips were.

Wrapping my arms around her, I pulled her closer, licking the seam of her lips.

Li opened for me, letting me taste her. Both of us groaned at first touch.

My body lit with currents firing up my spine.

I rested my hand at the back of her neck, tangling my fingers into her soft strands.

Pulling away, we panted, breathing the other in. I searched her eyes.

“Do you regret it?” I asked.

“What?” she breathed.

“Falling?”

Her eyes bounced back and forth, trying to read mine. I got it. The fear. Not just admitting the fall but officially taking the step off the cliff into the crashing waves below.

“No,” she whispered.

“Good,” I whispered back, relief coating my veins. “Me neither.”

The smallest smile tipped her lips before she looked over at the bed, then back at me. Suddenly, those soulful eyes, afraid to be brave a second ago, turned hooded with the same need I felt tightening my body.

“You sure?” I asked.

“Yes,” she whispered back, tightening her grip on my hair, her body arching into mine.

Need took over. I tucked my arm under her knees and lifted her.

Li squealed a laugh, and holy hell, I’d never felt such joy, it almost hurt.

Smiling, I lay her on the bed and followed, covering her petite body with my own.

We took. She kissed me, and I kissed her.

It was deep, it was passionate, and I wanted this to last for-fucking-ever.

Li wrapped her legs around me, then rolled me over onto my back. I looked up into her face, surprised, which brought a cheeky smile to her face. Grabbing the hem of

my shirt, she pulled it up and off me.

“Wow,” she breathed, running her hands over my chest and torso. “I had a very close-up encounter with this, but from this view? Wow.”

I wanted the same experience. I took her shirt and pulled it off, then fell back on the bed.

She had on a lacy bralette thing that didn't cover anything.

At all. Her perky, light brown nipples called for my tongue.

I ran my hand up her bare, smooth back and brought her chest closer until I could close my mouth around one lace-covered nipple.

Li gasped then moaned, undulating her lower half over my rapidly hardening dick. Li's nails run up my side. Shivers caused shockwaves that had my balls pulling tight. I flicked the tip of my tongue on her hardened peak, then switched to give the other one the same pleasure.

Impatient with need, Li sat up and pulled off the bra thing, flinging it somewhere behind her, then bent over, letting me have full access to her skin.

I took one breast entirely in my mouth and sucked.

Crying out, Li ground harder against me.

I was so damn hard now. I could feel the tip weep. I wanted to taste her all over.

I flipped her over and ran my teeth and tongue along her neck.

Arching into me, she wrapped her legs tightly and rubbed herself against me, which drove me wild.

Groaning, I reached down and unbuttoned her shorts, then lowered the zipper.

I worked my mouth down her body, stopping again to take the other breast into my mouth.

“Lucas,” she whimpered.

“What do you want, beautiful?”

Gasping, she held my hair and pulled. “I want your mouth.”

“You have it,” I growled. I couldn’t help the sounds coming out of me. “Where do you want it?”

Moaning, she fed me her breast. “Everywhere,” she exhaled.

“Be specific, love.” I started traveling down her stomach while hooking my hands into her shorts and underwear, pulling them down.

“Yes,” she panted. “There.”

“Where?” I demanded.

“My clit. I want your mouth there.”

Didn’t have to tell me twice. Pulling down her shorts, I tossed them aside, scooting further down and took her thighs in my hands, pulling her closer to my face.



Heaven. Her aroused scent sent a message straight to my cock which jerked in my pants.

Groaning, I ran my nose up her inner thigh, breathing in deeply.

“Lucas.” Li wiggled her body closer, wanting my mouth on her.

Looking into her eyes, I asked, “You my girl?”

Her chest stuttered as she stared. “I wanna be yours,” she whispered.

I shook my head. “Are you my girl?” I asked, firmly so she didn’t doubt for a second what I wanted.

“I’m yours,” she said. I didn’t know how badly I needed to hear that, and she saw it all over my face. Confidence bled into her features. “Are you mine?”

“I’ve been yours since you grabbed those abomination candies at the gas station in Tennessee.”

Li laughed wholeheartedly, flinging her head back. Smiling, I dipped my head and ran my tongue up her center. Sharply inhaling, Li grabbed my hair again, pulling me closer to her core. Licking up into her folds I found her clit. I pulled it into my mouth and sucked.

Li’s body shot off the bed. Flicking my tongue against it in my mouth, I barred my arm against her pelvis, keeping her in place. She wasn’t just moaning anymore and I fucking loved it. Let the whole Rustic Junction hear her screaming my name.

While driving her wild with my tongue, I found her wet opening and slowly pushed my middle finger deep inside her. Her warm walls sucked me in and held tight. I

wanted my cock in there so bad. I pushed my hips into the bed for some relief.

Groaning like a beast, I ran the flat of my tongue from her entrance all the way up, back at her swollen nub. I added a second finger and curled them in until I found the varied texture I knew would set her off.

“Lucas,” she screamed, fighting my hold on her body as it jerked and tightened with her release.

She tried pushing me off with her hand, but I stayed with her until the last tremors traveled down her body.

That’s it. I needed to be inside her. Now.

Standing, I ripped my pants open and I almost came right there when she opened her legs wider as an invitation, stretching her arms over her head, arching her tits up.

I took my pants and briefs off in one shot.

I almost jumped on her before having some brain cells left and grabbing the condom from my wallet.

Her eyes traveled down my body and landed on my dick appreciatively.

Twitching, it wept for her while precome ran down my shaft, coating my balls that felt ready to explode.

I was so sensitive that rolling the condom on required me to tighten my abs and breathe through it.

I crawled over her body. Li’s legs landed high up my body, pulling me in.

Her hands explored everywhere they could reach.

Kissing her felt like a missing piece I didn't know was missing, falling into place every time.

Tasting her deeply, I lined up my cock with her core and nudged the tip in. Fuck. Warm. Tight. Wet.

"Don't hold back," she whispered against my lips. "Give me all of you."

"You have all of me," I told her.

"Prove it," she challenged. I knew she was giving me shit. Even now.

Grinning back, I slid in and thank fuck she was wet because I didn't stop until my balls rested against her skin. Sucking in air, her head arched back into the pillow. I groaned into her neck.

"Fuck, you feel good," I moaned.

"Oh, my god. You're so," her breath hitched. "You're everywhere."

I widened my legs, digging my knees into the mattress. I hooked her leg under my arm, pulling it higher and sinking deeper. "Oh, god," she cried. "Yes, Lucas."

I pulled out slowly, feeling every ripple of her inner walls gripping my hardened cock and just before my tip slipped out, I snapped my hips deep.

A sharp cry came from Li, but her hands and legs squeezed me tighter. "More," she moaned. "So much more."

“Anything you want. It’s yours,” I growled into her mouth as her tongue licked my lower lip.

We were undone. Soon, our hips became unhinged as Li cried for more, harder, deeper.

I took hold of the back of her neck and used it as leverage to pull her down into each thrust. Her hips raised to meet mine, and the sound of skin meeting skin echoed in the room as the sun was setting.

Neither of us gave a shit about the noise we were making.

Li’s hand ran down my body and met my ass.

She gripped it and pulled me deeper inside her.

“Come,” I growled into her mouth. The hand I had at her neck found her clit between the heat of our bodies and my thumb played until everything around and in her tightened so hard, I thought my dick would snap off.

Her body bowed, and the cry she released felt like freedom.

I pushed through the squeeze and tunneled my cock into heaven, crying out as my hips pistoned, ready to detonate.

I gripped her neck with my teeth and yelled as my balls pulled tight, my spine, shocked with electricity, and the first wave of come shot from my cock.

“Fuck!”

We held the other so tightly. Once I knew she had hers, I wrapped my other arm

around her and pulled her body into me, just trying to get deeper and release. Releasing every pain, every loss, every desire. Letting it all go while gaining everything in return.

Panting, I rolled us to our sides while still keeping us fused together as one. She refused to let go, and I felt the same. Her hand grazed up and down my back, causing my hips to jerk from aftershocks. Damn. I couldn't wait to take her bare one day. I wanted to feel it all.

Kissing where I marked her neck, I brushed my lips up behind her ear. Her core squeezed, wanting more. I didn't see us leaving this bed for the rest of the day.

Finally, able to breathe and think, I pulled back and saw her eyes bright and happy.

"Hey," I said quietly.

She giggled, then shook her head. "Hi," she smiled. "Wow."

"Fuck yeah. Wow." I agreed. Never had sex ever felt like that. Ever.

"That was..."

"Same," I said.

"Yeah?" Her eyes were suddenly vulnerable.

I leaned forward and kissed her lips. A gentle assurance and promise. "That was like nothing I'd ever experienced before."

"Good," she said, her confidence back.

Laughing, I rolled her on her back. She squealed again when I peppered kisses all over her neck and chest, pulling myself up to get rid of the condom. Kissing her belly button, I said, “Be right back.”

Washing my hands, I walked back into the room to find Li hugging the pillow, much like the first night at Heartstone, we slept in the same bed. I ached for her then. And now, she was mine. And I didn’t think she truly understood how she had all of me in return.

If she wanted to stay here in Rustic Junction, we’d find a way. We’d make it work. I knew I had a good woman in my hands. And I believe Uncle Filip led me to her. I wasn’t letting her go.

Li

My body felt like jello, and I'd never been happier.

Lucas came back from the bathroom, scooped me in his arms, and rested us comfortably in bed, where he told me everything that happened in Basic Plains before coming to find me.

I mostly listened, ignoring the gnawing in my gut at my homeless/jobless status.

I adored this bubble we were in, but what awaited us outside this room?

It already went against the odds that we fell for each other while barely knowing the other.

His life was back in Virginia, running his uncle's construction company.

And me? I had nowhere to go. Rustic Junction wasn't even a forever stop, just a wait for my next move, stop.

"Hey," he raised my chin. "What's bouncing around in there?"

Sighing heavily, I drew imaginary shapes along his strong, massive chest. Seriously. My guy was huge. That brought a smile to my face, making the uncertainty sting that much more.

"It was all for nothing."

“What was?” His fingers combed through my hair, which made focusing very difficult.

“This entire road trip. The job was already filled. She sent me an email two days ago. I just haven’t been checking them.” I avoided his eyes. I felt the shame of being twenty-nine and not having my shit together.

“Hey.” He waited till I looked at him. “It wasn’t for nothing.” I wrinkled my nose. “How else would we have met each other?”

“Hmm.”

“Yeah. Hmm,” he grinned. “You know. I think your l?o lao had something to do with this.”

“What?” My eyes widened.

“Think about it.” He turned into me until I was on my back, and he rested on his forearm above me, running his fingers over my collarbone. “It’s like they had a hand in helping us find each other.”

Surprised by this theory, I passed my fingers through his deliciously disheveled hair. “You really believe that?”

Suddenly, a vulnerable young man was before my eyes.

He shrugged, focused on the paths he was making with his fingers over my skin.

“The coincidence at the bar. My uncle’s favorite saying knocked my senses and brought me back to you.



I don't know." Those winter eyes I loved so much pierced mine.

"If he was at play, surely, your grandmother was too."

I didn't hate the idea. "She would do something like that," I chuckled. "She would've teased you, only speaking Chinese in front of you when she could speak English perfectly." I smiled, remembering how innocent she played, but I got my mischievous side from her.

"He would've loved you," he said, taking my breath. "For real. You two would've ganged up on me. I already know."

Laughing, he kissed me. A sweet, heartbreakingly healing kiss.

"I have his ashes," he said softly.

"This whole time?" I didn't know he was carrying them the entire trip.

Nodding, he continued. "I was thinking, heading back to Virginia, stopping at Heartstone. There was this awesome spot by the river. I think," he stopped to clear his throat. "I think he'd like it there."

My heart tugged, for more than one reason. I loved that he found somewhere he felt he could release and let go of his uncle. At the same time, it hurt not being the one to go with him. I'd be stuck here, figuring out what to do with my life.

"You could maybe," he started. When I looked at him, he said, "You could also give some of the shards back to the earth. We can leave them there to rest?" Seeing my confused reaction, he cupped my face. "Do you want to stay here?"

"I don't have anywhere to go. I have to figure that out." I stared at his neck, running

the tip of my nail through the light hairs on his chest. “I don’t have a home anymore,” I said so softly, I barely heard it, yet somehow, it felt like the loudest thing I’d ever said.

“Come home. With me,” Lucas said.

“What?”

“Doesn’t have to be forever, if you don’t want it to. Just come home.”

Home. That word was so tempting because it wasn’t Virginia I’d call home. As cheesy as it sounded, it was him. He felt like home.

“We’re nuts,” I whispered. Lucas laughed so deeply, I felt it in my own chest.

“Who the fuck cares if we are,” he said, his laughing lips kissing mine. “Come home to me,” he whispered. “We’ll figure it out.”

“And what? Live with you? Wouldn’t we be setting ourselves up for failure?” I wanted to free dive without a care, but my logical brain felt like it had to consider practicality.

“You want your own apartment? We’ll get you one. It doesn’t have to look like anything. It’s whatever we want.”

“When did you become so carefree?” I laughed. The Lucas I met days ago ate vegetables on road trips. He used logic and paper maps for travel. This carefree, let’s be in love, Lucas felt sudden and new.

“One thing you’ll learn about me,” he leaned down and nibbled on my lower lip, bringing my body to life again. “When I set my mind to something, I don’t believe in

doing it half-ass. I'm all in."

"All in?" I raised my brow, feeling that beautiful, hard tip nudge my core. Raising my head, I bit his lip back. "Prove it."

I'm learning my man doesn't back down from a challenge. Lucas most definitely proved it. All night long.

\*\*\*

Driving away from Rustic Junction, we left with an SUV full of trinkets and treats.

Melody hugged me goodbye and sent us off with a bottle of their rustic apple pie moonshine she stole from the back.

Her mother, Wynona, winked when we came downstairs this morning, and I thought I might die from embarrassment.

Lucas and I are not quiet lovers. At all.

She sent us off with some homemade shepherd's pie and cookies she had made the night before.

We got the car checked out and gassed up before we headed off.

The man at the gas station dressed up as a horse stable sent us off with varied pickled veggies, some soy sauce eggs Lucas was down for, and souvenirs from Rustic.

It was a sweet, quirky town, but definitely not where I wanted to call home.

My body was curled up in the passenger seat, facing Lucas. His hand held mine and

rested on my thigh. I drew shapes on his open palm, thinking. “What do you think about me teaching pottery?”

Glancing over, he thought about it for a second. “Would that make you happy?”

I shrugged. “Throwing clay, working at the wheel is the only time I feel detached from everything, in a good way.”

“So, why not just create things in your own space and sell them online or in person at novelty shops?”

The idea tickled my brain. I hadn’t thought of that. “You think people would buy my stuff?”

“Hell yeah. You showed me pictures. The ones you did of those cute animal planters were great. I could see people wanting them.”

Nodding, I kept drawing on his hand with my fingers. “I could still offer classes, too. I’d just have to find a maker’s space or pottery location that maybe rents out space.”

“We actually have a large Maker’s community where I live. There’s an awesome warehouse with tons of equipment for community use.”

My chest bubbled, giddy with the possibilities. “I told you,” he said, squeezing my hand. “We’ll figure it out.”

Smiling, I brought his hand up and kissed it. “We really will.”

The next morning, we were leaving Kansas and heading toward Missouri. Lucas insisted on driving through the night, so we took turns. He fought me on it at first, but I wasn’t having him sleep deprived and driving through the night.

We stopped at a rural gas station to top off.

While Lucas took care of that, I was on the hunt for snacks.

Li approved ones. The bell chimed at my arrival.

For a random middle-of-the-highway stop, it was fairly big.

Near the back was an Asian market section, which surprised me.

At a small table sat an older Asian woman surrounded by cultural ceramics, beads, handkerchiefs, etc.

She smiled sweetly, almost knowingly, at me. “Hi,” I said. “These are beautiful.” I was hovering my finger over some of the ceramic cats curled up, sleeping. One of them was white with delicate blue designs.

“That one is special,” she said in Chinese.

“Oh.” Surprised. “You’re Chinese. Me too,” I said, also in Chinese. “My grandmother was born there. I was born here.”

She picked up the cat I was eyeing and rested it on her palm.

“She brings you prosperity, good luck, and protection. She represents the yin balance in life. Feminine.” She encouraged me to take the ceramic cat by placing it in my hand.

“You have your yang,” she tipped her head to the window.

I turned and saw Lucas walking toward the gas station.

Then I jerked slightly as the feel of her withered yet soft hand cupped my cheek. Staring back at her, moisture filled my eyes. She gently patted my cheek in a nurturing way, just like L?o lao used to do, then pulled away and sat back down.

The door chimed, pulling me back. I composed myself, looking at the ceramic cat in my hand. “How much?” I asked.

“A gift,” she said.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t—“ but she gave me a look I was very familiar with. You did not argue with your elders. You accepted what they said.

I smiled and whispered, “Thank you.”

“Hey,” Lucas said, wrapping his arm around me. “Ready to go?” He waved politely at the woman, then pointed to the cat. “That’s cute. Almost reminds me of...” he didn’t finish.

“Yeah,” I smiled.

We walked off after he paid for gas, and I felt that lovely woman’s eyes on us.

I wrapped the cat in one of my shirts to protect it and packed it away.

As we drove off, I studied Lucas’s profile.

He was right. L?o lao and his uncle definitely orchestrated this.

I never felt so at peace with any life decision.

Thank you, L?o lao.

And don't worry, Uncle Filip. I'll take good care of him.

I leaned over and kissed his bearded cheek. Lucas turned to press a kiss on my head, then rested his hand on my thigh. I leaned my head back, smiling.

Love wasn't so scary after all. Not when you felt it for the right person who also felt it and loved you back.

We cruised down Route 14, letting go of our ghosts and free-falling into radical living.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:08 am*

Lucas

There was something about Heartstone, Missouri, that sealed my fate. It only felt appropriate to lay things to rest here. Li and I arrived two nights ago. We had every intention of just passing by and leaving later that evening for Virginia, but Dawn and Kathy weren't having any of that.

Poor Jeremy just stood against the wall, signature ball cap pulled low, hiding his grin. When Li brought those puppy eyes my way, I rolled mine, knowing we weren't going anywhere. Somehow, our old room was available. We got to live out some fantasies we both had from that extremely hard morning.

Yeah. I made a dick joke. But I remembered waking up with her body wrapped around me. The tips of my fingers grazed her breast. Her smooth skin on her thigh as I pulled that leg closer.

We really had to learn to be quieter. The red on Li's cheeks every time we came down for breakfast only made it worse. It was like walking in with neon signs on our heads flashing, we had fan-fucking-tastic sex last night. And this morning.

I didn't remember ever being this sex obsessed before. It wasn't just the mere action of having sex. It was her. Everything Li said, did, didn't do, drove me wild. And thankfully, with the way she pounced on me last night when we got back from dinner at Kathy's, she felt the same way.

Bjorn updated me that things were going well back home. He encouraged me to take all the time I needed. He knew what I meant to do with the ashes. I promised that



when I got back, I'd be present and help him figure out the future direction of the company.

Li and I held hands in front of a pristine lake by Lover's Stroll Park.

The sun bounced off, glinting against the ripples.

The trees swayed with the summer wind. It was the most peace I'd ever felt other than lying in Li's arms. She held my sweatshirt with the pottery shards in the other arm, and I had Uncle Filip's ashes in a container in mine.

"Are you thinking in the river or into the dirt?" she asked reverently.

"Maybe, both?"

Nodding, she let go of my hand and bent down, opening the folded-up sweatshirt. All the white and blue painted designs created a mosaic on the ground.

"How about you release some into the river, I'll place some of her shards at the shoreline, then the rest, we bury by this tree?"

The tree rested at the shore of the river. It was tall and full. Heavier branches sagged with leaves shading the entire area where we stood.

"Yeah," my voice sounded thick. "This is perfect."

Li smiled up at me with tears in her eyes.

Together, we set pieces of the vase in the water, the running river, gently passing over them.

Then, together, we opened the container and emptied half of it into the water.

Neither of us said anything out loud. We kept our eulogies to ourselves.

We felt what the other felt. The pain, the loss, the release, the love. It was freeing.

Once we buried the rest at the base of the tree, we stood in each other's arms, watching the river flow. Li held the now-empty sweatshirt against her stomach, her cheek on my chest. The end of one thing, the beginning of another. The circle of life.

Later that night, Dawn did up her veranda with Edison bulb string lights, candles to keep the mosquitoes away, and a small electric fire pit to roast marshmallows.

Dawn and Jeremy rocked on the two chairs, sitting side by side, holding hands.

Jeremy busted out the whiskey. Li sat on my lap in the Adirondack chair she raved about to Dawn.

Wait till she sees the two in my backyard when we get home.

Smiling, I sipped my glass of whiskey neat.

Li leaned into me, sipping hers with ice.

Her and Dawn were laughing about something Kathy did last night.

I glanced over and saw Jeremy watching me.

A soft, knowing grin appeared as he subtly tipped his whiskey glass my way.

Giving him a nod of gratitude, I did the same with my glass.

There's nothing a large beer and a good woman can't fix.

Well, Uncle Filip, we're drinking whiskey, not beer, but you were right. Tipping my face up, Li looked down at me, smiling. Dawn and Jeremy added to the conversation I was only half listening to, but in that moment, it was just us, Li, and I, in our own bubble.

We hadn't said the three words. Not officially, even though we both admitted to falling in love.

But I felt them. Looking at her now, her eyes softened.

She saw it in mine. And without saying the words, we both leaned in and pressed those words into the other's lips.

This kiss and every kiss with Li felt like breaking through the surface and finally taking your first breath.

I was going to love this woman for the rest of our days, fight for us, and appreciate each moment while we had them.

We still had a lot of living to do. Together.