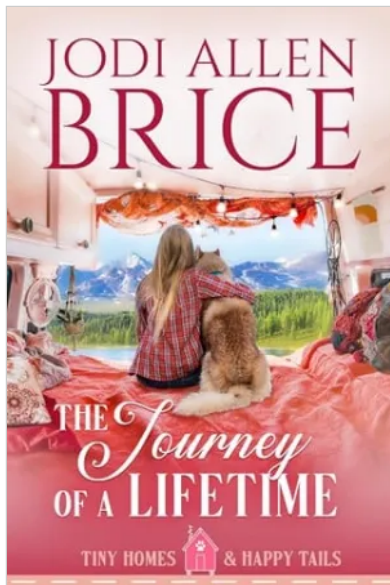




The Journey of a Lifetime (Tiny Homes and Happy Tails #2)

Author: *Jodi Allen Brice*

Category: Romance

Description: When Maggie Sullivan's world shatters—betrayed by the two people she trusted most—she leaves behind a high-powered legal path and hits the road with nothing but a friends van, her seeing impaired dog, Walker, and a map full of unknowns.

From small towns to mountain skies, Maggie's journey leads her not only across states but deep into her own heart. Along the way, she rescues a young woman escaping abuse, confronts her parents' controlling grip on her future, and discovers the quiet courage it takes to stop surviving—and start living.

With Walker at her side, she's about to find the life she was always meant to live.

Total Pages (Source): 47

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie Sullivan slipped her laptop in her backpack and headed out of the college classroom.

She finished her last exam for the semester and was looking forward to going home for the summer.

A smile tugged at her lips as she made her way toward the apartment she shared with her boyfriend, Mason Finch.

Since it was only a convenient block from the college, there was no need to drive.

She mentally ran through the recipe she planned on making for them tonight. Creamy pesto chicken with roasted tomatoes, her signature dish.

Mason had another two days of exams. She didn't mind waiting until he was done before going home together. The two days would give her time to tidy up their apartment before heading home to see each of their parents for summer break.

Maggie glanced at the time on her phone before sticking her key into the lock. She heard the click, and she opened the door.

Stepping inside the apartment, she froze. Something felt off.

Glancing around she didn't see anything out of the ordinary, but then she heard a noise coming from the bedroom.

Odd. Mason had another hour of studying with his study group before he should even

be home. Maybe the stress of studying had gotten to him, and he had come home for a quick nap.

Maggie didn't bother setting her purse or backpack down but headed down the hallway to the bedroom.

Each step she took made her heart pound in her chest.

The unmistakable sound of a female's moan jolted straight through her heart.

She shook her head, refusing to believe what she was hearing. Her brain searched for logical excuses. Maybe Mason was watching TV in the bedroom.

Except they didn't have a TV in the bedroom.

Maggie wanted to turn around and run out of the apartment, but her feet kept moving forward.

She stopped at the bedroom door and squeezed her eyes shut.

"Lauren, you know I love it when you do that," Mason whispered loudly.

Maggie's eyes shot open.

Lauren Keller.

Her best friend since elementary school.

The bedroom door was cracked slightly open. Her stomach twisted as she reached out and pushed the door open further.

Mason and Lauren were too wrapped up in each other to notice she was standing in the doorway.

Maggie reached for her phone and took a quick picture.

She waited for what seemed like an eternity, but still they didn't notice her.

They were completely unaware that she was even there.

She was invisible.

Nausea rose up in the back of her throat and she turned to leave. For a moment she thought she would hear Mason's voice calling out for her to stop and that it was all a misunderstanding.

But with each step she took, all she heard was silence.

Like a robot, she walked out the front door with her purse and backpack and closed the door loudly.

She hurried to her car. Opening the car door, she glanced over her shoulder.

They would have heard the door slam. They would have to know she'd been in the apartment.

Her heart sank further when she realized Mason wasn't following her.

Despair and disbelief washed over her as she slid into the driver's seat.

Starting the engine, she backed out of the parking spot and headed away from the apartment.

With each passing block, she expected her phone to ring, for Mason to be calling asking her where she was.

The call never came.

An hour into her drive home, she finally received a text.

Shaking, she pulled off the interstate and reached for her phone. She took a steady breath, ready to give him hell.

Maggie read the text.

Hey, Sweetheart. Hope you don't mind but I have to pull an all-night study session with Luke. Crashing at his place tonight. Love you.

He had not even missed her. On top of that he was lying to her about spending the night with Luke. She saw Luke leaving this morning to head home for the summer.

He was spending the night with Lauren.

A thousand insults rushed into her head like a raging tornado. Her heart was broken and, for the first time in a long time, she felt utterly lost.

As tears slid down her cheeks, she turned off her phone, tossed it in the back seat and turned her car toward home.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Still in shock, and with a heavy heart, Maggie walked into her parents' house.

Her mother, Julia Sullivan, came around the corner and looked a bit shocked when she saw her daughter standing there.

"Maggie! I didn't think you would be home so soon. Are you done with all your exams?" Her mom came over and gave her a quick hug. She glanced behind her. "And where is Mason?"

Maggie nodded. "Mason still has exams to take. I finished mine." She cleared her throat. "Mom ..."

Her mom waved her hand in the air. "I wasn't expecting you so soon.

But now that you are here, you can help set the table for dinner.

We are having the Smiths over tonight. You remember the Smiths, don't you?

They just bought another house in Hawaii.

Their law firm is doing exceptionally well. " She hurried back into the kitchen.

Maggie didn't want to help in the kitchen. She wanted to talk to her mom about Mason and Lauren and their betrayal. While she'd never been close with her mom, she felt like she needed her at what felt like the lowest point in her life.

Her feet felt like they were struggling through quicksand as she followed her mom

into the dining room. “I need to talk to you about Mason, Mom.” Her voice quivered with emotion. She tried to swallow but her mouth felt like ash.

Her mom didn’t even bother looking at her. “I think the Smiths might just offer you a summer job interning at their firm. It’s great experience and would look wonderful on your resume.” Her mom smiled as she counted out the fine China to set the dining room table.

“I need to tell you something. It’s about Mason.” Maggie managed to get the words out.

Her mother’s face fell. “Please tell me you two didn’t have a fight. You know how much we like Mason. He comes from a very good family and, once you two started dating, his father invested a large amount with your father.”

Her father, John Sullivan, was a financial planner, and had done well by landing Mason’s father as a client. She’d never been close to her father, who always worked late and prioritized success over a family life.

Maggie opened her mouth to speak but nothing would come out.

Why in the world did she think her mother would listen to her this time?

Finally able to form words, Maggie settled with, “We didn’t fight.”

Her mother’s face broke into a big smile.

“Good. That’s good, honey. We will have a nice dinner with the Smiths tonight.

I’m sure they’ll be so impressed with you and offer you an internship.

Although it won't be a lot of money, but the experience is so valuable. It will open a lot of doors for you."

Something inside of Maggie seemed to withdraw.

She didn't want to think about an internship. She wanted her mother to see she was in pain. For once she wanted her mom to comfort her.

Coming home had been a mistake.

Maggie glanced to the back yard. "Where's Walker?" She looked back at her mother.

Her mother's gaze darted away, and she began working on a floral centerpiece arrangement for the dining room table.

"Mom?" Maggie narrowed her eyes.

She let out an irritated sigh. "He's in the garage. We've been keeping him out there since he started having problems."

Maggie's heart tugged in her chest. "What kind of problems? Why didn't you tell me before?"

Her mother shrugged and continued to work on the arrangement to her liking. "I wanted you to focus on school and not worry about your dog. You know how important college is."

Worry seeped into her chest. "What's wrong with Walker?"

Her mother set down a bunch of frilly white flowers and turned to look at her daughter.

“Walker is having problems running into things. He walked into my very expensive vase that I keep by the fireplace and busted it. When he kept running into the wall, I finally took him to the vet. I thought he was having a stroke, but the vet said ... getting old. As dogs do.”

Maggie’s heart dropped. She couldn’t imagine a life without Walker.

Her mother picked up the flowers and began sticking them in the centerpiece. “So I decided to stick him in the garage. He can’t get into trouble out there. Maggie, you must know he’s an old dog, and it’s time we said our goodbyes.”

Maggie couldn’t believe her ears. Ignoring her mother, she ran toward the garage and opened the door. Her hand found the light switch on the wall and flipped it up.

Walker was in the corner of the garage curled up on his dog bed asleep. His once white fur was starting to yellow, reminding her of his age.

Her heart twisted in her chest. Her mother put his dog bed out here.

Maggie swallowed the lump in her throat. “Walker?”

The Labrador retriever slowly lifted his head and wagged his tail.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Walker lifted his head and smiled when he heard Maggie call his name. His eyesight may be blurry but he would know her voice and her scent anywhere.

She was his Maggie.

The scent of oil and gas hung in the air. He didn't much like this part of the house. It was cold and damp and he kept running into the car.

"Walker." Maggie knelt beside him and wrapped her arms around his neck in a hug.

He smiled and nudged closer. He'd missed his Maggie.

When she pulled away, he tried to focus on her face. But his eyesight wasn't what it used to be. The last few months it was getting harder to focus.

Good thing he still had his nose. He could find his Maggie anywhere using his nose.

Maggie sat beside him and ran her fingers through his fur before scratching him behind the ear.

He grinned and curled up in her lap.

"I've missed you, Walker," she whispered against his fur.

He gave her a lick across the face letting her know he'd missed her too.

She let out a giggle.

He liked the sound of her laugh. It made his heart want to burst with love.

“Walker.” Maggie blinked, and a tear rolled down her face. “Mason is cheating on me. I can’t believe he would do something like that.” She swallowed. “I guess I never really knew his character.”

Walker let out a bark. He wanted to let her know that he never liked Mason. He tried to warn her when he peed on the guy’s pants leg. But all that got him was Maggie’s mom yelling at him.

A dog could always tell what type of character a person had. Dogs were never wrong.

Maggie looked deep into his eyes. “I can’t tell my parents, at least not yet. They really like Mason. It would disappoint them to know I’m not staying with him.”

Walker gave her hand a lick to let her know everything would be okay.

“Thanks, boy.” Her eyes drew together in concern. “Mom told me you are having some eye issues.”

Walker sighed and lay back down in her lap.

Now was not the time to be worried about him. He didn’t like to see her sad.

He whined.

“I don’t know what my parents told you, but you’re not going anywhere.”

Walker stood and cocked his head.

She got to her feet and patted her thigh. “Come on, boy, let’s go to my room.”

He let out a stretch and then tried to follow the sound of her footsteps. He bumped into the fender of her mother's car.

Maggie gasped and immediately went to him. She cradled his face between her hands. "Oh, Walker. I'm so sorry. I forgot ..."

He wished he could tell her he wasn't hurt.

Maggie looked around the wall of the garage. She found something and came back over to him. Kneeling, she snapped a collar and leash around his neck.

Walker sighed. He hated a collar.

"This is so you won't run into anything. Come on, boy. Let's go to my room."

He made his way up the familiar steps back inside the house.

He could smell her mother cooking something in the kitchen. Whatever it was smelled good. But he knew he certainly wasn't getting any of it. Since Maggie had gone away to college, all he got was dry dog food. Yuck.

Maggie's mother stepped out of the kitchen and scowled when she saw Walker.

"Maggie, he needs to be in the garage, so he won't bump into something and destroy it." She pressed her lips into a thin white line.

"He's not staying in the garage. He's my dog, and he's going to my room with me." Maggie lifted her chin and walked past her mother with Walker in tow.

When she opened her bedroom door, he smiled at the familiar scent.

They both stepped inside, and he bumped into the bed.

“Oh, Walker. Here, let me help.” Maggie picked him up and put him on the bed.

He walked in a circle and curled up into a ball.

He was back inside, in Maggie’s bed. Most importantly, his Maggie was home.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie curled up beside Walker on her bed and buried her face into his soft fur. She let the tears she'd been holding back flow down her cheeks as she thought about Mason and Lauren, and their devastating betrayal.

It was bad enough that Mason had cheated on her, but it was worse that he cheated on her with her best friend. She simply could not understand how Lauren would do something so despicable.

She and Lauren had been best friends forever.

Maggie had never even seen any signs that Lauren had any interest in Mason.

There were even a few times Lauren had hinted that Mason wasn't good enough for Maggie.

Looking back, Maggie wondered if that was Lauren's attempt at breaking them up so Lauren could be with Mason.

She buried her face in Walker's fur. Walker wouldn't judge her.

Not like her parents would once they found out.

Like usual, they would find a way to make Mason's infidelity her fault.

Her father would brush off Mason's actions while her mother would tell her to think about protecting her family's name.

To her patents, reputation was everything.

Maggie's stomach lurched at the thought of having dinner with them tonight, especially since they were having company. She racked her brain to come up with an excuse.

Her phone buzzed in her purse. She sat up, quickly fished her phone out and looked at the screen.

It was a text from Mason asking her to call him back.

She glared and tossed the phone on the bed.

No way was she calling that jerk back. Walker seemed to agree and let out a snort.

There was a quick knock on her bedroom door. "Maggie, can you run to the bakery and pick up the dessert I ordered for tonight?" Her mother called out from the other side of the closed door.

Maggie rolled her eyes and stood. She had no desire to go anywhere, but maybe the fresh air would do her some good. "On my way." She looked down at Walker and smiled. "Want to go for a ride, Walker?"

The dog let out an affirmative bark, and she laughed.

Gathering her purse and Walker's leash, she led him out of her room to the front door.

"Maggie, what are you doing? You can't take Walker to the bakery. He's a dog."

Her mother gave her a look like her daughter had lost her mind.

Maggie decided not to argue. She didn't have the energy. Instead, she shrugged and hurried out the front door. "I'm not taking him into the bakery. He'll wait in the car."

She didn't bother waiting to hear her mother's words, and quickly put her dog in the passenger's seat. Hurrying around to the driver's side, she slid in and started the engine.

Walker gave her a toothy grin when she rolled his window down. He stuck his head out and let the wind blow through his fur.

He looked like a younger version of himself. He looked happy.

Maggie quickly found a parking spot in front of the bakery and pulled in. She reached over and patted Walker on the head. "I'll be right back, boy."

Maggie climbed out of her car and walked to the bakery. She glanced over her shoulder as she opened the door to see Walker resting his head on the window and watching the people strolling along the sidewalk.

The sweet scent of buttercream frosting and cinnamon wafted over her. The comforting aroma pulled her back in time, reminding her of childhood birthday parties.

A time when things were simpler. A time when things were happier.

She bent to look at the display case of cinnamon rolls the size of a dinner plate while she waited her turn.

"Your mother would tell you no respectable lady would order something so big. She would say to choose the macaroon instead of the cinnamon roll."

Maggie straightened at the familiar voice.

“Daniel. What a nice surprise running into you.” She smiled at her old friend and gave him a quick hug. “And I’m not here for cinnamon rolls. Mom ordered a dessert for dinner tonight.” Maggie took in his longer hair and shook her head. “It’s been a while.”

She had been best friends with Daniel Baylor all through middle school and junior high.

His dad was the beloved vet of the town.

Often his father would bring home an animal that had surgery earlier in the day to keep a close eye on them overnight.

She could remember many times going over to his house to see a pet being nursed back to health.

Daniel studied her and nodded. “It has been a while. I hear college is going well. At least that’s what your mom told my dad when she brought Walker in.” His expression hardened.

Maggie frowned. “I’m out for summer break. Just got home today.” She cocked her head. “I didn’t realize it was time for Walker’s shots.”

He gave her an accusing look. “It’s not.” He turned his attention back to Mrs. Wilson, the owner of the bakery, and grabbed his bag of goodies. “Thank you, Mrs. Wilson.” He gave Maggie a look before walking out the door.

Maggie bristled at the way Daniel had dismissed her. While they weren’t as close as they once were, they were always on good terms.

“Maggie! Back in town, I see. I guess you are here to pick up for your mom.” Mrs. Wilson smiled brightly. “It’s in the back. I’ll be right back.”

Maggie bit her lip and glanced out the window. Daniel was climbing into his old blue pickup truck.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, she headed for the door, calling out to Mrs. Wilson that she’d be back later. She had time to talk to Daniel before picking up the dessert for dinner.

Maggie ran out onto the sidewalk just as Daniel pulled away and drove in the direction of his parents’ house.

Walker looked at her, gave her a toothy grin and let out a bark.

She headed to the driver’s side and slid inside the car. Maggie started the car and pulled out on to the street.

Maggie pulled into Daniel’s driveway just as he was getting out of his truck. When he spotted her, he frowned.

She climbed out of the car. This time Walker didn’t stay in the car. He followed her through the open driver’s door, jumping to the ground.

“What are you doing here? Aren’t you going to be in trouble with your mom for not picking up her dessert?” He arched his brow and crossed his arms over a muscled chest. The bag of goodies dangled from his hand.

She crossed her arms and lifted her chin. “I want to know what your deal is. Do you have an issue with me that I don’t know about? You’ve never been mean to me. But you were back there.”

He snorted. "I'm not being mean to you."

Maggie shoved her finger in his chest. "You most certainly were mean. And dismissive."

Daniel frowned. "I've never been mean to you in my life."

She arched her brow. "Fine. Then why did your tone change with me when you said Mom brought Walker in to see your dad. Is something wrong with him?"

Daniel studied her, and he dropped his arms to his side. "Your mom hasn't told you."

It was a statement, and not an accusation.

A cold shiver ran down her back. "Tell me what?"

Daniel set the bag of goodies on the hood of his truck. He bent and called to Walker. The dog slowly made his way over.

He rubbed Walker between the ears. "Walker is going blind."

She shook her head. "You're mistaken. Mom said he's having trouble in the house. Bumping into things. She said he's just getting old."

He stood and looked at her. "No, Maggie. Walker is losing his sight. He's slowly going blind. One day he'll wake up and the world for him will be dark."

Maggie swallowed the lump in her throat. "Mom didn't tell me that."

Daniel snorted. "Did she tell you she brought him in so Dad would put him down?"

Maggie's mouth dropped. She bent down and cuddled Walker into her arms. "That's not true."

Daniel arched his brow and crossed his arms over his chest. "Ask your mom. Or you can ask my dad. He's inside."

Maggie blinked. "But she didn't put Walker down." She glanced down at her beloved dog.

"That's because Dad refused. He said he wouldn't put a dog down who was just going blind. He said it was heartless."

The full events of the day came to a culmination. From Mason's cheating to her mom not listening to her, to finding out what could have happened to Walker. She sat on the concrete driveway, and hugged Walker close.

Walker, as if sensing something was wrong, licked her face.

Daniel eased down to sit beside her. "Dad said he figured you didn't know anything about it. But your mom said she had talked to you about it and you agreed. I should have known you would never do something like that."

Maggie looked at him. "You should have called me and let me know. I can't believe she was going to do that." She wiped away her tears with the back of her hand.

"Your mom views Walker as a nuisance. She never was an animal lover." Daniel draped his arm over his knees and glanced down.

Maggie swallowed hard as Walker lay down and rested his head in her lap. "I know, but still."

Daniel cocked his head. “I think Dad scared her from trying to take him anywhere else to have it done. He told her that if Walker came up missing, he was going to report her to the police. That scared her into not trying to find a vet who would do what she was asking.”

Maggie’s shoulders slumped. “Thank God for your dad. He always was a good man.”

Daniel smiled and nodded in agreement. “So, you are home for the summer. Any plans? I’m sure you have an apprenticeship with some big, fancy law firm.”

Just the thought made her stomach turn. “Yeah. Mom has the Smiths coming over for dinner. She expects they’ll offer me a summer internship.”

Daniel snorted and stood. “You don’t sound overly excited.” He held out his hand. She took it and got to her feet.

She dusted off the seat of her jeans and shook her head. “It seems like everything has changed in a day. From Walker to Mason ...” her voice drifted off.

Daniel frowned. “What’s going on with Mason?”

She shook her head. She wasn’t ready to talk about it with anyone.

Daniel didn’t push. He was like that. He never forced her to talk about anything she didn’t want to talk about.

He pointed to the garage. “I don’t think you’ve seen my van since I finished it. Come on, I’ll show you.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie grabbed Walker's leash and gave him a gentle tug. They walked slowly toward the open garage where a white Econoline van was parked. She cocked her head. "Looks like an ordinary van."

Daniel went to the side door. "From the outside it looks like an ordinary van. But wait until you see the inside." He opened the door and stepped aside for her.

Walker immediately put his paws on the sidestep of the van ready for a tour.

Maggie peered inside. "Wow, you can totally live here."

Daniel smiled. "Oh, I have. I spent three months in Wyoming last summer in this. I have both shore power and solar power. I did a lot of boondocking."

Maggie furrowed her brows. "What's boondocking?"

He grinned. "Camping without power." He nodded toward the van. "Go on inside and look around. "

She stepped inside.

There was a small sink directly in front of her. She opened the cabinet underneath and spotted a two-burner propane stove.

"You can cook inside or, in nice weather, take it outside. There's a small portable table you can put it on if you want to experience cooking in the great outdoors," Daniel stated.

She looked at him over her shoulder. “I take it you cooked outside a lot.”

He smiled. “Every chance I could. I think the only time I cooked inside was when it was raining.”

She turned back to the small cabinet. Underneath were cooking utensils, plates and cups, along with a small skillet. She found a small crock pot. “Where is the plug-in for the electric?”

Daniel helped Walker inside and pointed.

“There’s an outlet here.” He patted the opposite side of the van.

“As well as a small table that flips up.” He released a latch and flipped a small wooden table top up.

He pulled out a small folding stool. “You can eat here or use this as a mobile workstation.” He patted the top before storing the tabletop and chair away.

“That’s a really good use of space.” She smiled and looked toward the back of the van. “Nice bed.”

There were two steps that led up to the bed which spanned the width of the van.

“I installed the steps because I took Coco with me when I went camping.” He smiled as he spoke of his chocolate Labrador.

“Oh, I bet he had fun camping,” Maggie said wistfully. She loved the idea of escaping where no one could find her.

Walker bumped into the steps. Then gingerly he put one foot in front of the other and

climbed on top of the bed.

“Walker, I don’t know if Daniel wants you up there.”

Daniel laughed. “Leave him alone. Why don’t you climb in? I paid a little more for the bed. I can’t sleep in an uncomfortable bed.”

Walker walked in a circle and then curled into a ball at the end of the bed.

Maggie smiled. “Looks like Walker approves.” She climbed into the bed and lay down, straightening her legs. “There’s plenty of room. I’m surprised since it’s a van.” She sat up and rubbed Walker’s head.

“There’s storage both under the bed as well as cabinet storage over the bed.” Daniel stepped up on the bottom step of the bed and reached up to the ceiling. He flipped down a screen. “I installed a TV to stream movies.”

Maggie shoved up on her elbows and nodded. “You have thought of everything.”

Daniel shrugged. “Just the basics. It’s good to get away and spend time in nature. Away from people.”

Something shifted in her chest. “Getting away sounds nice.”

Daniel nodded. “Too bad you will be too busy with your internship to do some camping.”

Maggie snorted. “Even if I wasn’t working, I can’t go camping. I don’t even own a tent. Besides, tent camping doesn’t sound very appealing.”

Daniel parked his hands on his hips. “You don’t have to tent camp. You could take

my van.”

Maggie eased off the bed and chuckled. “I wish.”

Daniel studied her. “What’s stopping you?”

Dealing with Mason, her duty to a possible internship at a prestigious law firm, her parents’ expectations.

Most of all, fear. That’s what was stopping her.

Those thoughts ran through her mind, but she didn’t have the courage to say the words out loud.

“Think about it.” Daniel stepped out of the van. Maggie looked at Walker, smiling at how he seemed right at home in the van.

She glanced around at the interior of the van. For a second she envisioned herself on a cross-country trip toward Colorado. A smile settled on her lips.

Her phone buzzed suddenly in her jeans pocket. Reluctantly she pulled it out, only to see it was her mother calling. She reluctantly answered the call.

“Hi, Mom.” She said with a forced smile.

“Did you pick up the dessert? You’ve been gone a while.” Her mother sounded exasperated.

Maggie’s eyes went wide. “I got distracted. I’m on my way there.”

Her mother huffed. “Well, hurry up. You still need to get ready for dinner.” She

ended the call.

Maggie's shoulders slumped. Reality had pulled her out of her daydreams and into the prison she had found herself in.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie pushed her food around on the expensive China plate that her mother used for special guests.

Nothing but the best for the Smiths.

“So, Maggie.” Mr. Roy Smith looked at her over the rim of his crystal wine glass.

“Your parents have been telling me how well you’ve done in college.

I suppose you’ll be looking for an internship this summer.

Someone like you who wants to get a head start on a promising law career should always be thinking how to advance in the world. ”

Maggie glanced between her mother and father who were watching her every move.

She cleared her throat and set her fork down. “I haven’t officially put in an application for an internship yet. But I think it’s a good idea.”

She cut her eyes at her mother who visibly relaxed.

“And how is that boyfriend of yours? Mason?” Mrs. Kathy Smith asked with a smile.

“His mother is my best friend, but I guess you knew that. Imagine if you two got married and started your own law firm. I bet it would be a good match for you.”

Maggie sighed. Marriage shouldn’t seem like an investment. It seemed like everyone at the table was more concerned about money than what made someone happy.

“Yes, where is Mason?” Her father frowned. “I thought he would be coming back home with you.”

Maggie took a sip of her water and looked at her father. “I finished my exams earlier than Mason. He’ll be on his way back home soon. I’m sure his parents are excited to see him.”

The image of Lauren and Mason together flashed through her head. Maggie felt the blood drain from her face.

“Maggie, are you okay?” Mrs. Smith gave her a concerned look. ‘You look a bit pale.”

Maggie forced a smile. “I’m just tired. It’s been a long day.”

Mr. Smith took a bite of his steak and waved his fork in the air. “You might have that stomach bug that’s going around. I heard the news talking about it. Dreadful thing.”

Her mother immediately pressed her hand to Maggie’s forehead. “It might be best for you to go lay down, Maggie. You don’t want to give anything to our guests.”

Maggie nodded her head in agreement. She wanted nothing more than to escape to her room where Walker waited for her. “That’s a good idea.” She excused herself from the table and hurried to her room.

“Don’t worry, Maggie. I’ll save a spot for you in our internship program.” Mr. Smith called out.

Maggie reached her room and shut the door behind her. Walker’s head lifted from the bed. He gave a wag of his tail.

Maggie flopped down on the bed beside him.

The very idea of staying at home all summer under her parents' judgmental eye while working for Mr. Smith made her heart sink.

Mr. Smith had a reputation of not only being a hard task master, it was also rumored he had a wandering eye where young females were concerned.

Walker, sensing her distress, snuggled closer to her and reclined his head on her chest.

She smiled and rubbed his head. "You're the only one who seems to understand me. Too bad we can't just run away."

Walker lifted his head and cocked his chin.

Maggie closed her eyes and imagined her and Walker escaping from her current reality. It was too good to be true.

A knock on the door had her eyes springing open. She sat up just as her mother opened the door. She peered in with a smile on her face.

"The Smiths invited us to ride over and see the new home they built on the lake!" She squealed and clapped her hands together. "It's the biggest house in town and I've been dying to get a look inside. "

"That's nice." Maggie managed to say.

Her mother rolled her eyes. "You could be a little more excited for other people, you know, Maggie." She gave her a glare.

“Now, Mr. Smith has said he’s willing to give you a summer internship.

He says it will be late hours but will look good on your resume.

You should be grateful. He says you will start Monday. ”

Maggie’s mouth dropped open. “But I wanted a few weeks at home before I started work for the summer.”

Her mother pressed her lips into a thin line. “Maggie, everything isn’t about you. This is a great opportunity for your whole family. Being in good with the Smiths will raise our own position. I might even get Mr. Smith to invest in my boutique idea I’ve had for ages.”

Her mother’s boutique idea was something that Maggie had heard about for years. Her mother wanted to open a clothing boutique.

Maggie had tried to tell her mother that there wasn’t a market in their town for another boutique. Most of the women went to Memphis to do their shopping. Her mother wouldn’t listen. She just knew people would flock to her boutique once she got it up and running.

“We will be back late, so don’t wait up.” Her mother shut the door without another word.

Maggie glanced at the calendar on her phone.

She only had a few days at home before starting work at a place she knew she was going to hate.

She turned around and looked at Walker. “I can’t believe she did that. She just

accepted a job for me. Just so she and Dad could get in good with the Smiths.” She curled her fingers into fists as realization hit her.

Walker sat up on the bed and let out a bark.

She nodded her head. “You know what, Walker, you’re right. It’s time I stop letting my family run all over me.”

She dialed a number on her cell phone. When he answered, she swallowed hard and hoped he would say yes to her request.

“Daniel, it’s Maggie. I need a favor. It’s huge. I want to borrow your van for the summer. I want to leave and take Walker on a trip with me. If I don’t leave now, I won’t ever do it.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie had never packed so quickly in her life.

Daniel had graciously said yes to her borrowing his van when she called.

After ending the phone call, Maggie focused on packing.

Thankfully she'd not taken all her clothes to the apartment and had some items still in her closet.

She found some old hiking boots and threw them, along with her laptop, into a bag.

She even found the journal she kept in high school and added it as well.

Unlike some people, Maggie didn't journal her life. She wrote down story ideas.

Ever since she was a little girl, she wanted to be a writer. She created stories in her head and would write them down. The problem was she had so many stories but had never actually finished one.

When she was in middle school, there was an author who came to school to talk to the children.

That author left a mark on Maggie. She was even offering an online mentorship for those interested in writing.

Maggie had gone home that day and submitted a short story and was immediately accepted.

When she told her parents, they laughed it off.

They said it was a scam and that the author was only after her money.

After all, they said, Maggie couldn't be that good at writing.

From that day on, Maggie shoved her dreams aside and let her parents dictate her life to her.

Shaking her head, she looked back at Walker watching her from his position on the bed.

"I've got to pack some dog food for you. But first let me put my bag in my car. I'll be right back, okay?"

She hurried out of the room and headed outside. She opened the trunk and placed her bag in.

Once she was back inside the house, she grabbed his half full bag of dog food and hauled it out to the car. She slammed the trunk shut and headed back to get Walker.

Grabbing his leash and collar, she attached it to her dog.

Walker sat patiently and wagged his tail, sensing the adventure they were about to go on.

She smiled. "Are you ready? We're about to make some memories."

Just then her phone buzzed.

It was a text from her mom.

We are just going to spend the night with the Smiths. We've had too many cocktails, and they insisted. Can you believe it?!

Maggie snorted and shoved her phone into her jeans pocket.

She was determined more than ever that she needed to get away from her family.

She needed time to think.

She needed space.

"Come on, Walker." She headed out of her room and walked with Walker to her car.

The drive over to Daniel's was quick. She pulled into his driveway. Immediately she spotted him in the garage.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and ambled over.

Maggie got out of the car with Walker at her side.

"You got here fast. Good thing I gassed up the van yesterday." Daniel grinned.

Maggie's heart was thudding in her chest. "Thanks for letting me borrow your van. I know it's a big favor."

Daniel tilted his head, and his expression became serious. "Are you okay? For you to be this impulsive, something must have happened. Want to talk about it?"

Maggie shook her head. "Not really."

Daniel held out his hand. "Hand me your phone. I'm going to add my contact

information in case you need something.”

Maggie frowned. “I already have your contact info. Remember, I just called you.”

Daniel arched his brow, nodding his head. “That’s true. I had been wondering, though, since I hadn’t heard from you in a while. Figured you changed your number.”

Her face heated. She stared at the ground in embarrassment. “I haven’t been a very good friend. I’m sorry, Daniel. I seem to have lost myself. I don’t even know who I am anymore.”

Daniel stepped forward and squeezed her arm gently. “Then let this trip be a way to find yourself again.”

Maggie looked up and smiled. “Thanks.”

Daniel nodded. “Where’s your stuff?”

Maggie walked to the back of her car and opened her trunk. “Everything is in here. I packed fast and probably forgot something. I figure I can buy whatever I need on the road.”

She had enough money to make it for a few weeks.

Daniel grabbed her bag and the dog food.

Maggie frowned. “I forgot about my car. I don’t know where to park it.”

Daniel grinned. “I already have that figured out. You can park in the garage where the van is. Let me put your stuff in it first and then I’ll back it out.”

Maggie stood back as Daniel placed her bag in the storage area underneath the bed. He stored Walker's dog food there as well.

"I took the liberty of putting on new sheets. And the quilt is clean. There's an extra blanket under the bed if you need it."

Maggie chortled. "It's going to be summer soon. I don't think I'll need it."

Daniel looked at her. "Once you get into the mountains, you will change your mind. Trust me. Also, there's a small tent under the bed as well in case you want to sleep under the stars.

" He turned to the small refrigerator under the sink.

Kneeling beside it, he opened the door. "Mom made some chicken salad for you to make sandwiches. She also put a couple of Greek yogurts in here as well."

Maggie was touched at his mother's kindness. "That was very sweet of her. I need to thank her."

Daniel stood and shrugged. "She just left. She had to go to her weekly quilting lesson at the church. But I'll pass on your appreciation."

Maggie nodded. She watched Daniel get into the driver's seat and back the van into the driveway. Next Daniel pulled her car into the garage. He walked back over to her and dangled two sets of keys.

Maggie shook her head. "You keep my car keys in case you need to move it or use it."

Daniel nodded. "Okay." He held out the van keys to her. "If you have any questions,

please call or text, day or night.”

She arched a brow. “Any time? Are you sure about that?”

He laughed. “I’m sure. I’m a light sleeper.” He handed the keys over to her. “Where are you hoping to make it to tonight? It’s already kind of late. You could spend the night here and take off tomorrow.”

Maggie’s heart thudded in her chest. “If I spend the night, then I’ll change my mind. I need to go now.”

Daniel nodded in understanding. “Give me a general direction where you want to go, and we’ll map out a route.”

Maggie swallowed hard. “I want to see mountains. I was thinking of Colorado, but nothing too busy.”

Daniel smiled. “Have you ever been to Estes Park?”

Maggie shook her head.

Daniel pulled out his phone and quickly typed something. He turned the phone back to her so she could see.

“That’s gorgeous.” She studied the small town nestled against the backdrop of the majestic mountains. An elk was lounging in the park while visitors walked past.

She looked up at him. ‘Have you been there?’

Daniel smiled. “I have. I spent a couple weeks at an RV park there and then boondocked near Pagosa Springs for another week. Just remember, if you boondock,

make sure you stock up on food and water. Oh, and wood for a campfire at night.”

Maggie nodded as her head filled with a thousand questions. She felt like she was about to jump out of a plane without a parachute.

She wasn't ready for this.

Her cell phone buzzed, and she looked at the screen.

Her stomach dropped. The text was from Mason.

Your mom invited me over for dinner tomorrow night. Make sure you make that apple pie I like. I deserve a reward after working my butt off this semester. Can't wait to see you. Love, Mason

“Is everything okay?” Daniel frowned.

Suddenly her mind cleared, and any lingering doubts disappeared like wisps of smoke.

She looked up at him and nodded. “It will be. Everything was just made perfectly clear to me. I'm going to just drive until I get tired tonight.”

Daniel nodded. “Afraid you'll change your mind if you wait any longer?”

Maggie shook her head. “There's no going back now. I need to put as many miles as possible between me and here. I'll send you a text when I stop for the night.” She looked down at Walker. “Ready to go on an adventure?”

Walker gave a toothy grin and let out a bark.

The journey was starting.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie made it over the Arkansas state line before midnight. She would have made better time, but there was a traffic accident on the Memphis bridge which caused traffic to be backed up for miles. By the time she pulled into the small RV park, she was starving and exhausted.

Daniel had gone over how to hook up electricity and water to the van before she headed out. He made her record a video so she could refer to it.

First things first. She needed to take Walker for a brief walk before starting any of that.

After finding her spot for the night, she parked and grabbed Walker's leash. Attaching it to the dog, she pulled up her flashlight app on her phone and guided him over to the grassy spot nearby their campsite.

Thankfully, most of the campers were already asleep. The only noise around her was the passing cars along the highway and the occasional cracking of a late-night campfire.

Walker quickly did his business and wagged his tail. She walked back to the van and began setting up the electricity and water.

By the time she was done, her stomach growled. Walker looked up at her and let out a bark.

"Come on, boy. Let's get inside and eat before we go to sleep." She opened the van door and they both clamored inside.

Maggie opened the mini fridge and grabbed some of the chicken salad Daniel's mom had made. Instead of making a sandwich, she decided to scoop some on the paper plate and eat it with crackers.

She reached under the bed and pulled out Walker's dog food. She quickly filled a bowl and placed it on the floor next to a bowl of water she had prepared for him.

He eagerly ate his late dinner.

She eased onto the bed and ate her chicken salad and crackers.

It was a weird experience. The whole time she had been driving she expected her phone would be blowing up with calls from Mason or Lauren.

They were probably too busy with each other to even remember she was alive.

Maggie finished off her late dinner and tossed the paper plate into the garbage bag. Walker looked up at her from his empty dog bowl and cocked his head.

"One more walk before bedtime, boy." She grabbed his leash and opened the van door.

She didn't walk far from the van because it was so dark. Once they got back to the van, she made sure to lock all the doors before she brushed her teeth.

Maggie changed into some gym shorts and a T-shirt before climbing into bed. She snuggled under the sheets and patted the space beside her.

Walker climbed onto the bed and settled next to her.

She smiled as she patted his furry head. Within minutes he was fast asleep.

She glanced at her phone before she plugged it in for the night.

Before closing her eyes, she sent Daniel a quick text. She wanted to let him know her location.

Turning on her side, she quickly found the sleep she desperately needed.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie woke to Walker whimpering at her side.

When she pried her eyes open, sunlight streamed in from the windows.

Groaning, she sat up. She would remember to make sure the window shades were closed tonight. She'd been too exhausted to think about it last night.

Walker let out another whine.

She tossed the covers off her legs. "Okay, boy. I get it. Let me get my shoes on."

Maggie made quick work of putting her sneakers on before grabbing Walker's collar and leash.

Once Walker was secure, she opened the door.

The humidity hit her in the face as she stepped outside.

Summertime in the South was always brutal. It was only May but was going to get worse as the summer months went by.

The RV park was abuzz with people cooking bacon over griddles and kids riding their bikes.

Maggie glanced down when Walker was done with his business and pulled out a doggie bag from the leash. She grimaced as she cleaned up after Walker and then quickly found a garbage can to dispose of the green plastic bag.

As she walked back to the van, her stomach growled as the smells of breakfast cooking around the campsites wafted around her.

She shut the van door behind her and Walker and washed her hands at the tiny sink. Turning around, she faced the dog.

“Are you ready for breakfast?”

Walker cocked his head in response, wagging his tail.

She laughed. “Of course you are.” She found his dog bowl and filled it with food.

Before she set it on the floor, she gathered her clothes together. The RV Park had a public shower she could use, and she was going to take advantage of getting a hot shower while she could.

After gathering her clothes and essentials, she set Walker’s bowl on the floor and shut the van door behind her. He would be content in the air-conditioned van while she showered.

Maggie entered the bathroom and went to the shower area. It smelled of mildew, but everything appeared relatively clean.

Twenty minutes later, after her shower, she walked back to the van with damp hair.

Walker barked before she opened the van door.

Cautiously peeking in, she smiled and rubbed his head. “It’s just me, Walker, but I’m glad you are being a good guard dog.”

Walker leaned into her hand.

Maggie's stomach growled again, reminding her she was late eating breakfast.

Tossing her dirty clothes on the bed, she went to the cabinet and fished out the coffee maker.

She placed the coffeepot on the small counter before reaching for the bag of coffee grounds.

Once she started the coffee, she scrounged around in the cabinet for a quick breakfast.

Luckily, she found a couple of granola bars and grabbed one.

"I have to make a grocery run. We are going to need food for tonight" She sat on the floor next to her dog.

She would make a quick visit to an ATM for emergency cash and just use her credit cards for gas and food along the way.

She wasn't much of a spender and had saved the monthly allowance her parents had put in her checking account.

She wasn't rich by any means, but she would have a comfortable trip.

Maggie stared out the open van door at the activity of the campers.

She spotted a couple campers drive by and frowned. Because she had gotten there so late, she forgot to look up the check-out time.

Grabbing her phone she quickly pulled up the website. She grimaced as she realized she was supposed to check out fifteen minutes ago. Now she wouldn't even have time for her coffee.

Maggie threw her unopened granola bar on the counter and stepped outside.

An old lady in a yellow golf cart stopped in at her camping spot. She was wearing a T-shirt with the name of the campground. She clamored out of her golf cart with a clipboard in her hand.

Maggie shoved her hands in her jeans pocket and gave the woman a sheepish grin. "I'm sorry. I just realized I am late checking out." She pointed over her shoulder to the van. "I got in late last night and overslept."

Just then Walker jumped out of the van and made his way over to Maggie.

The older woman's eyes lit up. "You have a dog. He reminds me of the first dog I ever had. I was just a little girl." Her eyes softened at the memory.

Maggie glanced at Walker and smiled. "His name is Walker."

The older woman bent down and held out the back of her hand. "Hello, Walker."

Walker cautiously walked over, stumbling a bit over his feet. He sniffed her hand and then gave her a lick.

The old woman laughed and ran her fingers over his head. "He's a good boy. Seems to be getting a little old, like me."

Maggie smiled. "We are on a little road trip. Sorry I'm late leaving. I can start packing up right away."

The old woman stood and shook her head. "Don't you worry about a thing. We have a policy for campers who get here after ten. Those who arrive late can check out at three instead of eleven."

Maggie sighed with relief. “That’s great news. That gives me time to get some coffee.”

The older lady frowned. “You’ve not eaten anything today? Well, I can help with that.” She held up a finger and headed back to the golf cart. She lifted the lid on the cooler strapped to the back.

She returned and held out something wrapped in aluminum. “It’s a bacon, egg, and cheese breakfast sandwich.”

Maggie’s stomach growled again as the delicious aroma reached her. “How much is it?” She started for the camper to get her purse.

“No charge. I made extra. I always have extra for the employees working in the store.”

Maggie took the sandwich and smiled. “Thank you. I need to buy groceries before we camp tonight.” She unwrapped the sandwich. “This looks wonderful.”

The old woman smiled and started for the golf cart. “The campground store also has some basic groceries if you want to pick up some things before you hit the road. All at a good price too.” She waved before driving away.

Maggie sank down in the doorway of the van and bit into the sandwich. She moaned in delight.

“Maybe this camping thing isn’t so bad after all.”

Walker let out a bark.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Walker blinked his eyes slowly. The slow swaying of the van and the soft music Maggie was playing on the radio was starting to put him to sleep.

He couldn't really make out the distinctive objects they were passing along the road because of how fast they were going, but he knew from the smell drifting in from the open window they were in the countryside.

Rural areas always smelled better than city spaces.

He wasn't sure where they were going, and he didn't really care.

As long as he was with Maggie, that's all that mattered.

He rested his head back down and felt his eyelids grow heavy. It had been a while since he'd been on a trip. The gentle sway of the van was making him sleepy.

He tried to fight sleep, but he finally lost.

He dreamed of racing through meadows and chasing bunnies. The grass was soft under his paws, and the cool breeze drifted across his fur.

There were mountains in the distance and flowers were blooming everywhere.

In his dream, his eyesight was crisp and he could see for miles away.

It was the most beautiful place he'd ever seen.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie pulled into Pinnacle State Park near Little Rock, Arkansas. She had thought about driving as far as she could, but she also wanted to enjoy her trip with Walker.

She had picked up some essentials from the shop at the campground and was looking forward to cooking a meal tonight. While she was there, she overheard a couple talking about how much they enjoyed Pinnacle State Park so she decided to stop there for the night.

When she pulled into the park, she stopped at the visitors' center.

She smiled and got into the back of the van. Walker wagged his tail with excitement as she reached for his leash.

She opened the van door and Walker eased out. Once he stepped onto the grass he did his business.

Maggie tightened her hand on the leash as a squirrel scampered a few feet away from Walker.

Walker didn't move despite looking in the direction of the animal. Her heart sank in her chest. She knew Walker was old, but seeing the obvious signs broke her heart.

She knelt beside her dog and rubbed his head. "Your eyesight isn't what it used to be, is it?"

Walker leaned into her hand. He looked in her direction and gave her a toothy smile as if he didn't have a care in the world.

“I wish I had your outlook on life, Walker.” She pressed her head against him.

Her phone buzzed in her jeans pocket and she looked at the message.

It was from Mason.

What time should I come over for dinner tonight?

She gripped the phone in her hand, wanting to tell him exactly where he could shove his dinner.

She sent back a text.

I’m not going to be home tonight.

She waited a beat to see if he would follow up but he left her on “read.”

Walker let out a bark. She looked at the direction he was barking toward as a park ranger walked toward them.

Maggie stood.

The ranger gave her a stiff smile. “Hello, ma’am.” He glanced at Walker. “We just had to close one of the trails due to storm damage.”

Maggie frowned. “Storm damage?”

He nodded. “A large tree has fallen across the trail, making it impassable. But our other trails are open. Just make sure to pick up after your dog.”

She nodded. “Of course.” She glanced at the visitors’ center. “Do you know if there

are any camping sites available for tonight?”

He cocked his head. “We don’t have sites for camping. But there are a couple of nearby campgrounds that are posted inside the visitors’ center. They shouldn’t be too booked up this time of year.”

She nodded and gave a gentle tug on Walker’s leash. “Thank you. You’ve been very helpful.”

He tipped his hat and headed to his truck.

Maggie made her way to the entrance of the visitors’ center and checked to make sure it was okay for Walker to enter.

Once inside, a blast of cold air-conditioning hit her and she glanced around.

There were two female park rangers manning the desk.

She walked over to the bulletin board. She found the numbers for several campgrounds and pulled up their websites on her phone.

When she finally decided on one, she called and made a reservation for the night.

She grabbed a map of the park on her way out the door.

“Okay, Walker. Let’s pack some water and snacks and hit the trail.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie sighed with relief as she backed into the campground site. She grabbed Walker and began hooking the van up to electricity and water. Thankfully it was still light and, unlike last night, she could enjoy sitting outside with Walker.

Once the van was hooked up, she took Walker for a quick walk.

Back at the campsite she looped Walker's leash to the picnic table and opened the van door.

She grabbed the burger meat, buns, platter and bag of chips. She set all the ingredients for their dinner on the picnic table. Walker lifted his head and sniffed.

There was an inground grill with a stack of wood left over from the previous campers. She headed back in the van and scrounged around in the cabinets.

After a few tries, she managed to start a fire in the grill.

Maggie opened the package of ground beef. She began to mold the meat into patties. There was enough for three burgers.

She grabbed a spatula from the van and set the burger patties on the grill. She kept a close eye on the hamburgers while they cooked.

She opened the photos on her phone and swiped through all the photos she had taken of her and Walker on their hike.

They had sat on a large rock halfway through their hike on the trail while she snapped

a selfie with Walker.

The dog leaned into her looking off to the side with his tongue lolling out of his mouth.

Maggie swiped through the photos, smiling at the sunset she'd captured as they came off the trail.

Suddenly there were raised voices nearby.

Walker lifted his head and let out a small growl at the sound of a loud male voice.

Maggie frowned and glanced across the road at the young couple standing outside their camper.

"Can't you do anything right?" the man yelled. He threw a beer can down on the ground and stormed off to the back of the camper.

The woman shoved her hands in her jeans and glanced around. She met Maggie's eyes, and her face went red with shame. She ducked inside the camper

The man came back into view and, for a moment, Maggie thought about walking over to make sure everything was okay. But, by Walker's low growl, she figured it would only make things worse.

She'd keep an eye on him while she cooked. Once he went back inside the camper, she relaxed.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Walker's whole body ached from their long walk. Not that he minded. It had been a while since he'd been out in nature. There were so many new sniffs that he wasn't used to.

It was a lot better than the depressing garage Maggie's mom put him in.

His sight was not as clear as it once was. But his smell was getting keener by the day.

He smelled the squirrel on the trail before Maggie saw it. She had to hold tight to his leash to keep up.

Of course, the yard rat got away. They usually did.

Lying next to Maggie as she cooked dinner was the best end to their day.

He smelled the anger and fear somewhere close. He lifted his head and growled.

Maggie rested her hand on his head. He didn't stop growling. He now heard the man's raised voice.

He didn't like the way his voice sounded. He could tell from his smell the man was bad.

He let out another growl to let the man know he would protect Maggie.

When the man's voice went quiet, Walker felt Maggie relax.

She rubbed the top of his head and spoke in a soft voice. “Let’s go inside for a bit, Walker.”

He followed her inside the van.

Once the door shut behind him, he sat beside Maggie on the bed. He rested his head in her lap and closed his eyes.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie woke up and stretched. Walker lifted his head from where he was snuggled against her legs, blinked, and went back to sleep.

She grinned and climbed out of bed. She prepped the coffee the night before so all she had to do was turn it on.

Slipping her sneakers on, she grabbed her pink zip-up hoodie and stepped outside.

It was surprisingly cool this early in the morning. Back in Mississippi it would be twenty degrees hotter.

Maggie pulled her hoodie over her head and sat at the picnic table.

The birds were starting to sing, and the sunrise was streaking across the horizon in vivid colors of orange and pink.

After a while she got up and headed inside the van.

She pulled a coffee mug out of the small cupboard and poured herself a hot cup of coffee.

Walker lifted his head off the bed and let out a whine.

“Come on. Let’s go for a short walk.” She pulled out his leash and collar.

Walker eased off the bed and stood still while she attached everything.

Grabbing her cup of coffee, she headed outside with Walker.

She glanced over at the camping spot where the couple had argued last night. It was empty.

She was relieved the guy was gone, and hoped the woman was okay.

She couldn't imagine dating someone who was abusive.

Her stomach dropped as she thought about Mason. She didn't know if she were more hurt by Mason or by Lauren.

Walker barked, bringing her out of her thoughts. She smiled and looked at him. "I guess you are hungry."

She made quick work of pouring the dog food into his bowl. She put it on the ground and Walker quickly shoved his face in the food.

Maggie chuckled and topped off her coffee before heading outside. She left the van door open so Walker could join her when he was finished with his breakfast.

She sat at the picnic table and sipped her coffee.

A red-breasted robin hopped over toward her and cocked its head. It let out a chirp and then pecked the ground.

Walker poked his head out of the door and stepped outside.

Maggie watched to see if he would chase the bird. His ears perked up at the chirp, but he didn't seem to notice how close it was.

Instead, he lifted his snout, sniffed the air and then gave a lazy stretch with his back legs.

He smiled as he walked over to her and sat at her feet.

“Good morning.” A man walking his chihuahua smiled as he passed. The little dog spotted Walker and started barking his head off.

“Good morning.” She nodded and glanced over at Walker. His fur raised on his back, and he stood up.

She put her hand on his back in case he started to bolt for the little dog. Walker usually ignored other dogs when they barked. Maybe last night’s encounter with the couple had him on edge.

Walker settled down and Maggie took another sip of her coffee.

Her phone buzzed and she fished it out of her pocket.

It was a text from her mom.

I want to take you shopping before you start work. While you are out with Walker, can you pick up some orange juice?

Maggie’s mouth dropped. She’d been gone two days now and her mother didn’t realize it.

Had she really become so unseen, even to her family?

She quickly typed back a reply

I don't need clothes. Thanks for the offer.

She hit send.

She didn't bother telling her she wasn't even in the state of Mississippi. Hopefully, by the time she found out, she would have put another state in between them.

Dumping out what was left of her coffee—now chilled—she stood and headed inside the van.

She needed to get back on the road.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Walker sat and watched Maggie get the van ready to go. He'd noticed the sadness in her eyes after she'd gotten a message on her phone. Despite his bad eyesight, he could still sense her emotions.

Maggie bumped her knee against the back of the open van, grimaced, and mumbled something under her breath.

He'd eaten his usual breakfast along with her leftover oatmeal that Maggie hadn't finished. Oatmeal wasn't his favorite, but he rarely turned down food.

Maggie turned and looked at him with her hands parked on her hips. "Well, boy. Are you ready?"

Walker grinned and let out an affirmative bark.

She laughed and grabbed his collar and leash. "One last walk before we hit the road."

He stood still while she attached his collar to him. He knew she was in a hurry but, once his sniffer caught the smell of a squirrel, he couldn't concentrate on doing his business.

He spotted movement and headed for the large oak tree.

The yard rat had gone up the trunk, evading him.

He turned back to the smell of their van.

Once he climbed in, Maggie went around to the driver's side. He made his way from the back of the van to the passenger's seat and settled in for the drive.

Maggie slowly made her way toward the entrance when he smelled something out the window.

He let out a bark.

She frowned at him. "What is it? You already had your walk."

He put his feet on the open window and stuck half his body out.

Maggie stopped and grabbed at his collar.

He might be old, but he was fast. Before she could grab him, he jumped out the window.

Maggie screamed and scrambled out of the van.

Walker knew she would follow so he didn't bother waiting for her.

He made it five feet into the woods and stopped.

"Walker, what are you ..." Maggie's words trailed off.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie froze as she came face to face with a woman sitting against a tree, sobbing.

It was the same woman who was arguing with the man the night before.

As soon as she saw Walker and Maggie, the woman scrambled to her feet, eyes wide.

It was then Maggie noticed the woman's black eye.

It hadn't been there last night.

Maggie forced out the words trapped in her mouth. "Are you okay?"

The woman ducked her head. "I'm fine."

Maggie didn't move. "You don't look fine. Why are you out here in the woods?"

The woman shrugged and seemed to shrink into herself. "My boyfriend kicked me out of the truck."

Maggie swallowed. "How long have you been out here?"

The woman dug her sneaker into the ground. "A few hours, I guess. I'm waiting for him to come back. He usually comes back after we get into a fight." She stole a glance at Maggie. "This is the longest he's ever left me."

Maggie was horrified by the fact the woman had been kicked out and left behind. What kind of person would do that?

“My name is Maggie Sullivan, and this is my dog, Walker.” Maggie felt sympathy and anger at the same time. “I can take you into town if you want.”

The girl shook her head. “But he won’t find me if I leave.”

Maggie sighed heavily. “Maybe that’s a good thing.”

The woman’s face went red with shame.

Maggie cleared her throat. “Look, do you have any family you can stay with?”

The woman shook her head. “They don’t like Tony and won’t talk to me.”

Maggie bit the inside of her mouth. “Is Tony the guy that left you here?”

The woman nodded and glanced away.

“What’s your name?” Maggie asked quietly.

The woman looked at her and she dropped her eyes to the ground. “Cindy Miller.”

Maggie smiled and stuck out her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Cindy eyed her outstretched hand and slowly took it.

Maggie glanced over her shoulder. “I’m just traveling through myself. Me and Walker are headed to Estes Park, Colorado.”

Cindy’s eyes went wide. “I’ve never been to Colorado. I’ve never really left the state of Arkansas.”

The girl's family was in Arkansas. That was at least some information. She looked older than Maggie, with dark circles under her eyes and the bruise. Maggie suspected it was her circumstances that had aged her.

"You can't just stay in the woods and wait for Tony to come back. What if he doesn't?" Maggie studied her black eye. "Do you even want him to?"

Cindy sighed. "I have nowhere else to go."

While they had been talking, Walker had been sniffing the ground like a pig on a mission to find a truffle. But he suddenly stopped and walked over to Cindy and sat down at her feet. He looked over his shoulder at Maggie and gave her sad puppy eyes.

Maggie felt sorry for the woman, but she had enough problems of her own without involving herself in someone else's life. Besides, how could she help?

Walker let out a whine. Cindy glanced over at her. "Can I pet your dog?"

Maggie relaxed. "Sure. Walker is really friendly."

Cindy slowly crouched and reached out a hand. Walker sniffed and licked her fingers. This drew a smile from Cindy who then stroked his head.

Maggie glanced back at the road as an RV passed.

"I really need to get on the road."

Cindy stood and nodded.

Maggie blew out a breath. "But I can't leave you out here. What are you going to do

if Tony doesn't show up? I doubt you want to spend the night in the woods."

Cindy's eyes darted around the wooded area. Clearly, she'd not thought past today.

"How about this? How about I drive you into town? I've got to pick up some things from the grocery. At least let me get you something to eat." Maggie hoped she would agree. It didn't feel right leaving the woman behind.

"I don't think I should leave"

Maggie heard the rumble of a truck. She turned to see a park ranger pull up behind her van.

He slowly climbed out of his vehicle. He walked toward them with a frown. "Is everything okay here, ladies?"

Maggie glanced at Cindy who had gone pale.

Maggie faced the ranger and forced a smile. "Everything is fine. My dog had to take a bathroom break."

The ranger smiled at Walker and then over at Cindy.

Maggie's stomach tightened as she waited for the ranger to ask about her black eye. He said nothing.

It was then Maggie noticed that Cindy had pulled her hoodie over her head to help conceal her injury.

"I can understand about dogs. I have a German shepherd myself. It's like having a toddler. Just when I want to go somewhere with him, he's either needing to stop

every thirty minutes to pee or is wanting a pup cup.”

Maggie nodded in agreement. “I don’t think Walker has had a pup cup in a while. I’ve been away at college and am taking a trip with him over summer break.” She glanced at Cindy. “Along with my friend. You know, a girl’s trip.”

The ranger smiled. “Well, I hope you are enjoying yourself. Don’t stay parked on the side of the road too long. We get a lot of traffic, and I don’t want any accidents.”

Maggie walked toward Walker. “We were just leaving.” She gave Cindy a pleading look before heading to the van.

She opened the side of the van and Walker climbed inside. She walked around to the driver’s side just as the park ranger started his truck.

Thankfully, Cindy climbed into the passenger’s seat.

As she pulled back onto the road, she glanced over at Cindy. “I’m glad you decided to come.”

Cindy shrugged. “I don’t like cops.”

Maggie made a turn. “He was a park ranger, not a cop.”

Cindy snorted. “Same thing. They all carry weapons, and they don’t believe you when you need help.”

Maggie didn’t know how to respond. Instead, she drove silently into town, wondering if she’d made a mistake trying to help.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie had fueled up the van before pulling into the parking lot of the grocery store. Cindy had been quiet the entire ride despite Maggie trying to engage in conversation with her.

She glanced over at her before grabbing her bag. “Why don’t you go in with me? It’s too hot to wait in the van.”

Cindy glanced over her shoulder at Walker. “What about him? Are you just going to leave him in the van?”

Maggie bit the inside of her cheek. She was going to leave the van running while she grabbed some groceries, but she was uneasy about leaving Cindy. She could very easily drive off with a van that didn’t belong to her and Walker.

“I’ll stay here with Walker.” Cindy said quietly.

Maggie didn’t move.

Realization flashed through Cindy’s eyes. “You’re scared I’m going to steal your van.”

Maggie quickly shook her head. “It’s not that”

It was exactly that.

Cindy gave her a small smile. “I don’t blame you. I mean, you don’t know me from Adam’s housecat.”

Maggie slumped toward the steering wheel. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to insult you.”

Cindy chortled lightly. “Believe me, I’ve experienced worse.”

That made Maggie feel even worse. “So, what should we do?”

Cindy leaned over, fished something out of her back jeans pocket and held it out to Maggie. “What if I give you my driver’s license as insurance I won’t take off in your van?”

Maggie glanced at the photo.

Cindy Miller. Age twenty. Younger than Maggie.

The woman in the photo looked a lot different. Her face was fuller, and she was smiling. Gone were the dark circles under her eyes.

“Take it.” Cindy nudged gently. “Tony takes it sometimes to make sure I won’t run off.”

Maggie’s eyes grew wide.

Cindy realized she’d said too much and dropped her driver’s license into Maggie’s bag.

Her cell phone dinged with a text. She looked at the message and rolled her eyes.

It was Mason asking her to call him back.

“Are you avoiding someone?” Cindy asked carefully.

Maggie snorted. “Something like that.” She grabbed her bag. “I won’t be long.”

Leaving the van running, she closed the door behind her and headed inside the grocery store.

It took her less than ten minutes before she was checking out. After paying with her debit card, she headed outside to see Walker sitting in the driver’s seat and Cindy gently petting him.

She opened the side door to the van and stepped inside. “Looks like you two are getting along just fine.”

Cindy shot her an anxious look. “I tried to stop him from sitting in the driver’s seat, but he was insistent.”

Maggie laughed and put the cold food items into the small refrigerator. “It’s okay. He loves the air conditioner blowing in his face.” She finished putting the groceries away.

She patted her leg and smiled at Walker. “Come on, boy. I don’t think you can drive to Colorado.”

Walker crawled out of the seat and headed to the bed where he promptly curled up.

Maggie slid into the driver’s seat and put the van in reverse.

Cindy seemed to forget that she was going to wait for Tony, which was fine by Maggie. She knew the girl was not safe with that man.

“I’ve got some ground beef for burgers tonight. Hope you aren’t vegan.” Maggie smiled hoping to put the girl at ease.

Cindy shook her head. "I'm not vegan." She cut her eyes at Maggie. "I can't pay you for gas or food or anything. Tony took my money before he made me get out of the truck."

Maggie gritted her teeth together. Tony sounded like a complete jerk.

She forced herself to relax and give Cindy a reassuring look. "No need to pay for anything. Besides, you kept an eye on Walker while I was inside, so we are even."

Cindy's brows bunched together and she chewed the bottom of her lip. "People always want something."

Maggie cleared her throat. "Did Tony teach you that?"

Cindy was silent for a beat, and Maggie thought she might have said too much.

Cindy shrugged. "He's not always mean. It's just when he's been drinking too much or when I push his buttons. It's my fault I made him angry this morning."

Maggie arched her brow but kept her tone neutral. "Oh yeah? What did you do?"

Cindy picked at a hangnail. "I put cream in his coffee. I'm the one who likes cream. This morning, I handed him the wrong cup and he got upset." She shook her head. "I should have double checked before handing it to him."

Maggie couldn't believe what she was hearing. "So, you made a mistake, and your boyfriend gives you a black eye and abandons you. He sounds like a real jerk."

Cindy shook her head. "He's not always like that. He's been so loving and attentive. He gave me a place to stay when my parents told me they disapproved of our relationship. He's paid for everything since then. I should be more appreciative of

everything he's done for me."

Maggie tightened her hands on the steering wheel. "I'm going to assume this is not the first time he's hit you." She nodded at the girl's black eye.

Cindy quickly looked out the window, hiding her eye from Maggie's inspection.

Silence filled the van.

When Cindy finally spoke, what she said shocked Maggie.

Cindy took a deep breath and breathed it out. "I haven't talked to my parents in over six months. Tony threw away my cellphone, so there's no way for them to contact me. After all I've put them through, I'm sure they don't want to hear from me now. He's all I know. This is my life now."

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie wasn't sure what to say. Cindy has certainly been brainwashed by Tony. She didn't want to say the wrong thing, yet she wanted to give the girl some encouragement.

She smiled. "I want to thank you for watching Walker while I was in the store. This is a spur of the moment road trip, and I didn't think things through."

Cindy blinked. Her face went pink with embarrassment at the compliment. She ducked her head. "It was nothing."

Maggie shook her head. "No, you were a big help. Thank you."

Cindy smiled and sat up a little straighter. "So where are you stopping tonight?"

Maggie cut her eyes at the girl. "Well, we are stopping in Wichita, Kansas, for the night. I already booked a campsite at this cute RV park. It even has a swing set at our site."

Cindy shifted in her seat. "Maybe you should just drop me off at the next exit at a gas station and I'll call Tony to come get me."

Maggie shifted in her seat. "I thought you didn't have a cell phone?"

Cindy shrugged. "I don't. But I'm sure I can borrow one from someone."

Maggie didn't volunteer her own phone. She didn't know how to convince Cindy not to go back to her abuser, and she knew, if she pushed too hard, Cindy would do the

opposite.

“You know, I could use some help with Walker on my trip. Why don’t you just go with us to Estes Park.

Once we get there you can call Tony and find out where he is.

He can come get you or I can give you the money for a bus ticket to meet him. ”

Cindy blinked as if contemplating her options. She glanced in the back of the van. “There’s no place for me to sleep. I’ll just be in the way.”

Maggie shook her head. “You can take the bed. I was going to set up a tent for tonight anyway. It will be the first time I camped in a tent, and it was one of the things I wanted to do on this trip.”

Cindy’s eyes widened. “You’re giving me your bed?”

Maggie snorted. “Sure. But only for tonight.”

Cindy’s shoulders slumped.

Maggie grinned. “Tomorrow night you’ll take the tent, and I’ll get the bed. We can rotate.”

The reassurance drew a smile out of Cindy. “Okay. But you must let me pay my way somehow. Let me make dinner tonight.”

Maggie cut her eyes at her. “Do you know how to make burgers?”

Cindy lit up. “Absolutely. My mom taught me. I can make the best burgers in the

South.”

Walker gave an affirming bark.

Both girls laughed at the canine.

“Looks like you’ll have to make extra for Walker. He seems excited to have the best burger in the South.” Maggie chuckled.

Maggie managed to make good time to Wichita. They got caught up in traffic, so, when they finally pulled into the camp site, they were starving.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie let out a contented moan. “Cindy, you were not kidding. This really is the best hamburger I’ve ever had.” She set her burger down on the paper plate and took a drink of water.

Cindy’s face brightened. With each encouraging word, the shadows under her eyes and the weight she seemed to carry on her shoulders seemed to be less visible.

“Thank you. My family are really good cooks. I used to stay with my grandparents in the summers when I was a kid and she taught me how to can vegetables out of their garden.” Cindy took a bite of her hamburger and glanced away.

“That must have been nice. I never knew my grandparents. My mom’s parents were killed in a car crash and my dad’s parents live in England. He cut them off before I was born.”

Cindy glanced over at Maggie. “What did his parents do for him to cut them off?”

Maggie blinked. “Actually, I’m not sure.

He just says they never got along. They moved to England before I was born and never tried to keep in touch.

” It always bothered Maggie that her only set of living grandparents didn’t even try to reach out to her after knowing they had a grandchild.

Whenever she brought it up with her parents she was always quickly shut down and they changed the conversation.

As the years passed, she didn't think about the subject much anymore.

"You said this was a spur of the moment road trip." Cindy gave her an inquisitive look. "What made you take a trip in the first place?"

Maggie set her half-eaten burger down. Her gaze wandered over to Walker and she debated how much to tell the girl. In the end, she decided to go for the truth.

"I caught my boyfriend and best friend together. In our apartment."

Cindy's eyes grew wide. "Your best friend? Did you get in a fight with her?"

Maggie shook her head. "They didn't even hear me when I walked in. So, I left our apartment and went home."

Cindy's eyes darkened. "I bet your parents wanted to punch him in the face, especially your dad."

Maggie felt her shoulders slump. "I didn't tell them when I got home."

Cindy stared.

"It's just that my parents really liked Mason and he's from a good family and I didn't want to disappoint them."

Cindy snorted. "Sounds like Mason is the one that disappointed them, not you." Cindy nodded. "My dad almost punched Tony in the face when he came over to my house the first time."

Maggie's eyes widened. "Sounds like he made quite the impression. What did he do to make your dad want to hit him?"

Cindy looked toward the thick line of trees, lost in thought. “He was eating dinner with us. He got upset when I spilled my drink in his lap. He called me a bitch.”

Maggie’s mouth dropped open. “In front of your dad?”

Cindy shrunk into herself a little. “Yeah. My dad jumped up and said nobody speaks to his daughter or any woman that way. My mom was holding him back and told Tony to leave.”

Walker walked over to Cindy, sensing her sadness, and rested his head on her knee.

“What happened then?” Maggie asked carefully.

“He left. I was crying and my parents were upset. They tried to tell me that Tony was no good and abusive. But they didn’t see him on the days he was nice and kind and loving to me.

I told them they didn’t understand. A week later I ran off with him in his truck.

I made one call to them telling them Tony and I loved each other and that I was okay.

I just knew they would understand in the end.

After that call, I heard nothing from them. ”

Maggie studied the girl. “You haven’t heard from them since?”

Cindy rubbed Walker between the ears. “Tony threw my phone away. I don’t have a way to contact them. I doubt they would want to see me anyway. Tony said they called his number and told him they never want to see me again.”

Maggie narrowed his eyes. “Tony’s lying.”

Cindy looked at her. “No, he’s not. You didn’t hear how mad they were at me for leaving.”

Maggie shook her head. “Cindy, your parents aren’t mad at you.

They are mad at Tony. He’s abusive. Anyone who would lay hands on a woman and call her names is abusive.

He lied to you so you would be cut off from your family and depend only on him.

He’s managed to isolate you from the people who love you. ”

Cindy stood up suddenly and crossed her arms. “You’re wrong. He loves me. He’s just trying to protect me.” Shoving her hands in her jeans pockets, she didn’t look at Maggie. “I’m going for a walk.”

As she walked off, Maggie wondered how Cindy was so blind not to see who Tony was.

Her mind drifted to Mason. He might not have laid hands on her, but he certainly had emotionally abused her by cheating.

Maybe she and Cindy were not as different as she thought.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Walker finished sniffing the grass and quickly did his business.

He loved this time of night, right before bedtime when the grass was cool and damp. Tonight he was camping outside with Maggie.

Since the sun went down, the temps were cooler, and Maggie had even put on a hoodie before setting up the single tent.

As she walked him back to their campsite, he watched Cindy as she stared into the dwindling campfire.

He could smell the sadness on the girl. She was so different from his Maggie, and it made him sad as well.

Cindy stood and got into the van.

What Cindy needed was a good dog. A dog that would cuddle with her at night and always protect her. Especially from that man named Tony.

The hair on Walker's back stood on end at the thought of him.

"Are you settled for bed? Need anything?" Maggie poked her head inside the open van door.

Walker sat at her feet and waited.

"Are you sure you don't want me to sleep in the tent and you sleep in the van?"

Cindy's voice was quiet and unsure.

Maggie nodded. "Of course. I think Walker will enjoy sleeping outside with me tonight. Isn't that right, boy?"

Walker looked up at her and wagged his tail. There was nothing better than being outdoors. He might even have a chance to sneak out of the tent and catch one of those squirrels that kept running away from him.

"Well, good night then." Maggie walked over to the tent. She looked down at him. "Ready for bed, Walker?"

He didn't need to be asked twice. He walked into the tent and made a couple of spins before settling down on the bottom of the sleeping bag.

Maggie zipped the tent closed and crawled into the sleeping bag. It didn't take her long before she fell asleep.

Walker rested his head between his paws and smiled to himself.

Maggie. A road trip. Sleeping outdoors.

Life didn't get much better than this.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie pushed herself up on her elbows and yawned. Walker had moved several times during the night and was currently positioned with his head draped over her legs.

She had a restless night of sleep and was in desperate need for coffee.

She eased Walker's head off her body and crawled to the tent opening. Unzipping the opening, she clamored out.

Early morning light, purple and blue, filtered through the trees. In a few more minutes the sun would be rising.

Maggie looked longingly at the van. She desperately wanted a cup of coffee but didn't want to wake up Cindy.

She heard a rustle in the tent and spotted Walker poking his furry head out of the opening.

"Want to go for a walk?"

Walker climbed out of the tent, sat and gave a toothy grin.

Maggie grabbed his leash and snapped it to his collar.

They made their way toward the nearby trail. Walker happily took the lead as he sniffed all the smells of the forest.

A squirrel stopped in the middle of the trail and looked at Walker. The furry animal lifted his back leg and scratched his ear.

Walker stopped and his ears perked up. Maggie tightened her hold on the leash. But Walker didn't move.

Walker lifted his nose in the air and inhaled.

It occurred to her that Walker couldn't see the squirrel ten feet ahead of them. But he could hear and smell the animal.

Her heart tugged for him.

"You smell him, don't you, Walker?" she said softly.

Walker sniffed the air.

A twig snapped in the woods and Maggie turned her attention to the sound.

A small deer lifted his head in her direction.

Walker must have sensed him too because he turned his head toward the sound, the squirrel quickly forgotten. The deer looked almost magical against the soft dawn filtering through the woods.

Walker took a step, and the deer bolted back into the safety of the thick woods.

She looked down at Walker and rubbed his head. "Let's head back and get some coffee. Hopefully Cindy is up. If not, we'll have to be quiet."

She led Walker back to the campsite. An early morning camper was milling about

their camp drinking coffee and checking on their hookup. Kids were playing games on their phones and taking random pictures of the campsite and local wildlife.

Maggie reached the van and tied Walker's leash to the picnic table. She carefully opened the van door and peered inside.

Cindy was still asleep, bundled in the sheets.

Maggie quietly grabbed the coffee pot, coffee, mug, and a large bottle of water and took everything outside. She grabbed an extension cord and hooked it up to the small outlet near the van door. She hooked the coffee pot to the extension and quietly shut the van door.

While the coffee brewed, she sat at the picnic table.

Her phone buzzed. She pulled it out of her pocket.

Glancing at the message, her heart rate thudded in her chest.

We need to talk. Mason

She left him on read and started to shove her phone back in her jeans pocket but it buzzed again.

Maggie, where are you? You start work this week. ~Mom

She snorted and put her phone away. "So, it took you three days to figure out your daughter was not at home. That is very telling."

Cindy poked her head out of the van. "Is that coffee I smell?"

Maggie smiled. "Almost ready. Grab another cup from the cabinet."

A few seconds later, Cindy appeared in the same clothes she'd worn yesterday with a brown mug in her hand.

"How did you sleep?" Maggie stood and poured them both a cup of hot coffee.

Cindy gave her a sleepy smile. "Best night's sleep I've had in a while." She took a sip of her coffee and sighed. "How was it sleeping in the tent last night?"

Maggie arched her brow. "It wasn't too bad. I didn't get cold. Walker snuggled next to me all night."

Cindy gave the dog a rub between the ears. "I'm kind of excited to sleep in the tent tonight. I haven't slept alone in a tent. I always had ... Tony." She glanced away.

Walker let out a whine breaking the tension of the moment.

Maggie stood. "He's ready for his breakfast. Be right back." She disappeared into the van and reappeared with a bowl of food and a bowl of water.

"Here ya go, Walker." She set the bowls down in front of him. "There's a campground shower that doesn't seem to be busy right now. Why don't you go get a shower first and then you can watch Walker while I go."

Cindy studied the ground. "I don't have any clean clothes."

Maggie shrugged. "I've got some clothes you can wear. I'd say we are the same size."

Cindy looked up at her, eyes wide. "You'd let me borrow your clothes?"

Maggie walked over to the van. “Of course. Let me see what I’ve got.” She climbed inside and quickly found some gym shorts and T-shirt. She poked her head out of the van. “I picked out shorts since it looks like it’s going to be hot today. Is that okay?” She held up the clothing.

Cindy stood. “That’s great. I’ll make sure to get them clean before I give them back.” She took the offered clothes.

“Wait. Here’s my shower bag.” She held out a mesh bag with shampoo, conditioner, soap, deodorant, and her toothpaste. “I don’t have an extra toothbrush but I can run to the campground store and pick one up.”

Cindy shifted her weight. “I don’t want to be a bother.”

Maggie grabbed Walker’s leash. She started walking toward the store before Cindy could argue. “No bother. I’ll get a shower after you are done.” Maggie strolled toward the store.

Walker stopped to sniff a couple thatches of grass and peed on a tree. Once they got to the store, she hesitated, unsure they would allow dogs inside.

A woman walked out the door with a large Great Dane in tow.

Maggie chuckled. “I guess that answers my question.” They walked inside. A cold blast of air skittered across her skin. She headed down the short aisle and quickly found the toothbrushes before heading back to the front.

“What a beautiful dog,” the cashier gushed. She was an older woman with salt and pepper colored hair. “What’s his name?”

Maggie handed her a ten-dollar bill and looked down. “His name is Walker.”

The cashier handed her change. "I bet he's a good boy. Are you traveling with family?"

Maggie hesitated. "Nope, just me and Walker."

The cashier nodded. "It's good you have a dog with you. I bet he gives you peace of mind and protection."

Maggie laughed. "And lots of cuddles."

The cashier grew solemn. "Just be careful. There are so many young women that go missing every day. Just look at our bulletin board. We print out Facebook posts about missing young girls in hopes one of our travelers spots them."

Maggie glanced over at the bulletin board by the door. "That's a great idea."

The cashier gave her a warm smile. "Be sure to check it out on your way out." She glanced at Walker. "Do you mind if I give him a treat? We keep them behind the desk for extra special doggos."

Maggie nodded. "Of course. He would love one."

The cashier reached below the desk and retrieved a small dog bone-shaped treat. Walker gently took the offered treat out of her hand and headed for the door.

Maggie stopped short of the door and glanced at the bulletin board. A lot of the missing women looked underage. Her heart sank when she thought about these girls who had found themselves in danger. She took a step and stopped when she spotted a picture of a young blonde woman.

She glanced back. The cashier had left her position behind the register and was

restocking the cooler with waters.

Quickly Maggie removed the post of the missing girl and folded it before putting it in her pocket. She quickly headed back to her van. Cindy wasn't back from showering.

She loaded Walker into the van and closed the door. Sitting on the unmade bed, she unfolded the piece of paper.

It was a Facebook post about a woman who had gone missing while camping. Her boyfriend had posted it under a camping page. She pulled out her laptop and looked up the boyfriend on Facebook.

A shiver ran down her spine as she recognized the man. It was Tony, and he was looking for Cindy.

God only knew what he would do once he found her.

The door of the van flew open, and Maggie jumped. Cindy's hair was up in a towel, and she had Maggie's clean clothes on. "It's your turn."

Maggie folded up the paper and stuffed it in her jeans pocket. She jumped up and quickly grabbed some clothes. "Great, I won't be long. Hey, do you mind staying in the van with Walker? I don't think this heat is agreeing with him, and I want to keep an extra eye on him." She lied.

Cindy's smile faded. "Of course. Should we take him to the vet?"

Maggie shook her head. "No, I think he just needs to stay inside where it's cool." Grabbing her clothes and the shower caddy, she stepped out the door. "I'll make this quick." She shut the door behind her.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Cindy munched on her egg and bacon sandwich while Maggie barely kept the van under the speed limit.

“I don’t see why we had to leave before eating breakfast.” Cindy took a drink of water. “I mean, it’s supposed to be a road trip. It’s not like you have a deadline.”

Maggie had taken a quick shower without bothering to wash her hair.

By the time she got back to the campsite, Cindy was frying eggs and cooking bacon.

She told her to make a breakfast sandwich so they could eat on the road.

After seeing the flyer, Maggie was scared to stay longer in case someone would recognize Cindy.

Maggie didn’t look at the girl. She didn’t want her to see the lie in her eyes. “The quicker we get to Colorado, the more time I will have to spend in the mountains. Besides, it’s a lot cooler.” She cleared her throat. “Have you ever been to the mountains?”

Cindy chewed thoughtfully. “When I was about eight, my parents took me to the Smokey Mountains. We stayed in a motel while we did all kinds of things like mining for gold and cooking over a campfire.” She glanced at Maggie.

“You know, when Tony said we were going to travel around in his camper, I thought it was going to be a wonderful time. Turns out camping wasn’t as fun as I remember.”

Maggie cut a glance at her “Maybe camping wasn’t the issue. Maybe he was.”

Cindy rested her sandwich on the paper towel on her lap.

Maggie regretted saying anything. She shouldn’t have brought up Tony. The more she disparaged him, the more Cindy would defend him.

“I wonder how far he got without me.” Cindy stared out the window.

Maggie frowned. “What do you mean?”

Cindy shrugged. “Tony was always helpless when it came to directions. He would let me read the map and tell him where to turn. Now that I’m gone, what’s he going to do?”

Maggie couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She took a few beats before answering. “He has a cell phone, right? Can’t he just use Google maps? Where was he planning on going anyway?”

Cindy blinked. “Mexico. He said we were going to go to Mexico because the cost of living is cheaper there.”

Maggie frowned. “So, he has your passport?”

Cindy nodded. “Tony always locked up important papers in this safe he kept in the truck camper.”

Maggie tightened her grip on the steering wheel. “Oh yeah? Like what kind of important stuff?”

Cindy picked up her sandwich and pulled off some bread. “You know, like my birth

certificate, passport, money from my savings account”

Maggie’s stomach dropped. “So, he kept your papers locked up. From you.”

Cindy quickly shook her head. “It’s not like that. He knows how forgetful I am and always losing things. He locked them up so they would be protected.”

Maggie stole a glance at Cindy. “I noticed you had your driver’s license with you. Did he let you drive a lot?”

Cindy’s brows knit together. “Tony never let me drive.”

Maggie bit the inside of her lip. “So, what would happen if he got tired?”

Cindy wrapped her unfinished breakfast sandwich in the paper towel. “We would stop at a rest area or parking lot and sleep.”

Maggie signaled and passed a slow-moving car.

“I know why we left so fast from that RV park.” Cindy stated.

Maggie’s heartbeat sped up. “You do?”

Cindy gave her a steady look and nodded. “You got a text from your boyfriend. It must have upset you.”

Maggie felt relief surge through.

“How long have you been with your boyfriend?”

Maggie was grateful for the change in conversation. “His name is Mason, and we’ve

dated since tenth grade.”

Cindy nodded. “That’s a long time. I met Tony online. He sent me a message on Instagram. He’s my first boyfriend.”

Maggie rested her arm on the console. “Oh yeah? Mason is my first boyfriend too.”

Walker put his snout on the console, wanting a pet.

Cindy chuckled and gave him some pets.

Maggie decided to push for more answers. “We are both majoring in law. His father is an attorney, and he wanted to go into the family business.”

Cindy cocked her head. “What about you? Why did you want to study law?”

Maggie shrugged. “My parents always wanted me to be an attorney.”

Cindy frowned. “So, you didn’t want to be an attorney?”

Maggie shifted in her seat. “I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t say you did either.” Cindy stated. “What do you want to do?”

Maggie didn’t need to think about her answer. “I wanted to be a writer. But my mom said I would never make any money. She said an attorney would be a better choice.”

Cindy gave her a sympathetic look. “Your mom doesn’t sound very supportive.”

Maggie bristled. “What did you want to do?” She didn’t like how the conversation turned to her.

Cindy brightened. “I wanted to be a veterinarian. I’ve always loved animals. My mom would take me to the animal shelter to volunteer on the weekends.”

So did Cindy give up her dreams for Tony?

Her phone rang and she glanced over at it.

It was from Mason.

“Are you going to answer that?”

Maggie hit the decline button. “I’ll call them back.”

Cindy pulled her legs up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her knees. “Looks like I’m not the only one with family issues.” She sighed heavily.

Maggie wanted to argue, but she stayed silent. Maybe what Cindy was saying was truer than Maggie realized.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Walker eased out of the van and stretched his legs on the grass before marking his territory. They had been driving for what seemed like forever, with Maggie only stopping to get gas.

Something was bothering Maggie. He could smell it on her.

Cindy had tried to get her to stop in Missouri so she could get some snacks for the road.

But Maggie had insisted on hurrying to get to their destination in Kansas.

When she pulled into the camp site in Wichita, he'd been relieved to get out of the van.

As much as he liked this road trip, his bladder wasn't what it used to be.

Maggie kept glancing over at Cindy who was leaning against a tree, mesmerized by the activity of families at different campsites.

Cindy looked sad. Walker didn't like anyone to be sad.

He walked back toward the girl.

He rested his head against her thigh.

Cindy looked down and smiled. "I bet you are tired of all that riding, Walker." She rubbed his head.

Walker let out an affirmative bark.

Cindy laughed.

“Can you watch Walker while I hook up the van?” Maggie asked.

Cindy nodded. “Of course. We can go check out the area.” Cindy gave a gentle tug on his leash. “Let’s go, boy.”

Walker happily trotted beside Cindy, taking in the campsite scenes. Several small dogs gave a bark as he passed, but he effectively ignored them. He could smell the other dogs, but they were blurry moving objects.

A fat squirrel jumped out in front of him. He was so close Walker could see his beady little eyes.

He stopped at a tree and sniffed before doing his business.

As they headed back to the van, he quickened his pace. He knew that Maggie had bought some treats just for him. He couldn’t wait to get back to the van and try them out.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie and Walker headed toward the small area of the campground where there were benches and a playground. A few kids were laughing while their parents pushed them on the swings. The sounds of crickets and smell of pine needles settled over her like a warm blanket.

She sat on the bench and Walker plopped at her feet. She pulled her journal out of her backpack and fished out a pen.

It was the first time on the trip that she'd pulled it out. She had been so occupied, between Mason and Lauren and Cindy, that this was the first time she had thought about it.

Maggie ran her finger down the leather cover with embossed flowers. The colors had long faded but their outline was still there.

She opened the book and began to read. They were all short stories created by her wild imagination when she was younger.

For much of her life she seemed to live inside her head where she could be anything.

Reading used to be one of her favorite things.

But when she started spending all her free time writing stories, instead of practicing dance lessons or piano, her parents had quickly made their disapproval known.

She glanced up from reading.

As the years went by, she found herself trying to please them to find their approval and love. In doing so, it had left zero time for doing what she wanted.

Slowly, she'd lost herself.

When she'd gotten into Ole Miss, her parents had been thrilled. Even her father had told her how proud he was of her. John Sullivan was stingy with compliments and even more so with his love.

Picking up her pen, she found a clean page and began to write. She began to journal her road trip with Walker. She recanted her feelings of feeling free and how being out in nature seemed to relax her.

She was lost in her words until her phone buzzed with a text. She closed her journal and picked up her phone.

Hey, I need to talk to you. I went by your house and your mom said you weren't there. Call me. ~ Lauren

Her stomach tightened as she put her phone back in her jeans pocket. Her heart seemed to twist in her chest like a pretzel.

Maggie wanted to confront Lauren and never speak to her again.

No matter how hard she tried, Maggie could not wrap her head around why Lauren had betrayed her.

Her phone rang and she pulled it out again. She hit the answer button without glancing at the screen.

"Lauren, I don't want to talk to you right now." Maggie's voice trembled.

“Maggie, it’s Mom. Where are you? Today is your last chance to go shopping before starting work tomorrow.”

Maggie blinked. She said the first thing that came to her mind.

“I don’t need to go shopping, Mom.”

There was a beat of silence on the other end of the phone before her mother spoke.

“Oh. Well, you should have told me that Lauren had already taken you. I know she’s your best friend, but she doesn’t always dress professional. I hope you didn’t take her advice on which clothes to buy.”

Maggie snorted. “Lauren is the last person I would take advice from. Look, I have to go.”

Before her mom could argue, Maggie ended the call.

The phone rang again, and she quickly answered. “Look, I said I have to go. Stop calling.” She had no patience for her family right now.

“I must have called at a bad time.” Daniel’s voice held a tinge of amusement. “Is everything okay?”

Maggie felt her face go red. “Daniel, I’m sorry. I thought you were my mom.”

Daniel chuckled. “She came by my parents’ house to see if you were there. The garage door was down so she didn’t see your car. Said something about you starting work Monday, which is tomorrow.”

Maggie shook her head. “Yeah, well that’s not going to happen. I think I can make it

to Estes Park in a day.” She stood and arched her back.

“Well, don’t rush it. You should rest for another day before making the trip. Also make sure you look online and book your site. They tend to book up pretty fast.”

Maggie nodded. “That’s good to know.” She made a mental list of what she needed for the cooler climate so she could stop on the way and shop.

“How’s Walker?”

She smiled. “He’s good. He seems to be enjoying himself. I can tell his sight is failing. But his sense of smell and hearing is stellar.”

Walker looked up at her when she said his name.

“Dogs are resilient. When one sense decreases—or goes—the other senses compensate. He’s still got a lot of life in him.”

Maggie scratched his head. “I think so too. He seems to be enjoying our little adventure.”

She needed this trip more than she knew.

“Call me if you need anything or have questions. Be safe.” Daniel said softly.

“Always. And thanks again.” Maggie ended the call and gathered her things. She and Walker made their way back to their campsite.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

“What do you think about staying another day?” Maggie asked Cindy over the campfire.

Cindy sat up straight in her chair and frowned. “For what? I thought you were eager to get to Estes Park?”

Maggie shrugged. “I don’t know. I mean this is supposed to be a road trip, and I feel like it’s going by too fast. I mean the journey is half the fun, right?”

Cindy gazed thoughtfully into the flames. “I wonder what Tony is doing? I bet he’s mad that I didn’t stay and wait for him.”

Maggie pressed her lips into a thin line. Tony was looking for Cindy. And when he found her it wasn’t going to be good.

“I was looking online to see what we could do tomorrow. I found this Old Cowntown Museum that has a historical re-created town, you know, like the old west. It’s about twenty acres.”

Cindy tugged on her bottom lip with her teeth. “What about Walker? We can’t just leave him behind?”

Maggie brightened. “They allow dogs, so he can come with us. I bet he’ll enjoy it too. What do you say?”

Cindy shifted in her seat. “I don’t know. I hate to keep letting you pay for stuff. I wish there was some way I could pay you back.”

Maggie smiled. “Come on, don’t you want to see a real-life cowboy town? Imagine what it was like living back then. No electricity, no cars, no drive throughs!”

This brought a smile from Cindy. “Santa brought me a cowboy hat one year. I was five and wore that hat everywhere.” Cindy relaxed in her seat with a far off look in her eyes as she thought about her past. “Christmases were the best at our house. We always had everyone over on Christmas morning. There were tons of food and presents. I could remember falling asleep in the middle of the pile of wrapping paper while the adults played cards.”

Maggie felt a twinge of envy as Cindy spoke about her memories.

While she never lacked for anything, Christmases were always a ritual.

She’d open her gifts on Christmas morning, followed by tidying up the house and removing all the wrapping paper for a photo that her mom would insist on right before dinner.

Her mom loved posting pictures of the perfect Christmas filled with presents and perfectly set dining room table.

Maggie always felt like something was missing and always hoped the next Christmas would hold that Christmas magic she was looking for.

“I think you’re right. I think Walker would like to see the Cowntown Museum.” Her eyes widened. “I wonder if they have real horses. I bet Walker would love to see a horse.”

Maggie glanced down at Walker who was lying at her feet.

His head perked up when he heard his name.

She nodded. "I bet he would love that too. So, since we have a long day ahead of us tomorrow, we should get to bed." She glanced over at the tent by the van.

After a dinner of leftovers, she had helped Cindy set up the tent for the night.

"Are you sure you want to sleep in the tent?"

Cindy's eyes widened with excitement. "Absolutely. Do you mind if Walker sleeps with me? Just to ward off any snakes."

Maggie laughed. "Of course. But I would be more worried about a squirrel than a snake."

Cindy stood and reached for Walker's leash. "I grew up in the country. I can sleep with a squirrel. Never a snake." She gave a gentle pull on the leash and Walker followed close.

Maggie looked back at the fire.

Sleeping with a snake.

Those words drifted through her mind. It was funny. The longer she was away from Mason, the less stress she felt. Shouldn't she be absolutely devastated over losing Mason? Did that make her a bad person that she was feeling free for the first time in her life?

Shaking her head, she stood up and stretched her arms over her head. She needed to make sure the coffeepot was ready for the morning and check the website for tickets to the museum.

She looked forward to sleeping in her bed tonight. She looked over at Walker and

Cindy near a big oak tree.

Maggie watched as Cindy's smile grew. She was animatedly talking to Walker, probably about sleeping together in the tent.

It was Cindy's wide-eyed optimism that Maggie wished she had. Maybe with a few more miles between her and home, she would discover it along their journey.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Walker could barely contain his excitement as he walked between Maggie and Cindy in the old western town.

Maggie said they were heading toward the barn where they kept the horses. He'd never seen a horse in real life, only on TV.

The scent of musty buildings and dirt tickled his nose. While the image of buildings was not as crisp as it should be, he could see enough to know what they were.

He stopped walking to sniff the dewy grass and some daisies. He bit off a blade of sweet grass and chewed.

"Come on, Walker. We are almost to where the horses are," Maggie encouraged.

He spit out the grass and trotted beside Maggie.

A strange scent had him lifting his head in the air to investigate further. He heard a whinnying, and knew he was close to these large animals.

"Aww, they are so gorgeous." Cindy's voice was full of awe.

"Come on, Walker. Let's walk over to the fence so you can get a better look.

Two large beasts, their images blurry, stomped their hooves. The scent he was smelling was stronger now. He realized it was the musk of the horse's flesh he'd been smelling.

He edged closer to the fence and poked his head through the gap. The horse's large head bent down to meet his and their noses touched.

He pulled back at the strong scent, and the horse snorted as he pawed the earth.

Walker slowly poked his head back through the gap in the fence and touched his nose to the horse's. His scent was strong but pleasant and his nostrils soft as velvet. He liked what he smelled. He nudged the horse's nose with his and gave him a lick.

Salty.

Maggie and Cindy laughed, and he looked up at them. He didn't know what was so funny. How else was he supposed to make friends?

He looked back at the horse. The horse blinked its long eyelashes, bent his head and gave him a long lick across his snout.

This time the girls laughed even louder.

"Aww, Walker. I think she likes you." Maggie bent down and rubbed his head.

Walker looked at her and wagged his tail.

He was glad. He liked making new friends.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie sat at the picnic table and glanced over at Walker.

She smiled as the old dog chased rabbits in his sleep.

After the Old Cowtown Museum, they had discovered a park on the outskirts of town. It wasn't busy so they had grabbed some burgers from a fast-food joint and grabbed a blanket out of the van. For the next few hours, they had a picnic and let Walker explore the different scents in the area.

Afterwards they stopped by the grocery store and picked up a couple of steaks to grill.

Maggie stood and headed to the grill to check on the steaks. Her stomach growled at the heavenly aroma.

She sat back down and pulled out her phone and opened Facebook. After seeing the post about Cindy, she had joined several Facebook camping groups. She needed to make sure there were no more posts about Cindy. She didn't want Tony to track them down.

After browsing through the groups, she didn't find any mention of a missing girl named Cindy.

She glanced back at the bathrooms. No sign of Cindy.

She pulled out her bag and dug around until she found Cindy's driver's license. She had not remembered to give it back to her when they met. She looked at the address

and typed in her last name and address into the search bar on her phone.

Three names came up. Maggie then typed the names into Facebook to see if she could find a match.

There were several Millers in the city of Jonesboro, Arkansas. Maggie began clicking on the profiles of each one. She stopped when she came across a woman who looked a lot like an older version of Cindy.

Joy Miller.

She clicked on her profile.

Joy had not posted in a while. The last photo she posted was one with Joy, her husband Mac, and Cindy. The caption read, "Remembering better times."

Maggie looked up. Her gut was telling her to message Joy and tell her where Cindy was. But she also knew Cindy would be furious with her if she did.

She glanced over at the bathrooms and then down at Walker. "What do I do? I'm afraid if I don't do anything, Tony is going to catch up to us and convince Cindy to go back to him. Something bad is going to happen to her if she goes back. I just know it." She squeezed her eyes shut.

"Know what?" Cindy tilted her head to the side and dabbed her wet hair with the towel.

Maggie quickly turned her phone off and smiled. "Nothing. I was just rambling to Walker."

Cindy looked at the dog and smiled. "I think he really enjoyed the museum today. It

was funny watching him interact with those horses.”

Maggie rubbed Walker between the ears. The dog lifted his head. “You made some new friends, didn’t you, boy.”

Cindy pointed to the van. “I’ll head inside and make the salads.”

Maggie stood and headed over to the grill. “Perfect timing. The steaks are almost done.”

Cindy headed inside the van, leaving Maggie alone with her decision to contact Cindy’s parents or not.

In the end, Maggie decided to wait until Estes Park before sending Joy a message.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

They had been driving for hours, and Maggie needed to get out and stretch her legs. They were ten minutes out from Estes Park, and she was anxious to get to her campsite and set up.

“It says on the website that you have to order your tickets for the Rocky Mountains online, and you will be notified if you get in.” Cindy glanced over at her. She’d let the girl borrow her phone so she could look up the information for visiting the Rocky Mountain National Park.

“Really?” Maggie threw her a glance.

“Yeah. It says here they do that to limit the number of visitors allowed in the park each day to prevent overcrowding and protect the park’s resources.” Cindy held out the phone.

Maggie pulled over to a small rest area and parked. She took the phone and clicked on the ticket information and purchased two tickets for tomorrow. “Okay, it’s booked. I’m going to let Walker stretch his legs before we get to Estes Park.”

Cindy reached for the door handle. “Good idea. I think I’ll head to the bathroom as well.” She climbed out of the van and walked toward the restrooms.

Maggie opened the side of the van and quickly leashed Walker. The dog was more than ready to get out. She walked him over to the green grass area clearly marked for dogs.

She pulled out her phone and looked at Joy Miller’s page. Glancing up to make sure

Cindy was nowhere in sight, Maggie sent a quick message to Joy.

“Mrs. Miller. I am a friend of your daughter, Cindy. Are you interested in talking to me?”

She hit send before she could change her mind. Just in time too. Cindy walked over to her with a big smile on her face. “I’ll watch Walker while you use the bathroom.”

Maggie handed her the leash. “I will be right back.”

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

They pulled into the small RV park. The sunset with the backdrop of the mountains took Maggie's breath away.

"I'm glad we got a spot. Looks crowded." Maggie pulled up to the office to check in. "I'll be right back."

She opened the door of the cabin-themed office. It was empty except for the woman behind the counter.

"Hello. Can I help you?" The older woman smiled.

"Yes, I have a reservation for a few nights. My name is Maggie Sullivan."

The woman clicked the keyboard of the computer and nodded. "Yes. You are here for five nights?" She looked up.

"That's correct." She glanced out the window at the mountains rising in the background. "Do you ever get tired of that view?"

The woman followed her gaze. A smile settled on her lips. "I don't. And I can't imagine living anywhere else." She handed Maggie a slip of paper with the number of her camping spot.

"Thank you." She headed out of the office and jumped back into the van.

"Do we have a good camping spot?" Cindy asked excitedly.

Since they had crossed into Colorado, Cindy hadn't mentioned Tony. The second the mountains came into view, her excitement grew.

Maggie saw the real Cindy.

"It's just up this hill and to the right. We should have a great view of the mountains."

Cindy smiled and clapped her hands excitedly. "I can't believe we are here. It's like a dream come true."

Maggie navigated the tight, curving road and turned onto the next road. Every spot had an RV or camper, and families were sitting in camping chairs and talking.

Her heart tugged in her chest at the scene. What she wouldn't give to have a supportive family.

"I think this is our spot." Cindy glanced back down at their paperwork and pointed.

"Let's get parked and hooked up so we can take a walk and explore a bit." Maggie pulled up and put the van into reverse. She carefully backed into the camping spot.

Cindy squealed and hurried out of the van. Maggie patted the passenger's seat and Walker climbed up. She reached for his leash and attached it to him.

They got out of the van and glanced around at the small campsite. Despite the campsites being small, they had a picnic table, a pole with a hook to hang a lantern, and a swing near a firepit ring with fresh wood piled neatly.

"What can I help with?" Cindy asked.

"Nothing really. Let me get everything hooked up to electricity and water and then

maybe we get an Uber into town. I heard there are elk at the park.”

Cindy frowned. “Can Walker come?”

Maggie smiled. “Absolutely. I think we can find an Uber that is dog friendly.”

She got busy getting the van set up. After making sure the electricity and water were properly in place, she pulled out her phone and ordered an Uber that allowed dogs.

She looked over at Cindy and rubbed her hands over her arms. “It’s chilly.

I’ll grab us a couple of hoodies.” She climbed in the van and grabbed her backpack.

She dug out two hoodies from the storage under the bed.

She slid one on. She slipped her journal inside the backpack and locked the van after getting out.

She held out the extra hoodie to Cindy. “Here you go. The Uber is going to meet us at the office.”

Cindy slid the hoodie over her head and pulled it into place. “Thanks. I can’t believe I’m in Colorado. It’s so beautiful.”

Maggie nodded in agreement and reached for Walker’s leash. “Let’s go. The Uber should be here in ten minutes.”

They walked past the other RVs and campers. There were not a lot of people, and Maggie suspected they were out visiting the town or the national park while the weather was nice.

There was a huge chair, about twenty feet tall. A couple of teens were giggling and taking pictures of posing on the seat. Once they were done, the girls climbed down and began taking pictures of the mountains.

“Let’s do this.” Maggie pointed to the chair. “You go first and I’ll get your picture.” She urged Cindy to climb up and sit in it while she snapped a picture.

“Okay, now your turn,” Cindy held out her hand for the phone.

Maggie handed it over and climbed up in the chair. Walker sat in front of her as Cindy took their picture.

She climbed down and looked at the picture on her phone. Maggie smiled. “Even Walker looks like he’s having the time of his life.”

Cindy nodded. “I think he is.”

They got to the office just as the Uber pulled up. Maggie opened the door and they all piled onto the back seat. Walker sat between them.

“I’m so glad you allow dogs. I didn’t want to leave Walker behind.” Maggie gave the Uber driver a grateful smile.

“Of course. Can’t let our fur babies miss out on the action in Estes Park.” He smiled as he turned onto the street. “Are you girls here on vacation or visiting family?”

Cindy shifted in her seat. “Vacation.”

The Uber driver nodded.

Maggie looked out the windshield. “I have two questions. Are there restaurants that

allow dogs? And are the elk going to go after Walker?”

The driver made a right turn. “Here is a vacation guide to Estes Park.” He held out a pamphlet. “And I highlighted the restaurants that are dog friendly when you requested a ride.”

Maggie took the pamphlet and smiled. “Thank you.” She looked up at him. “And the elk?”

The driver pulled up to a park. He turned in his seat. “The elk should leave Walker alone as long as he doesn’t chase them. Just give them a wide berth and you should be okay. You have no idea how many tourists try to pet one.”

Maggie’s eyes widened. “Pet one? We certainly won’t be doing that.

” She reached for the door handle and tightened her hold on Walker’s leash.

“Thanks for the ride.” She climbed out onto the sidewalk with Walker at her side.

She froze when she spotted an elk twenty feet away, laying in the middle of the grassy park watching people pass by.

“Oh my gosh.” Cindy whispered. “I’ve never seen one in real life.”

The traffic came to a stop as a second elk stepped out in the middle of the street. Maggie watched carefully as the elk took it’s time crossing the street. He paused halfway and glanced around as if wondering what all the fuss was about.

“It’s like we are living in a different world. I can’t imagine this ever happening in Mississippi,” Maggie whispered.

“Or Arkansas,” Cindy added.

Walker let out a small growl. Maggie looked down and rested her hand on his head. He looked up at her and then back toward the elk. He lifted his head in the air and inhaled.

“It’s okay, Walker. It’s just an elk. Don’t bother him and he won’t bother us.”

The hair on his back went down, and she gently tugged on the leash. “Let’s walk this way. There seems to be a lot of shops to explore.”

They spent another two hours exploring the idyllic town of Estes Park, lost in the beauty of the town.

Page 30

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie sat by the campfire and wrapped her blanket around her shoulders. After exploring the town, they had dinner at a restaurant in the Riverwalk area that offered outdoor seating. They had a picturesque view of the rushing water.

Cindy ordered the trout while Maggie ordered a burger for herself and a burger patty for Walker. By the time an Uber brought them back, everyone was exhausted.

Maggie set up a campfire while Cindy heated up some hot chocolate that she'd bought at one of the stores in town.

Cindy sipped her hot chocolate and sighed.

Maggie cut her eyes at the girl with a grin on her lips. "I haven't seen you this relaxed all trip." She gazed at the mountains in the dark. "I can't blame you. The mountains really are magical."

Cindy reached out and rubbed Walker's fur. "I think Walker agrees. He's worn out from his adventure."

Maggie's heart swelled with love as she looked at her dog.

He'd had quite the adventure walking the streets of Estes Park.

They stopped at the water's edge after dinner, and an elk stepped out of the woods to study the dog.

Walker let out a soft growl and studied the large animal.

They stood there watching each other until the elk got bored and walked back into the woods.

Maggie's phone buzzed with a text breaking the solitude. She glanced down at the message and frowned.

"Everything okay?" Cindy asked.

Maggie stuck her phone back in her pocket and shrugged. "It's a text from the apartment manager. He's saying the deadline for signing the lease is due in a week. Mason already signed and he's just waiting on me."

Cindy frowned. "Can you get your own apartment?"

Maggie shook her head. "I can't afford one on my own. Too expensive. Besides, the only person I could have considered moving in with is now my ex-best friend. Seems like I'm out of choices."

Cindy looked back in the fire. "There are always choices. Sometimes we don't like the options, but we must make the best of it."

Maggie shifted in her seat. "So, what do you think my options are?"

Cindy shrugged. "Well, you have to go back to college, and you have to have an apartment. It could be worse. You could be homeless and not able to go to college."

Maggie frowned. "You make it sound like I need to survive and not care about my happiness or what's right."

Cindy's shoulders slumped. "Maybe that's what life is, surviving and making it to the next day."

Maggie's heart stuttered in her chest. Was Cindy right? Was happiness and peace an elusive dream?

"But what do I know?" Cindy chuckled. "I'm exhausted. I'll take the tent tonight." She stood.

Maggie shook her head. "No, you take the bed. I'll take the tent. Besides, I've been looking forward to sleeping under the stars in the mountains."

Cindy frowned. "Are you sure? The temps are going to drop tonight."

Maggie nodded. "The sleeping bag is rated for low temps, and it will be close enough to the fire. Besides, Walker is a great blanket. Go ahead and take the bed."

Cindy gave her a grateful smile and nodded. "I'll see you both in the morning. Good night." She opened the van door and disappeared inside.

Maggie was tired, but her mind was unsettled.

She reached for her backpack and pulled out her journal and turned to a blank page.

She looked over at the fire and studied the flames.

Picking up her pen she began with one line about the dancing flames.

The more she wrote, the more a story began to develop.

Before she knew it, it was well past midnight and the fire was dying.

Yawning, she stood, put away her things and crawled into the tent with Walker beside her.

Before her head could hit the pillow, she was fast asleep.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie slowly opened her eyes. Walker was standing over her, looking down.

“You need to go potty?” She eased up on her elbows.

Walker whined and nuzzled her cheek with his nose.

She laughed. “I will take that as a yes.” She threw the sleeping bag off her legs and shivered at the noticeably cooler temps. She grabbed her hoodie and slipped it on along with her sneakers.

She attached Walker’s leash to his collar and unzipped the sleeping bag.

Maggie bundled deeper into her hoodie and stuck her hands in her hoodie pocket. Walker trotted about fifteen feet before stopping to pee on a nearby tree. She decided that, since Cindy was still sleeping, they would walk around the campground.

Families were outside, moms sipping their coffees while dads grilled breakfasts. Children were riding their bikes and laughing, while dogs snoozed by campfires. The smell of bacon sizzling and the sweet aroma of pancakes made her stomach growl.

By the time they made it back to their campsite, Cindy was standing outside the van stretching her arms over her head.

“Good morning.” Maggie smiled. “Did you sleep well?” Walker rushed over to give Cindy some licks on the back of her hand.

Cindy laughed and rubbed his head. “I slept like a rock. How was the tent? Was it

warm enough?”

Maggie nodded and opened the van door. “It was. Walker is a good snuggler and just the thing to keep the chill off. I’ll make us some coffee.” She stepped inside the van and grabbed the coffee pot and all the ingredients to get their day started.

After prepping the pot, she stepped back outside.

“What time are we supposed to go to the national park?” Cindy frowned.

“Ten o’clock. We have time for coffee and a shower before we need to head over there. I looked on the website, and we can drive the van there and park midway in a parking lot. There are buses we can take if we want to go further up.”

Cindy frowned. “Will they let Walker on the bus?” Cindy eased into a seat at the picnic table.

“Good question. Let me check the website.” Maggie pulled out her phone and quickly found the website.

“Bad news. He won’t be allowed on the bus or on the hiking trails.

It does say dogs can be walked near the picnic areas or on park roads.

” She looked at Walker. “I think we should just drive the van into the national park and see how far we can go. If we have to turn around, so be it. At least we’ll be together. ”

Cindy nodded excitedly. “I agree. Plus, I heard some campers talking about how they saw lots of animals on side of the roads, so maybe we’ll get lucky. I’ll go grab a shower.” She ducked inside the van. Cindy returned, holding a pair of red shorts. “Do

you mind if I borrow these today?”

Maggie shook her head. “Grab a pair of my jeans. It’s too cold for shorts. They have laundry facilities by the office. We can wash everything up tonight.”

Cindy nodded. When she stepped out of the van her arms were full of a fresh change of clothes and the shower caddy. “I won’t be long.”

Maggie reached for the coffee pot and poured herself a cup of coffee. She walked over to the swing on the camping pad and sat down.

Walker looked up at her. She made room on the swing and patted the seat next to her. “Come on, boy.”

Walker edged close and put his paws on the seat. He tried lifting his back leg but it was too high up. Maggie set her coffee mug down on the ground. She wrapped her arms around him and lifted him into the swing before sitting down next to him.

“This is the life, isn’t it, Walker?” She took a sip of her hot coffee and gazed at the mountains.

The jagged edges of the rock jutted toward the sky in snow-covered caps. The gentle, early morning breeze trembled the aspen trees and sent a calming cacophony through the campsite.

Walker licked his lips and sent a plume of breath up to the air. She laughed at the sight.

She wanted to start a campfire but they wouldn’t be here long enough before heading into the national park. They would just have to wait for tonight to build one.

Her phone buzzed, breaking the serenity of the mountains. She sighed heavily and pulled it out of her pocket.

Where are you?! ~Mom

Maggie should just ignore her mom. But when her mom sent the same text two seconds later, she felt her blood boil.

I'm out of state. On a vacation.

She hit send.

Her phone buzzed again, and she reached to turn it off. She glanced at the screen and realized it was not a text but a Facebook message. She clicked on it.

It was from Joy Miller.

"Is Cindy okay? We haven't heard from her in months! Please call me."

"Did you get another message from your boyfriend?" Cindy walked up to the campsite.

Startled, Maggie stood up and slipped her phone back into her pocket and forced a smile. "Yeah. I think I'm going to turn my phone off for the day. I don't want Mason to ruin our trip."

Cindy chortled. "Good idea. I can make us eggs and bacon while you shower."

Maggie blinked. "How about breakfast sandwiches? That way we can take it with us to the park and eat once we get there."

Cindy smiled. "Great idea. I'll keep Walker company while you are gone." She eased into the swing beside Walker. "Are you ready to help me make breakfast, Walker?" She hugged the canine close.

Maggie ducked inside and gathered her clothes. She hurried to the shower. Her mind raced with what she should say to Cindy's family. Right now, Cindy was doing well, and she knew if she pushed the issue of reaching out to them Cindy might be resistant.

Hopefully, after a trip into the Rocky Mountain National Park, she would have more insight into how to handle this.

Ever since she realized Tony was looking for Cindy, Maggie had been someone on edge. Since crossing into Colorado she finally relaxed. She had put some distance between them and hopefully it was enough to keep Tony away for them once and for all.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

The Rocky Mountains were breathtaking up close. There were elk walking up the side of the narrow road. Maggie had to slow down to make sure they wouldn't dart out in front of the van.

They also spotted a wolf trotting through the woods with something in its mouth.

The closer they got to the top the thinner the air was. Maggie's chest hurt a little with the higher elevation. Cindy complained that her head was starting to hurt. Maggie had read about elevation sickness and encouraged her to drink more fluids, which seemed to help.

They parked in the parking lot around halfway up the mountain. Instead of loading up into the bus, like the other visitors, they walked toward the woods with Walker on his leash.

"Let's don't go too far. Never know what kind of animal we might meet." Cindy cast an anxious glance at Maggie.

Maggie nodded. "Why don't we take our breakfast sandwiches over to that stump over there."

Walker wagged his tail as they made their way over to a cleared area among the trees.

Maggie glanced around before setting their sandwiches on the tall stump.

There was a line forming where people were waiting for the next bus to arrive to take them to the top of the mountain.

The mixture of retired couples laughing and younger parents trying to corral their kids while handing out fruit snacks broke through the silence of the park.

“I wonder if I’ll ever have that.” Cindy took a bite of her breakfast sandwich and looked over Maggie’s shoulder.

Maggie followed her gaze to the young couple.

The stressed mom had her long brown hair pulled up into a messy ponytail.

She kept shoving her sunglasses up on the bridge of her nose as she bent over to hand her cranky toddler a package of gummy fruit snacks.

Her daughter was busy entertaining the people waiting by singing a made-up song about bears in the woods.

A nearby retired couple commented on how cute she was to the mother, while the husband checked the baseball score on his phone, oblivious that the toddler needed his attention.

Maggie looked at Cindy. “Have what? Being stressed out with kids and a husband who won’t help?”

Cindy blinked and then turned to look at her. “Is that what you see?”

Maggie took a second look. “Yeah. What do you see?”

Cindy took another bite and examined the scene again before replying. “Kids and a husband. You know, a family.” She took another bite.

Maggie could sense she was thinking about Tony. She wanted to grab the girl and

shake her senseless before telling her Tony was an abuser and she deserved better.

It made her want to answer the Facebook message to Cindy's mom even more urgently.

"You'll have that one day. Someone who deserves you and loves you and treats you well." Maggie pulled off a piece of her sandwich and held it out for Walker. The dog gently took it out of her hand and gobbled it up. He looked up at her, wagged his tail, and gave her a toothy smile.

"You don't think Tony treats me well, do you?" Cindy stated.

Maggie locked eyes. "I don't think a man should ever put his hands on a woman. A man that does that is a bully."

Cindy set her half-eaten sandwich down on the stump and wiped her hands on her jeans. "It doesn't happen all the time. And the good times are really good."

Maggie lost her appetite. She fed the rest of the sandwich to Walker. "It's called the honeymoon stage. Where, after an abuser hurts his victim, he love bombs her with gifts, words of endearment, telling her how sorry he is and it won't ever happen again. Until it does."

Cindy's lips were pressed into a thin white line.

Maggie shook her head. "Cindy, if I didn't care about you, then I would let it go. But I do care. I consider you a friend. And I don't want you to get hurt—or worse. You have so much potential. You're smart, caring, considerate. You deserve the best."

Cindy's expression relaxed. She looked at Maggie under her lashes. "You consider me a friend?"

“Of course.” Maggie smiled. “You’ve been a better friend to me than Lauren. And I’ve known her for years.” She snorted.

Cindy smiled brightly. “I consider you my friend too, Maggie.”

Maggie remembered the message from Cindy’s mom. “You know, I bet your family is really worried about you. I bet they would love to hear from you.”

Cindy’s smile faltered. “I don’t know. A lot has happened. There are some things you can’t forgive.”

Maggie cocked her head. “What did you do that you think is so unforgiveable?”

Cindy wrapped her arms around her chest and studied the ground.

“Before I left with Tony, I stole some money.” She looked up at Maggie with pleading in her eyes.

“I didn’t want to, but Tony said we needed it for gas money.

I took two hundred dollars out of my dad’s wallet.

” Her face went pale before she looked away.

“I’ve never done anything like that in my life.

There’s no way they could forgive me for that.

” Cindy’s voice cracked with so much emotion that it broke Maggie’s heart.

“I’m going to tell you something. You might not like what I have to say.” Maggie

lifted her chin.

Cindy stiffened. “You are kicking me out of your van.”

Maggie blinked. “What?! No! I would never kick you out.” Maggie gave her a reassuring squeeze on her arm.

Cindy relaxed a little. “What is it then?”

Maggie cleared her throat. “I contacted your mom, Joy Miller, on Facebook.”

The color drained from the girl’s face and she swayed on her feet. She quickly steadied herself and met Maggie’s gaze. “You talked to my Mom?”

“Well, not in person. Just on Facebook Messenger. Her last picture she posted has you in it.”

Cindy swallowed. “What did you say?”

“I told her I was your friend and was with you.”

Cindy narrowed her eyes slightly. “Did you tell them Tony left me?”

Maggie shook her head. “No. And she sent me a message back asking if you are okay and that the family hasn’t heard from you in months. Your mom seems really worried about you.”

Cindy slowly walked a few feet away, staring up at the sky. She turned on her heel. “So she’s not mad?”

Maggie quickly took her phone out of her back pocket and pulled up the message

from Joy. She held it out. “Look for yourself.”

Cindy didn’t move for a second. She padded slowly toward her and reached for the phone.

Cindy was reading and rereading the message.

“Are you mad?” Maggie asked softly.

Cindy lifted her eyes. “No.” She looked back at the phone. “She doesn’t sound mad.”

Maggie smiled. “She’s not. She’s worried about you. Why don’t you call her?”

Cindy shoved one hand in her jeans pocket.

“Your mom is worried about you, Cindy.” Maggie’s voice was soft and gentle.

Cindy nodded. She walked a few feet away, typed in the phone number and held it to her ear.

“Hello, Mom? It’s Cindy.”

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie poked another marshmallow on the end of the metal skewer and held it over the campfire.

“These are the best s’mores I’ve ever had.” Cindy took another bite, and the chocolate and marshmallow squeezed out between the two graham crackers in a gooey dessert.

“Must be that fancy chocolate I picked up at the store by the riverwalk today.” Maggie pulled her charred marshmallow from the fire and placed it between two graham crackers and a small piece of chocolate.

She took a bite. The sweet flavors had her moaning with delight. “You’re right. This is wonderful.”

Walker edged closer to her and lay his head on her leg. He looked up at her with sad eyes.

She laughed. “Dogs can’t have chocolate. But I can give you a graham cracker.” She pulled a cracker out of the plastic sleeve and held it out. Walker gently took it out of her hand and lay back down, enjoying his snack.

“What do you have planned for tomorrow?” Cindy asked.

“While you and your parents are spending time together, I’m going to take Walker to this little hiking trail that allows dogs. I hope to find a quiet place near the water where I can journal.”

Cindy grinned. "I can't believe they will be here tomorrow."

Maggie laughed. "They would have been here tonight if there was an available flight." Grabbing a paper towel off the roll, she wiped up her sticky fingers. "What are the plans for you guys tomorrow?"

Cindy chuckled. "Their flight arrives in Denver at nine. It should take them about an hour and a half to get here, unless my mom drives. Then it will take an hour." Cindy's face glowed with renewed vigor under the dancing flames of the fire.

"They'll come pick me up here and we will go to the park, find a bench and talk.

" Her brows furrowed. "Which restaurant should we have lunch at?"

"Why not take them to the restaurant we went to with the outdoor seating option. You might see some elk by the water."

Cindy nodded. "Yes, that's perfect." She leaned back in her seat. "Thank you, Maggie."

Maggie lifted the water bottle to her lips and took a sip. "For what?"

Cindy gave her a knowing look. "Thank you for contacting my family. I might never have had the courage to do it on my own. Tony told me so many times my family didn't want anything to do with me."

Maggie tightened her grip on the bottle. "I hope you now see that Tony is a liar."

Cindy nodded slowly. "I know that now. It's hard to really hear someone tell you that your boyfriend is a bad guy. And it's even harder to tell a friend the truth. I'm glad you did, Maggie."

Maggie felt a satisfied smile slide across her face. The stress of worrying about Cindy's safety had been lifted from her shoulders. Now that Cindy seemed to be back on track, Maggie needed to figure herself out.

"I'm glad I could help."

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Walker raised his head and yawned. He looked over at Maggie who was still asleep. Since they'd been in the mountains, he had been waking up early. It must be the fresh mountain air.

He eased closer to Maggie and rested his head on her stomach. She stirred in her sleep but didn't wake up.

Walker knew today was going to be special. Cindy's parents were coming. He could sense how happy she was. Her parents would protect her from that bad guy, Tony.

He wondered how long he and Maggie would stay in the mountains. He liked it here. While his vision might be getting worse, he felt more alive and vibrant since they'd arrived.

He most definitely liked road trips.

Walker sighed heavily, hoping the motion would wake Maggie. No such luck.

She'd stayed up after Cindy had gone to bed in the van and written in her journal. Once she began, she couldn't seem to stop writing. Once the fire died, they'd crawled in the tent and went to sleep.

He dreamed of chasing bunnies in a meadow and squirrels up a tree. In his dreams everything was more vivid than in reality, and colors seemed to come to life.

Walker's tummy rumbled and he shifted against Maggie.

Still she didn't wake.

He snuggled against her and decided his only option was to go back to sleep.

Soon his eyelids grew heavy and he was chasing bunnies again in a meadow of purple flowers.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

“We will get an Uber. I still have the name of the guy who allowed Walker to come with us that first night. He should be here any minute.” Maggie snapped the leash on the dog.

Cindy frowned. “I hate to put you out. It would be easier for you to take the van. I can just sit here and wait for my parents.”

Maggie shook her head forcefully. “Absolutely not. I’m not letting you wait outside. They have the address of the campground, right?”

Cindy wrung her hands together. “Yes, and I told them what campsite we were at.”

Maggie glanced at her Uber app. “He’s getting close.” She looked up at Cindy. “Maybe I should wait until your parents get here to leave.”

Cindy grabbed her arm. “No. I’ll be fine. Come on, I’ll walk you to the office so you won’t be late for your Uber.”

Maggie relented. Walker brushed up against her leg as Cindy walked them to the office, chatting excitedly.

The familiar car pulled up in front of the office and the driver gave a little wave.

“I guess this is my guy.” She took Cindy’s hands between hers. “I know you will have a wonderful day with your parents. I can’t wait to meet them.”

Cindy gave her hands a gentle squeeze. “Please have dinner with us tonight? I’m sure

my parents would love to meet you.”

Maggie nodded and slowly walked to the car with Walker at her side. “How about we cook dinner at our campsite?”

Cindy’s eyes grew wide. “They would love that.”

Maggie opened the car door. “Perfect. Once we get back, we can go grocery shopping together.”

As the driver pulled away, Maggie lifted her hand. Cindy waved back and hurried back to the van.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie had the Uber drop her and Walker off at a dog-friendly hiking trail.

The meandering trail led them by a slow-moving creek.

Wildflowers and berry bushes were in full bloom, bursting with colors of reds, blues and yellows.

Walker's nose went to the ground where he seemed focused on some animal droppings. She gently tugged the leash.

Birds chirping in the tree tops and wind in the leaves made her eager to find an area to spread her small blanket out and open her journal.

The hiking trail led to a small waterfall.

Maggie smiled. "I think we've found our spot, Walker."

She found a clearing under a sprawling tree and spread the blanket out on the grass.

Maggie sat down and made space for Walker. The dog made a couple of circles and lay at her feet.

She pulled out her journal. Her fingers gingerly touched the pages as she looked at her previous entries. Leaning back against the tree, she closed her eyes and wondered what her life would have looked like if she had followed her heart when she was young.

What would her life look like now if she had finished a story all those years ago?

Opening her bag, she dug out a pen. Her gaze landed on the mesmerizing waterfall and the roar of the water hitting the rocks beneath.

The scent of rich earth and perfume of flowers settled over her.

If it were up to her, she would live here forever right in front of the waterfall.

Unfortunately, she needed an income to live, so living by a waterfall was a dream.

Maggie put pen to paper and began to write about her beautiful surroundings.

Walker twitched in his sleep. Maggie stopped writing and placed her hand on his back. He stopped moving, lifted his head and let out a big yawn before going back to sleep.

“I wish I had your outlook on life, Walker. You don’t have a worry in the world.”

Her phone buzzed. She was surprised to see the call was from Daniel.

“Hey, Daniel.”

“Hey, you. I was just calling to check in on you. Did you make it to Colorado?”

Maggie relaxed against the tree. “I did. I’m sitting in front of a waterfall with Walker. It’s stunning.”

Daniel chuckled. “I bet. Estes Park is one of my favorite places to camp. So how are you doing?”

Maggie looked down at Walker. "I'm actually doing better. Since I put some space between me and Mason, I'm doing better."

Daniel cleared his throat. "Speaking of Mason ..."

Maggie sat up straight. "What?" Unease snaked up her spine.

"He came by my house ... with your mom. They wanted to know where you were. Your mom happened to see your car in our garage when my dad opened the garage to take the garbage out."

Her breath caught in her throat. "What did you say?"

Daniel snorted. "I told them you were on vacation. And you would contact them when you are ready."

She relaxed. "Good. I guess I still need to make some decisions soon about my future."

She would have to face her parents sooner rather than later. And then there was Mason, which was another issue.

"Nature always helps make things clearer."

She smiled. "I hope you are right. I've got to figure out what to do about the apartment. The lease needs to be renewed for next semester. But I don't want to stay with Mason."

Daniel was silent for a beat. "I'm assuming Mason doesn't know how you feel."

She sighed heavily, the weight settling on her shoulders like a shawl. "I guess I need

to have that conversation with him.” It was a little scary to think about life without Mason. He’d been her first boyfriend.

“See, I was right. Nature does help you see things clear to make the right decisions. Call me if you need anything.” He ended the call.

She looked at the time on her phone. She dialed the number from the voice mail.

“This is Maggie Sullivan. I will not be renewing my lease for the apartment.”

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

“Maggie, this meal is really good.” Mac Miller took another bite of the potato.

“Thank you, Mr. Miller. It’s a recipe that I found on Pinterest. Hobo meal.

You can add whatever you want, season it and wrap it in aluminum foil.

I didn’t know if you guys liked spicy stuff like peppers so I just added chicken, potatoes, squash and onion.

”Maggie took another sip of water and watched how closely Joy sat next to Cindy at the picnic table.

The mom couldn’t stop smiling at her prodigal daughter.

Joy caught her watching and smiled. “Maggie, I can’t thank you enough for all you did for Cindy. Thank God you were there at the right time to pick her up. I don’t think we’ll ever be able to make this up to you.”

Maggie’s face went hot with embarrassment. She took a piece of chicken and held it out for Walker. “You don’t have to thank me. I’m just glad your family is reunited.” Walker rested his head on her leg, begging for more table food.

“Maggie, how long will you be in Colorado?” Mac asked before taking another bite.

“That’s a good question. I’m out on summer break so I’m not real sure right now. This trip was a bit of a spur of the moment.”

Mac nodded. “My dad used to take me fishing on the weekends. We would camp out by the river. It was one of the best times of my life. Being out in nature creates the best memories.”

Maggie glanced up at the starry sky. “You are right, Mr. Miller. I won’t ever forget this trip.” She glanced over at Cindy. “What do you have planned for tomorrow?”

Cindy’s face lit up. “We are going to the wolf sanctuary in Divide, Colorado. It’s about a three-hour drive, so we are going to leave around seven. Do you want to go?”

Joy touched Maggie’s arm. “Yes, Maggie, you should come with us.”

Maggie was touched by the gesture. “I appreciate the invitation but I’m thinking of doing some sightseeing in town with Walker. I saw a cute bakery that had dog cupcakes. I think I’ll treat him.”

Mac held out a piece of potato to Walker. “He’s such a good boy. I’m glad Walker’s been with you both for protection.” Walker took the offered treat and gobbled it down. He sat at Mac’s feet waiting for more food.

Maggie laughed. “Yeah, he’s enjoyed this trip as much as I have.”

Walker whined.

Maggie pushed herself up from the picnic table. “He needs to go for a walk.”

Cindy scrambled up. “I’ll take him. I am going to miss him when we leave. I want to spend a little extra time with him while I can.”

Maggie handed her the leash. “Of course. He’s going to miss you too.”

Cindy snuggled Walker before standing and snapping on his leash. “Come on, boy. Maybe we will see a squirrel.”

When Cindy was out of earshot, Maggie turned to Joy. “I’m glad today went well.”

Joy shook her head, her eyes filling with tears. “Maggie, I can’t thank you enough for taking care of Cindy. I can’t imagine what she would have done if you had not stopped.”

Maggie smiled. “I’m just glad everything worked out for the best. What are Cindy’s plans once she gets home?”

Mac set his drink down. “She wants to be a vet. So we are going to get her enrolled when we get back. Arkansas has some really great vet schools.”

Maggie closed her eyes. “I’m so glad to hear that. I was afraid she would have second thoughts about going back to Tony.”

Joy’s eyes darkened. “She told me some of the things he did and said to her. If I ever get my hands on him, I’ll strangle him.”

Mac snorted. “Not if I get to him first.”

Maggie suppressed a grin. She liked Cindy’s parents.

A dog’s bark drew their attention, heads turning toward the sound—then a woman’s scream shattered the quiet of the campground.

Mac was the first one on his feet. “That sounds like Cindy!” He raced down the trail where Cindy had taken Walker.

Page 38

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie ran behind Mac toward Cindy's scream. Campers were standing at the end of their camping spaces looking wide eyed.

Suddenly up ahead, Walker ran toward her, his leash dragging behind him.

The dog barked as he raced toward her, his nose in the air.

She stopped and grabbed his leash. "Walker, where is Cindy?"

Walker let out a bark and tugged hard on the leash.

"Let him go. He's trying to tell us where she is." Mac insisted.

Maggie quickly bent down and unhooked the leash. Walker didn't hesitate and raced down the road from where he'd come.

Mac and Maggie ran after Walker. Up ahead, Maggie recognized Tony's truck. Her heart dropped.

"That's Tony's truck," she said breathlessly.

Mac raced past Maggie and opened the truck door. The dome light revealed it was empty.

"Mac, look! Walker is running into the woods!"

Maggie pulled out her cell phone from her jeans pocket and hit the flashlight icon.

She spotted Walker just before disappearing in the dense woods.

“Go back to the campsite and wait for the police.” Mac grabbed her arm.

Maggie shook her head. “No. I’m not leaving Cindy or Walker. Besides, I’m sure Joy has already called them.”

Mac didn’t waste time arguing with her and headed into the woods. Maggie followed.

With each hurried step, Walker’s bark grew louder.

What Maggie saw next horrified her. Walker had Tony backed up against the tree, barking at the evil man. Tony held Cindy against his chest like a shield, refusing to let her go.

“Tony, let my daughter go!” Mac demanded.

Tony’s eyes darted to the father, and he tightened his hold on Cindy’s neck. The girl’s eyes bulged and she went into a coughing fit.

“Don’t come any closer!” Tony reached behind his back and pulled out a knife from his waistband. He waved the weapon toward Mac.

Mac froze, his hard glare laser-focused on Tony.

“Get that stupid dog away from me.” He loosened his hold on Cindy. She wheezed as she gasped for air.

“What do you want, Tony?” Maggie asked, her words unsteady.

Tony narrowed his eyes on her and pointed the knife at her. “You. You tried to mess

things up between me and Cindy. You took her away from me.”

Maggie lifted her chin. “You abandoned her on the side of the road. She made the decision to leave with me.”

Tony shook his head. “No, you brainwashed her into thinking I didn’t love her, that she didn’t need me. Cindy needs me. She belongs to me.”

Mac growled low and deep. “If you don’t let her go, I’m going to kill you.”

Tony snorted. “And you. Cindy knows you and Joy don’t love her. Parents should want their kids to be happy. But not you two. You wanted Cindy miserable where she couldn’t live her life with the one person that loves her.”

Maggie took a step forward. “Loves her? You tried to kidnap Cindy, and you are currently holding her hostage with a knife.”

Tony’s wild-eye stare landed on Walker. “Shut that damn dog up before I gut him.”

Maggie’s heart lurched in her throat. “Don’t you dare touch Walker.”

Tony glared at her. “You need to stay out of my business. You should have left Cindy on side of the road where I left her.”

Maggie tried to shift the conversation. “How did you even find us?”

Tony sneered. “The picture on Facebook.”

Maggie shook her head. “I didn’t post any picture on Facebook.”

Tony glared. “No, some teenagers did. They were taking some pictures and Cindy

appeared in the background with some large chair. They happened to post it to one of the RV groups I'm in."

Maggie's heart dropped to the ground. After being so careful to stay hidden, they were found anyway.

Page 39

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Walker happily went with Cindy for his nightly walk. He'd been glad that she was with her parents again. He glanced up at her. She had a contented smile on her face.

It made him happy. He gave her a toothy smile of his own.

He sniffed a nearby tree before doing his business.

"You ready, boy?"

He turned around, and then the scent hit him.

Familiar.

Menacing.

Dangerous.

He let out a low growl.

Cindy chuckled. "Are you smelling a squirrel, Walker?"

A dark figure stepped out from the woods. "Not a squirrel. Me."

Walker's growl turned into a full-on bark.

"Tony." Cindy's voice quaked and she tightened her hold on the leash.

Walker stepped in front of her and continued to bark. He could smell the scent of anger and beer pouring off Tony.

“You’re coming with me.” Tony pulled out a knife.

Walker barked as Tony stepped closer.

“You tell that dog to shut up or I’m going to take care of him myself.” Tony warned.

Walker wasn’t scared. He took a step closer and continued to bark.

Tony lunged at him with the knife. Cindy pushed Tony back. They both went tumbling to the ground.

Tony pressed Cindy to the ground.

Cindy looked at him. “Walker, go get help!”

He didn’t want to leave but Cindy screamed at him a second time to go for help.

He looked at her for a second and then raced back in the direction of Maggie.

Page 40

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie's gaze landed on the knife. Tony held the knife beneath Cindy's chin, the blade glinting under the light of the flashlight from her phone.

Despite her face, streaked with dirt and fear, Cindy looked at Maggie. "I'm not going with Tony. I'd rather die than go with him."

"Don't come any closer!" Tony snarled, his voice raw and shaking. Sweat broke out across his face and Maggie could smell him from where she stood.

Walker stood his ground. The dog barked ferociously, echoing off the thick trees. Though nearly blind, he moved with purpose, circling and snapping, every hair on his back raised.

Cindy whimpered as Tony jerked her closer. The blade nicked her neck. A small drop of blood trailed down her skin.

"Shut that damn dog up!"

From the corner of her eye, she could see Mac edge slowly to Tony's side. She knew she had to distract him so Cindy's father would be in a better position to take Tony by surprise.

"Let her go, Tony!" Maggie yelled, her voice breaking. "This is over. You don't want to do this." She took a step forward.

"I said, stay back!" Tony shouted, pressing the blade harder. Cindy cried out.

Walker's bark turned guttural. Every hair on his back raised upward as if he were ready to pounce.

Tony's eyes narrowed on her. Maggie had never seen someone's eyes so full of hate until she stared into Tony's.

A man like Tony was incapable of redemption. He was pure evil.

"Please," Maggie said, as she lifted her hands trying to calm him down. She tried to keep her voice calm and soft. "You're scared. I get it. But this won't end the way you want. You're surrounded. The police are on their way. You don't have to do this."

Tony faltered. His eyes widened and his breath turned ragged. For the first time, his eyes showed something close to panic as reality set in. He knew there was no way out for him.

Walker darted forward, baring his teeth.

Tony flinched.

In that split second, Cindy stepped down hard on his toe and yanked herself free. She stumbled away.

Cindy's father tackled Tony to the ground. The knife skittered across the dirt as they hit the forest floor. Maggie grabbed it just as a police officer emerged from the brush with a drawn taser. Joy Miller was right behind him.

Cindy ran to her mother and collapsed into her arms, sobbing with relief that the ordeal was over. Mac went to embrace his family.

Three more police officers came out of the woods, and they quickly handcuffed

Tony.

As he was being led away, Maggie felt all the adrenaline rush out of her body, and she collapsed to the forest floor.

Walker walked over. Maggie pulled her dog into her lap and let her tears soak into his fur. "I was so scared he was going to hurt you, Walker."

Walker looked up at her and wagged his tail slowly. He licked her across the cheek. Maggie laughed and held him tighter.

"Ma'am, there is an ambulance on the way," the officer addressed Cindy. "After they assess you, we are going to need a statement."

Cindy nodded. "I'll do whatever you need. As long as that man gets locked up and won't ever come near me again."

The officer looked at all of them. "That's not going to be a problem. He has a warrant out in Arkansas for attempted kidnapping of a minor. With your statement, we hope this guy gets locked up for a long time."

Maggie felt her heart drop. Tony was more dangerous than she originally suspected.

"You found her," Maggie whispered as she hugged Walker close. "You brought us right to her."

"Walker saved Cindy. He deserves a steak." Mac smiled at the dog.

Maggie held Walker's head between her hands. "You're right. He's a hero."

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

After the police hauled Tony away, handcuffed in the back of the car, the campsite grew silent except for the crackling fire.

Cindy, wrapped in a blanket, sat beside Maggie, both of them staring blankly into the fire. Walker lay at their feet, exhausted from the night's events.

Mac and Joy were standing at the back of the rental car, giving the girls some privacy.

"Maggie, I want to thank you." Cindy's voice was small but steady.

Maggie frowned. "It was Walker who led us to you."

Cindy slowly shook her head. "I'm not talking about that. Thank you for giving me a place to stay. Thank you for taking me to Colorado. Thank you for contacting my parents. I don't know how I'm going to repay you."

Maggie smiled. "You don't have to repay me. That's what friends are for."

Cindy studied Maggie for a second. "Most of all, thank you for being my friend. Sometimes friends tell us things we don't want to hear. You were a friend to me for telling me the truth about Tony I might not have wanted to hear, but it was the truth."

Maggie nodded.

Cindy glanced back at the fire. "We are going to a hotel tonight. You should come with us. I'm sure the hotel will allow Walker."

Maggie shook her head. “No, you need time with your parents. To mend fences and stuff.”

Cindy nodded and lifted her chin. “You’re right. Which is why I called your mom when you were having your statement taken by the police.”

Maggie jerked her head in Cindy’s direction. “You what ?”

Cindy smiled. “I called your parents, well your mom. I told her where you are. If this experience has taught me anything, it’s that time is precious. If you don’t want to go back to law school, then tell them. Despite what you decide, you owe them a conversation.”

Maggie blinked. “You called her ?”

Cindy nodded. “I did. I did it because I’m your friend.” She stood up and took the blanket off. She gently wrapped the blanket around Maggie’s shoulders and gave her a hug. She reached down and put her head on Walker’s head.

“I put my mom’s number in your phone so we can stay in touch.” Cindy smiled as she walked over to her parents.

Maggie stared until their headlights disappeared into the night.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

The next morning, Maggie stepped out of the van into a quiet campground. After the disturbance last night, the campers had slept in. A gentle mist hung between the trees, and birdsong filled the empty space between the leaves of the trees.

She took Walker on a short walk for him to do his business before heading back to the campsite.

She wiped down the dew on the seat of the picnic table before she sat down.

Walker made two circles before sitting under the picnic table. He rested his head on her sneaker. Pulling out her notebook, she flipped through the pages, rereading lines she'd written the day before.

“Magaret Elise Sullivan, what in God’s name are you thinking?”

Maggie’s head jerked up at her mother’s voice. Julia Sullivan stood at the edge of the campsite, arms crossed, usually perfect hair slightly windblown, and anger in her eyes.

Maggie stood slowly. “Mom?—”

Julia marched toward her. “You disappear. You cut off contact. You won’t tell me where you are.

I finally got it out of Daniel that you were on a road trip in his van.

” Julia narrowed her eyes. “Do you know how worried I’ve been, thinking you have

been kidnapped or crashed.

What if the van broke down? You have no idea how to fix a vehicle.

We live in a dangerous world, Maggie.” Her voice trembled.

“Mom ...” Maggie held up her hand, but her mother wasn’t finished.

“Then I get a call from some girl I’ve never met—telling me my daughter, who is traveling alone, is in Colorado, that she’s been harboring a runaway, and there was a man with a knife involved? Maggie, are you trying to put me in an early grave?”

Maggie exhaled. “Let’s back up. First, I wasn’t kidnapped and didn’t have a wreck in the van, Mom. Second, Cindy’s not exactly a runaway. She’s with her parents now. And, third, the man with a knife has been arrested.”

Her mother gave her a horrified look. “That’s supposed to make me feel better?”

She took a deep breath and folded her arms over her chest. “I left because I needed some space to think. I was never alone. Walker was with me every step of the way.” She glanced under the picnic table.

Walker lifted his head at the sound of his name.

When he realized he wasn’t being called, he went to sleep.

“You left because you needed to think? You blew off an important internship at a very prestigious law firm. This will affect your future, Maggie!” Her mom’s voice cracked when speaking her daughter’s name, her composure unraveling. “Do you even hear yourself?”

Maggie stood straighter. "I hear myself. For the first time in a long time."

Julia stared at her. "So that's it? You're just going to throw away your future as an attorney?"

"No, I'm not throwing away my future." Maggie said. "I'm choosing a different future."

The words landed in the space between them like stones. Her mom looked stunned. She opened her mouth to speak but no words came out.

Maggie cleared her throat. She felt stronger now. All the fear of disappointing her mom disappeared like mist. "I came out here to find out who I am without the pressure. Without law school. Without Dad's expectations. Without yours."

Her mom's face slightly softened. Maggie noticed the chink in her armor.

"I'm not doing this to hurt you," Maggie said more gently. "I just ... I want to write. Really write. I know that sounds foolish to you, but it's the first thing I've been sure of in years."

There was solid silence between them.

Her mom looked away, blinking hard. "I always wanted you to do well in life, Maggie. A solid career where you can be independent and not rely on a man. I just didn't want you to be in a situation where you are trapped in a relationship. I don't want you to end up like me."

Maggie's eyes widened. "End up like you? You aren't trapped."

Her mother gave a sad, knowing smile. "You just didn't see it."

They stood there, mother and daughter, neither sure what came next.

Finally, Julia sighed and walked over to the bench. She sat, her movements slower now, as if the fight had left her.

Walker lifted his head and nudged her knee. Julia rubbed his head. "Walker looks good."

Maggie smiled, the tension beginning to ease. "I think the fresh air has made him more energetic. He seems like a puppy again."

Julia winced. "Maggie, I didn't want to take Walker to the vet to have him put down. Your father was the one who insisted."

Maggie froze. "What?"

Julia lifted her chin. "It seems we have a lot to talk about, and you've had quite the night already. Why don't I go get us a hotel room?"

Maggie shook her head. "I want to stay here. You go ahead and get a room."

Julia bit her lip. "Can I bring you some coffee?"

Maggie smiled. "I can make coffee here."

Julia frowned. "Here? How?"

Maggie walked to the van and gathered the coffeepot and everything she needed to make coffee. She plugged it in and prepped the coffee pot and waited for the coffee to finish.

“You have electricity in the van?” Julia cocked her head.

“Yeah. Daniel remodeled the van himself. He’s even boondocked in it.” Maggie knelt down and rubbed Walker between the ears.

“What’s boondock?” Julia clutched her designer bag to her chest and eased onto the seat of the picnic table.

“When you camp without being hooked up to water or electricity.”

Julia winced. “Have you done that?”

Maggie laughed. “I haven’t. Not yet. But I would love to while I’m here. Camping out by a mountain sounds lovely.”

Julia glanced around. “Wouldn’t you be afraid of bears?”

Maggie shrugged. “Not if I’m careful. Besides, Walker will sense a bear before I even see one. From what I’ve read, bear attacks are rare here.”

She didn’t look convinced.

Maggie finished pouring two cups of coffee. “I hope you like it.”

Julia took the outstretched mug and took a sip. Her eyebrows lifted slightly at the taste. “Pretty good.”

Maggie grinned to herself.

They sat in silence, sipping their coffee.

Maggie cleared her throat. “What did you mean by you being trapped?”

Julia stiffened. The atmosphere between them changed, became sharp and jagged.

She stood and set her coffee mug down. “I should go get that hotel room. I’m worn out from the flight and all the excitement.” Julia looked like she wanted to say more, but changed her mind. “Thank you for the coffee.”

Maggie stood and nodded. “Of course.”

Julia frowned. “What are your plans for today?” Her lips pressed into a thin line and Maggie saw the brief flicker of panic play across her eyes. “You’re not leaving, are you?”

Maggie shook her head. “No. I’ve reserved this spot for a few more days.”

Relief spread across Julia’s face. “Good.” She glanced over her shoulder. “I should be going.”

Maggie felt the tension between them grow. It was like trying to talk to a stranger. She couldn’t help herself. She still needed to talk to her mom. She couldn’t leave things this unsettled between them.

Maggie cleared her throat. “If you don’t have plans for dinner, you can join me and Walker.”

Julia’s eyebrows shot up at the gesture. “You don’t mind?”

Maggie smiled. “Of course not. I’ve actually wanted to have dinner at the Stanley Hotel, but they don’t allow dogs.”

Her mother cocked her head. “Maybe we could do pickup. That way we could see the outside of the grounds with Walker and you could go in and get the food.”

Maggie was taken aback. She didn’t think her mother liked Walker all that much.

“That would be great.” Maggie said softly.

Julia hesitantly approached her and gave her a hug. “After you look at the menu, let me know what you want so I can order it. I’ll pick you up around six to go get everything.”

Maggie glanced at her dog. “With Walker? You don’t usually let Walker ride in your car.”

Julia shrugged. “It’s a rental. See you tonight.”

Maggie spent the rest of the day writing at her campsite. She took breaks to stretch her and Walker’s legs. Time seemed to have gotten away from her. Before she realized, it was time for her to get ready for dinner.

She hoped tonight would go a lot smoother than the last few days of this trip.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

The Stanley Hotel was crowded with guests and visitors. Lucky for them, there was hardly anyone outside in the garden maze, so Maggie and her mom decided to look around the grounds before picking up their food.

Walker sniffed out a rabbit from one of the bushes. Maggie tightened her grip on the leash, but the bunny didn't move. They stayed for twenty seconds looking at each other before the bunny decided to hop back in the bushes.

After picking up their food, they drove back to the campsite. Maggie had already put a tablecloth on the picnic table with some short candles she'd found under the cabinet. Her mother lit the candles while she gathered some plates and bowls.

"I think you ordered too much food." Maggie plated the eight ounce Colorado Angus Filet and topped it with the black truffle herb butter sauce. While she plated the second filet, her mom added sides which consisted of roasted garlic whipped potatoes and grilled asparagus.

"Whatever we don't eat tonight we'll eat for leftovers." Julia scooped up the Caesar salad into two separate bowls. "I'm going to leave the charcuterie board in the box. We can pick from there."

Maggie nodded. "I'll grab some waters."

Julia shook her head. "I picked up something special while we were at the Stanley." She pulled out a bottle of Emblem Cabernet Sauvignon and smiled "Figured we could use it."

Maggie held up two red Solo cups. "It's not crystal. But it will do."

Her mom laughed and worked on the bottle with a corkscrew that she'd bought in the souvenir shop.

Walker looked up at Maggie and whined. She rubbed his head. "I'll give you some of mine, boy."

Julia shook her head. "No need. I picked up a steak for Walker too."

Maggie's mouth fell open. She collected herself and placed a hand to her throat. "You picked up a steak for Walker?"

Julia nodded and held up a third box containing another steak. "I'll just cut it up for him."

She cut the steak into bite size pieces and placed it in his dog bowl. "Can I give it to him?"

Maggie blinked back the stinging tears. "Yes. He would love that."

Julia smiled and looked at Walker. "This is for being such a good boy." She scratched him behind the ear. Walker looked like he was smiling. She set the bowl down in front of him.

He quickly dug into his tasty dinner.

"He has the right idea. Let's eat." Julia sat down and picked up her knife and fork.

Maggie hadn't seen her mom this relaxed in a while, if ever.

She had so many questions to ask her but didn't want to ruin the moment.

Instead, she began to cut her steak. Popping a piece of the tender meat into her mouth, her senses exploded in delight.

She let out a moan. Her mom laughed. "I'm glad you like it.

The sides are amazing too. Might have to eat there again while I'm here.

" Julia took a sip of her wine and smiled.

"So how long do you plan on staying?" Maggie asked, careful to keep any emotion out of her voice. She didn't want her mom to think she wanted her to leave.

Julia chewed thoughtfully and sighed. "I'm not sure yet. This was all spur of the moment."

Maggie snorted. "I know what you mean."

Julia picked up her cup of wine. "Want to tell me what's going on? You didn't even tell Mason you were leaving. I would have thought you would have at least confided in Lauren since she's your best friend."

Maggie set her fork down. "I guess you talked to Mason."

Julia nodded. "He came by the house looking for you."

Maggie arched her brow. "Did Lauren come with him?"

Julia frowned and slowly nodded. "Yes, she did."

Maggie took a sip of wine. "I have broken up with Mason and will not be getting back together with him."

Her mom looked shocked. "But you two were so perfect together. I would have thought ..."

Maggie held up her hand. "I caught Mason and Lauren in bed together. There is no coming back from this."

Julia's eyes went wide and her face went white. She reached over and squeezed Maggie's hand. "Oh, Maggie. I'm so sorry. I know it must be devastating."

Maggie braced herself for the rush of sadness and grief that usually washed over her when she thought of Mason and what they had. This time the pain was small. She knew she was quickly getting over Mason. "You have no idea how hard it was when I found out. But I won't let this define me."

Julia slowly pulled her hand back and reached for her wine. "I know more about betrayal than even you know."

Maggie stilled at her mom's words. She wasn't sure what she meant, but she had to have clarity. "What do you mean?"

Julia took a generous drink of the red wine and met Maggie's gaze. "Your father isn't a faithful husband, Maggie. The first time I caught him with another woman you were around five years old."

Maggie's mouth went dry. Her father was always distant with her, but she never thought he was a cheater. "Dad cheated on you?"

Julia nodded. "Yes. That was the first of many. The latest is Kathy Smith."

Maggie's eyes bulged. "The wife of Roy Smith? The couple you had over for dinner the other night? The couple whose house you stayed in overnight?"

Julia's shoulders slumped and she clasped her hands in her lap. "Yes."

Maggie stared. "Why did you stay?"

Julia sighed heavily. "I was scared. I didn't know how I would be able to raise you on my own.

Your father has always been the breadwinner and controlled all the money.

He's a powerful man who has influence. He even told me the judge wouldn't give me a dime if I divorced him.

He knew all the judges, so I believed him.

I felt like it was my duty not to leave him so you would have a home with both your father and mother. "

Maggie snorted. "But you were always pushing me to be perfect. I always felt like I couldn't live up to the high standard you and dad set for me. Like I was never enough."

Julia's chin quivered and she seemed to crumple inward.

"Maggie, I'm so sorry I made you feel like that.

That was never my intention. I just wanted you to have a good career where you don't have to depend on a man for money.

” She looked up at her. “I stayed because I thought duty mattered more than dignity. I thought it was the loving thing to do. But I was wrong.”

Maggie stared at the woman before her. Her heart ached with what her mom had been through, how she suffered in silence all these years while putting on a brave facade.

“Dad’s going to be pretty mad about me not going back to law school,” she stated.

Julia snickered. “Too bad. It’s your life. Not his choice. He’ll get over it.”

Maggie bit back a smile. She’d never seen her mom so ... open.

“And he’s really going to be mad about me breaking up with Mason,” Maggie added.

Julia grew serious. “Don’t ever light yourself on fire to keep someone else warm. You are so much braver than I ever could be.” Julia shrugged. “Besides, I never really liked Mason that much anyway.”

Maggie gasped. “You didn’t? I thought you loved Mason.”

Julia narrowed her eyes. “I thought he was a bit too arrogant the first time I met him. Like your father.”

Maggie took another sip of wine. “So what are you going to do now? Will you go back home and act like everything is okay between you and Dad?”

Julia set her cup down. “I’m going to talk to an attorney.”

Maggie’s heart dropped. “You don’t think Dad will go to couples therapy?”

Julia snorted. “I’ve asked him a hundred times to go to therapy. He says he doesn’t

need therapy.” She shook her head. “No, sweetheart. I may end up penniless and living in a small apartment, but at least I’ll be at peace.”

Maggie swallowed the lump in her throat. “Whatever you decide, I’m here to support you.”

Tears spilled onto Julia’s cheeks as she squeezed Maggie’s hand. Maggie stood and walked around to hug her mom tight.

“This isn’t the end, Mom. It’s just the beginning,” Maggie whispered against her mom’s hair.

Now Maggie had some planning of her own.

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:35 am

Maggie spent the next day walking around downtown Estes Park with her mom. Julia marveled at how close the elk were and made sure to put herself between the large animal and Walker. She even popped into a dog-friendly bakery and bought him some treats.

“Oh, look. I want to go into that art gallery.” Julia pointed across the street.

They walked to the door. “I’ll wait out here with Walker while you look.” Maggie settled onto a bench and Walker lay at her feet. She fished out her journal from her backpack and started writing.

“Maggie, you will never believe who I ran into.” Julia was all smiles as she walked toward her from the gallery.

Maggie stood and shoved her journal back in her backpack. “Who?” She tugged on Walker’s leash. Walker trotted happily next to her.

“Ashley Bradshaw. We were best friends in high school. I want to introduce you.”

She glanced down at her dog. “What about Walker?”

“Ashley said he can come in. It’s dog friendly.” Julia tucked her arm into hers.

Maggie and Walker stepped inside. The walls were lined with different landscape paintings, some that Maggie recognized as Colorado landmarks.

A middle-aged woman with spikey hair and wearing a colorful blue and green

flowing dress smiled and held out her hand. “You must be Maggie. Julia has been telling me all about you. I’m Ashley.”

Maggie shook the woman’s hand, surprised by her grip. “Nice to meet you, Ashley.” She glanced at the painting to her right. “This is beautiful. Is the artist local?”

Ashley’s smile widened. “Yes. Her name is Marion Harper. She has been painting all her life, and just started selling her work. She just turned eighty.”

Maggie gaped. Ashley laughed at her reaction.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to react like that.”

Ashley waved her apology away. “Don’t be sorry. I love letting people know. Marion is a great example of how it’s never too late to start over. Isn’t that right, Julia?”

Julia brightened and nodded enthusiastically. “That’s exactly right, Ashley.”

Ashley knelt and held up the back of her hand to Walker. The dog sniffed and then licked her hand “Julia tells me Walker has been taking a road trip with you.”

Maggie laughed. “He seems to be enjoying it.”

Ashley stood and looked at her. “She also said Walker is losing his sight. You know a dog’s other senses will kick in to compensate.” She walked over to a cushioned bench, sat, and patted the seat next to her.

Maggie followed her lead and sat. “It still makes me sad.”

Ashley gave her a comforting smile. “I know. But dogs are tough.”

Maggie reached down and rubbed Walker's belly. "I guess you are right. I just worry about him." She looked up at Julia. "So you and Mom went to high school together?"

Ashely nodded. "We did. We became best friends in seventh grade. It wasn't until college that we drifted apart. I guess it didn't help that I moved to a different state." Ashley leaned back. "Your mom tells me you've been in law school but are considering a career change."

Maggie jerked her head in Julia's direction, surprised that she would share that information. "I guess I am."

Julia blushed and looked at a nearby painting of the Colorado mountains and wildflowers bursting with purple color. "The artist really started life over at eighty?"

Ashley stood. "She sure did. Her husband of fifty years left her ten years ago and so she started selling her paintings."

Maggie frowned. "Why would he leave after being married so long?"

Ashley snorted. "He got on the blue pill and met a thirty-year-old who was looking for a sugar daddy."

Julia curled her hands into fists. "That's awful."

Ashley shrugged. "It was. But Marion ended up better in the end. She's making money hand over fists with her art and has a nice home in the mountains with a couple of dogs. She can do whatever she wants and doesn't have to worry about taking care of someone else."

Julia sighed. "That sounds nice."

Maggie caught her gaze. Her mom shifted her weight. “So, Ashley is actually looking for someone to write about an upcoming art exhibit she will be hosting to raise money for domestic violence survivors.”

Maggie blinked. “But I don’t know anything about domestic violence.” She looked over at Ashley.

The owner laughed. “I’m not suggesting that. I need someone to write an article for the gallery’s website to draw publicity and hopefully raise a lot of money. All of the artists involved will be donating a piece of art. It’s going to be a silent auction.”

Maggie’s heart stuttered in her chest. “That sounds wonderful. But I don’t know if I can do that. I’ve never written anything ... professionally.”

Ashley shook her head. “Your mom says you are a very talented author. And, as we know, Julia doesn’t lie.” She smiled at her friend before excusing herself to help a customer.

“How do you know how I write?” She looked at her mom.

Julia shrugged. “I snuck a peek at your journal last night when you went inside the van to change clothes.”

Maggie’s eyes widened.

“So I think you should write this article. Ashley said she will pay you.”

Maggie shook her head. “No. I wouldn’t take money for the charity event. But maybe this is a step in the right direction with writing. If nothing else, it will be good practice.”

Julia smiled brightly. “I think you’re right.”

After saying their goodbyes, they walked out of the gallery with smiles on their faces.

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:36 am

“How did you like sleeping in the tent?” Maggie held out a hot cup of coffee to her mom.

Julia stretched and took the coffee. “It’s not the Hilton, but the fresh air was nice. Next time I’m using a memory foam mattress.” She took a sip of coffee and sighed.

Maggie stuck her one hand in her jacket pocket and lifted the coffee cup to her lips with her other hand. “So what are your plans?”

Julia wrapped the sleeping bag around her shoulders and eased onto the picnic table bench. “I suppose I need to get home. I have a lot of things to get sorted out.”

Maggie bit the inside of her cheek. She wanted to press her mom for more information but wasn’t sure she wanted to hear it.

Julia sighed heavily. “I want to tell you how sorry I am for not being the mother you needed. I will always regret not being more supportive of you. If I could go back in time, I would be a better mother to you.”

Maggie rubbed her finger on the edge of the handle, unsure of how to handle this new side to her mom.

“I think you did your best. And you’ll always be my mom.

I’ll always love you.” Julia’s eyes began to water, and she stood up.

She went to Maggie and enveloped her in a tight embrace. “I love you, Maggie.”

Maggie blinked back her tears. "I love you too, Mom."

Walker came up and nudged his snout in between them. Laughing, they both bent and gave him kisses on the head.

"I guess I should ask you about your plans for the summer?" Julia wrapped herself in the sleeping blanket and sat.

Maggie glanced at the mountains. "I'm going to go to the office this morning and ask if I can extend my stay. I have enough money for another week and, after that, I don't know. While I'm here, I'm going to write that article for Ashley's website and maybe look for some online writing work."

Julia cocked her head. "You didn't tell me you were working on a book." She arched her brow. "Remember I snuck a look at your journal."

Maggie shrugged. "I started writing down my feelings after what happened with Mason. It soon turned into a novel."

Julia smiled. "I like that. A novel about a strong woman who travels with her faithful dog and finds her own way in life. I think it will be a best seller."

Maggie felt her face go red. "It doesn't have to be a best seller. I would settle for rent and groceries."

Julia glanced in the direction of the mountains.

"I've decided I'm going to leave your father.

I talked to an attorney last night and I've made an appointment to see him tomorrow.

I think it's time for me to start living my dreams too.

I'll find something affordable, a small apartment and get a job.

Who knows? Maybe my dream of having my own boutique might happen down the road. ”

Maggie smiled at her mom. “I think you're right. I think you will achieve your dreams.”

They enjoyed their breakfast together around the campfire before Julia left to head home.

After taking Walker for a long walk, Maggie headed to the office to see if she could stay another week.

“Good morning.” Maggie greeted the campground host who was busy putting waters in the cooler.

The woman smiled. “Good morning. What can I do for you?”

Maggie winced. “I know it's short notice but I was wondering if I could extend my stay here at the campground.”

The woman walked over to the computer and tapped on the keyboard. “Let's have a look. What's your name?”

Maggie stepped up to the counter with Walker. “Maggie Sullivan.”

The woman grinned. “Ah, yes. It's already been taken care of. You have the campsite spot for the next eight weeks.”

Maggie shook her head. "I don't understand."

The woman chuckled. "Your mother came in this morning and paid for the next eight weeks to secure your campsite. Looks like you are here for the summer."

Maggie stood there, stunned. Her mother did this for her?

She finally snapped out of it and cleared her throat. "I had no idea."

The woman smiled. "She said it was a surprise."

Maggie didn't know what to say. She swallowed back the emotion at her mom's sweet gesture. "I don't know what to say."

The woman nodded. "Be sure to call your mom and thank her."

Maggie nodded. "I will."

As she walked back to her campsite, she dug her phone out of her pocket. She tried calling her mom's number, but it went to voice mail. She was in the air and had probably turned her cell phone off.

Maggie typed in a quick text. Once her mom landed, and turned her phone back on, the message would be waiting for her.

It simply said, Thank you so much for believing in me. I couldn't wish for a better mom.

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:36 am

Maggie walked back from the campsite showers, admiring the quiet and beauty of the morning. It had been four weeks since she arrived in Estes Park, and a lot had happened.

Her mom had filed for divorce as soon as she got back to Mississippi.

Julia had secured a great attorney who was fighting for a good divorce settlement.

It had turned out that her father had attempted to hide numerous assets from her mom, but they were quickly discovered.

Her father had moved out of the house and into a studio apartment with a twenty-something-year-old.

While her mom had been heartbroken by how fast her father had moved on, Julia was ready to get on with her life.

She was looking for employment and had some leads lined up.

As far as her father was concerned, he'd been livid when Maggie told him she wasn't going back to school.

He told her to think about what people would say if she threw this opportunity away.

She ended up telling him that he was more concerned with his image than the happiness of his daughter.

After he tried to assassinate her mother's character, she told him she wanted no contact until he got his act together.

Maggie had some good news in her own journey.

The charity event at the gallery had been a hit.

Her write-up on the gallery's website had drawn in so many people there was a waiting line outside.

They raised over thirty-five thousand dollars in one night.

Ashley had even connected her with three more businesses in Estes Park, a bakery, a doggie daycare, and an ice cream shop that needed someone to write and keep up with their websites.

It was a great way to make some decent income while working on her novel.

She soon found a working routine that she enjoyed.

When it came to Mason, she had sent him a text telling him she knew what he had done with Lauren, and they were over. He blew up her phone with hundreds of texts trying to gaslight her and, when she wouldn't respond, he became agitated. She blocked him.

She smiled to herself at how far she had come in only a few weeks.

Maggie shook her wet hair and draped her damp towel over her arm. Her fingers brushed against the doggie treats in her pocket she'd picked up in the office.

"Maggie."

The sound of the familiar voice had Maggie stopping in her tracks. She slowly turned.

Standing behind her was her best friend. Ex best friend. Lauren.

Maggie's heart thudded in her chest. "What are you doing here?"

Lauren clasped her hands in front of her and stood for a moment before speaking. "You ignored my texts and then blocked me. I really need to talk to you." Dark shadows hung under her eyes and she looked like she'd lost weight.

"I don't think we have anything to say to each other." Maggie turned her back.

"Please, Maggie, we have been best friends forever. You can't let one mistake ruin our friendship," Lauren pleaded.

Maggie felt her anger rising. She curled her fingers into fists and slowly turned to face her.

"We were best friends. You destroyed that when you slept with Mason." Her voice was steady and measured despite how angry she felt.

"It was a mistake. I know that now. I regret that more than you know." She wore her guilt like a shawl.

But it didn't move Maggie.

"I trusted you. And you threw away our friendship over nothing. I bet you and Mason didn't last very long after I dumped him."

Lauren's face went pale and she studied the ground. "No. He said I ruined everything."

Maggie laughed. “That’s rich, coming from him. He’s too selfish to accept the consequences of his own actions. That’s why I ended up blocking him.”

Lauren’s face was full of guilt and regret. “You’ll never know how sorry I am.”

Maggie studied her friend. She sighed heavily. “I believe you are.”

Lauren’s face brightened.

“But that doesn’t mean we can go back to how things were. I need faithful people in my life who won’t betray me. I hope that you remember this when you meet your next best friend.” Maggie turned and headed to the van.

While it stung to leave Lauren behind, she knew she had to forge her own path with solid relationships.

When she got to her campsite, she turned around. Lauren was gone.

Her heart tugged with sadness at losing her friend. But when she opened the door of the van and Walker greeted her with a toothy smile and a wag she knew she’d made the right decision.

She sat down beside him and held him close. “What do you say we go find a spot in the mountains to write and chase bunnies?”

Walker grinned and let out an affirmative bark.

Maggie Sullivan knew she’d made the right decision.

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:36 am

Walker lay his head at Maggie's feet while she scribbled in her journal. He didn't know what was so important that she had to constantly be writing stuff down, but at least it made her happy.

They'd been in Colorado for almost two months now. She decided to get her own van. She had discussed it with Daniel and they came to the conclusion that she would just buy his van and he would design another one.

Daniel had flown out a couple times during the summer to visit. He would always sleep in the tent and Maggie would take the van. Walker could tell by the way Daniel looked at Maggie that he loved her. She just didn't see it ... not yet.

Maggie had limited her clients so she could still have time to write. The owner of the bakery said she could park her van on his land by the water if she wanted to stay. She was contemplating taking him up on his offer.

She was happier than he'd seen her in a while. She was finding her place in this world.

As for him, despite his eyesight growing poor, his sense of smell and hearing were amplified.

He could hear a squirrel thirty feet away and smell a bunny across a meadow.

It always made Maggie laugh when he launched himself full speed, chasing one of the creatures.

He never caught them because they were so fast. Maybe one day.

He looked up at Maggie, and she met his gaze.

“We are living life, aren’t we, Walker?” She rubbed his head.

Living life. That’s exactly what they were doing.

And living life to the fullest.