



The Layover that Changed Everything (The Meet Cute #1)

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Category: Romance

Description: Two years after walking away from an eight-year relationship that left her shattered and uncertain of her worth, Delilah is finally ready to start over.

With no ties left in Texas and a heart still healing, she sets out on a soul-searching journey across the country—one one-way ticket at a time—in search of something she’s never truly known: a place that feels like home.

Flight after flight, city after city, she convinces herself she’s chasing freedom. But deep down, she’s running—from the ghosts of her past, from the ache of loneliness, and from the fear that home might not exist for someone like her.

Then, during a routine layover in Raleigh, North Carolina, everything changes.

High above the clouds, on a nearly empty flight, Delilah meets Jon—a quiet, magnetic stranger with his own baggage and his own reasons for running.

What begins as a casual conversation stretches into hours. Stories are shared. Secrets unfold. And somewhere between turbulence and touchdown, Delilah finds herself opening up in ways she hasn’t in years.

Drawn to his kindness and intrigued by his silence, she begins to wonder:

What if home isn’t a place at all?

What if it’s a feeling—unexpected, consuming, and impossibly timed?

And what if this unplanned detour is exactly where her story was always meant to begin?

A heartfelt winter romance about second chances, the power of serendinity, and falling in love when—and where—you least expect it

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:12 am

Two years had passed since the worst breakup of my life. Eight years wasted on a man who drained every ounce of my spirit—a narcissist in the purest form. Leaving wasn't just an option; it was survival. So, I ran.

Texas no longer felt like home. Nothing tied me there anymore, so I did the only thing that made sense—I packed a bag, booked a flight, and set out to find a new place to call my own.

One by one, I explored different corners of the country.

Michigan. Florida. Oregon. Pensacola. Maine.

Washington. Indiana. Each stop a piece of a puzzle I wasn't sure how to solve.

And now, I was stuck in Raleigh Airport, North Carolina.

A layover that wasn't just a pause in my journey—but a moment that would change everything.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:12 am

The Oyster Problem

Song : If It Weren't For The Wind - Ella Langley

“No Oysters today sug, they don't have a shucker” - Great, just what I needed, an oyster bar with no fucking oysters.

I glanced to my right, my curiosity piqued.

The voice belonged to a man with pale skin, a rough goatee along his jaw, and a military cap adorned with navy pins pulled low over his forehead.

He was short in stature, with glasses on his chiseled nose, and leaning against the bar as if he had all the time in the world.

He caught me staring and grinned, an easy, lopsided kind of smile.

As he got up to use the restroom, I felt his eyes planted on my ass, I relished in it.

When he sat back down I decided to say something to him as the result to find out if he was single or not, the man just exuded big dick energy and what girl doesn't need that in her life.

“That's a pretty strong opinion for someone at an airport bar,” I said, raising a brow. He took a slow sip of his Bud Light, eyes twinkling with amusement.

“Ain't my first rodeo with no oysters, sweetheart. Name's Jonathan, and if you're

sittin' here alone, I reckon you're stranded just like me." I smirked.

"That obvious?" He tipped his bottle toward me.

"Only folks sittin' here solo are either runnin' from somethin', hatin' their job, or missin' a flight."

"Missed flight," I admitted, as I tapped my perfect double shot old fashioned, the whiskey was warm in my throat but cold on the ice, just what a girl needed right now.

"Well then," Jonathan said, settling onto the stool beside me, "guess that means we got some time to kill." And just like that, the layover didn't seem so bad anymore. Almost immediately, Jon looked at his phone and shot up from his seat.

"Shit! I think my plane is boarding!"

Without thinking, he pulled a few bills from his wallet, dropping them haphazardly onto the bar top, and took off in a blur toward the C Gates.

I sat there, frozen, the disappointment hitting me like a weight in my chest. Just like that, the handsome stranger—this unexpected moment—was gone, swallowed by the airport crowd.

With a sigh, I pulled out my card, sliding it across the bar without even glancing at the total.

I wasn't in the mood to care. Gathering my bag, I stood, adjusting the strap over my shoulder before heading toward my gate.

Then it hit me. My phone hadn't buzzed, not once, since I'd been sitting there.

A deep sense of unease crept in as I reached for it, digging through the abyss of my overstuffed purse.

When I finally fished it out, the screen lit up, and my stomach dropped.

6 notifications from American Airlines.

Your gate has changed .

Your gate has changed.

Your gate has changed—again.

Your flight is boarding.

Now boarding C Class.

Shit.

I'd had my phone on silent, as always. I hated people. The 'Do Not Disturb' setting was practically my default, in real life and on my phone. And now, because of that, I was late.

“Goddammit.”

Panic surged through me as I bolted through the terminal, weaving between slow-moving travelers, dodging suitcases, and nearly colliding with an elderly couple debating the overpriced souvenir stand.

My gate was now C42, which, of course, felt like it was in an entirely different zip code.

I was always doing this—running late, barely making it, forever playing catch-up.

Hell, I'd probably be late to my own damn funeral.

By the time I reached the gate, I was breathless, my chest heaving as I waved my boarding pass at the gate agent, who gave me the kind of look reserved for last-minute idiots like myself.

I muttered a half-hearted apology before rushing through the jet bridge, the familiar stale scent of airplane air hitting me as I stepped inside.

Everyone was already seated. Eyes flickered towards me as I made my way down the aisle, my bag smacking against the seats as I passed.

38F. A window seat. My usual choice—tucked away, out of sight, away from people.

And then, as I reached my row, I froze. Jonathan.

That same Southern drawl, that same impossibly wide grin, and those deep, gorgeous dimples.

He was in the aisle seat, looking up at me with amusement dancing in his eyes.

Between us, a beautiful Hispanic woman sat, earbuds in, scrolling through her phone, completely uninterested in the moment unfolding beside her. I grinned so hard my cheeks hurt .

“Looks like fate has a sense of humor,” he murmured.

I sank into my seat, still catching my breath, my pulse racing for more reasons than one. Maybe this flight wasn't going to be so bad after all.

As I settled into my seat, the man beside me wasted no time striking up a conversation.

His words tumbled out in a fast, nervous stream, and it didn't take long for me to realize—he wasn't just chatty.

He was anxious, maybe he was scared of flying, or heights.

Out of instinct and maybe a little kindness, I offered him a CBD gummy.

He didn't even hesitate—just popped it into his mouth as if I'd handed him a piece of candy he'd been waiting for all day.

I smirked to myself. I see he never got taught the “Never take candy from strangers” lesson in life ...

.. Gummies from strangers on airplanes—what could go wrong?

Somewhere between his rambling and mine, I mentioned it was my birthday.

I hadn't expected much of a reaction, but his eyes lit up as if he'd just been handed a mission.

I wasn't sure if he'd already had a few drinks—, no, I was sure.

I'd seen him at the bar before boarding.

So naturally, he flagged down the flight attendant and tried to order me a birthday drink, completely unaware that the plane hadn't even left the gate yet.

I bit back a laugh as she politely reminded him we were still parked and couldn't

serve alcohol until we were airborne.

Outside, the February chill painted frost on the window beside me, the kind of cold that seeps into your bones.

And while I watched the ice glint in the low afternoon light, he started up again—rambling about the wind, the weather, the flight delay, possible conspiracies involving air traffic control.

I didn't have the heart to stop him. Then, out of nowhere, he handed me his phone.

"Put your number in," he said like it was the most natural thing in the world. And so, I did.

As the engines finally roared to life and the plane began to creep down the runway, something shifted.

The air felt heavier. Or maybe lighter. I couldn't tell.

All I knew was that I felt it—the moment you meet someone and your gut whispers, Pay attention you stupid bitch, this isn't the usual asshole you fall for...

I must've dozed off for a bit—maybe thirty minutes at most. But when I opened my eyes again, the sky outside was darker, and the man beside me?

Still talking. I smiled to myself. Of course he is, this man never shuts up - my worst nightmare in human form, well they say you attract what you fear, and I fear noise and chatty mc chatty's.

When I woke back up, my neck slightly stiff from the awkward airplane nap position, the first thing I saw was Jonathan's face—animated, expressive, mid-story.

“...and then the dog just ran off with the whole turkey leg. Just gone. Like poof—Thanksgiving dinner, ruined.”

I blinked a few times, adjusting to the light and the subtle turbulence bouncing us softly in the air.

“Wait—what?” I murmured, still half-asleep but already smiling. He grinned.

“You fell asleep during the best part, but don’t worry—I’ll recap the entire thing.” Of course, he would, you chatty, fucking man.

This man had an endless stream of stories, each one more ridiculous and oddly charming than the last. And the way he told them—he talked with his hands, with his eyes, with the kind of enthusiasm that made you forget you were strangers.

I couldn’t help but laugh, the kind that bubbled up unexpectedly and left me feeling warm, even in the chill of the airplane cabin.

Somewhere around our second drink, I found myself leaning in a little closer, our hands somewhat touching across the woman between us with every bump in the air.

It was the kind of electricity that doesn’t announce itself loudly—it just simmers.

Quiet and steady, like the hum of the plane beneath us.

And maybe it was the altitude or the Jack and Coke’s or the way he looked at me when I told him I loved cold weather, but I started to feel something I wasn’t expecting on a random flight out of North Carolina: Safe. Curious. Interested.

I glanced down at my phone where his number was now saved—Jonathan Idaho—because at that moment, I still didn’t fully believe Idaho Falls was a real

place.

“You ever been out West?” he asked.

“Does Vegas count?”

He chuckled. “Sort of. But no. You need to see real stars. Mountains. Silence.”

“Silence sounds nice,” I said.

He looked at me for a second too long.

“Yeah. But not tonight. Tonight you get me instead.”

And just like that, 30,000 feet in the air, I realized this wasn ’ t just a meet-cute. This might be the beginning of something.

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The Flight

Song : Riptide - Vance Joy

“So, you wanna know the full story?” he asked, his eyes still warm but a little more serious now .

I nodded, not quite sure what I was inviting in, but curious all the same. He exhaled slowly.

“I got three kids. Two boys and a girl. 19, 15, and 7. My oldest, Joseph is a splitting image of his mama, and the younger boy, Wayne ... that boy’s got a temper on him, just like me.”

“My youngest, my baby girl, her name is Melissa.” I raised a brow.

“So, two ex-wives?” He laughed—not a bitter sound, more like someone resigned to the truth.

“Yeah. Two. The first one I married at twenty-two. We were navy sweethearts, or at least that’s what we called it.

Got married quickly before I deployed. She stuck around long enough to get through my first tour, then decided she didn’t want to be a military wife, and screwed every guy that smiled at her while I was away on tour. Can't say I blame her.”

“And the second?”

“Hood rat in Fayetteville”. Thought I’d learned my lesson the first time, but turns out I’m a slow learner.” His honesty was disarming. There was no self-pity in his voice, no attempt to paint himself in a better light. Just fact. Raw and real.

“So... Navy, huh?” I asked. He nodded.

“Fourteen years. Was good at it, too. The structure kept me sane. Did a couple of deployments overseas, mostly ship duty, until the Iraq war started heating up. They needed bodies. I volunteered for a joint assignment with the Army. Two years on the ground—Fallujah and Baghdad mostly. That shit changes you. You don’t come back the same.”

I felt the shift in his voice like something dark had curled beneath the surface. He didn’t look at me when he said it, just stared out the tiny window like the clouds might hold some sort of forgiveness.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly, not because I pitied him, but because I didn’t know what else to say. He waved a hand, brushing it off.

“It’s life. You survive, or you don’t. I did. Barely. But I came back.”

I could feel the weight of those years settling between us, not heavy like regret, but solid like stone. I reached for my drink, letting the silence stretch out for a minute. He seemed to need it. Then, as if reading my thoughts, he shook himself out of the memory.

“Anyway, I just got back from North Carolina. My aunt—she’s not doing too well.

She just had hip surgery and needed help with my uncle who needs care in his older years.

She raised me after my mom went left and the last guy she dated left me with bruises so bad the school called the police on her.

So grandma came and got me after that and took me to the farm, but after grandma died, Aunt Becky took me in but then I needed to go when I hit 19, I was too much for her. ” My heart ached a little at that.

“You take care of everyone, don’t you?” He gave me a small smile.

“Someone has to.”

That was the thing about Jonathan. He wasn’t loud about the pain he’d carried, but it was there, in the corners of his eyes, in the way he talked about people like they were responsibilities and not just relationships.

“So, back to Idaho Falls,” I said, shifting the conversation.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice getting lighter again.

“Six-bedroom house I split with my old military brother Blake. He’s ex-Navy, too.

Single dad but he’s dating a woman now, I don’t know her well, her name is Patricia and she comes over every weekend to spend time with him.

We figured it made more sense to team up than try and make it on our own.

Plus, our kids like having each other around. Cousins more like siblings.”

“That sounds kinda wholesome.” He chuckled.

“It was until Blake decided to become Mister Charity. While I was in North Carolina,

he told me he was renting out the basement to some woman who needed a place.” I raised an eyebrow.

“And the problem is...?”

“That basement’s mine,” he said, almost childlike in his protest.

“Three bedrooms, private bathroom, my damn fridge.

It’s my peace. With PTSD and all, I need space. I don’t sleep like a normal person. Sometimes I wake up in a sweat at 3 a.m., and the last thing I need is some stranger in my space when I’m pacing the halls like a ghost.”

That made sense. More than sense. I could almost picture it—Jonathan roaming the basement in the dark, memories from the desert still lodged deep in his bones, chasing quiet like it was oxygen.

“Did you meet her?” I asked.

He shook his head .

“Nah. Just Blake’s word that she’s ‘nice’ and ‘really needed help.’ That’s the problem with Blake.

He’s too good sometimes. No boundaries. I told him I was gonna talk to her when I got back.

See if we can figure something out. I just..

. I don’t like surprises.” I nodded, sipping the last of my drink.

“Well, if she turns out to be awful, you can always retreat to the mountains.” He smiled.

“That’s the plan.” I shifted slightly, feeling the press of reality creeping back in.

“After this flight, I’ve got one more to Houston,” I told him.

“My parents are throwing me a birthday dinner—well, more like a ‘we haven’t seen you in six months’ guilt fest disguised as a dinner.”

“Big family?”

“Loud, nosy, always trying to marry me off. The usual.” He laughed.

“Sounds familiar.”

“And then,” I said, leaning back, “I’ve got one more flight. Chicago. I’m checking out some rental listings there. Thinking about relocating.” He tilted his head.

“From where?”

“Kind of... nowhere, right now,” I admitted.

“Been bouncing around for the past year. Freelancer life. I have a townhouse in Fort Worth but I’m barely there, my best friend needed a place and I needed someone to watch my cats while I find a new home” He let that sit a beat.

“So what are you chasing?” The question startled me more than I expected. Not because it was too personal, but because I didn’t have an answer. Not a real one, anyway.

“Maybe a place that feels like mine,” I said finally.

“Maybe quiet. Maybe myself.” He nodded slowly like he understood that kind of search. Maybe he did.

We lapsed into a comfortable quiet then, both of us watching the world shrink beneath the plane’s wings.

Somewhere, a baby cried. Someone coughed.

The flight attendants rattled the drink cart up the aisle, their heels clinking against the thin carpet.

Jonathan pulled out his phone again and checked the time.

“How long’s your layover in Dallas?”

“About two hours,” I said. “Just enough time to get annoyed.” He laughed again.

“Well, happy birthday again. If I was better prepared, I’d have brought a gift.”

“You gave me your entire life story in one flight. That’s better than a gift,” I teased.

“Careful,” he said, grinning. “You keep saying stuff like that, I might think you like me.” I didn’t say anything. Just smiled.

When the wheels touched down in Dallas, the jolt of the landing reminded me I hadn’t flown this much in years.

My spine ached, my head was foggy, and I was dangerously close to choosing sleep over social interaction.

The goodbye was quick. Jon gave me a one-armed hug as we disembarked, something warm and solid in the way he held me.

“Text me,” he said, “when you land in Chicago. Or if your parents drive you insane.”

“I will,” I promised, slipping off the plane with the kind of reluctance that only comes when you’re leaving something unexpectedly good behind.

The moment my boots hit the tile of the terminal, Dallas hit me like a wall—thick, warm air, the overwhelming scent of airport food, and the dull roar of movement everywhere.

People streamed in every direction as if they were in a time-lapse come to life, voices layered over announcements layered over the beep of cart horns and the wail of a toddler mid-tantrum.

The flight to Houston from Dallas was uneventful, a short 1 hour dash is what it felt like and then here I was - finally in Houston, TX.

I adjusted my bag and pushed through the crowd, dodging a family reunion in full swing near baggage claim, and followed the signs to the ride-share pick-up on my usual autopilot setting. My phone buzzed.

Jonathan Idaho: Don’t let Chicago freeze your heart. And don’t let Houston drive you nuts. Happy Birthday, sweetheart.

I smiled, tucking the phone into my pocket as I spotted my Uber pulling up to the curb—a black Mazda with a dented front fender and a driver sipping a huge iced coffee looking mildly irritated.

I slid into the backseat and gave him my parents’ address, then let my head fall back

against the headrest. Outside, the city blurred by.

Neon signs. A million people. Pickup trucks, strip malls and sprawling suburbs bathed in a soft gold sunset.

I'd only just arrived, but already I was thinking about the next leg.

Chicago. Snow. Noise. Change. And somewhere, a basement in Idaho Falls that wasn't as empty as it used to be, a man that cured every nervous cell in my body but also annoyed the life out of me with his chatty Kathy personality.

I closed my eyes, letting the hum of the car and the pull of exhaustion wash over me.

It was my birthday. And this year, it felt different.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:12 am

The House On The Lake

Song : Whiskey & Rain - Michael Ray

The Uber rolled up the long, winding drive, gravel crunching beneath the tires as we passed the quiet rows of stately waterfront homes.

I stared out the window, my fingers tapping an uneven rhythm on my thigh.

The lake shimmered under the late afternoon sun, and even in winter, the house looked like something pulled from a lifestyle magazine—clean lines, big windows, all red stone and pale wood.

Four bedrooms, four bathrooms, and a boat dock so pretty it had once been featured on the neighborhood's real estate brochure.

My stepdad was still proud of that one. I took a breath as the car came to a soft stop at the front entrance.

This wasn't just a house—it was the 'American Dream', carved out in drywall and teakwood. And in it lived my overachieving, brilliance-dripping parents. Trinidadian to the bone, loud with love, firm with judgment, and the kind of people who didn't believe in mediocrity.

I stepped out of the car with a sigh and steeled myself for the next three days.

My mother was the first one to the door, of course. Always punctual, always poised.

She wore her usual colorful maxi dress, but it was the sharpness in her eyes that stood out most. She hugged me tightly, the familiar scent of jasmine and ginger clinging to her skin.

“You late,” she said, half-scolding, half-smiling.

“Again.”

“Happy birthday to me,” I mumbled, hugging her back.

My stepdad appeared behind her, his salt-and-pepper beard freshly trimmed, arms wide open.

“Come now, girl! Give yuh old man a hug!” I laughed to myself, letting them pull me inside.

The house hadn’t changed. Same open floor plan, the same oversized sectional, same glass wall that gave a perfect view of the lake. It was the kind of place that begged for calm and reflection, but I always felt like a guest there. My things were never in the drawers. My name wasn’t in the mail.

“Put yuh bag down. You hungry?” my mother asked, already heading toward the kitchen.

“Starving. I’ve been eating airport snacks for a day and a half.”

She clicked her tongue. “God forbid you prepare for once in your life.”

I rolled my eyes and wandered toward the back patio, pulling open the back door.

The breeze off the lake was cool and salty.

I closed my eyes and let it wash over me for a second.

I hadn't been back here since last summer, and even then, it was a short visit.

Too many memories. Too much expectation.

It always took me back to those first few years in the States—awkward, angry, resentful.

I was fourteen when we moved here, plucked away from the only home I'd ever known in Trinidad and thrown into suburban Houston like a fish dropped on hot asphalt.

My mother had tried to prepare me. She always tried.

She told me it was a new start, that America had more opportunity, that I'd be thanking her one day.

But all I saw was what I left behind—my best friends, my school, my rhythm.

Trinidad had been color and sound and freedom.

Houston was flat, bland, and unbearably fake.

And the girls at my new school? They didn't know shit about struggle.

They wore too much lip gloss, cared more about homecoming dresses than homework, and never missed a chance to remind me that my accent made me different.

So I did what any angry teenager would do. I shut down. I rebelled. I dropped out.

“Lunch is ready!” my mother’s voice cut through the nostalgia.

I moved inside, pulled by the smell of callaloo and stewed chicken. Even after all these years, she still cooked like she had a family of ten to feed. The table was already set, and my stepdad was halfway through a bottle of Carib.

“You still drinkin’ this piss water?” I teased, grabbing a chair.

“Eh-eh, don’t insult the culture,” he said, raising it like a toast.

I laughed and sat down, grateful for the distraction.

We made small talk while we ate—how the neighbor’s son finally graduated from A&M, how the HOA was threatening to fine them over a cracked driveway, and how my mother was still teaching physics at the charter school across town.

I nodded and smiled through it all, but I could feel the questions hanging in the air like storm clouds.

“So what are you doing for work now?” my mother finally asked, piercing me with that look.

“Nothing new, still running my apartment locating business. Just traveling, exploring a few places. Looking at rentals in Chicago next.” She raised a perfectly arched brow.

“Chicago? In February?”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “I know. Cold as Eskimo’s balls.” My stepdad snorted. My mother didn’t laugh. She just shook her head and looked down at her plate.

“You know, it wouldn’t kill you to go back to school.” Here we go.

“I have my GED and a couple of degrees, Ma.”

“You smart. Too smart to be drifting around life like this.”

“I’m figuring it out.”

“You thirty-three. You shoulda figured it out already.” I pushed my fork across the plate.

“Thanks for the birthday pep talk. ”

After lunch, I escaped to the guest room upstairs, my lair, as I called it, the one with the view of the dock.

I dropped my bag on the bed and flopped backward, staring at the ceiling fan as it spun lazily above me.

They weren’t wrong. I was drifting. But not without reason.

After I left Mark, everything shifted. He was supposed to be the exception.

The man who took me out of the strip clubs and into something softer, safer.

For the first time, I thought I had real stability—a penthouse in downtown Dallas, designer bags, dinners with people in expensive suits.

He’d given me everything I thought I wanted.

Until I realized all I had was a glorified cage with a view.

He was a liar, a drunk, a serial cheater who collected dancers like trophies.

And me? I stayed too long. Eight years too long.

Until I was thirty-two, tired, jaded, and finally free.

Now I lived in a modest townhouse forty-five minutes outside the city, two cats, one tiny chihuahua, and a lot of silence.

I hadn't been back to a strip club in almost a year.

But I hadn't figured out the rest yet. I didn't know what I wanted to do.

I just knew I didn't want this. Not the past, not the heat, not the constant ghost of Mark lurking around every corner of Texas.

So I got on planes. Fifteen flights this year, and counting.

A new city every month. Looking for somewhere that felt right. Somewhere that felt like mine.

And then there was Jon. I pulled out my phone and stared at his number —Jonathan Idaho.

God, that man. He came out of nowhere like a summer storm.

One minute I was sulking over oysters in Raleigh, the next I was halfway in love with a man who told stories like gospel and had a smile that made you forget everything else.

He told me everything on that flight. He'd served fourteen years in the Navy but spent two of those on the ground in Iraq, embedded with an Army unit.

Said it was the hardest time of his life and the loneliest. He talked about the friends he lost and the scars he came home with—some physical, most not.

He had three kids. Two ex-wives. And a house in Idaho Falls he shared with his brother Blake, another ex-Navy guy and fellow single dad.

They bought the house together—a six-bedroom spread just outside town, with a view of the mountains and a basement that Jonathan claimed was his sanctuary.

Only now Blake had let some woman move into that basement—said she needed a place to stay—and Jon was pissed.

“I like my space,” he told me.

“That basement is the only place I feel halfway normal. With her down there, I feel like I’m back on deployment. No privacy. No control.” I got it. More than he realized.

And now here I was, lying on my parents’ guest bed, thinking about a man I barely knew but couldn’t stop thinking about. A man who, weirdly, made me feel... steady. Like maybe my instincts weren’t broken after all.

The next day passed in a blur of awkward family moments and backhanded compliments.

My birthday dinner was fancy, expensive, and exhausting.

My mother gave me a gold bracelet and a book on anxiety and depression in your 30s — like I needed anything more depressing in my life.

My stepdad gave me a card with cash inside and a wink that said, buy something stupid with it.

I loved them, but I couldn't breathe in their house for long, even though I would be back after Chicago to say my final goodbye before I picked a permanent residence that wasn't my townhouse in Fort Worth.

The morning after, I packed my bag again.

Flight #16 was calling. Chicago. Middle of February.

Probably the dumbest decision I'd made yet. But maybe also the smartest.

I gave my mother one last hug, promised I'd "think about school," and climbed back into an Uber.

As the car pulled away from the house on the lake, I glanced over my shoulder.

The dock glittered under the rising sun, the boat swaying gently in its slip.

It was beautiful. Picture-perfect. But it wasn't mine.

I leaned back against the seat, pulled out my phone, and stared at Jon's number again.

I didn't text him. Not yet. But maybe soon.

Right now, I have a plane to catch. A city to explore and more bad decisions to make.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:12 am

The Chicago Trip

Song : Nevermind - Dennis Lloyd

I landed at O ' Hare just before noon, and for the first time in a long time, I felt...

calm. Not bored. Not numb. Just calm. The usual swirl of thoughts didn ' t rush in to greet me the second I stepped off the plane.

It was like the Chicago air carried some kind of chill I welcomed.

A clean slate. The snow hadn't started falling yet, but the sky was heavy and gray as I made my way to the ride-share pickup, coat zipped high, fingers tucked deep into my sleeves.

Rockford wasn't exactly close to the airport, but I liked being tucked just outside of the chaos.

I needed this trip to be a little slower.

A little softer. So I sat back in the Uber, watched the trees blur past, and tried not to think about much of anything.

The Airbnb I booked was a gem—modern, warm, and stocked like a liquor store.

A whole wall of shelves with whiskey, gin, vodka, and even a few imported bottles I couldn't pronounce.

Whoever owned this place knew how to host. I dropped my suitcase by the door, peeled off my boots, and took a moment to just stand there.

Quiet. Alone. Free. It started snowing just as I unpacked.

Big, fluffy flakes that fell like confetti.

I curled up on the oversized couch with a blanket, turned on the fireplace, and started a rom-com marathon.

I let myself unwind—no schedules, no decisions.

Just warmth, movies, and the low hum of snowfall outside the window.

The next day—Friday—I took the train into the city, determined to play tourist for once.

I visited Millennium Park, took selfies with the Bean, and laughed at myself for acting like such a cliché.

I bought keychains, fridge magnets and a snow globe I didn't need.

And then I splurged on a birthday dinner at The Capital Grille.

Alone. They gave me a candle in my dessert and sang softly like they weren't sure if I'd start crying or dancing.

I did neither. I just smiled, thanked them, and toasted myself.

To thirty-three. To freedom. To find something that felt like home.

After dinner, I wandered through the city, letting the cold slap some life into me.

My cheeks were pink from the wind, and my fingers were stiff despite my gloves.

I found myself at a little upscale spot called Maple pouty lips, but not try-hard—and I texted him:

“Hey, you. Remember me?”

Seconds turned into minutes.

Then came the reply:

“I don’t know who you are.”

I stared at the screen, blinking.

Was he joking? Was this some kind of flirty amnesia thing? Or did he seriously not remember?

“Never mind. I guess I’m not memorable,” I replied, fingers trembling with embarrassment. I threw the phone across the couch, groaning loud enough to scare the dog I didn’t have with me.

What the fuck ?

Had I hallucinated that connection? Was I so love-starved that I’d imagined the whole thing?

I curled deeper into the couch, pizza in one hand, a bottle of Fireball in the other.

I loved cinnamon whiskey. But it hated me back in a way that made me feel less alone.

The rest of the night was a blur of vampire romance, drunk scrolling, and stupid tears I refused to acknowledge.

I texted no one. Called no one. I just drank until the bottle was too light to hold and passed out on the couch in a tangle of supreme pizza crust and regrets.

The next morning was a crime scene. Fireball bottles.

Pizza boxes. My pride shredded somewhere under the coffee table.

I dragged myself into the bathroom and washed the smell of cinnamon and shame off me, vowing never to drink that poison again.

I bundled up, grabbed a hot coffee, and went back into the city.

Despite the freezing wind and aching head, I toured a few apartments downtown—lofts with exposed brick, quiet corners with Chicago river views, and overpriced shoeboxes that promised “urban charm.” I wasn’t ready to sign anything.

But I needed to see if this place could be it.

Could be home. Surprisingly... I liked it more than I thought I would.

There was something gritty about Chicago that made me feel real.

Like I didn’t have to smile all the time. Like I could just exist here.

That night, I found a cozy Irish pub on the corner near the Airbnb.

It was dark, warm, and smelled like Guinness and comfort.

The bartender reminded me of someone's grandpa, and the jukebox played classic soul all night.

I sipped a whiskey (not Fireball), and let the heat soak into my bones, and it felt...

good. Just good. No Jon. No expectations.

No old ghosts. When I got back to the Airbnb, I packed slowly, folding each shirt as it mattered.

Tomorrow, I'd head back to Houston. One last straight flight.

No layovers. No flirtatious strangers. Just me, my bags, and my weird depressing life with my 2 cats and tiny dog.

I woke up early the next morning, refreshed for once, and even excited to see my little dog Nacho.

I missed that boujee little furball like crazy.

My cats were still in Fort Worth with my best friend Christine, who had offered to keep them while I figured things out in exchange for a 2 bedroom townhouse that wasn't near her son's father.

She didn't ask questions. Just said, "Take your time. I got them." She always understood. That's why she was my best friend.

The Uber ride to the airport was smooth.

I had my United Club pass, so I planned to lounge, eat, and enjoy my two free drinks.

But Chicago's airport is a beast, and I wasn't about to make the rookie mistake of relaxing before finding out if my actual gate truly existed.

Once I confirmed I wasn't boarding from some alternate universe terminal, I headed to the lounge.

Lunch was incredible—real food, not sad peanuts—and the drinks were strong.

The perfect sendoff. I watched people bustle past, wondering where they were running off to.

Wondering what it would feel like to have a one-way ticket somewhere and not be afraid.

The flight home was uneventful. I watched a movie, drifted off for a bit, and woke up as we touched down at George Bush Intercontinental Airport.

Storms had rolled through while I was in the air, so traffic was a mess, but I didn't care.

I was almost home. Sort of. My parents were still at work when I arrived, so I let myself in with the spare key.

The house smelled like curry and candles.

I raided the fridge for leftovers—chicken pelau and some fried plantains, the good stuff—and reheated a plate before heading up to my old room.

I didn't even bother changing clothes. I just kicked off my boots and climbed into

bed, only to be greeted by a soft woof and two tiny paws hopping up beside me. Ranger.

My mom's dog now, but once mine. He used to whine every time I left him alone.

Had to sleep right next to me or he'd panic.

I gave him to her because I knew she'd be home more, but every time I visited, it was like nothing changed.

He curled up beside me, head resting on my stomach, eyes already closing.

Nacho climbed up next, licking my hand like I'd been gone for years instead of days.

I scratched behind his ears and let the comfort wash over me.

This trip hadn't solved everything. I still didn't know where I belonged.

Still didn't know what came next. But I knew one thing.

I wasn't going back to the old me. And even if Jon didn't remember me—or pretended not to—I remembered who I was when I met him.

And maybe that version of me deserved a second chance.

Whether it was in Chicago, or somewhere else entirely, I'd keep searching.

And until then? Nacho. Ranger. A warm bed. And no more Fireb all.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:12 am

The Phone Call

Song : It Just Comes Natural - George Strait

Jon.

JON?!

I stared at the name as it rang. Nah.

I let it go. Straight to voicemail. Weirdo. Ghost me during a vulnerable birthday moment and then call me like it's nothing? Fuck off. Then—oh no, no no no—FaceTime. FaceTime?!

“What in the absolute fuck,” I muttered, sitting up, trying to smooth my pillow-crushed curls and wipe the drool off the corner of my mouth.

Against all better judgment, I answered.

I was ready. READY to tell this man off with a vengeance I'd been simmering for days.

But then there he was. That smile. Those dimples.

His skin glowed under the soft lights of wherever he was calling from, probably his serial killer basement.

And those brown eyes—big, warm, apologetic.

The kind of eyes that didn't need to say a word because they already screamed "I'm so sorry" loud and clear.

I opened my mouth. Closed it. He beat me to it.

"Hey. Please don't hang up."

"Why are you calling me?" I asked, arms folded, heart already melting despite myself.

"I owe you a real apology. The gummies got me bad. I didn't remember a thing for like, three days. I found your text yesterday and...I panicked."

I laughed. Not because it was funny. Because the whole thing was so damn absurd.

"You mean to tell me, you blacked out for three days and didn't think to check your texts until yesterday?"

"I was embarrassed, okay? I really liked you. And then I woke up and had no idea what happened after that flight. And then I saw your message and your picture, and I was like—fuck. I blew it."

He rubbed the back of his neck, looking all bashful and boyish.

The irritation in me started to soften. Somehow, within minutes, we were laughing.

I don't even remember how it started—he made a dumb joke about me being a "gummy pusher," and I commented not trusting men who let strangers live in their basement.

But just like that, the conversation stretched.

Hours passed like minutes. We talked about everything and nothing.

Music. Childhood nicknames. Embarrassing drunk moments.

He told me about the first time he tried to cook for his kids and accidentally set off the fire alarm with a pan of lasagna.

I told him about the time I fell asleep in a Miami club booth with a cheeseburger in my hand and a feather boa around my neck.

He made me laugh until I cried. Literally cried.

Three hours in, I got a text from my dad:

“Is someone up there with you? What’s making you laugh so much lol.” I snorted and replied:

“I’m on the phone with a friend.”

I hadn’t even heard them come home. The garage door was right under my room and I didn’t hear a thing.

Good thing a serial killer didn’t have his eye on me—I’d be dead before I noticed, which didn’t sound so bad when your life is in shambles.

I took Jon with me everywhere on the phone after our constant face-timing.

To the bathroom. While I brushed my teeth.

Even when I got in the shower—camera off, of course.

He just waited and talked to me while I washed my hair.

Eventually, we both yawned too much to keep pretending we weren't tired.

“Good night, beautiful,” he said.

I bit my lip. My chest did that weird clench flutter.

“Good night, Jon.”

When I finally curled up between the sheets, Ranger and Nacho flanking me like furry little bodyguards, I smiled. It had been so long since I'd felt a real connection with a man. And even longer since I believed one felt the same way back. I slept like a baby.

The next morning, I was still groggy and half-blind, fumbling for my slippers and taking the boys out into the chilly Houston air, when my phone started ringing again. FaceTime.Jon. Again. This time, he was in his truck, baseball cap on, hoodie pulled up, heading to Costco.

“You're really committed to this FaceTime thing, huh?” I teased, shielding my phone from Nacho's sudden bathroom sprint.

“Well, I figured if I couldn't take you with me in person, I'd bring you along virtually.

” And just like that, I spent the entire day running errands with him.

He showed me the inside of his local Costco, the same aisles I knew but somehow

more interesting because they were his.

He argued with himself over frozen burritos.

I helped him choose a new blanket for when his daughter visited him.

We talked about my plans. Or lack thereof.

“I don’t even know where I’m going next,” I admitted, propped up on my elbows back in my room while Nacho snored on my feet.

“Well... why don’t you come out here? To Idaho Falls?” I blinked.

“I mean it,” he continued.

“Just for a couple of weeks. See if we vibe in person. You don’t have to stay. I’ll fly you out and back to Houston if it doesn’t work out.” I paused.

“That sounds like a good idea,” I said slowly, “But I don’t want to leave Nacho here again. He’s my ride or die.”

“Then bring him. I’ll pay for his shots if he needs ‘em, and his ticket. You just get yours.” I was floored.

Dumbstruck. This was either the most romantic thing a man had ever offered me—or an elaborate trap laid by a serial killer in the most scenic location possible.

I told him I’d think about it. Then I started Googling.

“Is Jon from Idaho Falls a serial killer?”

“What are the signs you’re being lured to your death?”

“Can small dogs defend you from murder?”

All valid research.

Tickets weren’t cheap. \$490 one-way. Painful. But maybe worth it.

Jon stayed on the phone the whole time while I toggled between flights, weather forecasts, and dog carrier dimensions.

We came to a deal: He would buy Nacho’s ticket and pay for his shots to get up to date — I’d stay for two weeks.

Just a test run. He’d make sure I had a space of my own.

Nacho would have a comfy spot. If it didn’t work out, I’d go home.

No harm, no foul. But deep down, I was already planning outfits.

Already picturing what the snow might look like from his serial killer basement sanctuary.

I hadn’t felt this excited in a long, long time.

Later that night, I went to the attic to grab a bag.

Not the big one. Just the medium-size one I used when I thought I might need more than two sweaters.

I sat on the floor of my childhood bedroom, Ranger chewing on a squeaky toy and

Nacho curled up in the blanket I got him from Petco, and I thought: What the hell am I doing?

But I couldn't stop smiling. Because this—this strange, spontaneous, slightly reckless chapter—felt like the first time in years that I was finally writing my own story.

No ex-boyfriends controlling the pages. No parents editing every paragraph.

No past selves whispering doubt into the margins.

Just me. And maybe a man with a gummy and bud light problem and a heart bigger than his state. I checked Nacho's vet records.

He was due for one shot. Jon sent me the money before I could ask twice.

I booked the flight. Two weeks. One medium suitcase, one carry-on.

A small dog. And a maybe-love story waiting in the mountains or a dueling escape from a very well-organized serial killer named Jonathon. To be continued...

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:12 am

The Idaho Falls Countdown

Song : I'm A Little Crazy- Morgan Wallen

I started thinking about how I ' d tell my parents.

I couldn ' t just say, “ Hey, I ' m flying to Idaho Falls to meet a man I FaceTimed with for a week straight, who makes me laugh so hard I choke on my spit.

” That would've gone over well. Instead, I landed on something vague but safe: I was meeting up with some old friends near Yellowstone Park and booked an Airbnb in Idaho Falls to explore the little mountain town.

My parents didn't ask too many questions—I'd always been the spontaneous, globe-trotting one in the family.

Houston to Idaho Falls? Just another random blip on my travel radar.

Back home, I threw myself into the kitchen.

I needed comfort food. My kind of comfort food.

I made curry chicken the way my grandmother taught me back home in Trinidad, letting the scent of garlic, curry powder, and thyme fill the house until even my dad poked his head in and asked when it'd be ready.

My parents devoured it like they hadn't eaten in days.

It was one of those meals that reminded me who I was—Trini to the core, always looking for love, always finding it in food.

Cooking had always been one of my secret weapons.

A well-seasoned pot of curry could bring a man to his knees.

Too bad none of the ones before Jon could keep their pants on long enough to be worth feeding. I plated mine with rice and sent Jon a picture.

He sent back a million drooling emojis and told me I better bring that same energy to Idaho.

I laughed, washed the dishes, took Nacho and his brother out for their nightly pee parade, and then sprinted upstairs to shower.

I knew that man was going to call me. He was consistent like that.

At six on the dot, the FaceTime rang. He had this cute little habit of always calling when the sun dipped low like he wanted to catch the golden hour with me.

I answered with the news on in the background—Houston chaos in full swing.

A car chase. A shootout. Possibly a gator in someone's backyard. Jon laughed, wide-eyed.

“Damn, y’all got Grand Theft Auto vibes every day there.” I asked him what was happening in Idaho Falls and he told me with a completely straight face:

“Some tourists tried to pet a bison again.” I lost it.

It was big news over there. That was the kind of place I was headed to—a town where the most dangerous thing was a fluffy, oversized cow with hooves. Then he hit me with it.

“Pack some church clothes.” I paused, mid-laugh.

“Excuse me?”

“I go to church every Sunday. It’s a Mormon church—but I’m not Mormon. I’m Southern Baptist. I just like to get my Jesus on.”

I stared at him, completely floored. This redneck, burly, hilarious man who could smoke fish and crack jokes was also spiritually grounded?

Was I was reading a rom-com script from *The Twilight Zone*?

Still, I understood it. I grew up Catholic and Pentecostal, in a country where religious festivals filled the calendar and Jesus was family.

I got it. He showed me his dinner—salmon he caught himself from the Snake River, smoked on a pellet grill like he was auditioning for some outdoor cooking show.

He was so proud of it, and I watched him plate it as if it was gold.

He looked like someone who belonged to the land, someone who made you feel grounded just by existing.

I couldn't believe how easy it felt to talk to him. No pressure, no weird innuendo, no subtle checks for exits. Just laughter and warmth. It wasn't even sexual.

That was the wildest part. The connection was deeper than that, richer. It felt

like...home.

By the time we hung up, I had six days left until I'd see him again, and I couldn't keep still.

For the next four days, we were on FaceTime constantly.

I mean constantly. Like, brushing-teeth-together, fold-the-laundry-together, "hold on let me pee real quick" kind of constant.

We carried each other in our pockets, on our screens, through every part of the day.

He asked me what I liked to eat and drink, and I rattled off my list—Coke, hot fries, chicken livers and ground turkey for Nacho.

The next day, he FaceTimed me from the grocery store, loading everything into his cart.

Including chicken livers. For my dog. If that isn't love, I don't know what is.

I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop.

For him to slip up and reveal something horrifying like he collects toenails or has a secret wife in Montana.

But nothing came. Just steady affection.

Interest. Excitement. He even told his overbearing aunt about me, and said she was "curious about the mystery woman with the Caribbean spice." Lord, I was falling.

With less than 72 hours to go, I looked down at my chipped nails and ashy ankles and

had a mini panic attack.

I hadn't done a damn thing to prepare. I hadn't even packed.

I booked a nail, hair, and brow appointment at Katy Mills Mall for the next day, hit up my Under Armor plug to hold some cold-weather clothes, and made a mental list of what I'd need to survive bumfuck Idaho in late winter/spring.

We fell asleep on the phone that night, and I couldn't even remember who knocked out first.

The next morning, I woke up early, showered, texted him a good morning selfie with my bonnet on, and warned him I'd be off the grid until 4 p.m. My mall day was a full-blown mission.

Nails, toes, brows, then hair. I made it through by imagining his reaction when he saw me with fresh curls and a new matching set.

I hit Under Armor hard, stocked up on cozy hoodies, fleece-lined leggings, and snow boots that looked both cute and practical.

Because even if I died in a snowbank, I'd die looking good.

I ended my day at The Cheesecake Factory bar with an old-fashioned, ride-or-die. I ordered two, because I deserved it, and texted Jon:

“All done.”

The FaceTime came in before I even set my phone down.

I laughed, popped in my AirPods, and set him up against the ketchup bottle so he

could watch me devour the chicken fettuccine alfredo I ordered and flirt like a lovesick fool.

I ordered my Uber after a third drink and floated home in a happy buzz, tipsy on whiskey and a man I hadn't even kissed yet.

The Amazon package was waiting when I got back—Nacho's flight carrier.

I dragged it upstairs and FaceTimed Jon again, this time from my closet floor as I packed and modeled each outfit like I was going on America's Next Top Girlfriend.

He gave his approvals, threw in some jokes, and we ended the night with the same ritual: phone by the pillow, hearts wide open, sleep tugging at our eyelids.

It felt like something was happening. Something wild, something reckless, something terrifying and perfect.

And if this was all some elaborate April Fools joke, then honestly? I didn't care. I was all in.

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The Denver Situation

Song : Colder Weather - Zach Brown Band

The goodbyes always felt like an eternity, no matter how many times I ' d done them before.

The hugs were always the same: tight, lingering, full of unspoken words that echoed through the air long after they were over.

My mom ' s arms wrapped around me like she was afraid I might slip away, and as she pulled back, her face was a mix of worry and love.

“Be careful, okay?” she said, her Trinidadian accent thick with concern.

“And don't forget to eat, my girl.” I smiled softly, fighting the lump in my throat.

“I won't forget, Mom.”

“Text me when you land, even if it's late. ”

“I will,” I promised.

My dad stood behind her, his arms crossed as he tried to mask his emotions.

He wasn't one for overt displays of affection, but I could feel the weight of his pride in the way he looked at me.

His expression softened, and for a moment, I saw the father I remembered from my childhood—the one who’d carried me when I was too tired to walk, the one who told me to never settle for anything less than what I deserved.

“You got everything?” he asked, his voice gravelly, yet gentle.

I glanced over at the pile of bags near the door. There was Nacho’s carrier, my carry-on, and a small purse.

I double-checked my phone.

“I think so.”

“You’ll be fine,” he said, giving me a rare nod of approval.

“Safe travels.”

I squeezed his hand before turning to head out. But just before I reached the door, I heard my mom’s voice again.

“Make sure you call us when you get there, alright?” I simply nodded.

“I will. ”

I got to my gate and—oh, joy of joys—the screen said my flight was delayed.

Not because of Denver weather like they’d been threatening all day.

Nope. Houston had decided to throw a thunderstorm soirée after I’d already left.

You can’t make this stuff up. It was like the universe was playing a game of “How

inconvenient can we make this girl's trip?

” Or this episode is called “How bad does she want the dick” Har, Har universe.

Naturally, I did what any emotionally exhausted woman would do—I dragged myself and my tiny chihuahua, Nacho, to the Outback Steakhouse that happened to be located right next to my gate.

He sat in his carrier like a miniature king surveying his kingdom, and I ordered an old-fashioned.

Then another. And, for symmetry, a third.

Jon was on FaceTime, equal parts amused and concerned like he wanted to sign me up for AA himself as I sipped my feelings.

“I think this is what they call ‘taking the edge off,’” I said, stirring my drink like I was auditioning for a sad-girl cocktail commercial.

“At this rate, you’ll be naming the ceiling tiles by drink four,”

Jon teased.

He looked good, too—too good for someone on the other side of the country, making me wish teleportation was real.

Three drinks and a few blurry jokes later, the gate agent finally got on the mic and said the words we’d been dying to hear: “Now boarding.” I downed the rest of my drink like a champion, paid my alcoholic bill, scooped up Nacho, and made a beeline for the plane.

“Wheels up” I texted Jon.

We finally landed in Denver hours later, and by that time I was the human version of a melted crayon.

But I wasn’t done yet. My connecting gate?

Gate 139. My current location? Gate 32. Because why not make this a full-blown triathlon?

So there I was, practically sprinting across the airport with a three-pound chihuahua strapped to my back and my carry-on slamming into my calves every few steps.

I was breathless, slightly hungover from the old-fashioned, and trying not to cry.

By the time I got to Gate 139, the plane was pulling away from the jet bridge like a moody ex-boyfriend who “just can’t do this right now.

” I wasn’t the only one left behind—there were seven of us total, a ragtag crew of weary souls who all stared in collective horror as our hopes disappeared down the runway.

I FaceTimed Jon immediately. He answered on the first ring, since he’d been waiting, hoping I’d say I made it. Instead, I just shook my head.

“They closed the gate. The plane left. It’s gone,” I said, trying not to sound like I was narrating a Nicholas Sparks scene.

His face fell. “Damn.”

I could tell he was disappointed, and that somehow made me love him more. But

instead of sulking, he just took a deep breath and said, “Alright. I’m gonna cook chicken livers and rice.”

“For us?” I asked, hopeful and delusional.

“For Nacho. He deserves a proper welcome.” Honestly, that made me melt.

The man was preparing a home-cooked meal for my dog.

If that wasn’t love, I didn’t know what was.

Meanwhile, I got in line at the airline’s version of purgatory—customer service—and was informed the next available flight to Idaho Falls would be at 10:30 a.m. the next day.

Perfect— I’m spending the fucking night in fucking Denver airport.

So I mentally adjusted to the idea that I’d be spending the night in this shithole airport.

I ran to the only bar open to grab dinner and of course — an old-fashioned and FaceTimed Jon .

The bar was an hour from closing so I ate an overpriced steak, cashed out and headed towards the overnight sleeping area part of the airport, Jon in my pocket as I bought a neck pillow, 3 airport blankets, some soda and water for nacho with a cold cut sandwich.

I made our bed by the window portion of the gate and cuddled up with Nacho and the overpriced vending machine snacks.

It wasn't the glamorous reunion I'd envisioned.

No soft snowflakes drifted down as Jon lifted me off the ground in an airport rom-com swoop.

No dramatic kiss at baggage claim. Just me, my tiny chihuahua, and a night under the fluorescent lights of gate seating.

But even in all that chaos, I knew one thing for sure: Jon—and the chicken livers—would be waiting.

The worst part about tonight is — I couldn't stop thinking about this man's dick — was it big, what if it's tiny ...

oh god I need help, well technically I needed to know what Jon's cock felt like and at least I was halfway to finding out.

I stayed on the phone with him until I passed out as usual, he was so loving and protective I probably wouldn't put it past him if the man watched me sleep in the airport on FaceTime all night.

After passing out I woke up at around 2 am and looked up, only to see the most beautiful view of snow coming down heavily against the window wall of the D gate area in the most picturesque scene ever as I lay there staring at the snow in an attempt to distract myself from the noise around me.

A voice echoed through the airport every now and then, announcing delays and cancellations, and I felt a pang of frustration every time.

But I couldn't afford to waste time being upset.

I had to push through. After all, it wasn't the end of the world.

I just needed to get to Idaho Falls. And then, finally, I would be with Jon. That chatty fucking man.

Hours passed in what felt like a haze. I barely noticed when the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a long shadow across the airport.

I sprouted up immediately and saw the time — 7:38 AM.

I decided to head to the ladies' room to freshen up and change into a new Denver, Colorado T-shirt I bought at the gates so that I wouldn't smell like the airport when I got to Idaho Falls.

I rushed to Jonny Rockets to grab one of those famous omelets, finish some apartment work I had and FaceTime Jon before my 10:30 flight.

It wasn't until I opened my email did I see the lease for the highrise in Minnesota I applied for months ago came back approved, what the fuck?

I forgot about applying to that place but I'm a sucker for a highrise apartment in the sky, well move-in wasn't until June 1st so that gave me enough time if things didn't work out with Jon.

I sat there dumbfounded for a second then I called Jon, I decided not to tell him about the lease approval in Minnesota, I didn't want that to interfere with how this was going to play out.

"Good morning, beautiful" his eyes just as bright as the sun glaring through the airport glass.

We talked about how in just a few hours, we would be reunited and of course, for me all I could think about was this man's dick but it wasn't until the final boarding call for my flight rang out that I snapped back to reality.

I put Jon in my pocket, Nacho on my back and bolted towards my promised trip for penis.

As I made my way to the gate, a sense of anticipation washed over me once again.

Finally. After what felt like an eternity, I was going to be one step closer to him.

I could almost see Jon's face as I boarded the plane—his smile, his eyes, the warmth of his presence.

And, just as I settled into my seat, my phone buzzed with a new message.

Jon: I'm here waiting for you. See you soon, babe.

I CAN'T WAIT TO SEE THIS MAN!

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:13 am

I felt my heart do a little flip as the plane slowly began to taxi toward the runway.

This was it. The moment I'd been waiting for.

The flight from Denver to Idaho Falls was mercifully short, though every minute felt like an eternity.

I kept my eyes glued to the window, watching as the sprawling cityscape below transformed into jagged mountains, and the once-thick clouds parted to reveal a breathtaking, crisp blue sky.

I whispered under my breath “ Is that a fucking double-wide trailer as an airport” I THOUGHT I whispered but the woman next to me answered -“Yes dear” fucking hell, I need to work on my inside voice, maybe Jon is a serial killer, never have I flown into a double-wide trailer airport but even the view didn't ease the flutter of nervous excitement in my chest. I checked the time, again.

12:30 p.m. The plane touched down softly on the tarmac, the landing gear kissing the ground with a smoothness that almost made me forget how much of a mess the journey had been.

As we taxied toward the gate, which I swear was only one because who the fuck flies to this place unless you live here or come here involuntarily, I exhaled deeply, feeling the tightness in my chest loosened just a bit.

But there was no time to linger on relief. Jon was waiting for me.

I grabbed my carry-on bag and nacho, who slept soundly on the flight there but I knew he had to go to the bathroom, unfortunately, my boujee dog cannot pee in public places so I knew he had to go so I dashed through the airport, my heart pounding with anticipation.

The terminal was quieter than I expected, a sparse group of passengers scattered through the seats, their faces illuminated by the harsh, sterile light of the overhead fixtures.

There was an escalator leading to baggage claim and I immediately got on, going down, my eyes flicked around, searching for him. And then, I saw him.

Jon stood near the exit, his frame instantly recognizable even in the dim light.

His jacket was unzipped, one hand tucked into his pocket, the other holding a bouquet of sunflowers — this man can't be real.

But it was the way he was looking at me—his eyes dark, intense, but somehow soft—that made my breath catch in my throat.

I took a few hesitant steps forward, not quite believing this was happening.

The past few months of texting, facetimeing, and dreaming about this moment suddenly felt surreal, like I was living in a dream and would wake up at any second.

But as I drew closer to him, everything around me melted away.

He saw me then, really saw me, and his eyes softened even more.

The slight smirk on his lips turned into a genuine smile, and in that moment, I swear the whole room faded into the background .

“Hey,” I whispered, almost shy.

I could feel my cheeks flush, and my heart pounding as I stood in front of him. I’d never felt this vulnerable, but it also felt like coming home.

Jon chuckled, a low, throaty sound that sent a shiver down my spine.

“Hey, beautiful,” he said, stepping forward and pulling me into his arms.

The warmth of his body enveloped me, and I felt my pulse quicken.

It wasn’t the first hug we’d shared, but this one was different.

This one was real. This one was in person, and I could feel the steady beat of his heart against mine.

For a few long moments, neither of us spoke.

We just stood there, wrapped in each other’s arms, savoring the connection that had felt so distant just hours ago.

I could smell his cologne, something warm and woodsy, and I closed my eyes, savoring the moment.

His arms were strong around me, his touch steady and grounding.

When he finally pulled back slightly, he cupped my face in his hands, his thumbs brushing against my skin in a slow, gentle rhythm.

He was looking at me with such intensity that I almost forgot how to breathe.

“You made it,” he said softly, his voice low and husky.

“I did,” I replied, smiling despite the sudden rush of emotions that threatened to overwhelm me.

“Sorry, I’m so late. Storms and flight delays—welcome to my life.” Jon chuckled again, the sound vibrating through his chest.

“Don’t worry about it. You’re here now. That’s all that matters.” I nodded, but I couldn’t stop myself from looking at him.

He was just as handsome as I remembered if not more so, standing there in the low light of the airport.

The roughness of his jawline, the way his dark hair was slightly tousled, the strength in his shoulders—it was like all the anticipation from the past months had culminated in this perfect moment.

But there was also a certain hunger in his gaze that I couldn’t ignore.

It made my heart race in a way that was impossible to ignore.

He wasn’t just looking at me like he had a thousand times on our phone calls—he was seeing me, really seeing me, and it made something deep inside me stir.

Before I could say anything else, Jon leaned in and kissed me.

It was a soft, tentative kiss at first like we were both savoring the closeness, the feeling of finally being together.

But soon, the kiss deepened, and I felt my body melt against his, my hands

instinctively reaching up to thread through his hair.

His lips were warm, firm, and tasted like the familiarity of everything we'd shared in our late-night conversations, the teasing, the longing, and now, the reality of us finally being here together.

The kiss was slow at first, but as the need for more grew, it became more urgent, more desperate.

I could feel the heat building between us, the tension and the longing that had been simmering for so long.

When we finally broke apart, both of us gasping for air, Jon's face was flushed, his eyes dark with desire.

"God, I've missed you," he murmured, his voice low and rough.

"I've missed you too," I replied, barely above a whisper. His lips curved into a smile as he took my hand.

"Come on, let's get your suitcase, I'm not letting you out of my sight for a second."

I laughed, the tension of the journey melting away as he led me, I couldn't help but feel a thrill of excitement. This was it. We were finally here, and everything felt right. Then almost immediately Nacho cried and I knew what that cry meant— Mom I need to fucking pee— NOW.

I ran to the nearest door to let him out and almost immediately Nacho let the bushes in front of the airport have it...

for a while, we both chuckled at this boujee little dog, I love this little guy.

The chaotic journey, the delays, the frustration—it didn't matter anymore.

Because now, I was with him. And that was all that mattered.

The Perfect Welcome

Song : Worst Way - Riley Green

When we reached the baggage area, two older women were standing by the counter, chatting animatedly about something that sounded suspiciously like a grandchild's soccer game. I glanced around for my pink luggage, and sure enough, there it was—sitting by the counter, looking a little lonely.

“There it is,” I said, pointing at it. Jon's eyes followed mine.

“Your pink suitcase is hard to miss.”

“I like what I like,” I said with a playful shrug, and he laughed, the sound light and carefree.

We quickly grabbed my bag, and I couldn't help but notice the way his hand brushed against mine as he helped me lift it. It felt easy, natural—like we'd been doing this forever.

“You're a pro at this,” I teased, feeling my cheeks warm under his gaze.

“You'd be surprised,” Jon replied, flashing me that smile that made my heart skip a beat. We made our way to the parking lot, where the cold Idaho air hit us like a wave.

Nacho, my ever-excitable dog, immediately darted for the snow-covered bushes, clearly needing to do his business— Again, this time it wasn't number 1, Jon

immediately reached into his pocket and pulled out a plastic bag.

“ I figured this would happen, so I came prepared “Did the military train this man or god himself, I thought to myself.

“Isn’t this place beautiful?” I said aloud, my eyes scanning the snowy landscape.

The soft, powdery white snow blanketing everything gave the town a kind of serene, untouched charm that was hard to describe .

Jon looked at me, a knowing glint in his eye.

“You’re reading my mind, aren’t you?”

I grinned. “I think you’re reading mine.”

He chuckled and slipped his arm around my waist as we walked to the car, the soft crunch of snow beneath our boots the only sound for a few moments.

“Want to grab something to eat?” Jon asked, pulling the car keys from his pocket.

It was a rental since his truck was left in North Carolina, but he said he wanted to go get it in a month or so.

I didn’t know if he already planned that I would be here that long or not but I just said “ok”.

Of course, I did. Food was my love language.

I could cook it, eat it, and enjoy every moment of it.

"Yes," I said without hesitation, already imagining the flavors of whatever delicious thing we'd end up eating. Jon raised an eyebrow.

"Well, Blake's on his lunch break downtown. He was talking about the best Chinese food in town. Want to try it?"

"Best Chinese?" I practically lit up at the mention.

"You're speaking my language, Jon."

He laughed, and as we climbed into the car, I couldn't help but feel excited. Not just for the food, but because it felt like I was starting to understand this place—and him. The idea of meeting Blake, Jon's friend from his Navy days, only made me more curious about the world Jon came from.

We drove downtown Idaho Falls, the streets lined with quaint shops, a true hallmark town and everything was covered in a thick blanket of snow. The buildings here had a charm that was impossible to miss—small town, big heart.

When we parked near the restaurant, nacho was in the backseat comfortably asleep, he would be fine in the car until we were done eating and I'd bring him back a doggy bag anyway.

I could already tell it was going to be one of those places that just had that "special" vibe.

The kind where the food was just as good as the atmosphere.

As we walked in, the rich smells of ginger and garlic hit me immediately.

Blake was already seated at a corner booth, looking every bit the Navy guy Jon had

described.

Standing about six feet tall, with fiery red hair that practically matched the boldness of his personality, Blake had a scruffy, lumberjack-like charm that made him look like he'd just walked out of a winter catalog.

"Blake!" Jon called out, and Blake stood up, giving him a hearty handshake .

"Good to meet you!" I said, offering my hand.

Blake gave me a warm smile, and his handshake was firm, just like Jon's.

"Heard a lot about you," he said, his voice deep and friendly. "Good to finally put a face to the name."

The restaurant had a cozy vibe, with warm wooden tables and lanterns hanging from the ceiling.

It wasn't fancy, but the atmosphere felt welcoming, like a place where everyone knew each other.

As we dug into our meals—steaming bowls of lo mein, crispy spring rolls, and everything else you could imagine—I couldn't help but notice how easy it was to fall into conversation with both of them.

Blake had that easygoing charm about him that made it feel like we'd been friends for years, and before I knew it, we were all laughing like old pals.

Jon and I kept glancing at each other across the table, a quiet moment of connection passing between us every now and then.

I couldn't help but feel a little flutter in my chest every time our eyes met.

There was something about him, something magnetic, that made everything else fade into the background.

After lunch, we decided to take a walk around downtown Idaho Falls.

The snow had begun to fall again, and it made everything look even more magical—like something out of a holiday postcard.

The river, which was partially frozen, flowed quietly beneath a bridge, its icy surface glistening in the afternoon light.

"This place is incredible," I said, turning to Jon. "I can't believe how beautiful it is."

Jon smiled, his hand slipping into mine as we walked along the path, nacho walking along in his little snowsuit I bought off Amazon like he owned the place.

"It grows on you, doesn't it?"

"I don't think it's just the place," I said, squeezing his hand.

"It's the people, being with you makes everything seem more special."

He stopped for a moment and turned to face me, his eyes soft and warm.

"You're making me feel like I'm the one showing you something amazing."

We continued our walk, and eventually, Jon drove us to his house.

As we approached, I could already tell it was going to be one of those places that felt

cozy and welcoming.

The house had a big front yard with snow covering everything in sight, and I was immediately struck by how much it felt like a home.

Jon unlocked the front door and led me inside.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” he said, grinning like he was showing off something extravagant.

But it wasn’t extravagant—it was simple, comfortable, and warm. Everything about it screamed “home,” and it made me feel like I could settle in here easily.

“Wow, it’s beautiful,” I said, stepping into the living room.

“You’ve got a great space.”

“Thanks,” Jon said, his eyes lighting up.

“I’ve put a lot of work into it. Come on, I’ll show you the basement.”

The basement was what Jon referred to as his “lair,” and as soon as we descended the stairs, I could see why.

It was decorated with vintage records, an impressive collection of movies, and even a few old-school arcade games.

It was clear this was Jon’s sanctuary, a place where he could unwind and just be himself.

I set my suitcase down, and Jon reached over to help me with Nacho, who had been

napping in the car so the little fella was a tad groggy.

“How about we get you settled in, and then maybe... a shower?” Jon suggested, his eyes mischievous.

I laughed, feeling a blush creep up my neck.

“I’d love a shower.” As we stepped into the bathroom, I couldn’t help but feel a little nervous, and a little excited. But more than anything, I felt at home. With Jon.

The bathroom was immaculately clean and in it stood a large walk-in shower with stained glass at the top where all his carefully placed shampoo, conditioner and soap bottles stood, wait, did this man buy MY brand of shampoo and conditioner too?

Of course, he did ... and with Nacho comfortably asleep in the bed, I seized the moment and got completely naked, jumped in the steaming shower and pulled him in, I couldn’t wait any longer ...

I needed HIM. The man’s cock was immaculate, at least a solid ten inches and it was fucking solid as a rock I couldn’t keep my mouth off of it.

I had him so hard he pulled me up and said “Let’s take this to a flatter surface” I agreed, immediately hopped out, grabbed a towel and went straight to his bed.

The way he touched me, he made love to me, eating my pussy in the most savage yet delicate way I’ve ever had, his hard cock throbbing inside me, in and out until we both climaxed as if our life depended on it. This man’s sex game was of the gods.

After the vicious sexual attack on my part, we spent the evening unwinding, the warmth of the house wrapping around us as we laughed, talked, and simply enjoyed being together.

The day had been perfect, and as we settled into the cozy living room, Nacho curled up at our feet, I couldn't help but think that maybe, just maybe, this was the start of something special and one thing for sure— Jon wasn't a serial killer .

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The evening unfolded lazily, the way only the first real night of something special can.

After the shower and the amazing sex that was had, and the feeling of being in Jon's world—a place that was so new and yet somehow felt right—I found myself curled up on the couch, wearing one of his oversized hoodies, sipping on the cup of fireball I promised I'd never drink again.

The house felt warm, almost like a soft blanket around us, and with every passing minute, I felt the earlier tension in my shoulders melt away.

Jon had changed into a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt, looking effortlessly comfortable and my mischievous mind eyed his dick print in those sweatpants “Well gosh darn it Delilah, you've done it again with the amazing judgment of penis size, I knew that man was packing a serious punch in his boxers” I thought in my idiotic inner voice.

His usual easy smile was still there, but there was something more to it now, something deeper in his eyes as he sat beside me.

He looked at me like he was seeing me for the first time, or maybe for the thousandth—hard to say, but either way, it made my heart skip a beat.

“Nacho's been so quiet,” I said, glancing down at my dog, who was snoring peacefully at my feet, curled into a ball on the rug.

“I think he's finally recovering from the jet lag.” Jon laughed softly.

“He’s got a good sense of timing, doesn’t he?”

“I’m sure he’s just getting used to Idaho Falls.” I smiled, leaning back into the couch, feeling a little bit like I was in a dream.

“It’s... it’s a beautiful place. I never imagined it would be so picturesque.”

Jon nodded, his gaze drifting toward the window where the light from a distant streetlamp cast a soft glow over the snow outside. The falling snowflakes seemed to glow under the streetlights, creating this perfect, peaceful scene.

“It’s quiet, isn’t it?” he said, his voice thoughtful.

“I like it. Sometimes, it feels like it’s just me and the world.”

“I can see that,” I said, my gaze following his.

There was something about the way he spoke about the town like it was more than just a place to him—it was home.

The thought made me realize that I had no idea where my sense of home was.

For the longest time, I had thought it would be in Texas, surrounded by my family.

But now, sitting here with Jon, in a house I’d never seen before, I wondered if maybe home was more about the people you were with than the place itself.

“I think I could get used to this,” I said softly .

Jon looked over at me, his expression unreadable for a moment. But then, a slow smile spread across his face.

“I’m glad to hear that. You’re always welcome here.

” I felt my heart race a little at the unspoken promise in his words.

It wasn’t just the invitation to stay—it was the possibility of something more, something that had been building between us since the moment we met.

The air in the room shifted slightly, and I realized I was holding my breath, waiting for something.

Then almost immediately, I heard a door slam in the basement and Jon’s face immediately got drained of happiness.

“ FUCK, Blake’s charity case just got home, I guess it’s about time you get to officially meet everyone and have a pretend family dinner, Patricia’s here too”

I reached into my suitcase and pulled out my emergency comfort outfit: the holy trinity of shame—sweatpants, a slightly oversized Star Wars T-shirt (Luke Skywalker, don’t fail me now), and socks that didn’t match but, hey, neither do most couples on 'Love Is Blind.' I gave myself a quick look in the mirror and tried my best to smooth down my hair and my freshly fucked face. I didn’t exactly scream “wholesome houseguest,” but I also didn’t scream “just spent two days stranded in travel hell, now freshly defiled,” so I counted that as a win.

As soon as we walked upstairs, the room went from chatter to absolute silence.

You know that awkward moment in a rom-com when the record scratches and everyone turns to look at the new girl?

Yeah, that. Staring back at me from the dining room table were four people and two absurdly photogenic dogs.

There was a tall, model-esque blonde who looked like she'd cry during a perfume commercial—definitely Lauren, Blake's "charity case." Beside her was a short guy with Spanish soap opera vibes, who I was guessing was either her boyfriend or a very clingy emotional support human.

Then there was a petite, on the chunkier than me side blonde with a sharp bob and a "quiet mouse" aura—Patricia, Blake's girlfriend.

She had the kind of vibe that made me think she judged people more than she looked in the mirror at the person staring back.

You know, just in case she could smell the sex.

And then the dogs. Oh, the dogs. Two stunning blue heelers, the kind of dogs that probably have more followers than I do.

"That's Kara and Hero," Blake said like we were being introduced to royalty.

"They'd love to meet Nacho."

Nacho, for his part, wagged his tail like this was the best day of his life.

I introduced myself, trying not to sound like I'd just crawled out of a romance novel and straight into someone's family dinner.

On the kitchen counter, I spotted the meal Jon had made—smoked fish, fluffy rice, and freshly steamed broccoli.

All of it looked like something out of a healthy living magazine, which was ironic, considering I'd lived on stale airport pretzels and passive aggression for the last 24 hours.

So yeah. Welcome to Idaho Falls. Please don't mind my post-coital glow or the fact that your dinner smells better than my dignity.

We all sat down to the kind of meal that made me question every mediocre Tinder date I'd ever tolerated.

Jon—this infuriatingly gorgeous, lumberjack-coded man—had whipped up smoked fish, rice, and broccoli like he was auditioning for a cooking show and trying to seduce my parents at the same time.

Everyone at the table was lovely, warm, chatty—your basic wholesome dinner crew—except for Lauren's so-called “handyman,” Tory.

And I say “handyman” in air quotes because the man gave off serious DIY exorcism vibes.

There was just something about him...maybe it was the way he laughed two seconds too late or the fact that he didn't blink enough?

Either way, I filed him under ' Keep An Eye On That One ' and smiled through it.

We laughed about my epic, cursed journey from Houston to Idaho—me vs.

weather, airlines, and basic human patience—and everyone seemed genuinely sympathetic. Or at least entertained.

When we finished, I think they all sensed the bags under my eyes were threatening to unionize, because they offered to do the dishes so Jon and I could “get some rest.” Rest. Right.

That got a mutual eyebrow raise from Jon and I, because let's be honest, the only

“rest” on either of our minds was of the horizontal cardio variety.

We took Nacho outside so he could do his business in the snow, and he looked at us like we’d personally betrayed him.

My sweet, pampered Texas dog lifted one paw, glared at the snow-covered yard as if it owed him money, and then gave me a look that screamed You brought me to this frozen hellhole for THIS?

And then Jon and I descended into the basement—his cozy, man-scented bachelor dungeon—where “rest” was still absolutely not on the itinerary.

“Do you want to talk?” he asked, his voice a little softer now, more vulnerable.

“About... anything?”

I wasn’t sure what to say at first, but the words came anyway, spilling out before I could stop them.

“About everything, maybe. About this—us. How it feels so... right, but also a little scary. I’ve never been good at doing this—the whole ‘getting close’ thing. But with you, it’s different. I don’t know what it is, but it feels... easy. ”

Jon smiled, and there was something in his eyes—something soft and genuine.

“It’s different for me, too. I’ve never really met anyone like you. I guess I didn’t expect to feel this... connected so quickly.”

“Me neither,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

The silence stretched between us, comfortable and full of unspoken things.

I could feel the weight of the moment—the vulnerability, the connection—and it was more than I'd expected when I first landed in Idaho Falls.

But there was something about Jon that made it feel like everything had fallen into place.

As if, after all the turbulence in my life, I had finally found something solid to hold on to.

“So,” Jon said after a moment, breaking the silence.

“What do you want to do tomorrow? I was thinking we could go out, maybe see the falls. They're frozen this time of year, but they're still pretty spectacular.”

“That sounds perfect,” I said, my heart warming at the thought of spending the day exploring with him.

“I've never seen anything like it. I can't wait.” Jon grinned, that same mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Good. Because we're going to make sure you don't miss a thing.” I laughed softly, feeling the butterflies return in full force.

There was something about the way he looked at me that made me feel like I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

The evening drifted on, and as the night deepened, we both felt the pull of exhaustion from the day.

Jon leaned back into the bed, pulling me gently against him.

His arm wrapped around my shoulders, and for the first time in a long while, I felt a sense of calm settle over me.

“We should probably get some rest,” he murmured, his voice laced with a quiet tenderness.

“Yeah,” I agreed, resting my head against his chest.

“Big day tomorrow.” Jon pressed a soft kiss to the top of my head.

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“I’m looking forward to it. You have no idea.

” I smiled into his chest, feeling safe and cherished in a way I hadn’t realized I needed until now.

Tomorrow would be a new day, a day full of possibilities and new experiences.

And with Jon by my side, I couldn’t help but feel like I was exactly where I was meant to be.

As the evening stretched into night, I allowed myself to drift off to sleep, the steady rise and fall of Jon’s breath a comforting lullaby.

Nacho curled up between us like he’s used to being here for years.

Tomorrow, we’d explore more of Idaho Falls—together.

And something told me it would be the start of something amazing .

The morning came too quickly, though I didn’t mind.

The sun was just beginning to peek over the snow-covered landscape outside the window, casting a soft, golden glow that seemed to promise a fresh start.

Jon was already awake, his arm around me, but he didn’t move.

He just lay there, letting the quiet of the morning settle in around us.

“Good morning,” I murmured, stretching out slowly, trying to ignore the butterflies that had taken up residence in my stomach.

The warmth of the bed, the softness of the blankets, and the peacefulness of the house made it hard to believe that just yesterday I had been flying through thunderstorms and missed connections to get here.

Jon’s lips brushed the top of my head before he smiled.

“Morning,” he said, his voice husky with sleep.

“I was thinking I could grab some breakfast first, then head out to see the falls?”

“You could grab some breakfast?” Before I could speak the man’s mouth was deep in my pussy licking every inch of me, I let out a screech that I’m pretty sure everyone in the house heard, I almost immediately came in his mouth and grabbed him on top of me and said “Now fuck me like you mean it” I said with a chuckle and boy did the man deliver, that huge cock again, inside of me, making me moan, making love to me once again, orgasm after orgasm before 9 am.

I came so hard I think the walls shook, then he came and it was a glorious start to the morning.

He fell beside me and I put my head on his chest.

“That sounds perfect.” I smiled, pulling the blanket tighter around us, though part of me didn’t want to leave the comfort of his arms after an orgasm like that. But I also couldn’t wait to see more of this town—the town that was starting to feel like home, at least for now.

We got out of bed and took our shower together, which I think is our thing now, got

dressed and made our way upstairs, where Jon immediately started brewing his coffee.

“I hope you like it strong,” he said, glancing over his shoulder at me as I wandered into the kitchen, still rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

“I can handle it,” I replied with a grin. “Strong’s my middle name.”

Jon chuckled and handed me a cup once the coffee was ready. The rich, dark liquid was just what I needed to wake up fully. I took a sip, feeling the warmth spread through me.

“This is perfect,” I said.

“I’ve missed good coffee. ”

“I aim to please,” Jon said, his voice warm and teasing. He grabbed a couple of breakfast burritos from the fridge, tossing them into the microwave.

“This is my go-to breakfast. Not fancy, but it gets the job done.”

“It’s exactly what I need.” I smiled, sitting at the kitchen island as he joined me, handing me one of the burritos.

I couldn’t help but feel a sense of contentment as we sat there, casually chatting over breakfast. It wasn’t anything extraordinary, but in that moment, it felt like everything I needed.

Once we finished breakfast, Jon grabbed his coat, and we headed out to the car.

Nacho, who had already claimed the best spot on the rug in the living room, wasn’t

too thrilled to be left behind, but Jon promised we'd take him on a walk later.

The drive to the falls was short but scenic, the snow-covered roads stretching out before us as we made our way toward the iconic spot.

I couldn't wait to see it—Jon had talked about the frozen falls all morning, and I was more than a little intrigued.

When we arrived, I was in awe. The falls were just as Jon had described—frozen in places, with the water still flowing beneath the thick sheet of ice.

It looked like something out of a winter wonderland, with snow blanketing the area and icicles hanging from the rocks.

The air was crisp and cold, but the beauty of it all made me forget the chill.

Jon took my hand, leading me closer to the edge of the river.

"This is one of my favorite spots," he said quietly, his voice almost reverent as he gazed out at the frozen falls.

"It's always different. Every season, every storm, it looks new." I smiled, squeezing his hand.

"It's amazing. I can't believe I've never been here before." Jon turned to face me, his expression soft.

"I'm glad you're here now."

His words caught me off guard, and for a moment, all I could do was look into his eyes, trying to understand the depth of what he was saying. The way he was looking

at me—it was like he was seeing me, truly seeing me, and that felt like something I hadn't experienced in a long time.

“We should take a photo,” I said, breaking the spell between us. I fumbled for my phone in my coat pocket and handed it to Jon.

“Will you take a picture of me with the falls?”

Jon grinned and took my phone, snapping a few shots of me in front of the falls. His eyes never left me as he did. It was like everything about this moment was centered around us, and I loved it. The snow, the falls, the cold air—all of it felt perfect, and being here with Jon made it even more so.

“Perfect,” he said as he handed my phone back.

“You look beautiful.” I rolled my eyes playfully.

“You’re going to say that every time, aren’t you?” Jon chuckled and shrugged.

“I say it because it’s true. You are beautiful.”

I couldn't stop the blush from creeping up my neck, but I smiled, feeling lighter than I had in a long time. Maybe this was what I'd been searching for—a feeling of connection, of being seen and appreciated in a way I hadn't thought possible.

We spent the next hour walking around the falls, taking in the peaceful beauty of the area. The snow crunched under our boots, and every now and then, we'd pause to admire a particularly beautiful view.

“Would you miss living in places like this?” I asked as we walked, the conversation drifting to more personal topics as it often did when we were together. Jon looked

thoughtful for a moment.

“I would, sometimes. But I’ve learned to appreciate the quieter places. The ones that aren’t as crowded, where you can just breathe.”

“Yeah, I get that,” I said, glancing around at the peaceful surroundings.

“It’s a nice change from the chaos of city life.”

We made our way back to the car after a while, the cold air finally starting to get to us.

As we drove back to Jon’s house, I found myself looking out the window, reflecting on everything that had happened since I’d arrived.

It had been less than twenty-four hours, but it felt like I’d known Jon for much longer.

He had no idea what was coming. While Jon was busy flapping his beautiful, bearded mouth about—God knows what, something endearing and probably woodsy—I was quietly plotting my next move.

See, while he thought he was impressing me with his smoked fish and sexy forearms, I was busy DoorDashing a grocery list straight to his Idaho doorstep.

I had a plan. A delicious, strategic, Southern-boy-seducing plan.

My secret weapon? Cooking. And not just any cooking—Caribbean-girl-meets-Southern-boy magic.

I was about to drop the culinary mic on this house.

I ordered everything I needed for my coconut steamed salmon and, as an appetizer, the holy grail: fried okra.

If there's one thing I know, it's this—Southern men cannot resist fried okra.

It's like a culinary kryptonite. So when the doorbell rang and I blurted out “That's for me,” Jon looked at me like I'd just revealed I moonlight as a ninja.

I followed it up with, “I'm cooking dinner,” and fully expected some kind of protest about how he's the house chef or whatever.

But nope. He just grabbed the bags and asked, “What do you need?” I swear, I almost kissed him on the spot.

Instead, I rattled off my list like I was preparing for battle: blender, cutting board, mason jar with a lid, can opener, and two medium-sized pans.

His face went full' you want me to find what now ?

'but I just smiled sweetly and said, “Sit and watch a pro.” He laughed, and I got to work.

First up, green seasoning—the Caribbean holy grail.

Cilantro, garlic, onion, green onion, and celery blended with water until it looked like a swamp smoothie of the gods.

I poured some over fresh salmon steaks in a Ziplock bag and stashed them in the fridge, then poured the rest into the mason jar like I was bottling a potion.

Jon, being the curious farm boy he is, grabbed the jar and took a straight sip.

Like...a sip. No warning, no spoon, just vibes.

He lit up like I'd just handed him liquid gold.

“Oh my God, this is amazing! What do you use this for?”

“Marinating meat and seafood,” I said, trying to sound casual and not like I was melting from his enthusiasm.

From that moment on, he was glued to my side like I was the Food Network and he'd lost the remote.

I moved on to the okra—chopped it fresh, seasoned the batter like my grandmother taught me, heated the oil, and started frying like my life depended on it.

The second the first batch hit the paper towels, this man reached over, snatched them like a raccoon in a trash bin, and shoved them into his mouth. His eyes went wide.

“You cook like Grandma!” Why, yes, Jonathan, I do. I am somebody's future grandma, after all.

He kept eating. And eating. At one point I had to swat his hand like, “Are you planning on leaving any for the rest of us?”

“Nope,” he said, mouth full.

“Not this fried okra.” Sold. Hook, line, and fried goodness.

He helped me plate the salmon—perfectly tender, infused with coconut, green seasoning, and the kind of love you don't find in store-bought spice rubs.

Tonight's dinner was just a cozy little foursome: Blake, Patricia, Jon, and I.

Lauren and Tory were off doing...whatever mysterious forest couple things they do when they're not giving me weird vibes .

I found out Tory owns a landscaping business, and Lauren helps him, which somehow tracks.

But the real star of the evening? My food.

Everyone ate like I'd cast a spell. And Jon—my sweet, stunned Jon—looked at me during and after dinner like he was witnessing a miracle.

Honestly? I think I just cooked my way right into this man's heart. One okra at a time.

Later that evening, as the sun began to set and the sky turned a deep shade of purple, Jon and I settled back in, both of us exhausted from the day's activities.

"Tomorrow, we'll take Nacho for a walk in the park," Jon said, flopping down on the couch beside me.

"I think he's getting cabin fever."

"Sounds good," I said, leaning against him, content.

"I'm glad I came here, Jon. I wasn't sure what I expected, but it's... it's been perfect." Jon's hand found mine, and he squeezed it gently.

"I'm glad you're here. Really. It feels right."

I turned my head to look at him, my heart skipping a beat at how sincere his words were. It wasn't just the town or the falls that felt perfect—it was this. Us. Here. Together.

"I'm glad too," I whispered, squeezing his hand back.

And as the night settled in, we sat there, side by side, the warmth of the house wrapping around us, the world outside fading away.

It wasn't just about the beauty of Idaho Falls or the snow or the food I cooked—it was about the way everything felt in that moment, with Jon.

Maybe, just maybe, I was starting to understand that this feeling of home didn't have to be tied to a specific place.

It could be with the right person. And in that moment, I felt like I was exactly where I was meant to be.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:13 am

The Day We Fell In Love

Song : Think I'm In love With You - Chris Stapleton

The days after our trip to the falls unfolded like a series of small, perfect moments.

The quiet mornings spent sipping coffee and watching the world outside the window, the lazy afternoons spent exploring Idaho Falls with Jon, and the evenings that we 'd either spend curled up on the couch together, or cooking dinner together with soft country music in the background letting the day fade away.

I spoke to my mother every other day and she eventually caught on to what was going on — I could never get anything past that woman, but she never judged which made this all so much easier.

There was a comforting rhythm to it all, something that felt grounded and steady.

But despite all the calm and simplicity, something lingered in the air between us, unspoken but ever-present.

We hadn't talked about what this was—what we were.

Every time I tried to bring it up, Jon would smile that easy smile of his and change the subject.

And I couldn't deny that part of me was afraid of the answer.

What if it was too soon? What if we were rushing into something without really knowing what it meant?

I tried not to let it bother me, to let things unfold naturally, but it was harder than I'd anticipated.

It felt like we were on the edge of something big, but neither of us dared to step over that line.

One evening, after we'd returned from another walk in the snow with Nacho, I found myself standing in the kitchen, my hands absently washing dishes as I thought about everything that had happened.

Jon was in the living room, scrolling through his phone, a comfortable silence hanging between us.

But it was the kind of silence that made my mind race, the kind where every thought seemed to echo louder in my head.

"Jon?" I called out, my voice hesitant.

He glanced up from his phone, his eyes soft but curious. "Yeah?"

"I—" I started, then paused. What did I want to say?

That I was starting to feel something more than just a passing attraction?

That I was worried about what it all meant.

Or was I just overthinking things again?

I set the dish down, wiping my hands on the towel before walking over to where Jon was sitting.

He looked up at me, waiting patiently, his expression open and inviting.

“I just... I want to talk,” I said, my voice softer now.

“About us. What this is. Where we’re headed.”

Jon put his phone down, giving me his full attention. His expression shifted, something flickering in his eyes—was it concern? Or maybe something else? I couldn’t tell, but it made my stomach flutter nervously.

“I didn’t mean to make you feel like we’re avoiding this,” he said after a beat, his voice quiet and thoughtful.

“I just... I didn’t want to rush anything. And I didn’t want to make assumptions, you know?” I nodded slowly, appreciating his honesty.

“I get that. I just... I guess I’m trying to figure out if this is real. What we have. Because it feels like it’s something, but I’m just not sure what.”

Jon stood up and then, walked over to me. He reached for my hand, his fingers gently curling around mine.

“It’s real, trust me. I may not have all the answers, but what we’ve got, it’s real.”

I swallowed, the words I had been holding onto suddenly feeling a little too big for me to speak. I wasn’t sure if I was ready to admit how much I was starting to care for him. How much I was already feeling connected to him in a way I hadn’t felt in a long time.

“I just don’t want to get hurt,” I said quietly, my voice barely above a whisper.

Jon’s eyes softened, his thumb brushing over the back of my hand in a soothing motion.

“I know. And I promise, I’m not going anywhere. Whatever this is, we’re doing it together.”

I wanted to believe him. I needed to believe him. But there was always that nagging voice in the back of my mind, telling me that things couldn’t possibly be this easy. That it couldn’t be this simple.

“But what if...” I started, then stopped.

What if what? What if this wasn’t the fairy tale I wanted? What if the connection I was feeling wasn’t as real as I thought? What if he wasn’t as invested in this as I was? Jon leaned forward, pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead before pulling back, his eyes locked on mine.

“Look, I can’t promise I have everything figured out, but I know I want to see where this goes. And I want to do it with you. ”

The sincerity in his voice hit me like a wave, and for a moment, I forgot about all my doubts and fears. I just wanted to feel this. To feel us. To let go of the past and allow myself to embrace whatever future we were building together.

“I think I want that too,” I whispered, finally letting the words come out.

Jon’s smile spread across his face, and at that moment, I knew I wasn’t alone in this.

We were both figuring it out, but we were doing it together.

And that was enough—for now. Later that night, as we settled into bed, I found myself wrapped up in Jon’s arms once more, this man did something to me in the best and worst way possible.

The familiar warmth of his body next to mine felt like home, and this time, when the silence stretched between us, it wasn’t awkward or filled with uncertainty. It was comfortable. Safe.

“I’m glad we talked,” I said quietly, my hand resting on his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart.

“Me too,” Jon replied, his voice low and steady.

“Sometimes, we just need to say the things we’re both thinking.” I nodded, pressing a soft kiss to his chest before settling in closer, my head on his pillow.

“Yeah, we do.”

As the night wrapped itself around us like a cozy, oversized blanket, I realized the hardest part of this whole thing wasn’t figuring out where we were going.

It was trusting that it was okay not to know.

Maybe the real leap wasn’t into love—it was into faith, faith that this wildly unexpected connection with Jon could be something real.

Something lasting. Tomorrow we’d figure out the rest. And the day after that.

But tonight? Tonight I was exactly where I wanted to be—tangled up in Jon’s arms, with the soft rise and fall of his chest under my cheek and the kind of peace I hadn’t felt in years stretching out before me.

For once, I didn't need to know the ending.

I was happy just being in the middle of the story. And then, clear as day, he said it.

“I love you, Delilah.”

I shot up so fast, I nearly gave myself whiplash—and scared the ever-loving soul out of Nacho, who responded by barking like we'd just been attacked. I blinked down at Jon, heart racing, and he gave me this adorably panicked look.

“Too soon?” he asked, instantly sheepish.

“No, dumbass!” I said, laughing and smacking his chest .

“That's what I was trying to tell you earlier!”

We both burst into laughter, the kind that comes from total relief and too many emotions bubbling over at once.

And then, without a second thought, I climbed on top of him, because if we were going to confess our feelings, we might as well celebrate properly.

His already hard cock made it easy for me to get on top ...

I rode him like Seabiscuit in the final stretch at the Kentucky Derby.

The man was irresistible and I was a very weak woman...

When it was over—after the gasping, the laughter, and the kind of post-coital cuddling that deserved a soundtrack—we curled into each other, limbs tangled and hearts full, and drifted off into the kind of sleep you only get when you 've just told

someone you love them... and meant i t.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:13 am

The Road Trip Plan

Song : She Had Me At Heads Carolina - Cole Swindell

The morning light filtered through the curtains, casting a warm glow on the room.

It was still early, but I was awake, lying there beside Jon, watching the rise and fall of his chest once again.

For a moment, I let myself drift in the peace of the morning, not wanting to disturb the quiet intimacy between us.

The past few days had felt like a blur— so much had changed, but it felt right.

HE TOLD ME HE LOVED ME... I'd never expected to find myself here, in this beautiful house in Idaho Falls, wrapped up in someone like Jon.

But as the days passed, the connection between us only grew stronger, and more undeniable.

It wasn't just the moments we shared or the sparks that flew when we were close; it was something deeper, something that was beginning to settle in my heart.

Jon shifted beside me, his eyes fluttering open as he stretched, his arm wrapping around me instinctively.

"Morning," he murmured, his voice thick with sleep.

“Morning,” I replied, my voice soft.

I turned to face him, meeting his gaze with a quiet smile. He smiled back, that same easy grin that never failed to make my heart skip a beat.

“How did you sleep?”

“Better than I have in a while,” I admitted, snuggling closer to him.

“I think it’s the bed. Or maybe it’s just being here with you.” His fingers gently brushed through my hair, and I felt a wave of comfort wash over me.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Jon said quietly, his voice laced with sincerity.

“I know we’ve only just started figuring things out, but... it feels right, you know?” I nodded, my fingers tracing the outline of his hand.

“Yeah, it does. It feels like we’ve known each other longer than just a few weeks.” Jon let out a small laugh, his thumb brushing over my knuckles.

“I guess time doesn’t always matter when the connection is this strong.”

As I looked at him, I realized how much truth there was in that. Sometimes, relationships don’t need to be dragged out for years before something real is developed. Sometimes, the right person just clicked, and everything else fell into place.

“We’ll take it slow,” I said after a moment, my voice steady but warm.

“We’ll figure this out as we go.” Jon nodded, his hand resting on my back as he held me close.

“I’m good with that. No rush.” It felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders, knowing that we were on the same page. That we didn’t need to have all the answers right now. We could just be in the moment, letting things unfold naturally, and see where it took us.

As the morning continued, we spent the rest of the day doing what felt like a simple routine, but it was so much more than that.

We went for a walk with Nacho in the snow, taking in the quiet beauty of the town.

It was everything I had imagined Idaho Falls to be—peaceful, serene, and full of charm.

The falling snow only added to the magic of the place, making it feel like we were on a winter postcard.

We wandered around downtown, stopping at a few small shops, and picking out little trinkets and souvenirs.

Jon seemed to know everyone we passed, exchanging friendly waves and greetings with nearly every person we saw.

It was clear that he was well-loved in this small town, and I couldn’t help but feel a little bit proud to be with him.

He had a way of making everyone around him feel comfortable like they were a part of his world.

As we walked back to the car, I found myself feeling at ease with the pace of everything.

It didn't have to be a whirlwind romance or some grand gesture—it could just be us, figuring things out as we went. And that felt like enough.

Later that evening, we returned to Jon's house, and after a quiet dinner with Blake and Patricia once again and the more I got to know them, the more they seemed to be the most vanilla, boring couple in Idaho Falls, we ended up in front of the brick fireplace yet again - a routine that we all seem to love including Nacho since he always curled up beside us.

The flickering flames cast a warm glow across the basement livingroom, and the atmosphere felt relaxed like we had all the time in the world.

"I've been thinking," Jon said as we sat there, his voice breaking the comfortable silence.

"My son Joseph, his graduation is coming up and I need to get my truck from North Carolina, maybe we should plan a trip, and I can introduce you to my crazy hick redneck family"

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued.

"Oh? Family?" Jon grinned, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

"How about it? We will make it an adventure across the United States "

North Carolina, where I met this amazing man. The thought of it brought a smile to my face. It was a place I had visited a few times before, but every trip felt different—it was always an adventure.

"That sounds amazing," I said, leaning against him as I imagined it.

“I’d love to show you around.” Jon’s fingers traced the edge of my hand, his touch gentle.

“Then it’s a date. We’ll figure out the details, but I think it’d be a great way to keep things moving forward, you know?”

It was funny how, just a few days ago, I had been unsure of everything—unsure of Jon, of what we were, of where we were headed.

But now, I could see it all unfolding before me.

The adventure, the connection, the promise of something new.

As we sat there, lost in our thoughts and the warmth of the fire, I realized how much I had changed since arriving here.

I had come looking for something, but what I found was something entirely unexpected—peace, connection, and the possibility of something more.

And it wasn’t just with Idaho Falls or the beauty of the town.

It was with Jon. He was the one who had shown me how easy it could be to be myself, to let go of the past and just be in the moment.

And for that, I will always be grateful.

“We’ll go to North Carolina, to meet YOUR family,” I said softly, my voice carrying the promise of something deeper. “But for now... I’m happy here.” Jon’s smile was soft, sincere, and a little bit playful.

“Me too.”

The night stretched on, the warmth of the fire and the quiet of the house wrapping around us, and for the first time in a long time, I felt truly at peace.

We didn't know where this was headed, but for once, that didn't matter.

What mattered was that we were on this journey together—and for now, that was enough.

The next morning, we hashed out our cross-country survival plan—Jon would cover gas and food and I'd take care of the hotels.

Not a bad deal, considering I had enough travel discounts racked up to make even a Marriott rewards rep weep with envy.

Blake was set to drive us from Idaho Falls to Wyoming, where we'd crash at Trevor's trailer palace for the night—yes, trailer, as in, metal box with aspirations and possibly a raccoon tenant.

Then it was eastward ho! to North Carolina.

Jon had already told me who Trevor was—his ex-brother-in-law.

As in, his first ex-wife's brother. Because apparently, one ex-wife just wasn't enough.

How do I manage to land in these situations?

Seriously, is there a cosmic sign on my forehead that says "Drama, please"?

Meanwhile, Jon kept rambling in the background, completely unaware that I was mentally rewriting my dating résumé under "red flags I chose to ignore." I packed a suitcase for what we estimated would be a week-long trek: some presentable clothes

to survive the eventual Aunt Becky interrogation (she of the overbearing Southern matriarch variety), and a handful of not-too-flashy outfits to avoid sticking out in the charmingly microscopic town of Angier, North Carolina.

“Jesus, Delilah, how the hell do you end up in these situations?” I muttered to myself again as I folded a sundress next to Jon’s Carhartt hoodie. But I already knew the answer to that: questionable choices, a soft spot for emotionally available men, and a GPS set permanently to “chaotic good.”

Jon and I decided to share one suitcase like a cozy, committed couple, and Nacho—obviously—got his travel bag because he’s a spoiled little boujee gremlin with custom blankets, organic jerky treats, and two outfits that say I bark at emotional instability.

Jon, naturally, had been slipping him bacon under the table and whispering sweet nothings to him like they were war buddies.

I’d stopped being jealous around Day 3. I called my mom to give her the rundown of our last-minute plan, and she responded exactly how you’d expect: half laughing, half deeply entertained, and wholly unfazed.

“You’re ridiculous,” she said.

“But at least it sounds like a good kind of ridiculous.” Thanks, Mom. Super reassuring.

Once we were all packed, I dragged Jon into the shower for some very necessary “cleaning”—and yes, that’s a euphemism.

That man’s body was a religious experience I planned to revisit like a sinner with no shame.

Let's just say he didn't need a loofah when I was around.

I devoured him like a starving woman at a steakhouse—medium rare, zero regrets.

Afterward, when we were scrubbed clean and thoroughly satisfied, we all climbed into bed—me, Jon, and Nacho, who claimed the space between us like he was paying rent.

We queued up Moonshiners, because nothing sets the tone for a long redneck road trip quite like amateur liquor distillers with questionable dental plans, and drifted off to sleep to the sound of thick southern drawls and explosive still failures.

Tomorrow, the chaos would begin. And I, for one, couldn't wait.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:13 am

The North Carolina Road Trip

Song : Fast Car - Luke Combs

If someone told me two weeks ago that I ' d be getting dropped off at a trailer park in Riverton, Wyoming with a man I met on a layover flight, with my rescue mutt Nacho in tow and a suitcase full of emotional baggage, I probably would ' ve laughed. Or cried. Or both.

But here we were—standing in front of what could only be described as a corrugated tin box with satellite dreams, as Blake's truck kicked up a final puff of gravel and disappeared down the dusty road but not before he gave me an awkward hug that said “ you're officially part of this incredibly weird family now that Jon's fallen in love with you”

“I swear to God, this place is held together with duct tape and the dreams of failed country singers,” I muttered as I pulled Nacho tighter into my arms. He whimpered and gave me a look that said, you dragged me into this chaos, lady.

Jon chuckled beside me because of course, he did.

“It's not that bad,” he said, knocking on the crooked screen door that swung slightly in the breeze.

“Trevor's harmless.” Harmless was a strong word for a man whose welcome sign read “ Enter at your own risk, motherf*ers ” in Sharpie on a piece of cardboard.

Trevor opened the door shirtless, with a beer in one hand and a cigarette tucked behind his ear like it was the world's saddest fashion accessory. His hair was long, and unkept, and looked like a Pokémon character, though I suspected that was more choice than style.

“ Well, well, well” he drawled, looking us both up and down. “ Jonny-boy and his lady friend. ”

I stepped forward, clutching Nacho like a toddler and gave him a smile that said I'm judging you, but politely.

“Hi, I'm Delilah. You must be Trevor. I've heard... things. ”

Trevor let out a wheezy laugh that made me briefly wonder if he'd ever inhaled something other than cigarette smoke and fried pork rinds.

“We're leavin' first light. I'm ridin' shotgun, but I'll drive when Jon gets too scared of my playlist.”

“Perfect,” I said, stepping inside, immediately hit with the scent of Old Spice, beef jerky, and something that might've once been a cat.

That night, we slept in what Trevor called the “Guest Suite,” which was just a tiny living room with a futon, lava lamp and a vintage collection of Hot Wheels nailed to the wall.

Romantic? Not exactly. But Jon and I curled up together, Nacho tucked between us like a judgmental little meatloaf, and somehow it felt right.

We hit the road just after sunrise, but not before changing into a so-called bathroom where the washer and dryer were probably worth more than the entire trailer itself,

the sky still smeared with the last remnants of night.

Our rental car—a dented silver SUV with a suspicious stain on the passenger seat—was packed to the gills.

Trevor insisted on bringing a duffel bag full of “necessities,” which turned out to be a collapsible fishing rod, a tackle box and an old karaoke machine he “never traveled without.” At least the man had his priorities straight.

“Priorities,” I whispered to Nacho, who was perched in my lap in his sherpa-lined travel harness like a tiny disgruntled emperor.

We crossed the state line into Colorado by midmorning, the mountains rising like a promise in the distance. Jon drove first, and Trevor DJ’ed from the backseat, playing everything from Creedence Clearwater Revival to a disturbing number of Taylor Swift breakup songs.

“This one’s about that bastard Jason from high school,” Trevor muttered during “All Too Well,” staring out the window like a man haunted by memories of lost love or a failed high school football career.

“Are you... okay?” I asked cautiously.

“No,” he said dramatically. “But thanks for asking.”

By lunchtime, we were in Fort Collins, where we stopped at a roadside diner called The Bacon Barn that promised “Breakfast Anytime” and “Hash Browns the Size of Your Face.” I ordered something called the “Trucker Slamwich” out of morbid curiosity and left twenty minutes later with a newfound respect for cholesterol.

Jon wiped syrup from Nacho’s face with a napkin and leaned in close.

“Still think this road trip was a good idea?” I smiled at him, my heart weirdly full.

“Honestly? I think it’s the best bad idea you’ve ever had.”

Trevor and Jon took turns driving that afternoon, the car filled with the sound of Trevor’s random life stories (“That time I got bit by a raccoon,” “When I wrestled a guy over a waffle iron,” “Why I think raccoons are time travelers”), and Nacho alternating between snoring and looking vaguely annoyed .

When we hit Kansas, the terrain flattened out like a pancake that had given up on having texture.

Just... land. Infinite, beige land. Trevor took over driving somewhere around Salina, fueled by Red Bull, sunflower seeds, and spite.

Jon had fallen asleep with his mouth open and Nacho was quietly snoring in his lap.

“I think those two will get married before Jon and I ever do,” I thought to myself and chuckled.

It was somewhere on I-70, the horizon stretched wide with nothing but grain silos and existential dread, that I caught myself singing along to Garth Brooks with reckless abandon.

“I got friends in low places,” I crooned, badly, and Nacho gave a disapproving grunt.

“You shut up,” I whispered.

“You’re just mad because you can’t reach the cup holder.”

We stopped for the night just outside Kansas City, Missouri, crashing at a budget

motel that boasted “Free HBO!” and “Water pressure strong enough to peel your skin.” We all needed showers—Jon especially, who had a stubborn bit of nacho cheese in his beard from the gas station snack run two states ago.

Trevor insisted on sleeping in the bathtub because he “trusted no mattress that smelled like lemon Lysol,” and who was I to argue?

Jon and I snuggled under the scratchy motel comforter, Nacho burrowed between us like a furry hostage.

“I can’t believe we still have 1,200 miles to go,” I muttered. Jon kissed the top of my head.

“I can’t believe we haven’t murdered Trevor.”

“Days not over yet,” I said, and we both laughed.

The next morning, we hit Illinois and Indiana in rapid succession.

We stopped in a small town near Indianapolis where Trevor claimed there was a “life-changing” donut shop.

He wasn’t wrong. I had something called a “maple bacon éclair” that made me reconsider every life decision up to that point.

By Ohio, I had full-on road trip hair—flat on one side, a little frizzy, vaguely resembling the hairstyle of a 1980s backup singer.

Jon didn’t seem to mind. He kept glancing at me like I was the prettiest woman to ever navigate a truck stop bathroom barefoot (which I did not do, but thank you for the fantasy).

We spent the night in West Virginia, in a quaint mountain inn that had actual quilts on the beds and a log-burning stove in the lobby.

Trevor flirted with the receptionist, who looked like she'd seen enough men in camo hats to last a lifetime, but she indulged him with a free moon pie and a wink.

I quietly mouthed "Don't do it, reconsider" to her but figured I should see where this goes, you know, for the plot.

That night, Jon and I stood outside under a sky so full of stars it looked like it had been photoshopped.

Nacho was doing laps in the melting snow, I couldn't believe we were nearing July and I'd almost been with this man for over a month, chasing absolutely nothing with the energy of a toddler high on sugar.

"I can't believe we're doing this," I whispered. Jon slid his arm around me.

"I can. It's the most fun I've had in years."

"Even with Trevor?"

"Especially with Trevor," he said, laughing.

"It's like traveling with a reality TV show that never got past the pilot."

By the time we crossed into North Carolina the next afternoon, I felt something deep in my chest shift.

Not in a bad way. In a this-is-what-it's-like-to-feel-alive-again way.

The trees thickened, the air turned warmer, and the landscape went from beige to vibrant green like someone had adjusted the color settings on life.

“We made it,” Jon said, looking over at me with a soft smile.

“We really did.” Trevor hooted from the backseat.

“And no one died! That’s a win in my book.”

We laughed, and as the car wound down the familiar roads toward Jon’s hometown, I realized something: this trip hadn’t just been about picking up a truck. It had been about us. Our weird little makeshift trio.

The plan was simple. Which, of course, meant it was destined to go sideways.

Trevor—yes, that Trevor, Jon’s ex-brother-in-law via his first ex-wife (because apparently, Jon collects marriages like some people collect vinyl)—was supposed to drop us off at Aunt Becky’s house.

Quick introductions, no lingering, and then we’d bolt straight for our not-so-luxurious accommodations at the Super 8.

You know, the kind of place where the pillows are flat, the curtains smell like wet carpet, and the air conditioner sounds like it’s coughing up its final breath.

But hey, it had a microwave and a fridge, which qualified as amenities in this part of North Carolina.

Trevor pulled up into Aunt Becky’s gravel driveway, which led to a beautifully taken care of manufactured 3 bed, 2 bath home that had a beautifully decorated porch and a yard with a chicken coop and a bed of collard greens, the tires crunching with every

bump like we were entering some backwoods version of Jurassic Park.

Jon had that nervous energy about him—you know, the kind that says,

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“Please let my family act normal for once in their lives.” I, on the other hand, was mentally preparing for the possibility that someone would offer me moonshine and call me “sugar tits.” We said goodbye to Trevor since he would be heading to Jon’s ex-wife’s house for Joseph’s graduation in two days and Jon was about to be reunited with his truck after leaving it in a hurry after Blake told him about the woman occupying part of his basement and decided to take that flight to Idaho falls where our romance begun, almost like it was all meant to be.

Surprisingly, Aunt Becky wasn’t the barefoot chain smoker I had imagined from the stories.

She was a short, silver-haired woman in a white T-shirt, Levi jeans and pearl earrings who greeted us with a bone-crushing hug and a “Lord, Y’all look tired,” like I wasn’t standing right there, awkwardly clutching Nacho’s leash while he sniffed a garden gnome’s crotch.

And then there was Billy Joe—her “longtime man friend,” which, in Southern-speak, means they’ve been playing house since the early 2000s but never legally tied the knot because “marriage ruins everything.”

Billy Joe wore a camo hat indoors, had a mustache that could’ve been registered as a wildlife sanctuary, and called Nacho “little fella” while sneakily slipping him chunks of ham from a sandwich he wasn’t offering to share with the rest of us. But honestly? It wasn’t that bad.

Aunt Becky asked us to stay for dinner, but Jon gave her the “we’ll be back tomorrow” line, and before she could guilt us with sweet tea and potato salad, we

were in Jon's burnt orange Chevy Colorado truck (which was named "Lenore") and was also the same truck that he left in Aunt Becky's care until he returned for it, which was now. After peeling out of the driveway like horny teenagers on prom night Jon was visibly relieved, which only made me wonder what exactly he'd been bracing for.

A goat sacrifice? A family square dance?

A PowerPoint presentation titled ' Jon's Dating History ' and Why It's a Cautionary Tale?

As we bounced down the gravel path and back onto the main road, Jon slipped into his tour guide mode, pointing out random landmarks like we were on some twisted, low-budget version of "This Is Your Life."

"There's the apartment I lived in after my first divorce," he said, nodding toward a squat brick building with chipped paint and a sagging balcony.

"And that's where my son went to middle school. Rough couple of years."

I stared out the window, nodding politely, while internally wondering if there was a brochure or perhaps a guided walking tour I could sign up for later.

By the time we rolled into the Super 8, I had adjusted my expectations so low they were practically subterranean.

And yet, even then, the room somehow managed to surprise me.

Beige walls. Beige carpet. Beige sadness.

But hey—microwave, mini-fridge, and the faintest scent of bleach.

It was practically a four-star experience in Jon's hometown.

Across the street was a Hampton Inn I had originally tried to book before being cruelly informed they were hosting some sort of convention—likely involving adults who make questionable life choices and dress like eagles or something, so, the Super 8 it was.

We dropped our bags, released Nacho from his backpack prison, and immediately decided to skip showering in favor of collapsing.

Our version of a romantic dinner? Bojangles.

Two three-wing dinners with Cajun rice and a six-piece chicken tender basket for Nacho, because of course, this damn dog is living his best life.

Jon popped open a six-pack of Bud Light he'd snagged at the gas station, while I changed into the one pair of pajama pants that made me look slightly less like a potato.

It was a Wednesday, which meant Blue Bloods was on.

I made it through two episodes, max. Somewhere between Tom Selleck's mustache and a particularly dramatic dinner scene, I passed out cold—mouth open, one sock missing, a chicken wing bone under my thigh like some sad, modern-day fairy tale.

The next morning, we were roused from our coma-like sleep by the unmistakable sound of housekeeping making their rounds.

There's nothing quite like the rattle of a cart and a forced "Housekeeping!" to remind you you're alive and sleeping in a place where someone once definitely hid drugs in the mattress.

Jon took Nacho out for a morning pee run while I splashed cold water on my face and tried to make myself look like someone who hadn't eaten her feelings in fried chicken just eight hours earlier.

By the time we were both dressed, the sun was already high in the sky and Jon was eager to head back to Aunt Becky's for lunch—clean, rested, and slightly more presentable.

We packed up the essentials—snacks for Nacho, an emergency sweater in case Aunt Becky decided to air-condition the house to near-Arctic levels—and hopped into Jon's burnt-orange truck and listen, I don't know who told Jon that color was a personality trait, but the truck fit him.

Loud, proud, and completely unapologetic, just like the man himself.

As we pulled out of the Super 8 parking lot, I felt that weird twinge of amusement and panic I always get when I realize, Oh crap, this is real, I'm meeting extended family.

I'm sleeping next to this man in a budget motel.

I just bought fried chicken for my dog like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Who am I? Jon reached over, resting his hand on my thigh like he'd done it a thousand times before, and smiled at me like we weren't speeding headfirst into a day of family small talk and lukewarm coleslaw.

“You okay?” he asked .

I nodded, then smirked.

“Yeah, just wondering how the hell I ended up in this situation. You, me, your ex-wife’s brother, a Super 8 motel, and now Aunt Becky and Billy Joe. It’s like a Southern rom-com nobody asked for.” Jon laughed.

“Welcome to my world.” Oh, honey. I’m not just visiting. I might be applying for permanent residency... NOT.

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The Day Before Graduation

Song : Chicken Fried - Zach Brown Band

I wore my best “ Meeting the southern family without looking like I ’ m trying too hard” outfit: a crisp pair of high-waisted Levi ’ s, a black fitted T-shirt, and my beat-up but beloved Sperrys. Simple stud earrings—classy, minimal effort.

My hair was flat-ironed within an inch of its life, not a strand out of place, which in North Carolina humidity is an Olympic feat.

I looked like I’d just stepped out of a J.Crew catalog for girls who don’t want to be judged by their boyfriend’s extended family but also might bring up therapy over lunch.

Jon, on the other hand, was peak small-town man: broken-in Wranglers, a gray polo shirt that clung in all the right places, and the swagger of someone who wasn’t about to meet his aunt, but instead rolled up to a tractor pull and win, naturally .

We arrived at Aunt Becky’s house a little after 11 a.m., pulling into the long, gravel driveway that crunched under the tires like we were entering a sacred southern portal.

The property was shockingly beautiful—immaculately landscaped with boxwoods and hydrangeas, a front porch complete with rocking chairs, a swing, and a flag that said “Bless This Mess” which, honestly, felt like a warning.

I glanced down at Nacho, who sat beside me in the passenger seat, dramatic as ever,

ears perked like he expected this to be a covert mission.

“Buddy,” I whispered, leaning in.

“You better not pee in this house. Sit on my lap and try not to act like the spoiled little drama queen you are.”

Nacho let out a sigh and blinked at me with all the indifference of a celebrity forced to fly coach. Message received, though. Grudging compliance.

Aunt Becky met us at the door, all warmth and heavy perfume, like a hug from your favorite teacher who secretly drinks before parent-teacher conferences.

She was wearing a long floral dress, her silver-gray hair swept up in a bun that screamed I run this family and I know where the bodies are buried—in a loving way, of course.

“Lord, she’s pretty, Jon,” she said the moment I stepped in, clapping her hands like she’d just won something. I smiled, the kind of smile that said ‘Thank you for not hating me yet.’

To my surprise, Aunt Becky was... pleasant.

Like, weirdly pleasant. Suspiciously pleasant.

Within five minutes, she had us settled in the living room, iced sweet tea in hand (because hydration here is 90% sugar), and was already pulling out the sacred family photo albums. I could practically hear Jon’s soul leave his body.

And then I saw it. A sixteen-year-old Jon.

Mullet. Cigarette dangling from his mouth like he was auditioning for a reboot of *The Outsiders*. I blinked.

“Woooooow,” I said, dragging the word out as I’d just seen a UFO. Jon groaned across the room.

“Please don’t.” But I was already flipping pages—prom photos (yes, he wore a white tux with a black collar and I will never unsee it), then Navy graduation shots, and finally photos from his tours in Iraq.

It was a visual journey of facial hair and questionable choices.

I looked up to find Jon staring at me in disbelief.

His jaw had dropped, and not in the sexy you-take-my-breath-away kind of way.

More like why-is-Aunt-Becky-doing-this-to-me kind of way.

She caught his expression and waved a dismissive hand.

“Oh hush, Jon. She ought to know where you come from.” I raised my glass to her.

“To context.” After about twenty more minutes of memory lane—and resisting the urge to sneak a mullet pic for blackmail purposes—we sat down to lunch.

The dining room was filled with smells that said we cook with love...

and lard. A big dish of steamed cabbage with ham hocks took center stage, surrounded by fluffy white rice, cornbread that looked like it came from a Baptist church potluck, and crispy fried chicken I’d probably write poetry about later.

I piled my plate like I knew what I was doing and made a mental note to kiss whoever cooked this—even if it was Billy Joe.

Just as I took my first bite, Aunt Becky said, as casually as if she were announcing the weather, “Jon’s boys are stoppin’ by in a bit.

And Holly too—just to say hi.” I froze. I looked up from my plate like I’d just heard someone casually mention they’d invited Satan to brunch.

“I’m sorry, who is stopping by?” I asked, trying to keep my voice light but failing.

Jon cleared his throat and gave me a look. The don’t-freak-out-in-front-of-my-aunt look.

“Yeah, my boys. They wanted to meet you,” he said with an apologetic half-smile.

“And Holly’s giving them a ride.”

Holly. The Ex-Wife?. Not just an ex-wife.

THE FIRST EX-WIFE. The Original. The one who came with a brother named Trevor and, apparently, joint custody of two actual humans.

I stared at my chicken. This escalated faster than my blood sugar after Aunt Becky’s sweet tea.

I chewed slowly, forcing a smile like this was fine.

Totally fine. Just another day of meeting my boyfriend’s aunt, her man-friend, two children, and oh yes—his first ex-wife.

My inner monologue was screaming. I had planned for southern politeness, maybe a passive-aggressive comment about how I “look healthy.” Not a surprise reunion episode of Jon’s Past Life: Uncut.

And yet, somehow, I wasn’t running for the hills.

I was still sitting there, petting Nacho, sipping tea, and waiting for the next twist like this was all part of some cosmic test. Jon nudged me under the table.

“You good?”

I turned to him, smiled sweetly, and said, “Oh, I’m great. This is just... so much fun.” He winced.

“You’re mad.”

“No, no,” I replied, picking up my fork again.

“I’m not mad. I’m just wondering if we’ll round out the day with your second ex-wife, a secret child, or maybe a surprise appearance from a cousin in witness protection.” He laughed into his napkin, which made Aunt Becky beam proudly like she thought we were just adorable.

At that moment, surrounded by photos of 2002 Jon with frosted tips, a dog who only responds to compliments and a meal that might cause heart palpitations, I realized something truly horrifying. I wasn’t just surviving this. I kind of liked it.

About thirty minutes later, there was a knock at the door.

Showtime. Jon stood up like he was bracing for a military inspection and opened it to reveal Holly—The Ex-Wife?—and his two boys standing beside her like reluctant

backup dancers.

Introductions happened in a blur. Jon rattled off names like he was speed-reading a CVS receipt, and I smiled and nodded, praying I didn't mix up which boy was which.

The whole encounter lasted all of fifteen minutes, tops.

It had the warmth of a job interview and the emotional intimacy of a handshake at a funeral.

Holly was... shorter than I expected. About my height, actually.

But where I had gone for subtle and sleek, she had more of a barn door in a windstorm presence.

Full face, full figure, full commitment to that "I'm only here because my kids made me" energy.

She didn't say much—just a couple of polite "nice to meet yous" and a tense smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. You know the type: all gums, no soul.

Then, as the boys shuffled off to talk to Aunt Becky, Jon leaned in close, dropping his voice to a whisper just for me.

"Would you believe she was ninety-eight pounds when I met her?" I blinked. Internally, I was already filing that under Things I Will Absolutely Bring Up Later When I Feel Petty.

"Yeah... sure," I thought to myself. "And I was born in a Whole Foods."

I didn't say anything out loud—just gave him a tight little smile and sipped my sweet

tea like a lady.

A sarcastic, increasingly unhinged lady.

Honestly, the whole thing was so quick and awkward that I half-wondered if I imagined it.

Holly gave Jon a quick wave, said something to the boys about “not staying long,” and then just...

vanished. Like a ghost in yoga pants. The kids stayed behind, which was nice.

They were polite enough, if a little shy, and Nacho immediately made himself the star of the show by flopping dramatically onto the floor like the diva he is.

Meanwhile, I was still mentally processing how I’d gone from quick lunch with Aunt Becky to an impromptu family reunion with Ex-Wife #1 and children in tow in under an hour.

I needed a drink. Or a nap. Or both. Preferably at the same time.

By late afternoon, I had gotten marginally more comfortable with Joseph and Wayne, which is to say, I no longer felt the overwhelming urge to climb out the bathroom window and run for the nearest Greyhound station.

It had been a long, slow social dance—me doing the two-step around my defensiveness while they awkwardly tiptoed around their loyalty to their mother (Holly, aka She-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named).

Joseph had the energy of a teenager who’d just realized his mom’s new boyfriend wasn’t going anywhere, and Wayne was polite in the way a pastor might be polite to

a tipsy woman crying too loudly during communion.

Not rude. Just... distant. Like he was trying to survive the day without picking a side in a civil war that started long before he was even born and then, as if the universe decided I'd earned a reward for not spontaneously combusting from tension, Holly didn't come inside when she came to pick them up.

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I stared out the window like a suspicious cat, half expecting her to change her mind and sweep through the door in one of her practiced breezy fake-smile entrances.

But no—she sat in the car. Didn't even wave.

And I didn't complain. At all. Honestly, I could've written her a thank-you note on monogrammed stationery.

She wasn't exactly on my "Most loved humans" list. She was in a file labeled "Handle With Alcohol."

The clock chimed five, and right on cue, Aunt Becky started clearing dishes that weren't even dirty.

Subtlety was not her spiritual gift. She yawned dramatically and smacked her thighs as she stood up with a long, drawn-out, "WELL, it's been a day," which everyone over the age of 40 knows is southern code for "Y'all can go now."

Jon and I exchanged the kind of glance people usually reserve for fire drills or overly long baby showers.

It was time to make our exit. We bolted like teenagers who'd just stolen their dad's truck and didn't want to get caught.

Straight to Napper Tandy's, Angier's version of an English pub by way of southern porch culture.

It was rustic and weird and charming in a “we-have-Guinness-and-fried-green-tomatoes” kind of way.

The floors creaked. The walls were covered in faded Irish proverbs and inexplicably a framed poster of Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson.

No one knew why it was there, and no one questioned it.

Angier, North Carolina, in general, had this uncanny vibe—like a Hallmark movie town that never quite got the budget for snow machines but, I bet come December, it sparkled.

I imagined string lights on every fence, wreaths bigger than small children, and locals smiling like they meant it.

I made a mental note to Google “Angier Christmas Festival” later.

Before I could sit, Jon had already ordered drinks like he had ESP.

A Bud Light for himself. An Old Fashioned for me.

He passed it to me with that boyish smirk that always made my spine act up.

“Those two women sure do stress you out, huh?” I said with the sarcasm of someone who’d been pretending to “stay neutral” for so long, it deserved an Oscar.

“Oh, you noticed?” He replied, raising the bottle to his lips like it was holy water and he was seconds from performing an exorcism. The bourbon hit just right—warm, smooth, and vaguely judgmental.

We ordered food and settled into a worn leather booth that probably had more secrets

than a confessional.

My fried fish sandwich was practically a religious experience, crispy, flaky, seasoned to perfection, with tartar sauce that made me want to thank Jesus himself.

I took a bite and let out a soft moan that made the couple next to us glance over.

Worth it. Jon's Philly cheesesteak looked divine too, a steamy mess of cheese and beef that had him humming after each bite.

We ate like we hadn't seen real food in days.

Honestly, between Holly's tension tornado and Becky's passive-aggressive casserole, we might not have.

"So," Jon said between bites, "Today wasn't completely a disaster." I raised an eyebrow.

"You're grading on a curve."

"I mean, no one screamed. That's progress." I nodded.

"Yet. No one has screamed yet."

We laughed, but there was this tightness behind my ribs.

A weight. The reality of it all. Being here, tangled in his life.

In his town. In a complicated dance with his kids, his ex, and his small-town memories of what could have been.

I wasn't sure if I was temporary or if I even had the guts to ask what we were doing.

I was also too drained to give a flying fuck...

After dinner, we drove back to the Super 8, which looked—under the soft menace of the spring moonlight—like it had been plucked straight from 'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre.' The kind of motel where you check for bed bugs and murderers.

The fluorescent sign buzzed overhead like it had a vendetta against peace. As we pulled in, I couldn't help but joke, "So romantic. You know how to spoil a girl."

"Only the best for you," Jon said with a dramatic bow as he opened the car door for me. Our room smelled like lemon cleaner and desperation, but it had hot water and a functioning TV, and honestly, that's all we needed.

Jon hit the shower first, emerging twenty minutes later looking raw and pink like a boiled shrimp.

His hair was damp, his jaw tense, and I could tell something was churning in him.

Maybe it was seeing Holly again. Maybe it was the weight of everything we weren't saying.

Or maybe, just maybe, this was all a lot for him too, and we were both pretending we could float through it like it was no big deal.

He downed a second Bud Light in three gulps as if it might erase the tension crawling up his spine.

"You okay?" I asked softly, sitting cross-legged on the bed in one of his old t-shirts.

“Yeah,” he said too quickly.

“Just needed to rinse the day off.”

“Or scrub it with steel wool?” He laughed, but it was hollow.

“Something like that.”

He climbed into bed, and we curled up around each other.

Safe. Or pretending to be. Moonshiners were on, a lullaby of thick accents and illegal distilling, and before long, our bodies responded the way they always did when the walls came down.

His hands were on my waist. My fingers in his hair.

Mouths that said too much and not enough.

And then breathless laughter, tangled limbs, and silence.

Sweet, warm, comforting silence. We didn’t say I love you.

Not yet. But it was there, bubbling beneath the skin, daring us to acknowledge it.

Tomorrow, Joseph had his graduation, and I would be skipping it.

Not out of protest (well, maybe a little), but because Jon’s daughter, Melissa—his bright, funny, precocious seven-year-old—would be spending the day with me.

And unlike some of the adults in this soap opera, she wanted me around.

The thought made my heart clench. In a good way.

In a terrifying way. Kids don't fake it.

They either love you or they don't, and Melissa...

she'd chosen me. For a day, at least. I had no idea what to expect.

Play-Doh and Barbies? Deep, existential conversations about why grown-ups cry in Panera bathrooms? Either way, I was in.

"I'm excited for tomorrow," I said, half to myself. Jon kissed my shoulder.

"Me too."

And just like that, under flickering motel light and with the faint scent of bourbon and cheap soap in the air, I felt...okay. Maybe not perfect. Maybe not certain. But okay. Which, for now, was more than enough.

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Graduation Day

Song : Prayer in C - Robin Schulz

The day started with a bang—literally. No, not a metaphorical “bang,” like the emotional kind people write about in Hallmark cards. I mean an actual bang. The kind that leaves your thighs sore, your hair in a knot, and your soul somewhere between sin and salvation.

I woke up to the heavy press of Jon’s arm draped over my waist, his chest warm against my back, and something hard nudging me with purpose.

When I turned over, there it was—his cock, in all its glory, standing at full attention like it had a job to do and a promotion on the line.

I swear it twitched when I looked at it.

I didn’t even get a chance to say good morning before he reached for me, still half-asleep, pulling me into him like I was the missing piece of a puzzle he was hellbent on solving and surprise—not a Levi’s boxer in sight.

Like magic. Or maybe habit. Either way, that man was ready. Resistance?

Please. I didn’t even pretend. That cock was mine.

Like, MINE mine. Trademarked. Engraved in memory.

Practically addictive. Every time we were together, it was like my body hit replay on every reason I'd ever wanted to be touched—loved—claimed.

The first time had been unforgettable. This time?

This time was a goddamn saga. I lost count of how many times I said his name or forgot my own.

After what felt like an hour—maybe more—of sheets tangled, hands everywhere, breathy cursing, and several moments that bordered on illegal in some states, we finally peeled ourselves out of bed, spent and flushed.

“I think we broke the laws of physics,” I muttered, reaching for a tank top and trying to get my legs to work again. Jon smirked, dimples flashing like danger signs.

“Worth it.”

I gave him a look that said you already know, and slipped into a steamy hot fifteen-minute shower to wash my sins away and once more into my comfort uniform: white tank top, lived-in Levi's, and those cheap-ass flip-flops I'd panic-bought at a Target on a road trip I barely remembered.

Comfort was key today—especially since I'd be spending it with Melissa, however her mother Natalia, not a fan of mine.

Ah, Natalia. The human embodiment of passive-aggressive tension and uncomfortable eye contact.

She wasn't just cold—she was permafrost. The kind of woman who could chill a room with a smile and seemed to believe that her one-night stand with Jon gave her eternal dibs on his future.

News flash, darling: you can't force a man like Jon into anything.

Not commitment, not brunch, not even choosing between sweet or unsweet tea.

He's stubborn, principled, and allergic to bullshit.

The very fact that she tried to stake a claim on him probably pushed him further away.

But credit where it's due—he never once ran from responsibility.

He was there for Melissa, fully and beautifully present.

And that? That alone made me fall harder. Again. And again.

Jon walked out of the bathroom wearing a navy polo that clung to his chest in a way that should've been illegal, dark Wranglers that hugged his hips like they had something to prove, and his trusty Hey Dude lace-ups—the most redneck fashion statement ever invented.

I looked him up and down and tilted my head.

“You know you look like the hot dad from every small-town grocery store fantasy, right?” He gave me that grin, slow and smug.

“You saying you have fantasies about me in Wranglers?”

“I'm saying I had fantasies,” I corrected, stepping into his space and brushing past him.

“Now I have memories.”

We grabbed Bojangles on the way to Aunt Becky's because nothing says class and sophistication like biscuit sandwiches dripping in butter.

Honestly, I wasn't complaining. I'd just burned more calories than an OrangeTheory session, and carbs felt like a spiritual requirement.

Nacho, my little boujee ride-or-die, was curled in the backseat like a silent judgmental puff.

He hadn't made a peep since yesterday, and for a second I wondered if he'd emotionally checked out.

Poor thing. He'd had a long few months too—dragged through airports, strange houses, and Aunt Becky's cacophony of Southern chaos.

I reached back, gave him a soft pat, and promised to grab his blanket and bed once we got to the house.

Boujee dogs need their creature comforts. So do high maintenance humans.

Aunt Becky greeted us like a one-woman welcoming committee—hair curled, house smelling like hairspray and something fried. I barely made it to the kitchen before she launched into a full play-by-play of her night.

“Those trashy idiots across the street were hollerin’ and carrying on until two a.m. I tell you, I thought someone was gonna get shot or married.”

No wonder Billy Joe is in the barn doing God knows what, he doesn't want to be here until he has to go to the graduation...

. Smart move Billy Joe. I took a giant bite of my sausage, egg, and cheese biscuit and

let the buttery joy soothe my soul.

All I wanted was three minutes of silent chewing.

But silence, I was learning, was not in this family's vocabulary .

"Y'all ever think maybe people just... like to talk?" I muttered to myself between bites.

"Or am I just a grumpy bitch before noon?" Probably both.

Jon left to pick up Melissa, which gave me a brief moment of peace. I refilled my coffee. I sat down. I stared into the void like a woman with battle fatigue. And then—they returned. I wasn't ready.

Melissa walked in like a curly-headed hurricane, all wild energy and wonder.

She had Jon's eyes. Jon's exact eyes. Same mischievous sparkle.

Same "I'm about to ask you fifty-seven questions and climb that chair" energy.

It hit me in the chest so hard that I had to look away for a second.

She ran straight to me and threw her arms around my waist like she'd been waiting for this moment her entire little life.

"Hi! I'm Melissa!" she announced. I melted. Like puddle-on-the-floor melted .

"Hi, sweetheart. I'm—"

"I know who you are," she interrupted confidently.

“You’re Daddy’s girlfriend.”

My eyes flicked to Jon, who was failing to hide his smirk behind his coffee cup. Oh, we were using labels now? Bold of her. Melissa spotted Nacho snoozing in his bed like a tiny Victorian ghost.

“Can I pet your doggy?”

“Of course,” I said, smiling.

“His name is Nacho.”

Nacho opened one eye and gave me a mom, are you fucking serious look that only a ten-pound dog with existential dread could pull off.

But, true to form, he let Melissa touch his ears, poke his belly, and declare him “the cutest little boy ever” without flinching.

He was either a saint or completely resigned to his fate.

Jon leaned down beside me, watching Melissa with a quiet, reverent kind of pride that made something shift in my chest. This man.

This little girl. This moment. Perfection.

As Jon, Aunt Becky, and Billy Joe headed out for Joseph’s graduation, the house started to quiet down—or, at least, shift into a different kind of chaos.

Jon bent down, kissed Melissa on the forehead, kissed me just a little too slowly on the lips—like he didn’t want to leave—and said, “Be good.” I gave him my best mock-angelic smile.

“Define good.” He just chuckled and gave me that half-smirk, half-dimple thing that should come with a warning label.

And just like that, he was gone. Suddenly, it was just me, Melissa, and Nacho.

The Dream Team. Chicago P.D. ended up on the screen—not because I’m obsessed with police procedurals, but because we’d exhausted every watchable thing on Aunt Becky’s streaming accounts.

And Melissa was deep into some iPad game that involved unicorns, sparkles, and the kind of screechy sound effects that could make your ears bleed.

Nacho, for his part, had given up on society entirely and curled into his tiny, dramatic little ball in his bed like the jaded royal he is.

Then, just as I was sinking into the couch with my lukewarm coffee and a silent prayer for five uninterrupted minutes, Melissa flopped next to me and—without warning—launched into a full-blown interview.

“How did you meet my dad?”

“Why did you cut your hair? Was it because the ends were all split?”

“What subject did you like in school? Did you fail anything?”

“Where did you get Nacho? Does he like pizza?”

It was like being on The Melissa Show, where I was the guest, the audience, and possibly the unwilling co-host. But somehow?

I loved it. She was a category five hurricane in glitter sneakers, asking me everything

from my childhood crushes to whether I believed in aliens.

The answer is yes, by the way—especially after visiting certain Walmart locations after midnight.

Every now and then she'd pause long enough to glance at the TV or poke Nacho, who would give me a side-eye like, I did not sign up for this job, lady.

But he endured it. Just like her dad. And just like me.

There was something so weirdly beautiful about it—this kid who barely knew me, choosing to open up, to ask questions, to curl into my space like she trusted me.

Like I was already part of her universe.

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Eventually, the house burst back to life with all the subtlety of a brass band on cocaine.

The boys came thundering through the front door like it was a scene from a teenage reboot of Top Gun, yelling over each other and trying to see who could be the loudest human in existence.

No Holly in sight, thank God. Small miracles.

Melissa squealed and ran to her brothers, who scooped her up like she was their tiny queen and they were her goofy, half-feral knights.

I smiled because, despite the chaos, there was something deeply sweet about the way they treated her.

Jon beelined straight to me like a man who missed his woman and wasn't afraid to show it.

His eyes searched my face like he was checking for signs of stress, exhaustion... or glitter-induced trauma.

“So,” he asked, grinning, “how was it?”

I stretched out on the couch and gave him a look.

“Like watching a younger you—but somehow more responsible, less accident-prone, and without the Bud Light habit.”

He laughed so hard he snorted, then immediately tried to pretend it didn't happen. I kissed his cheek like a reward. "You're cute when you're embarrassed." He rolled his eyes but didn't deny it.

About an hour later, the chaos thinned. The boys had somewhere else to be—probably a gas station and/or a Taco Bell—and Aunt Becky and Billy Joe looked almost suspiciously excited to see us go.

Becky hugged us like a Southern woman whose job was done and her house was finally quiet again.

Billy Joe just gave us a thumbs-up and muttered something about needing a nap and earplugs.

We piled into the truck to head halfway to Fayetteville to drop Melissa off with Natalia.

Nacho was curled in his bed next to her in the backseat, blissfully unaware that we were about to subject him to more social interaction.

Melissa fell asleep as soon as the tires hit the road, head tilted against the window, mouth slightly open in the most adorable snore imaginable. I glanced back at her, then at Jon.

"She's perfect," I whispered.

He didn't say anything, just reached for my hand and held it, eyes on the road but thumb brushing over mine.

The drop-off was... uneventful, which for Natalia meant gloriously devoid of drama.

She pulled up in her car like she was arriving at a red carpet event she didn't want to attend, gave us a strained smile that barely twitched her face, and muttered a flat "hi." Melissa, still half-asleep, hugged Jon, then climbed out and gave me a sleepy squeeze around the waist. "Bye. Tell Nacho I said bye."

"Will do, sweetheart," I said, already missing her.

Nacho blinked at her from the truck seat, half-lidded and supremely unbothered, because God forbid the dog show too much emotion.

Natalia drove off with all the passive-aggressive energy of a woman who wanted a medal for showing up.

I watched her car shrink into the distance and let out a breath I didn't know I was holding.

"Well," I said, leaning my head against the window, "that was painless. In a 'ripping-a-Band-Aid-off-your-soul' kind of way." Jon just shook his head.

"You're gonna make such a good stepmom one day." I raised an eyebrow.

"That a proposal?" He grinned.

"Not yet. Just appreciation." And with that, we turned back toward the open road, Nacho snoring in the backseat, the sun dipping low, and me wondering if this messy, loud, complicated life was exactly what I wanted.

We pulled into the Super 8 Motel parking lot like a couple of road-weary champions returning from a long battle...

only to find ourselves smack in the middle of a true crime documentary in progress.

Cop cars. Everywhere. Flashing red and blue lights lit up the yellowing siding of the motel like some kind of twisted rave.

Cops stood in clusters, radios squawking, caution tape flapping in the breeze.

One officer was jotting something in a little notebook while another talked to a shirtless man in SpongeBob pajama pants like this was all routine.

I blinked. Twice. Jon put the truck in park, rubbed his temple like he was about to solve the world's problems, and climbed out.

He approached one of the officers with that slow Southern charm he reserves for strangers and waitresses.

“Evenin’. What’s goin’ on here?”

The officer, chewing gum as if his life depended on it, replied casually, “Oh, you didn’t hear? This is where sex offenders stay after release. Something went down. Can’t say what yet. Just head inside and lock your door.”

The words floated out like a casual weather update. Like he was warning us about a light drizzle, not the presence of literal criminals. I stared at Jon, horrified.

“Is this the Murder Motel? Are we about to be an episode of Dateline?”

Then, like divine comedy decided to punch up the script, Jon blurted out, “Oh, uh—my wife and I are NOT staying here!” His what now?! My head snapped toward him. I swear I heard a record scratch.

“Wife?” He froze. I froze. The air between us snapped.

His eyes widened like he hadn't meant to say it, and mine did the same because maybe I didn't hate it?

And then we just lost it—dissolving into full-blown hysterical laughter in the middle of a literal crime scene.

Some cop looked over, probably wondering if we were high. Nope. Just traumatized.

I gave Jon a look that very clearly translated to: Call the damn Hampton Inn.

Now. I'm not dying next to a broken vending machine and a Bible drawer that smells like bleach.

He was already dialing. Five minutes later, our bags were half-zipped, Nacho was looking personally victimized by the chaos, and we were sprinting out of that hellhole like contestants on *The Amazing Race: Parolee Edition*.

Nacho let out the world's tiniest sigh from his dog bed like, Again?

The Hampton Inn—oh sweet Lord—was like checking into heaven with a better mattress.

The lobby smelled like lemon and fresh linens.

No suspicious stains. No side-eye from the front desk.

Just quiet, polished floors and someone who offered us warm cookies like we hadn't just escaped from Motel Alcatraz.

"Cookies?" I said.

“They have cookies. Jon, we’re home.” He grinned, clearly relieved not to be sleeping on a mattress that squeaked like it was covering a body.

Upstairs, the room was bright and clean.

Crisp white linens. Modern bathroom. Pillows that fluffed instead of deflated.

Nacho immediately took one look at the place and pranced to the bed like he’d been personally invited by royalty.

“You good?” I asked him, placing his tiny travel blanket on the comforter.

He spun around three times, curled into a ball, and let out a noise that said, “This is more my tax bracket.” I pulled back the curtains and spotted a glowing neon sign: The Sagebrush.

A saloon-style steakhouse attached to the hotel, dimly lit, probably cheesy, and—blessedly—serving alcohol.

“I see steak and bourbon in my future,” I told Jon, already grabbing my wallet.

“My treat.”

He looked at me like I’d just offered him free fishing gear and season tickets to every rodeo from here to Tulsa.

We made our way to The Sagebrush, which looked like someone crossbred a Cracker Barrel with a dive bar.

Inside, it was all wood-paneled walls, antlers, and booths with ripped faux leather.

A couple of dusty cowboy hats hung behind the bar like they hadn't been touched since Toby Keith was on the charts.

It was awful. And perfect. We ordered two old fashioned and two Bud Lights.

Then two more old fashioned. Because we deserved it.

I got the medium-well steak with mashed potatoes and asparagus.

Jon ordered the same, which only confirmed that we're either soulmates or basic.

The food? Surprisingly decent. Either that or the whiskey was kicking in.

I kept catching myself watching him across the table.

The way his eyes crinkled when he smiled.

The way he wiped the corners of his mouth before sipping his beer.

The fact that he didn't look at his phone once.

Not even when it buzzed. It was dangerous—how easy it felt.

Back at the hotel, the hallway was quiet.

The kind of quiet that wraps around you like a blanket.

We stepped into the room, bellies full, a little buzzed, and lit just by the soft glow of the nightstand lamp.

Jon closed the door behind us and leaned against it like he wasn't in a rush.

Like he was taking me in. I toed off my flip-flops, still feeling a little floaty, and turned toward him.

“Still thinking about that Super 8?” I asked.

“Only when I close my eyes,” he replied, stepping toward me, that crooked grin tugging at his lips.

“But this right here? This fixes all of it.”

His hands found my waist and pulled me toward him with a quiet urgency that melted something in my chest. We kissed slowly at first—soft, lingering, as we had nowhere to be and nothing to prove. But that quickly unraveled.

The night swelled between us like something tidal.

We were clumsy and laughing one second, heated and breathless the next.

His fingers slid under my shirt, tracing my skin like it was something sacred.

My hands fumbled with the buttons of his jeans like they were keeping me from salvation.

We stumbled toward the bed, still half-dressed and tangled in each other.

I whispered something stupid about those dimples.

He mumbled something about how I smelled like bourbon and sin.

We took our time. We didn't. It was hot.

Then tender. Then hot again. The kind of night that makes you forget what day it is.

The kind of night you feel in your bones for days.

Afterward, we lay tangled in each other, sheets kicked off the bed, limbs a mess, hearts thudding in unison like we'd just run a marathon and somehow won.

The TV glowed faintly in the background—Law & Order: SVU, of course, because what else do two sex-drunk adults watch after escaping a Motel of Doom? I looked over at him.

“Still think I’m your wife?” I teased, brushing my fingers across his chest. He smirked, kissed the top of my head, and murmured, “After tonight? I might tattoo it on my damn arm.” I smiled. Then passed out in his arms like it was the most natural place in the world.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:13 am

Back To Idaho Falls

Song : American Kids - Kenny Chesney

I rolled out of bed, stretched like I'd just survived a five-year war, and pulled on my go-to comfort uniform: worn-in Levi's, a soft white T-shirt, and my Sperrys—the holy trinity of “I might be traveling, but I still have standards.” I packed my suitcase with the practiced speed of a woman who'd stayed in far too many motels in the last week, then tossed Nacho's essentials into his little travel bag: blanket, treats, his outfits (yes, dog outfits —don't judge), and his tiny water bottle with the flip-out bowl.

Jon, already dressed in his standard road trip ensemble—Wranglers, boots, and a flannel with the sleeves rolled up just enough to make me lose track of thought—was loading up the truck like a man on a mission.

He looked absurdly attractive for someone carrying three different bags and a suspiciously crumpled hoodie.

Downstairs in the hotel breakfast nook, the vibe was aggressively wholesome.

The smell of fresh waffles, hot coffee, and artificially cheerful syrup packets hit me like a Hallmark movie set.

Bless them—they even let Nacho sit under our table like a tiny king, observing us like a TSA agent watching for crumb smuggling.

I devoured my plate of cheesy scrambled eggs, biscuits and gravy, sausage links that tasted like actual joy, and an orange juice that somehow managed to taste fresh despite being poured from a plastic jug.

Jon, ever the overachiever, went full lumberjack mode with a mountain of food: eggs, bacon, sausage, ham, hash-browns, grits, and toast. I looked at his plate, then at him .

“Planning to chop down a forest today?” He shrugged.

“Might have to wrestle a bear or two on the drive.” Fair enough.

We made one final pit stop at Aunt Becky’s to say goodbye.

She hugged me like I was her long-lost daughter and handed me a plastic grocery bag filled with homemade banana bread, a ziplock of boiled peanuts, and a tupperware of something that looked...

wet. I thanked her while silently planning to leave it in a gas station trash can somewhere between here and Kentucky.

Billy Joe gave us a hearty “Y’all drive safe now” while scratching his belly like a man with not a single care in the world.

Sweet people, truly but I was ready to leave this hillbilly Hallmark town behind and head back to the land of cattle, mountains, and way fewer relatives named after beer brands.

We hit the road, Nacho perched like a furry hood ornament on my lap, paws tucked, head on my wrist. He looked at the passing trees with an expression that said, I hope this isn’t another Super 8 situation.

We drove through North Carolina, its winding hills slowly giving way to Tennessee's dramatic ridge lines.

We passed through Knoxville where I made Jon stop at a gas station because I saw a sign for "World's Best Homemade Fudge.

" Spoiler: it wasn't. But the cashier named Loretta did give me a free moon pie and called me "darlin'," so all was forgiven.

By Kentucky, we were full of Cracker Barrel snacks and caffeine.

I made Jon stop at a roadside antique store shaped like a giant chicken—literally—because I spotted a sign advertising "Taxidermy and Hot Sauce." I bought neither, but I did get a hilarious Polaroid of Jon next to a mounted possum wearing a cowboy hat.

By the time we crossed into Illinois, the sun was sinking low, spilling gold over the flat land like butter on cornbread.

We were exhausted and slightly delirious, and my Spotify playlist had descended into 90s boy band territory.

We pulled off at a quiet little exit and spotted a Best Western nestled next to a retro-looking diner with neon signs promising "Breakfast. Lunch. Dinner. Pie."

"That's it," I said.

"This is where we live now." Jon nodded solemnly.

"I'm down to grow old here." Just across the parking lot, Jon's eyes lit up like a Christmas tree.

“Is that a dispensary?”

Sure enough, a sleek little shop with the name Ascend in modern, backlit letters sat just off the corner like a promised land.

I glanced at it, then at him. He was already muttering, “YOLO” under his breath like a man possessed.

Five minutes later, we were inside. I picked up some mango-flavored gummies because they sounded like they wouldn’t ruin my day, and Jon bought a couple of pre-rolls and a T-shirt with the shop logo.

Of course, he did. He looked like a college freshman about to write poetry and rewatch Pineapple Express.

We checked into the Best Western—thankfully clean, recently remodeled, and with no weird smells, which at this point in our journey was a five-star luxury.

The lady at the desk even gave Nacho a tiny treat from a glass jar labeled “Four-legged Guests Only.” He looked so smug.

I flopped onto the bed, sighing like I’d just crossed the Sahara.

The mattress was firm, the sheets smelled like lavender, and the bathroom had real towels—not those sandpaper napkins from the Super 8.

Jon lit one of his pre-rolls on the tiny balcony while I popped a gummy and started unpacking only what we needed.

The sky turned cotton candy pink while the highway lights flickered on in the distance.

The world felt quieter, somehow softer. It was just us, the dog, and the road we'd still yet to travel.

Later, we walked to the diner under the glowing neon signs.

The waitress called us “honey” and brought out pie before dinner “just in case y’all needed dessert first.” I could’ve kissed her.

We shared fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and the kind of green beans that had been simmered in bacon grease since noon.

I watched Jon sip sweet tea and talk about Idaho like it was home. Like I might be part of it now.

Back in our hotel room, Nacho was curled up in the middle of the bed like a loaf of furry bread.

I peeled off my jeans, tossed on Jon’s flannel, and snuggled next to him while reruns of 'The King of Queens' played softly in the background. As I drifted off to sleep, I realized I wasn’t just halfway across the country—I was somewhere entirely new. Somewhere I hadn’t been in a long time. Happy.

We woke up to the smell of bacon wafting through the paper-thin hotel walls and the gentle sound of Nacho snoring like a tiny, judgmental freight train wedged between us.

He was on his back again—paws in the air, mouth slightly open, full of drama.

At this point, I was convinced he was auditioning for a canine soap opera titled *Tails of Our Lives*.

I stretched out and sat up, wrapped in Jon's flannel shirt that now permanently smelled like him—cedarwood, warm skin, and a little weed.

Not mad about it. Jon grumbled something about “ten more minutes,” rolled over, and threw an arm across Nacho like he was a second pillow .

“Nope,” I said, patting his shoulder.

“If you want breakfast and a working bladder, it's now or never.” That worked.

We packed quickly—by now, we were a well-oiled, slightly grumpy machine.

I threw on another comfort outfit: a faded black hoodie, leggings, high-top Converse, and a messy bun that said, “Yes, I've been living out of a suitcase for days, and no, I'm not ashamed.

” Jon wore a gray tee that hugged his shoulders in a way that should probably be illegal in three states, cargo shorts, and his usual boots.

And somehow, it still worked. The man could wear a trash bag and still look like an off-duty cowboy.

We checked out, waved goodbye to the diner of dreams across the lot (RIP, cinnamon pie), and started toward Idaho Falls again, this time with the end in sight. But first—coffee.

Jon pulled into a mom-and-pop gas station that looked like it had been built in 1974 and lovingly neglected ever since.

There was a hand-painted sign that read “Hot Java & Homemade Jerky” hanging from the door.

Naturally, I made him go in. Ten minutes later, we had two steaming cups of suspiciously decent coffee, a paper bag of spicy beef jerky, and a local newspaper with the front page headline: Woman Marries Her Cat for Charity. America never changes.

Back on the road, the scenery started to shift.

Illinois' endless fields turned into Nebraska's "is-this-still-going" highways.

Flat, straight, and deeply boring in a way that makes you question your life choices and whether you packed enough snacks.

We made a playlist titled Flat States & Emotional Damage and took turns DJing.

Jon played Garth Brooks and Brantley Gilbert.

I retaliated with Alanis Morissette, Kehlani, and angry breakup songs that made him look over like, "Should I be concerned?" Somewhere in Iowa, we stopped for gas and found a roadside attraction proudly claiming to have the World's Largest Ball of Twine.

Of course, we stopped. Of course, we took a photo with Nacho posing in front of it like he was running for office. I mean, when life hands you twine...

Around mid-afternoon, we hit a detour thanks to some highway construction and ended up on a scenic route that curved along small hills and grassy valleys.

It was kind of beautiful in that accidental Instagram aesthetic kind of way.

We rolled the windows down, and the breeze whipped through the cab.

Nacho, perched on Jon's thigh with his head out the window, was living his absolute best dog life. Ears flapping. Tongue out. Bliss.

"I think he's officially happier than both of us combined," I said.

"Yeah, but does he have to file taxes?" Jon replied. Point taken.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:13 am

By the time we crossed into Wyoming, the sun had started its golden descent, and the temperature dipped just enough to make me want to pull my hoodie over my hands.

We stopped at a scenic overlook with a jaw-dropping view of wide, empty plains and distant mountains silhouetted in lavender light.

I leaned against the hood of the truck while Jon lit a pre-roll and passed it to me.

“You ever think about just... not going back?” I asked, half-laughing. He took a hit and exhaled slowly.

“What, just live off the grid? Get a goat? Change our names?”

“Mine would be something dramatic like Raven Winter. You’d be... Buck Maverick.”

“Buck Maverick?” He snorted.

“Sounds like a man who makes his own beef jerky and only drinks moonshine.”

“Exactly. It’s perfect.”

Eventually, the wind reminded us we were still human and subject to time and temperature, so we piled back into the truck.

Jon drove while I googled places to crash for the night and found a charming little inn outside Cheyenne that looked like a former brothel turned Airbnb. Naturally, I

booked it.

The inn was rustic, clean, and had a faint smell of old whiskey and lavender sachets. The owner, a woman named Marlene who wore six rings and had a voice like gravel and honey, gave us the room at the end of the hall and winked when she handed over the key.

“Y’all look like you could use a good night.” We could.

We brought Nacho in, fed him, and then collapsed onto the king-size bed that felt like heaven.

There was no TV. Just us, a vintage lamp casting golden light across the room, and the soft creak of wood floors under our feet.

Before we could sink into each other too deeply, my stomach growled loud enough to scare Nacho half off the bed.

“Okay, that was either your stomach or a demon,” Jon said, already reaching for his phone.

“What do you want?” I flopped onto my back and sighed dramatically.

“Something deeply comforting. I want food that tastes like someone’s Southern grandmother made it after church.”

Ten minutes later, Cracker Barrel was on its way via Uber Eats.

We ordered chicken and dumplings for both of us—because we’re soulmates, obviously—and a side of chicken tenders for Nacho, who was already eyeing the door like he somehow understood food delivery apps.

The man deserves a Michelin star for patience, and let's face it, he'd earned his comfort meal too.

When the knock finally came, we devoured dinner sitting cross-legged on the hotel bed, eating out of to-go containers with plastic forks, like royalty who had fallen from grace and landed somewhere much better.

It was exactly what we didn't know we needed.

The dumplings were soft and buttery, the chicken was tender, and for a brief, greasy, glorious moment—nothing else mattered.

Nacho wolfed down his tenders like he was preparing for hibernation and promptly curled up at the foot of the bed in his usual loaf-of-bread position, snoring within minutes.

We rinsed off the road in the shower—slow, steamy, hands exploring and lingering with the kind of intimacy that only builds when you've shared long silences and gas station jerky.

I washed his hair. He washed my back. We dried off, tangled ourselves in the warm quiet of a worn quilt and a low-lit room, and fell into each other like gravity had been trying to pull us here all along.

We didn't rush. We undressed each other like people who knew every scar and curve and freckle.

We made love like we hadn't in weeks—slow, deep, and reverent.

His hands are in my hair. My lips on his neck.

Every inch of him felt like home.... That cock

Afterward, tangled up and full (of food, of love, of sleepiness), my head rested on his chest, and his fingers lazily traced my spine. I whispered, “I don’t think I’ve ever felt this safe.” He kissed my forehead.

“I didn’t know I could be this happy.” I didn’t roll my eyes.

I didn’t deflect with a joke. I just laid there, heart cracked wide open, full of dumplings and stupid, beautiful hope, and let myself believe it might last. Because sometimes, even the most sarcastic, slightly jaded people find their way home.

Even if it’s via the world’s largest ball of twine and a chicken-and-dumplings Uber Eats delivery from Cracker Barrel.

We hit the road bright and early, leaving our gloriously clean charming inn behind like two road-weary warriors heading back to civilization.

Nacho curled up in his bed in the backseat, looked like he had just returned from war and was processing the trauma of being in a state that doesn’t believe in sidewalks.

I wore another comfortably careless outfit—sweats, a white hoodie, and Sperrys because I refuse to look like I’ve given up, even on a long drive.

Jon wore his standard uniform: Levi’s, a T-shirt tight enough to make me question God’s intentions, and that broken-in navy cap that looked like it’d seen some things .

The drive stretched out in front of us like a dusty ribbon. We passed windmills so tall they looked like alien arms reaching out of the earth, cornfields that never ended, and roadside billboards for fireworks, Jesus, and vape shops—sometimes all in one.

Around noon, our stomachs started having a heated argument with our brains, and I found us a lunch spot in Nebraska—a tiny town off I-80 called Ogallala, which sounded like a made-up Disney villain but boasted a diner with rave reviews called “The Chuckwagon.” Naturally, it was cowboy-themed to the max, complete with servers in bandanas and walls plastered with sepia-toned cowboy portraits.

We ordered burgers the size of our heads—mine with bacon and avocado, Jon’s with extra jalapenos because he hates the lining of his stomach.

Nacho sat under the table chewing a fry like he owned the place.

“This is what America tastes like,” I muttered, licking ketchup off my thumb.

Jon just grinned and stole a bite of my burger like we were already married and he’d earned food tax rights.

Back on the road, bellies full and eyes drooping, the miles ticked by slowly.

Somewhere around Boise, I realized the trees were getting taller, the mountains closer, and that gnawing anxiety in my chest a little tighter.

Jon’s hand found mine over the center console.

He didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to.

When we finally pulled into Idaho Falls, the air felt lighter.

The town still smelled faintly of pine and cow shit, but it was home.

Or maybe it was becoming one. We rolled past the familiar gas stations and grocery stores, Nacho popped his head up like he could smell his memory foam bed, and I

was already imagining a hot bath, wine, and the blessed silence of our own space. But of course, life had other plans.

As we turned down Jon's street, I spotted it first. A giant, obnoxious orange-and-white U-Haul parked right in front of the house.

"Oh no," I muttered.

"That better be someone's midlife crisis, because I swear to God..."

But it wasn't a random U-Haul. Nope. It was Blake. Jon's navy brother. And he was unloading boxes onto the lawn like someone who had no intention of leaving anytime soon. Jon stopped the truck in the driveway, his hand frozen on the gearshift.

"You have got to be kidding me."

From the front door emerged none other than Patricia—Blake's girlfriend, or as I lovingly refer to her, the human form of a Yelp review no one asked for.

She had her signature short lesbian-like hair, matching lounge set, and that expression she always wore like she just smelled something expensive and disapproved.

She waved like we were welcome guests to her mansion.

"Hey, guys!" I glanced over at Jon, whose face looked like someone had just asked him to perform a solo interpretive dance in front of Congress.

"I'm gonna throw up," he muttered under his breath.

We got out slowly, like people stepping into a dream they hoped they'd wake up from. Patricia was already skipping down the driveway with that chaotic energy of a

woman who believes in manifesting and juice cleanses. “Surprise!” she chirped, throwing her arms out.

“I decided to move in here while we figure out our next steps!”

“Next steps toward what?” I asked sweetly.

“Becoming the Idaho version of ‘90 Day Fiancé’?” She laughed like I was joking. I was not.

Blake came jogging over, sweaty and smiling.

“Hey, man! Thought we’d just get ahead of the curve and settle in before the wedding.”

“What wedding?” Jon asked, his voice cracking like a teenager whose life was flashing before his eyes. Blake blinked.

“You know... eventually. Maybe. It’s just temporary anyway.” Temporary. The most dangerous word in the English language.

I looked at Jon, and he looked at me, and Nacho let out the most theatrical sigh from the truck like even he was tired of the bullshit.

“Well,” I said with a forced smile, “nothing like an ambush roommate situation to spice up a homecoming.” Jon didn’t even try to hide the horror on his face.

“I swear to God, I’m gonna need a gummy just to process this.”

“You want one now or after we unpack?” I offered.

“Both.”

We stood there, still outside the truck, watching Patricia try to carry a box labeled “kids room” and I thought to myself “Kids?” Idaho Falls: where love blossoms, U-Hauls bloom in the driveway, and sarcasm is the only thing keeping us sane.

The Birthday Party

Song : Manic Monday - The Bangles

The house looked perfectly ordinary from the outside—two stories, beige siding, an American flag slightly faded from too much Idaho sun. But the moment I stepped inside, I had a feeling we’d just entered a portal to chaos.

“Kids?” I whispered to Jon, eyebrows raised in that please-tell-me-there’s-an-exit-plan way.

Jon, always the steady one, nodded and said, “Blake’s kids. Valentina and Vance. They come here for the summer.”

He said it like this was a normal thing like we were expecting guests for tea and not opening the door to the Real Housewives: Idaho Edition.

I hadn’t even taken my shoes off and was already considering slipping them back on and pretending I’d left something important in the car.

Like my sanity. Jon, bless his heart, tried to soften the blow with a little background as we walked into the living room.

“Blake had an ex-fiancée—Jeanine. They were together when we were in the Navy. Had two kids. Things got bad... like, really bad. DUIs, assault charges. He had a drinking problem and got violent. She finally left him.” I blinked.

“I... never saw that in him.”

“Yeah,” Jon said with a sigh.

“Anyone can pretend to be someone they’re not. But he’s clean now. Been working on himself.”

I nodded, though internally I was thinking: We’ll see. I’m not exactly one to judge. I was a stripper for ten years. I know all about second, third, and twelfth chances. But still. A woman’s intuition is a real thing, and mine had been buzzing since the second we pulled into the driveway.

“God’s not gonna ask me about Blake when I get to those pearly gates,” I muttered.

We entered the living room, and it was like stepping into a daycare center mid-meltdown.

Four kids. Count them—four. Two I immediately recognized as Blake’s spawn because of the strong family resemblance—ginger hair, Irish skin, and expressions like they were already bored of life at sixteen and eight respectively.

Valentina, sixteen, sat on the couch with her AirPods in, giving major don’t talk to me unless you’re offering Starbucks energy.

Vance, eight, was busy playing his video games at the dining room table, unbothered into what looked like an aggressive death match on the computer. But then there were the other two.

“Oh God,” I whispered. “No. No no no.” Jon followed my gaze and grimaced.

“Patricia’s kids,” he confirmed.

“Janet and Justin.”

Of course. Just what I needed—two miniature Patricias to haunt me before I’d even had a chance to pee.

Seriously, what is it with people naming their kids like they’re trying to start a knockoff cartoon duo?

Janet and Justin? It sounds like a discount crime-fighting team that solves mysteries with juice boxes and bad attitudes.

Janet, thirteen, stood stiffly near the stairs in a sweatshirt that looked like it had survived a few hand-me-down cycles.

Her resting bitch face was already fully formed—impressive for someone barely a teenager.

Justin, seven, was on the floor, legs spread out, shoving Oreos into his mouth like he was preparing for hibernation.

No plate. Just vibes. Oreo crumbs scattered like confetti on the beige carpet.

And then, as if summoned by the chaos, she walked in.

“Hi!” Patricia chirped like this was a perfectly delightful Sunday morning and not the prelude to my nervous breakdown.

“I’m so excited you’re here. These are my babies, Janet and Justin.” Your babies? Lady, they looked like they’d just walked out of a Hot Topic and a mud puddle, respectively.

Jon immediately went over to Valentina and Vance, giving each a hug.

It was obvious they adored him—and I mean lit up like Christmas adored him.

Vance even dropped his death game for a second to give Jon a high five.

Meanwhile, Janet crossed her arms and looked at me like I'd stolen her favorite lip gloss.

I smiled, tight-lipped. Mental note: keep your distance from the mini-patricias.

I'm all for blending families, but something about this one felt less Brady Bunch and more Lifetime Movie.

Jon didn't even glance in Janet or Justin's direction.

That was all the confirmation I needed that he too knew this was a whole pot of bad ideas simmering on the stove.

We were just waiting for it to boil over.

I stood by the kitchen island, scanning the place.

The décor was an odd mix of Pinterest dreams and clearance-rack nightmares.

Mismatched throw pillows, one of those live-laugh-love signs (gag), and a candle labeled "Vanilla Oak" that tried very hard to cover the scent of children and microwaved pizza.

It was failing. Patricia followed me into the kitchen, flouncing like this was her home.

“I just love it here. Idaho’s so peaceful.” Peaceful, my ass.

She started chatting about how she and Blake met—on a dating site, naturally. Which was fine. People meet online. What wasn’t fine was the timeline.

“I wasn’t interested until he told me where he lived,” she said with a giggle. Red flag number one. She also casually mentioned that she didn’t work right now, but she had big plans. She was “really into MBTI” and had figured out she was an INFJ, which to her, explained everything. I blinked.

“Oh... cool.” This is what you say when you’re thinking, Dear Lord, she thinks the Myers-Briggs test is a career plan.

Patricia said she used to be a teacher. And a psych tech.

At the state hospital. You know, two jobs that require actual degrees.

But all I found when I ran a background check—because yes, I still have access to my old fraud investigation tools, don’t ask—was that she worked as a cafeteria server at a Catholic school and got fired.

I don’t know what you have to do to get fired from serving tater tots to nuns, but I’m sure it wasn’t for being too qualified.

Oh, and the kicker? She claimed to be hiding from her “toxic family,” but Blake picked her up from a trailer park where she lived with her dad.

You can’t make this stuff up. Two ex-husbands, both allegedly abusive, but no trace of police reports or records.

Just a woman who seemed to have invented a life on vibes and Oreos.

“I believe in energy,” she said, handing Justin another Oreo from the sleeve she’d pulled from her purse like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat.

“And this house has really good energy.” Yeah. If by “good” you mean tense, possibly haunted, and a few bad decisions away from an emergency room visit.

I smiled politely and nodded. Meanwhile, Justin smeared Oreo cream on the couch cushion like it was an art project.

Patricia didn’t blink. I made another mental note: buy disinfectant.

Lots of it. Blake walked in then, looking slightly less strung out than usual, which I assumed was Jon’s version of “he’s doing better.

” He gave Jon a bro hug, nodded to me, and then bent down to hug his kids.

Valentina ignored him. Vance gave him a cautious side hug.

Janet and Justin were too busy existing in their weird orbit to acknowledge him at all. Patricia clapped her hands.

“I thought it’d be fun if we all had dinner together!”

“Yay,” I said, dead inside. Jon grabbed my hand.

“Want to go check out the backyard?” Yes. Please. Anywhere that wasn’t within earshot of Patricia or the mini-Patricias.

The backyard was a lovely place to escape anything—open, with a view of the mountains, a few pine trees dotting the lawn, and a chiminea that had never been used.

Probably because the minute anyone sat down, they'd be swarmed by unsupervised children asking for snacks. leaned against the railing and exhaled.

"So. That's Patricia's kids." Jon nodded slowly.

"Yup."

"And Blake's transformation." He raised an eyebrow.

"You're not sold." I snorted.

"Jon, I worked in fraud for eight years. That woman's entire personality is a red flag buffet." He laughed, pulling me into a hug.

"Just give it time." I stared back through the sliding glass door at the circus inside.

"I'll give it a weekend. After that, I'm faking a work emergency and taking Nacho to a hotel." Jon kissed the top of my head and sighed.

"God, I missed your sarcasm."

"Good," I said, smiling against his chest.

"You're gonna need it."

Because somehow, I knew this was just the beginning of all the drama this crazy, psychotic, manic bitch would bring into our lives...

. The basement smelled like incense, weed, and a faint whisper of despair.

Not exactly the welcome committee I was hoping for after a cross-country road trip.

Lauren and Tory were camped out on a worn corduroy sectional, eyes glued to a documentary about Princess Diana like it was the season finale of *The Bachelor*.

I couldn't tell if they were deeply moved or just completely stoned out of their gourds—possibly both.

I gave them an awkward “Hey,” the kind that comes out like a question when you're not sure if you've walked into a therapy circle or a séance.

They muttered something back, neither of them blinking.

“Either they're high,” I whispered to Jon as we slipped past them, “or Patricia's brand of crazy is contagious.”

Jon didn't argue. Instead, he led me down the narrow hallway to his bedroom, and the moment we got in, we locked the door like we were about to hide from zombies. I dropped my bag and turned to him, dead serious.

“We've got to find our own place to live. Immediately. Like, before we're added to a group chant.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:13 am

Images of my half-signed lease in Minnesota flashed in my head, followed by my townhouse in Fort Worth—now graciously occupied by Christine, my best friend and unofficial house-sitter.

Both were technically options... if the definition of “option” included several logistical nightmares.

Jon flopped down on the bed and looked at me with those big, thoughtful eyes.

“We can look at houses around here if you want.” I raised an eyebrow.

“You mean... in this town?”

“Tomorrow’s Vance’s birthday party,” he said, changing the subject, “and I’m barbecuing brisket.” Brisket, huh? That man knew exactly how to distract me.

“I’ll make sides,” I offered if only to regain a shred of dignity after being welcomed into what might be a makeshift commune.

We both nodded, like battle-hardened soldiers silently agreeing on a mission and sprinted to the bathroom to scrub off every layer of road trip funk.

Nacho, our loyal travel-weary pup, got a bath too.

He smelled like old car upholstery and mild regret.

Upstairs, Patricia was proudly slow-cooking what could only be described as a crime

against cuisine—frozen meatballs dumped straight into a crockpot like they were performing a trust fall.

The smell alone could devalue a home. Nope.

I wasn't going down with that ship. I hopped on Uber Eats like it was a lifeboat and ordered from a Chinese place downtown that I'd stalked online before we arrived.

Twenty minutes later, Jon returned from walking Nacho with a plastic bag of General Tso's salvation in his hand.

And thank God, Jon's room had a mini fridge and microwave.

I could survive in here for days. Maybe weeks.

All I needed were my leftovers, a Wi-Fi signal, and enough emotional distance from the upstairs circus.

We curled into bed with greasy chopsticks and muted TV, blissfully insulated from the outside world, when my phone buzzed. A message from an unknown number:

“Welcome to the cult... Delilah ??” Excuse me?

I replied, already dreading the answer:

“Who is this?” My phone dinged again—and again. And again. Four numbers replied at once:

Blake. Patricia. Lauren. Tory. Fantastic. I'd just been group-texted into a patchouli-scented nightmare. I texted back a simple:

“ok.....” Translation: Get me the hell out of here.

I put my phone on 'Do Not Disturb' and rolled over, praying that this was all an elaborate fever dream brought on by overexposure to secondhand sage smoke. But no. I woke up the next morning, and reality was still... real. Jon was already upstairs prepping his brisket like the culinary saint he was. I pulled on my jeans and wandered into the kitchen, determined to contribute something edible to this birthday barbecue before Patricia whipped out another crockpot tragedy. Potato salad. Fried okra. Zucchini fritters. Mashed potatoes. Mac and cheese. I created a Southern feast while Patricia's kids ran around like unsupervised raccoons and Blake's kids quietly observed me like I was the new zoo exhibit.

Eventually, Valentina, Blake's sixteen-year-old daughter, struck up a conversation.

And to my pleasant surprise, she was an actual delight.

Smart. Grounded. Spoke like a well-read adult who'd already emotionally outgrown this entire environment.

I liked her immediately. She had the quiet wisdom of someone who'd watched a lot of people mess up and took notes.

Vance, the birthday boy, was glued to Jon like a golden retriever on Red Bull.

It was sweet. Jon had that kind of warmth that kids trusted immediately.

Probably because he didn't talk down to them or fake a smile. He just was.

By party time, I'd met Blake's mom and stepdad—Jade and Tony—who, against all odds, seemed normal. Sane, even. Which made me wonder: Did they know they'd entered the epicenter of Weirdsville, USA? I doubted it. No one willingly signs up for

this unless there's a massive inheritance involved.

At around 6:30 p.m., Jon's expression shifted.

His shoulders tensed. That look washed over him—the one I'd come to recognize, the quiet weight of memories he never fully shared.

PTSD doesn't always make a grand entrance; sometimes, it just softly taps him on the shoulder and says, "Hey, we're back.

" He turned to me and said, "I think it's time to head downstairs. "

"Absolutely," I whispered, already collecting our leftovers like a woman escaping a hostage situation with takeout and dignity.

We passed Lauren and Tory on the way down.

They were surprise surprise, still on the couch watching a documentary—this time about mushrooms. Of course, they were.

Probably planning their next hallucinogenic journey through spiritual awakening and unwashed hair.

Back in the safe haven of Jon's room, we both collapsed onto the bed.

My mascara was slightly smudged from the grill smoke, or maybe just the emotional smoke of the last 24 hours.

I was just settling into the mattress when Jon turned to me and said the six most beautiful words I'd heard since "Your Uber Eats has arrived."

“Wanna escape this and go to Vegas?” I blinked.

“Like... Las Vegas?”

“It’s only six hours away,” he said casually like he was offering to go get milk. I stared at him, grinning like a woman freshly reborn.

“Of course I do, Jon. Of course, I do.” Because if there’s one thing better than surviving a basement cult in Idaho Falls, it’s escaping it in style—with a man, a dog, and enough General Tso’s to make it across the desert.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:13 am

The Las Vegas Escape

Song : One Man Band - Old Dominion

We were this close to slipping out unnoticed.

Just a few more steps, one quiet click of the door, and we 'd be free.

But, of course, chaos has a way of sniffing you out when you 're trying to ghost it.

We walked upstairs with our bags and Nacho in tow, only to be met by the truly unsettling sight of Patricia in the hallway—wearing mismatched socks and purple latex gloves—on her knees with a bottle of Pine-Sol and a wad of paper towels.

“Oh, just cleaning up the cat poop Jeanine put in Vance’s suitcase,” she said as casually as if she were describing her breakfast.

“She does this to trigger me.” Jon and I froze mid-step like we’d wandered into a deleted scene from *Unsolved Mysteries: The Idaho Files*.

“She put actual cat poop in the suitcase?” I repeated slowly because I needed confirmation that this was, in fact, the batshit moment I thought it was. Patricia nodded, still scrubbing like she was trying to exorcise a demon from the carpet.

“She’s been targeting me ever since she found out I’m a Pisces moon.”

And just like that, we had crossed the threshold from “Maybe this woman’s just

eccentric” to “Oh, she’s full-blown unstable and probably shouldn’t have unsupervised access to children, crockpots, or sharp objects.” Jon gently nudged my arm.

“Babe. Vegas.” Right. Escape mission, go.

We grabbed Nacho, tossed our bags into the rental car (a cherry red Toyota Camry, because if we were fleeing madness, we were doing it with cruise control), and peeled out of that driveway like it was the last chopper out of ’Nam .

The open road never looked so romantic. There’s something wildly therapeutic about watching Idaho disappear in your rearview mirror, especially when the sun is setting and your dog’s ears are flapping in the wind like he’s the main character in a dog food commercial.

We took turns DJing, which meant Jon graciously let me play 2000s R&B for three hours straight until he begged for a little Nirvana to “balance the vibes.” Nacho sat between us, perched like a judgmental potato, occasionally sneezing on the gearshift.

It was a solid six-hour drive to Las Vegas, but honestly?

It felt shorter with the thrill of freedom, a working A/C, and zero Patricia sightings.

By the time the neon glow of Vegas rose from the desert like an electric mirage, we were already feeling like different people.

Cleaner. Lighter. Considerably less likely to be invited to join a cult.

We pulled into Harrah’s Casino & Resort around 10 p.m.—Jon had booked us a room using his military discount like the absolute hero he is.

I swear, the woman at the check-in desk swooned when he handed her his ID.

I'd have to get that bitch fired later - mental note made, god Patricia is rubbing off on me... not going to get that sweet girl fired...

"We're dog-friendly, right?" I asked sweetly, pointing to Nacho, who was sniffing the base of a slot machine like it held the secrets to the universe.

"Of course," she said. "We'll even send up a little treat basket." If Nacho had thumbs, he would've fist-bumped her.

Our room was perfect. Not fancy, but crisp white linens, a city view, and most importantly, zero passive-aggressive group texts. We crashed hard that night, limbs tangled, Nacho curled at our feet, snoring like a 65-year-old trucker with a sinus infection.

The next morning, Vegas welcomed us like an old friend with bad decisions and bottomless mimosas.

We started with brunch at Yard House—Nacho got a special "dog-friendly" patio seat, complete with a water bowl and more attention than a Kardashian at Coachella.

I had the Nashville hot chicken sandwich, which was possibly sent from heaven, and Jon devoured a cheeseburger like it owed him money.

Then we wandered the Strip. Jon held my hand the entire time like we were on some kind of romantic recon mission—him in cargo shorts and mirrored sunglasses, me in a sundress that flirted with every breeze.

Nacho trotted beside us in his tiny harness like he owned the place, occasionally stopping to bark at Elvis impersonators or rogue pigeons.

The sun was hot, the sidewalks glittered, and for once, we didn't feel like two people running away from something—we felt like two people running toward something better.

That night we ate at Virgil's Real BBQ, where I nearly wept over the mac and cheese and Jon declared the brisket "almost as good as mine." Nacho got a bite of cornbread under the table and looked personally offended when we didn't also order him a rack of ribs.

We planned to stay in Vegas from Wednesday to Sunday, and while we were here, we'd started saying things like "When we come back next time..." and "Maybe we should look at condos near the Strip." There was something about being away from the madness, from Idaho's makeshift spiritual commune, that made us both remember who we were: two people who loved food, freedom, and each other...

and a dog who just wanted to chase pigeons and nap on clean sheets.

By the second night, we'd completely shed our former selves—the exhausted duo who had been navigating dog pee breaks, unpacked trauma, and people named Tory who think mushrooms have "consciousness." In Vegas, we were hot. We were untouchable. And we were getting our groove back.

After dinner at Virgil's that night, we walked the Strip again, this time slower, shoulders brushing, fingers interlaced like we were teenagers ditching curfew.

The desert heat had softened into something sultry, and the city lights flickered around us like they were in on our little secret.

Nacho was passed out in his sling—yes, a dog sling—tucked against Jon's chest like a fur baby kangaroo, dead to the world after too many barks and not enough naps.

We returned to our hotel room just before midnight, laughing as we kicked off our shoes and dropped the to-go box of ribs on the nightstand like it was precious cargo.

Jon set Nacho down gently on his dog bed, pulled the blackout curtains tight, and gave me a look I knew very well by now.

That look said: Come here. Slowly. And don't ask questions.

So I did. He caught me by the waist just before I made it past the foot of the bed, pulling me in so our hips aligned.

My hands slid up the back of his neck, fingers threading through hair that had grown just enough to tug on.

He kissed me once—softly—and then again, this time deeper until I forgot how to breathe properly.

He walked me backward until I hit the mattress.

Our laughter slowed. His hands found my hips.

My dress found the floor. There was no rush—just tension, built from days of flirting with disaster, dodging children, and surviving Idaho's own personal reality show.

His body pressed against mine, all heat and purpose, and it felt like we were finally taking back the hours we'd lost to chaos.

We didn't talk much. We didn't have to. The sheets twisted.

His mouth traced the line of my jaw, my collarbone, my chest. His voice in my ear—low and raspy—sent goosebumps across my entire body.

Every inch of him felt like a promise I'd almost forgotten I deserved.

After we were both satisfied from obviously coming too much, we lay tangled in a sweaty, satisfied heap of laughter, breathless and high off everything we'd reclaimed. Nacho snored through the whole thing. Rude.

By Sunday, we were running on a beautiful mix of exhaustion, overpriced coffee, and just enough adrenaline to pretend we might never leave.

Our morning began with room service—Jon ordered a “manly” omelet stuffed with three meats, and I ordered a huge breakfast burrito from Guy Fieri's restaurant because I fully intended to eat it like a woman who hadn't been publicly shamed by a crockpot of frozen meatballs just five days earlier.

Nacho, now fully adjusted to Vegas luxury, refused to drink from his travel bowl unless it was perched on a folded towel.

Diva. We spent most of the day lounging on the hotel casino floor, old-fashioned and bud light in hand, sunglasses on, looking like the cover of a couples' timeshare brochure but with way more sarcasm and less commitment.

Jon mostly looked up food and talked to Nacho.

I read a rom-com and people-watched. Nacho laid under my chair most of the time, wearing a tiny dog shirt that said “Las Vegas” because Jon thought he should have his own souvenir.

At one point, Jon leaned over and whispered, “I could stay here forever with you.” And for a moment, I believed we might.

We took our time packing up that evening, dragging our feet like teenagers who

didn't want to leave summer camp.

I shoved a few hotel shampoos into my toiletry bag for absolutely no reason other than spite.

Jon held up the leftover ribs like they were sacred artifacts and asked if I thought Nacho would care if we tried to bring them back.

We checked out just after sunset. The Las Vegas Strip lit up behind us like a farewell banner, and I took one last mental snapshot—me, Jon, and Nacho nestled in the backseat of our cherry red rental, ribs in the trunk, skin a little tanner, and not a single mentally unstable housemate in sight.

As we pulled onto the interstate, Jon reached for my hand and laced his fingers with mine.

“Back to Idaho Falls,” he said with mock doom in his voice .

I sighed. “Do you think they’ve moved on from cat poop yet?” He laughed.

“No chance.”

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But for the first time in days, I didn't feel dread creeping back in.

Because no matter how dysfunctional things might get, we had this.

Our inside jokes. Road trip playlists. Sweaty hotel sex.

Chinese takeout and shared glances that said you're my person even if this whole world burns down around us.

And of course, we had Nacho—snoring in the backseat, drooling on the same dog bed we'd brought from Idaho to Vegas like he was living his best damn life.

Vegas may have been temporary, but the way I felt driving away from it?

That felt dangerously close to permanent.

We didn't leave Vegas right away. Because nothing says mature adult couple like circling a Starbucks drive-thru three times arguing about whether Jon's phone or mine had the "real" GPS app.

Eventually, I took over and guided us out of the city, waving goodbye to the glowing strip in the rearview mirror like it was an ex we were still emotionally attached to.

Jon, sunglasses on, elbow resting out the window like a trucker in a country music video.

Nacho had claimed the middle seat in the back, snuggled into a nest of crumpled fast

food bags and a towel, blissfully unaware that his five- star vacation was officially over.

Meanwhile, I played DJ, which mostly involved scrolling through Spotify and skipping every song after four seconds because “this doesn’t match my road trip vibe.”

We took Route 93 out of Nevada, heading northeast toward Idaho with exactly zero enthusiasm.

“Do you think they’ll still be watching mushroom documentaries when we get back?” I asked as we passed a billboard for Alien Jerky and a shuttered brothel. Jon smirked.

“Odds are good. That or a conspiracy doc about how birds are government drones.”

“Honestly? At this point, I’d prefer that over another crockpot meatball sighting.”

We stopped for gas in Ely and ended up at a diner that hadn’t changed since the Nixon administration.

The waitress called Jon “sugar” and offered us “day-old pie” like it was an upgrade.

Jon, of course, accepted because he could not resist a baked good presented with vague regret.

I sipped my watery coffee and stared out the window at the endless flat nothingness, wondering how I’d ever return to a house where people weaponized suitcases with animal feces.

“You okay?” Jon asked, nudging my foot under the table.

“I’m just trying to mentally prepare for Patricia’s next episode,” I said.

“There’s only so much cat poop a woman can take before she spirals.” Jon chuckled and reached across the table for my hand.

“We’ll figure it out. Even if we have to camp in the backyard with Nacho and a bag of marshmallows.”

“Don’t tempt me. I could get into feral living.”

By the time we crossed into Idaho, it was late afternoon and the scenery had morphed into wide, golden plains with pine-covered hills rolling off in the distance like the backdrop of a sad indie film.

Nacho stretched out and farted dramatically in his sleep, filling the car with what can only be described as war crimes.

Jon nearly veered off the road trying to crack the window.

“He’s lucky he’s cute,” I muttered, sticking my head out like a golden retriever.

We rolled into Idaho Falls around 8:00 p.m. Sunday, sunburned and slightly hungover from our joy.

The closer we got to the house, the heavier the vibe became.

The laughter from Vegas was still there, but it had dimmed a little—like it knew it was about to be squashed by a woman who thinks horoscopes are a substitute for a background check.

As we turned onto Blake’s street, Jon slowed down.

“What are the odds it’s quiet inside?”

“About the same odds, Patricia has a PhD in anything but a delusion.”

We pulled into the driveway. I spotted Patricia through the front window, scrubbing something on the floor of the entryway like she was reenacting a Lifetime movie.

Her hair was in that short lesbian haircut which would have been more attractive on an actual attractive lesbian, she was wearing dish gloves, and she had a bottle of industrial cleaner in one hand and a vengeance-fueled stare in the other.

Jon and I exchanged a look. Oh no. As we stepped inside, she stood up, panting like she’d just finished an exorcism.

“Oh hey guys,” she said brightly.

“Just cleaning up the last of cat poop.” I blinked.

“I’m sorry. What?” She wiped her brow with a paper towel.

“Jeanine—Blake’s ex—put cat poop in Vance’s suitcase when she dropped him off. To trigger me. I’m finishing cleaning out the last bit of it” Jon made a choking noise. I just stared.

“Yup,” she continued, waving her gloved hand like she was swatting flies of delusion.

“She’s trying to destabilize me. I smelled it as soon as we walked in. Feral energy.”

“Oh,” I said, unsure if I was supposed to say something like that’s terrible or please seek help immediately.

Jon grabbed Nacho and bolted downstairs like a soldier retreating from an ambush.

I followed quickly, trying not to inhale whatever holy war was happening upstairs.

Once safely inside his room—which, thankfully, still smelled like Chinese takeout and our leftover Vegas cologne—I dropped my bag and collapsed on the bed.

“She’s unwell,” I said.

Jon kicked off his boots and flopped next to me.

“We’re getting our own place. No debates.”

“Yes. Like tomorrow.”

We both lay there in silence for a moment, staring at the ceiling as Nacho happily dug a sock out of Jon’s suitcase.

“You know what?” I said, rolling onto my side.

“Vegas might have ruined me for a normal life. I want turndown service. I want to shower without hearing someone scream about chakras.” Jon smiled and pulled me in close.

“Let’s go house hunting. Just you, me, and the fart goblin.”

“Deal.”

Outside the bedroom door, I could hear Patricia yelling at someone about how “the energy in this house is too reactive,” and someone else muttering about spiritual warfare.

Inside? It was calm. Quiet. Ours. I buried my face in Jon's chest and let myself breathe again.

We didn't find paradise in Vegas. But we'd found each other.

And with the right real estate listing, a Costco card, and enough soundproofing, we might just survive Idaho Falls too.

As night fell over Idaho Falls, the weird energy in the house began to thicken—like the air before a tornado, or the moment before Patricia opened her mouth and said anything.

Jon and I were curled up on the bed, half-watching some murder documentary and feeding Nacho leftover Chinese when my phone buzzed with a text from Patricia.

Great. Nothing like an unhinged message to ruin a murder documentary. Her text read:

“Vance just told me Jeanine tried to KICK down his bedroom door last month. This is abuse. I'm calling CPS.” I blinked at the screen. Then reread it, just in case I'd suddenly developed reading comprehension issues.

“Oh my god,” I muttered.

“She's lost it.” Jon looked over.

“What now?”

“She's accusing Jeanine of trying to break down Vance's door and wants to call CPS. Like she's Nancy Drew meets Judge Judy with a side of deeply unstable energy.” I tapped out a quick reply:

“I wouldn’t recommend that.” What I wanted to say was:

“Have you ever been evaluated by an actual mental health professional and not just your favorite Instagram meme account?”

I turned my phone over, my heart racing.

I’d already suspected Patricia wasn’t playing with a full deck, but this?

This was dangerous. And I wasn’t about to sit in a house with people this delusional without doing what any self-respecting woman with a background in fraud and risk management would do.

I opened up my private investigative apps and went full FBI.

Forget popcorn—I needed caffeine and a spreadsheet. I started with Tory.

“Oh no...” I whispered, mouth dry.

Because what I found? Was sickening. Tory—sweet, soft-spoken, mushroom documentary Tory—was a registered sex offender.

Not once. Not twice. But multiple times.

I stared at his mugshot, then down at the charges: Unlawful sexual conduct with three separate 14-year-old girls.

Multiple offenses. Across several states.

Within the last four years. My stomach turned.

“We have kids in this house,” I said out loud. Jon sat up instantly.

“What?” I turned my phone toward him.

“This is Tory. Charges. Mugshots. Repeat offenses. He’s been in and out of this house... with children.” Jon went silent. He read through it, jaw clenched .

“This is not okay,” he said.

“He needs to go.”

“Immediately.” Without waiting for another second, I created a group chat with Jon and Blake and dropped the bombshell. Screenshots. Links. Names. Dates. Everything. A beat later, Blake replied.

“WHAT THE F***.” Then another message:

“I’ll tell Lauren and Tory they need to go. Tonight.”

Finally. At least this circus was losing two clowns. And one predator. I sat back, breathing hard, heart still thumping with adrenaline and rage. Jon rubbed his face, clearly shaken.

“I can’t believe this,” I said.

“They just let him come here as he pleased? With zero background checks? Like it’s a commune for the criminally irresponsible?” Jon nodded grimly.

“We’re getting out of here, babe. House.

Apartment. Tent. I don’t care. We’re out.

” I looked at him—steady, furious, protective—and exhaled for what felt like the first time all day.

There was still chaos upstairs. But down here?

We had each other. We had a dog who didn’t talk back.

And we had a plan. Tomorrow, the real escape would begin.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:13 am

The Patricia Situation

Song : Good News - Shaboozey

Meanwhile, the house felt quieter—mostly because Jeanine had pulled the ultimate boss move the night before and picked up her kids.

One phone call from Blake telling her a registered sex offender was sharing a hallway with her children, and she drove straight down from Montana like a caffeine-fueled Terminator.

No small talk. No pleasantries. Just a text:

“Send them outside. Now.”

Valentina and Vance didn’t even get a proper goodbye, but I didn’t blame them.

If I had a ride out of that three-ring circus, I’d have jumped in the backseat like it was the last chopper out of Saigon.

So naturally, with the threat level slightly reduced, Jon and I decided to seize the opportunity to pretend our lives were normal for two hours.

We opted for Texas Roadhouse because nothing says “emotional recovery” like cinnamon butter and steak the size of a toddler.

Blake was working late at the dealership down the street, probably trying to sell a

used Kia while pretending his life wasn't currently an episode of Dateline: Domestic Disaster.

We took Jon's truck and Nacho came along, lounging in the backseat like he, too, needed comfort food and a break from adult lunacy.

We slid into a booth and ordered like we'd just completed military service—fried pickles, steaks, baked potatoes, and sweet tea that could dissolve your teeth.

We were mid-bite, savoring the rare silence when Jon's phone buzzed.

He glanced at the screen, froze, and then looked at me with the face of a man who'd just seen a ghost... or maybe a bill from the IRS.

"What?" I asked, already fearing the worst. He flipped the phone toward me.

A text from Blake:

"Hey, have you guys been smoking meth and weed at the house?" I nearly choked on my fried pickle.

"Excuse me—what?!" Jon blinked. I blinked. Nacho sneezed because even the dog couldn't believe the sheer stupidity radiating from that message. We said it at the same time, deadpan as if we'd been possessed by the same sarcastic ghost:

"Patricia."

Of course, it was. The woman had been suspiciously quiet since the whole Tory-the-predator scandal broke. And now, here she was, pulling an Oscar-worthy performance as "concerned housemate" while whispering meth accusations to Blake like we were characters in a Breaking Bad fanfic.

“She’s trying to isolate him,” I said, stabbing my potato with the fury of a woman who’s seen this exact narcissistic play before.

“She’s Mark 2.0. Make everyone else look like the problem so she can be the hero-slash-victim-slash-only one left standing.” Jon nodded, jaw tight.

“She’s doing the thing.”

“The thing!” I agreed.

“The gaslight-and-burn maneuver. It’s like she’s got a manual titled *How to Manipulate Emotionally Vulnerable Men in Ten Easy Steps* .”

“Should we respond?” Jon asked, already regretting asking.

“I mean... I could send screenshots of her fake job history, her crockpot meatballs, and her child’s bare hands in the Oreo bag—but maybe we just let it ride.”

“I can’t believe she told him meth.”

“Why not go full soap opera?” I snorted.

“Why stop at meth? Why not say we’re running a dogfighting ring in the basement and laundering money through Uber Eats?” Jon grinned, but it was the tired smile of a man who’d just accepted that his life had veered into reality TV territory.

“She’s spiraling,” I added.

“Jeanine took the kids, Tory’s gone, and her fantasy cult is collapsing. She’s losing control.”

“She knows her days are numbered,” Jon said. I looked at him seriously.

“We have to move.” He nodded.

“Agreed. I’m already looking. Preferably somewhere with no felons, functioning adults, and ideally—Target curbside pickup.”

“And a nice yard for Nacho,” I added.

“And no one who’s ever been banned from living neara Chuck E. Cheese.”

We clinked glasses, toasted to our escape plan, and spent the rest of dinner pretending we lived in a different universe.

One where roommates didn’t fake careers, gaslight boyfriends, or text you accusations straight out of a narcotics task force report.

By dessert, Jon was already looking at rentals.

I was checking flights. And Nacho? He was curled under the table, living his best life and probably thinking, Y’all should’ve listened to me from day one.

We were halfway through devouring our shared basket of Texas Roadhouse rolls—Jon covered in crumbs, me blissfully carb-drunk—when he suddenly looked up and said, “Hey... want to go visit your mo m and dad in Texas?” I blinked at him, a bit of butter on my thumb, wondering if he’d just read my mind or maybe saw the SOS blinking behind my eyes.

“And then,” he added, voice low and sincere, “we find a house, just for us. We come back here for what’s left and move into a real home.

No chaos. No cult. Just us.” I stared at him.

God, this man. Where had he been all my life?

Oh, right—serving in the military and living in Idaho with a cast of characters that made the Manson family look organized.

Still, in that moment, I’d never loved him more.

Not because he said exactly what I needed to hear, but because he meant it. All of it.

We drove back to the house feeling like Bonnie and Clyde if they’d traded in crime sprees for emotionally responsible cohabitation goals.

When we got home, the silence was golden.

No screeching children, no chaotic shouting, no smell of crockpot meatballs gone wrong.

Patricia, as usual, was nowhere to be found—probably rotting away in Blake’s room like a Disney villain in hibernation mode.

No job. No errands. Just pure, undiluted madness marinating in stale air.

I called my mom from the basement. She answered on the second ring.

“Delilah? ”

“Mommy, we’re coming to Texas.”

I gave her the rundown. Tory the predator, Patricia the lunatic, meth accusations, the

whole psychological dumpster fire. She didn't even hesitate.

"Oh my God. Please come here. Both of you. Stay as long as you need." Relief hit me like a Xanax to the soul.

She didn't even ask follow-up questions, because when your daughter says she's living in a house with someone who can't legally walk past a middle school, you don't wait for context—you just put the guest sheets in the wash.

Jon and I settled into the quiet basement room, the silence now tinged with relief.

We were finally escaping the Twilight Zone.

At least, I thought so—until Jon's phone rang.

It was Blake. He took the call in the hallway.

When he returned, he looked like he'd just seen a ghost tap dance across the living room in a meth-fueled rage.

"Okay," Jon said carefully, "I need to tell you something, but promise not to laugh until I finish." That's never a good start. I nodded.

"Blake says Patricia is going to call the police." I raised an eyebrow.

"For what? Cooking emotionally traumatizing meals?" He sighed.

"She says we've been smoking meth and cocaine at the house." I choked on my spit.

"WHAT?!"

“And...” He held up a hand like a traffic cop at a crime scene. “And she says you are running a sex ring in Texas. From Idaho.” I stared at him. For a good, solid three seconds, I thought he had to be joking. I laughed. Loudly. I laughed so hard I wheezed. Until I saw his face. He was dead serious.

“Oh my god, you’re not kidding.” My voice went flat.

“You’re not kidding.” Jon shook his head slowly.

“She told Blake she’s going to report us.”

“What is she, a failed improv student?” I muttered.

“This woman just woke up and thought, ‘You know what’s believable? An international meth-and-sex-ring operation managed out of a Mormon community home in Idaho Falls.’”

“And then,” Jon added like it was the final punchline in a cosmic joke, “Blake said to tell you to stop texting her.”

“TEXTING HER?” I barked.

“I haven’t texted that woman since she told me she was going to call CPS on Jeanine for allegedly kicking down a door!

” But now I second-guessed myself. I opened my messages.

Scrolled back. Nope. Nothing. Nada. Zip.

One text: ‘I wouldn’t recommend that’—in response to her trying to weaponize CPS like it was her personal backup dancer.

“That’s it,” I said, shoving the phone at Jon like it was exhibit A in a criminal trial.

“I literally told her not to do something insane and now she’s out here acting like I’m the one who’s got a Breaking Bad lab in the garage and a brothel in Amarillo.” Jon looked exhausted, rubbing his forehead.

“She’s trying to make us the problem before we expose her as the problem.” I sighed, dropping onto the bed.

“She’s so deep in delusion, she’s probably got a mood board somewhere labeled ‘Revenge Scenarios.’” Jon climbed in beside me, wrapping an arm around my waist.

“We’ll pack tomorrow. Just ignore her. We’ve got Texas on the horizon and a house to find.”

“You’re right,” I muttered.

“But you know what? First, I’m ordering Chinese food again.

Because if I’m going down for fake drug crimes, I’m going down full of General Tso’s chicken and fried rice.

” We both burst out laughing. Nacho curled up at our feet and gave a tiny bark like even he was ready to file a restraining order.

We had one foot out the door. And if Patricia wanted to call the police, I hoped they’d come with a straitjacket—because they were going to need it.

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Neither of us got a wink of sleep that night.

Not with Patricia—affectionately dubbed Flabby Patty Crazy Pants—stomping around upstairs like a drunk elephant in orthopedic flip-flops.

Jon gave her that name after witnessing a truly harrowing moment on the back patio.

The woman had declared war on bras, and gravity was winning.

Those things swung low like two weary travelers just trying to get home.

I swear Jon still flinches when he hears the words “free spirit.” He won’t even walk past Victoria’s Secret anymore.

Our bedroom—or what had become our war bunker—reeked of exhaustion and mild despair.

We had the ceiling fan going full blast to drown out the creaks from above, but no luck.

Every floorboard groan was a jump scare.

IDTV was on, naturally, because nothing says “relax” like listening to narration about husbands who murder their wives in remote cabins.

Nacho was wedged between us like a furry Switzerland, huffing dramatically every time one of us shifted. He was over it. We all were.

We finally dozed off around 2 a.m., but not before Jon whispered, “I swear if I hear one more thump from upstairs, I’m calling in an airstrike.”

By 7 a.m., I was wide awake and feral. The sun sliced through the blinds like it was personally offended we were still there.

I started packing with the manic energy of someone trying to outrun a natural disaster.

Four suitcases. Two giant tubs. Clothes, toiletries, my travel steamer, everything I’ve accumulated since being with Jon for 6 months.

Jon’s “emergency beard kit,” and all the good snacks Patricia’s kids kept trying to steal when they came over to “do homework” Yeah, sure. Homework.

The air inside the house was heavy—like it had absorbed every argument, passive-aggressive sigh, and microwave beep from the last month.

You could practically taste the dysfunction.

Jon moved around like a man possessed, assembling cardboard boxes like he was building a fort to emotionally hide inside.

I caught him fiddling with the keypad lock on his bedroom door, testing it three times like a dad leaving for vacation in a neighborhood full of raccoons with opposable thumbs.

“I just don’t want to come back and find a meth lab in here,” he muttered, tightening the bolt.

“Reasonable,” I said, tossing another pair of socks into a suitcase.

“She did ask me last week if we ‘happen to know a guy who’s good with rats.’ But, like, she winked when she said it.” Jon paled.

“I’m not coming back unless I have legal counsel.” He left to pick up the rental—thank God we weren’t taking his truck, which at this point smelled like wet gym socks and dog farts—and called Blake before he walked out the door. I only heard his side of the conversation:

“Hey, man. Just letting you know we’re heading to Texas for a bit. Yeah. Couple weeks. Maybe a month. Just until we feel... emotionally safe.” Pause .

“Yeah, I left you half the mortgage. So you can’t say we ghosted you.” Another pause. Then Jon ended the call with a tight smile and muttered, “He’s surprisingly chill for someone living with chaos on two legs.”

Meanwhile, I was double-checking the house like I was being graded. Doors locked. Candles are blown out. The leftover Chinese from last night was tossed so it wouldn’t become sentient while we were gone. Patricia, nowhere in sight... Coward narcissistic bitch

The place looked oddly peaceful in the morning light, which felt rude considering the psychological damage it had caused us.

It was like the house knew we were leaving and was putting on its best “no, stay!” face.

Too late. I wasn’t sticking around to become the next IDTV story.

I’d already picked out my villain monologue for the reenactment.

Jon pulled up in the rental—a sensible Chevy SUV that screamed, “We’ve given up

on cool and chosen survival.” He loaded the car while Nacho watched suspiciously from the open garage, clearly wondering if he was being shipped off again or if he was just along for the drama, as usual.

Jon slammed the trunk shut, we looked at each other, and without saying anything, nodded like two people escaping a cult with only a carry-on and a shared trauma bond.

Texas, here we come. Bring on my parents, an AC that works, and a home that doesn’t feel like a haunted real estate listing and if Flabby Patty tries to call us while we’re gone?

We’re changing our names and moving to Canada. That bitch is fucking nuts.....

Jon looked a little misty-eyed, the way a man does when he's trying hard not to feel feelings but they're elbowing their way to the surface anyway. This had been his home for three years, tucked into the folds of Idaho Falls, where he built a life with someone he’d served with in the Navy—a guy he didn’t just call a friend, but a brother.

And now? That so-called brother was playing house with a woman who could pass for the villain in a mid-budget Lifetime thriller.

I could only imagine what Jon was feeling, standing there with his jaw tight and eyes scanning the driveway like it might explain how Blake had gone from navy brother to whipped minion.

He probably felt abandoned, maybe even betrayed.

And yeah, I wanted to hug him. But I also wanted to slash Patricia’s tires.

Emotional growth and impulse control—it's a balance.

Blake, for his part, acted like a human shrug, completely oblivious to the fact that his new live-in nightmare had driven a wedge between him and Jon deeper than the Grand Canyon.

Patricia had wormed her way into every crevice of Blake's life like mold in a poorly ventilated bathroom.

And the worst part? He didn't even notice.

It was like watching a man proudly show off his new chains while insisting he's never been freer.

He was even dumb enough to buy her a car—with his credit, no less.

Like, full-on co-signed for a woman who thinks astrology is a personality type and hasn't paid for her shampoo since Obama was in office.

I mean, come on. She's clearly using him, and he's just standing there handing her the keys like it's a Hallmark movie instead of a slow-burning horror movie.

This is going to end badly one day and we weren't going to be around to see it...

. But we weren't about to stick around and host an intervention.

Nope. We had an 18-hour road trip ahead of us—Idaho Falls to Texas—and we'd decided to take it slow.

No more rushing from emotional landmine to emotional landmine. This time, we were going to breathe.

Jon packed up his camping gear with a kind of hopeful defiance like maybe the great outdoors could detox him from all the Patricia-shaped toxicity in the air.

I didn't say it, but I loved this plan. The idea of stopping somewhere under the stars, just the two of us (and Nacho, obviously), eating canned chili by fire and pretending we were unbothered by the emotional carnage we just left behind—it sounded like heaven.

So, we hit the road. A man with a bruised heart, a woman with sarcasm as her emotional support system, and a dog who honestly was just thrilled to be wherever snacks were. Texas was our next major stop.

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The Long Road Home

Song : Home - Edward Sharpe

The first rule of fleeing Idaho Falls with your emotionally singed Navy veteran boyfriend and a manipulative Chihuahua with Betty Davis eyes: pack snacks.

The second? Don't look back. We hit the road just after sunrise, the Chevy SUV packed to the brim with four suitcases, two plastic tubs of who-knows-what, a suspiciously over-prepared camping kit, and Nacho—snuggly wedged into his pet bed in the back like a tiny, overpaid travel critic.

His expression screamed “About time” as if he hadn’t spent the last week sighing dramatically while Patricia banged around upstairs like a wine-drunk raccoon in a full moon ritual.

The air was crisp as we pulled out of the neighborhood, a clean kind of cold that only existed early in the morning before life had time to disappoint you.

The sky above Idaho Falls was a watercolor blend of soft purples and sleepy oranges, and just for a second—I thought, This place could be beautiful.

And then I remembered Patricia existed here and snapped out of it.

Jon kept his eyes on the road, jaw tight, hands gripping the steering wheel like it had personally wronged him.

He hadn't said much since locking the door to the house, just handed me a thermos of his freshly made sweet tea and nodded like we were robbing a bank instead of casually moving halfway across the country.

"Any specific plan for the next eighteen hours?" I asked, sipping the sugar water Jon made.

"Or are we just driving until Nacho starts hallucinating?" Jon shrugged, the corners of his mouth twitching like he wanted to smile but his soul was still processing the trauma of Blake's girlfriend trying to manifest mushrooms in the backyard and meth in his room.

This has to be affecting his PTSD in a major way .

"I figured we'd take it slow. Camp somewhere along the way. Maybe near water. Nacho likes lakes, right?" Nacho snorted in response.

He was currently glaring at us in the rearview mirror, his head slightly tilted like he was wondering how he got stuck with two emotional disasters who forgot his premade chicken livers and rice meals in the fridge.

We drove in silence for a while, the scenery gradually shifting from small-town backyards and gas stations with suspiciously low hot dog prices to wide open stretches of highway.

Fields stretched out on either side of us like lazy green blankets, dotted with the occasional barn or broken-down tractor that looked like it hadn't moved since the 80s.

After about six hours of driving, one increasingly passive-aggressive road trip playlist, and three bathroom stops (one for Nacho, two for me), we finally veered off

the highway and pulled into a state park in Utah.

Jon said he found it on some military camping app with suspiciously enthusiastic reviews—“peaceful,” “secluded,” “only mildly haunted!”—and it was nestled right along the edge of a lake that shimmered like melted glass under the late afternoon sun.

The air smelled like pine and fresh dirt, and somewhere in the distance, a family of ducks was losing their minds. It was perfect. Like, almost too perfect. The kind of place you’d find in a true crime podcast right before someone disappears during a couple’s “healing weekend.”

We made a pit stop at a little roadside market right before where it looked like it hadn’t changed since 1989— complete with hand-painted signs, a cashier named Earl who looked suspiciously like a retired outlaw, and a cat in the bread aisle like he owned the place.

But, against all odds, the produce was fresh and the meat section wasn’t giving murder vibes, so we stocked up.

Hot dogs. Eggs. A gorgeous slab of salmon that looked like it belonged in a Pinterest photo.

Chicken breast for Nacho—because His Royal Grumpiness eats clean.

Disposable plates, red cups, two bundles of charcoal, potatoes you can just “heat up” and all the hotdog bread and “fixins” one could need, some sodas, and a bottle of whiskey that was going to make me feel like I had emotional depth later and a bag of ice.

Jon grabbed Bud Light, naturally, because the man is consistent if nothing else.

By the time we rolled into the campsite, the sky had shifted into that soft, reddish-blue haze that makes everything look cinematic.

The lake shimmered like it was trying to show off, and Nacho took one look around and did a triumphant zoomie through the pine needles like yes, I approve of this wilderness nonsense now that there's meat involved.

Jon set up the little charcoal grill like he'd been personally trained by Gordon Ramsay.

I tried to help but mostly just got in the way and asked unnecessary questions like, "Do you think bears can smell salmon from five miles away?" and "If I accidentally start a grease fire, is that covered by rental insurance?" All solid questions.

He didn't answer. He just gave me that half-smile, half-sigh look he always gives me when he's internally questioning his life choices but too in love to back out now.

Once the coals were glowing and popping like tiny fireworks, he laid out the food with the reverence of a man conducting a sacred ritual.

First the chicken for Nacho—is seasoned lightly, because Jon is extra and insists the dog has a sensitive stomach.

Then the salmon, skin-side down, seasoned with a little lemon and black pepper we found in the bottom of the grocery bag like fate had planned this.

The hot dogs went on last, hissing like they had secrets.

I poured whiskey into a red cup like a grown-up college dropout, took a sip, and immediately regretted not grabbing ice from the cooler he prepared. Still, the burn felt kind of poetic.

“Remind me again why this isn’t a honeymoon?” I asked, flopping down into a camp blanket I bought at the store like I hadn’t had a good stretch since leaving Idaho Falls. Jon didn’t even look up.

“Because there’s no cake and Nacho is the third wheel.” Nacho huffed from his spot by the fire, eyes locked on the grill like a tiny food inspector. If that chicken didn’t come out perfectly juicy, there was going to be a Yelp review in the form of passive-aggressive barking.

When the food was finally ready, it felt like something out of a rom-com montage.

The salmon flaked perfectly, buttery and soft, with just enough crisp on the skin to make it feel fancy even though we were eating it off paper plates, the potatoes cooked in such an incredible way in the foil that it took me back a little.

The hot dogs were charred in all the right places—smoky, salty, and just nostalgic enough to make me feel like a kid on a summer vacation I never had.

And the chicken? Jon cut it into little pieces, cooled it down, and served it to Nacho like a waiter at a five-star dog bistro.

Nacho ate it like he’d just emerged from a famine.

“This is good,” I said between bites, surprised.

“Like, dangerously good. Like... if I’d known you could cook like this before, I’d have moved in months ago.” Damn, I sound like Patricia... Stop it, Delilah. The crazy has officially rubbed off...

Jon cracked open a Bud Light, leaned back on the blanket next to me and gave me that relaxed grin he only wears when he’s far enough away from Patricia’s orbit to

breathe again. “You did move in. You just didn’t realize it.” I rolled my eyes but smiled anyway.

The air smelled like firewood and grilled meat and salt from the lake. The stars were just starting to blink into the sky above, and for the first time in a long time, everything felt... easy again. It wasn’t a honeymoon. But it was something better .

“Do you think Blake even realizes she’s ruining his life?” I asked, tossing Nacho a jerky treat that he caught with the skill of an emotionally unavailable linebacker.

Jon shrugged, “He doesn’t want to. It’s easier to believe she’s just quirky than admit he threw away a solid friendship for someone who thinks gluten is a conspiracy.

” I took a sip of my whiskey and let the dark sky wash over me.

The lake rippled gently, golden light catching in every wave, the trees whispering secrets above us.

It was... peaceful. Strangely so. Like the kind of peaceful that makes you suspicious that something is lurking nearby.

“You think this place has bears?” I asked, immediately ruining the mood.

“Because I swear I saw a TikTok where a girl tried to pee behind a bush and got chased back to her car in her thong.” Jon raised an eyebrow.

“I packed bear spray.” I blinked.

“Is that like pepper spray but for people who believe in camping?” He tossed a crumpled-up napkin at me.

“It’s actual bear spray. And yes, it works.”

Nacho barked once, then trotted over to the tent and promptly climbed into our military-grade sleeping bag like he paid the rental fee. He was done. Checked out. Living his best tiny dictator life.

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As the night lingered on, we ended up curled up by the fire on the blanket, Nacho came back out of the tent to lay with us, the stars spilling across the sky like someone had thrown glitter over black velvet.

We didn't talk much—just sat in silence, breathing, healing, slowly remembering what life felt like before we'd been emotionally mugged by a woman who claimed deodorant was “oppressive.” And even though the ground beneath us was hard and the bugs weren't aggressive to my surprise, I was this close to starting a fight over who forgot to pack Nacho's premade liver dinners but there was peace to it.

A strange, delicate little pocket of peace.

Jon looked over at me and smiled, “I'm glad we're here.

” I didn't say anything. I just nudged his foot with mine and handed him another beer.

Because I was glad too. Even if we were two messes on a runaway camping trip with an opinionated dog and emotional baggage stuffed into a rental SUV, I wouldn't have chosen anyone else to run away with.

That night by the fire was the kind of night that makes you wonder why people live in cities at all.

The stars were stupidly bright. The fire cracked and popped, throwing light across Jon's face, and for a moment I forgot that just days ago we were living underneath the rhythmic stomping and chaos magic of Patricia “Flabby Patty” and her spiritual warfare yoga that she also forced big burly Blake to try with her.

Nacho was still curled up between us like a tiny space heater, snoring softly with the occasional twitchy dream leg.

I sipped the last of my whiskey and let the heat of the fire and the drink melt the tension out of my shoulders.

Jon hadn't said much, just leaned back on the blanket beer in hand, staring into the flames like he was finally starting to exhale after weeks of white-knuckling his sanity.

"This doesn't suck," I said finally, kicking my foot toward his under the little folding table we had our food on. He gave me a slow grin.

"Not even a little."

With the fire crackling down to its last glowing embers and the air thick with the smell of grilled salmon, pine, and a hint of whiskey breath, I felt more at home than I had in a long, long time.

Jon wrapped the leftovers like they were national treasures, tucking the foil parcels carefully into the cooler with a kind of precision that made me weirdly swoony.

We doused the fire with water until it hissed in protest, then shuffled into the tent—Nacho leading the way like he owned the lease on our campsite.

Under the soft rustle of Utah pines and a sky littered with stars, we all collapsed onto our sleeping bag in a happy, smoky pile and passed out like a couple of overfed woodland creatures.

The next morning, we woke up tangled in each other like a pile of limbs and campfire smoke.

My hair smelled like charcoal and regret, and Nacho was aggressively licking my cheek like we'd overslept our shift at his imaginary office.

I pulled myself out of the sleeping bag and stumbled toward the cooler like a gremlin in search of caffeine.

Breakfast was hot dogs sliced up with scrambled eggs—don't judge, it's called camp cuisine—and somehow it hit the spot harder than a five-star brunch.

The eggs were fluffy, the hot dogs crispy, and Jon had his usual gas station coffee.

We sat there in the folding chairs we brought from the garage, greasy paper plates on our laps, and somewhere in the distance, a loon made a noise so hauntingly dramatic it sounded like it had just seen Patricia's aura.

"I kind of don't want to leave," I said, licking ketchup off my thumb. Jon looked out at the lake and nodded.

"Want to stay another night?" I didn't even hesitate.

"God yes. Nacho needs more nature therapy." Nacho barked once in agreement, which I took as legally binding. So, we stayed.

We spent the day walking the trail that hugged the lake, weaving through tall pines and stepping over rocks like seasoned outdoorsy types (me, tripping every third step while Jon pretended not to notice).

The air was fresh and cool, birds chirped in the kind of perfect harmony that made me hum along with them, and the lake itself glistened like it had a built-in Instagram filter.

At one point, Jon turned to me, eyes sparkling, and asked, “Think I can fish?” I blinked.

“Are you asking for permission or just letting me know you’re about to enter your Bass Pro Dad era?” He grinned and pulled a collapsible rod out of the back of the SUV like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat.

He fished for an hour or so while I laid out on the blanket reading trashy romance on my Kindle and pretending I wasn’t checking him out every time he turned his back.

Eventually, he caught a rainbow trout—slippery and shimmering and surprisingly not horrifying-looking.

He held it up like a trophy, beaming like a kid with his first science fair ribbon.

“Dinner,” he said proudly.

“I hope you know how to clean that thing because I’m not emotionally equipped for fish guts.”

We picked up some fresh corn and asparagus from a roadside stand just outside the park—run by a sweet older couple who gave us a discount after Jon told them we were “on a romantic camping getaway,” which is possibly the most generous euphemism for our escape-from-hell tour.

Back at the campsite, Jon grilled the trout with lemon and a little olive oil he’d packed (because apparently, my man is that prepared), threw the corn right on the coals, and pan-fried the asparagus with some leftover chicken seasoning.

The result? Unreasonably good. Like... “we could charge people for this” good.

We ate in silence, save for the occasional moan of food joy, and Nacho got a few grilled asparagus pieces tossed in with his dog food like the little prince he is.

After dinner, we hit the campsite showers which were... not the Ritz, but after two days in the wild, I would've happily bathed in a bucket. Jon emerged shirtless, towel slung low, and I swear I nearly proposed then and there. Camping may not be sexy, but that? That was objectively hot.

Back at the tent, we got a little drunk on what was left of the whiskey and Bud Light, and things...

escalated. Let's just say the tent walls were tested for structural integrity, Nacho stayed in the tent by choice, and I discovered that pine-scented shampoo is weirdly arousing when used on the right person.

We kissed like we were making up for lost time, whispered things we didn't quite say aloud in daylight, and got tangled up in the kind of slow, breathless intimacy that feels more like remembering than discovering.

I could stare at this man's penis all night long...

The next morning, the air was chilly and damp with dew, and the fire pit had gone cold.

I woke up sore in all the best ways, hair a mess, wearing Jon's hoodie because my clothes were still in a crumpled pile somewhere by the tent zipper.

We cooked up another batch of scrambled eggs—this time with the last two hot dogs sliced in for good measure—and sat quietly while Nacho watched a squirrel from a safe but judgmental distance.

Packing up took less than an hour. Jon folded the tent like a military Tetris master, and I made sure we didn't leave behind anything except good smells and a slightly emotionally scarred squirrel community.

We hit the road with twelve hours left on our trip to Texas.

The sun was rising behind us, turning the mountains soft and golden.

I glanced over at Jon, who looked... lighter.

Not fixed, not perfect, but better. I reached for his hand across the center console, twining my fingers through his.

He squeezed gently, his eyes still on the road.

"Next stop?" I asked. He smiled.

"Home."

And I realized—I wasn't just riding shotgun on a road trip.

I was building something with him. Somewhere between Idaho and Texas, in the silence of pine trees and the sizzle of campfire trout, we'd started writing a new chapter.

Together. Nacho sneezed in the backseat and promptly curled up on top of our laundry pile.

Twelve hours left. Just twelve more hours in a car that smelled like trail mix, wet dog, and leftover campfire dreams. We were sun-kissed, slightly crusty, running on gas station coffee and bad decisions—but somehow still grinning.

We drove in comfortable silence, save for Nacho's occasional huffy sigh from the back seat every time Jon missed a turn or I took too long choosing a playlist. Somewhere near Albuquerque, my lower back gave me the middle finger and Jon's knee started cracking like an old haunted door, so we pulled into a La Quinta Inn for the night.

It wasn't glamorous, but it had a real shower, two fluffy beds, and air conditioning that didn't sound like it was dying.

Jon let Nacho take the bed closest to the window (because of course he did), and we passed out watching Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives while eating KFC we picked up on the way in.

The next morning, we were back on the road by 9 a.m., smelling like soap and optimism. I made us stop at three different gas stations—each one sketchier than the last—because my bladder works on toddler time, and Jon graciously refrained from making fun of me (to my face).

At some point in East Texas, hunger hit us like a semi-truck.

We saw a Saltgrass Steakhouse off the interstate and swerved into the parking lot like our lives depended on it.

I devoured a ribeye like I'd been raised by wolves, and Jon ordered chicken-fried steak the size of a Texas license plate.

We brought Nacho the grilled chicken breast from the “not for dogs but we'll pretend” portion of the menu.

He licked his mouth, then farted once—loudly—and passed out in the back seat once again.

By the time we crossed into Houston city limits, the sun was sinking behind the horizon in a gold-and-pink haze.

Traffic was its usual chaos symphony—honks, brake lights, and one man who seemed to be arguing with his steering wheel.

Jon drove with quiet focus, his hand resting on my thigh, while I navigated and pointed out old landmarks like I was leading a very nostalgic, very judgmental tour.

And then, there it was. My parents' house on the lake.

Stately, sun-soaked, and radiating that unmistakable aura of Trini household energy—you could practically smell the curry and hear the soca music before we even pulled into the driveway.

The water behind the house shimmered in the fading light, dock lights twinkling, the porch chairs still creaking in the breeze like they remembered me. Jon parked, turned the engine off, and we both sat there for a second in silence.

“Ready?” I asked, my heart suddenly thumping like I was about to introduce him to royalty. He gave me a crooked smile. “Do I have to take my shoes off?” I laughed.

“If my mom’s in a good mood, maybe not. But don’t say anything bad about her pelau and you’ll live.”

Nacho popped his head up, tail thumping wildly, like finally, a proper house. We stepped out of the car, bags in hand, road-worn and sun-drunk and smelling like every state we’d driven through.

As we walked up to that big warm door, Jon reached out, took my hand, and squeezed.

Home. Texas. It wasn't perfect. It wasn't quiet.

But it was a relief—and now, maybe, his too.

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A Texas Welcome

Song : Texas - Blake Shelton

My redneck man was about to meet my Trinidadian parents.

This was either going to be a hilarious cultural collision worthy of a Netflix special...

or the beginning of Jon's slow and painful demise via passive-aggressive comments.

Either way, I was ready—with freshly waxed eyebrows, a tight grip on his hand, and a prayer to the ancestral gods of curry powder and good first impressions.

Jon, of course, looked about as nervous as a golden retriever in a duck pond—relaxed, mildly curious, and completely unaware he was about to be psychologically strip-searched by two sixty-something Trinis who took parenting, and cooking, very seriously.

I took a deep breath. The air smelled like freshly mowed grass, hibiscus blooms, and impending judgment.

I turned to Jon, "You ready?" I asked, brushing a bit of dog hair off his shirt that had probably come from Nacho, our four-legged, fur-coated emotional support chaos machine.

"Babe," he drawled, grinning, "I survived basic training, your road trip playlist, and Patricia. I think I can handle your folks." Famous last words.

The front door swung open before we even made it halfway to the ring doorbell.

My mom stood there in all her curry-scented glory, her house dress crisp, her brows arched with the power of a thousand unspoken opinions.

Beside her, my dad hovered like a tall, quiet watchdog with a steel-trap mind and a suspicious squint aimed directly at Jon.

“Hi, Mommy!” I said, trying to sound casual and not like someone leading her boyfriend into the lion’s den.

“Father.”

“Look how long you take to come home!” my mom said, enveloping me in a hug that smelled like cumin and garlic.

“You lose weight? You eating properly on the road? What happen to your skin? You not using that blue soap I give you?” And then her eyes shifted to Jon.

“This is him?” I opened my mouth to speak, but she was already circling him like a seasoned customs agent. Jon, to his credit, smiled politely and extended his hand.

“Ma’am. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Your daughter talks about you all the time.” My mother hugged him, gave him a once-over, nodded slowly, and turned back to the kitchen.

“Nice to meet you, Jon,” she said.

“Ah make curry chicken.” Translation: You’ll earn my respect one bite at a time, cowboy.

Inside, the house smelled like heaven and impending heartburn.

The living room was just as I remembered—plush caramel sofas with seasonal throw pillows, fresh cut flowers that had somehow become permanent fixtures, and my mom’s shrine-like collection of porcelain animals judging us silently from every available surface.

We followed the scent trail into the kitchen, where a full Trini spread awaited like the opening credits of a food documentary: golden roti piled high and soft, curry channa glistening with coconut oil, baigan choka perfectly charred, and the crown jewel—Mom’s legendary curry chicken, thick and fragrant with a kick that could bring tears to your eyes and cleanse your soul in one bite.

Jon, who had once considered Taco Bell to be “exotic,” looked like he’d just walked into the promised land.

“You hungry?” my mom asked him, still smiling.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

“Smells amazing.” Five minutes later, he was elbow-deep in roti and licking his fingers like a man who had found religion.

“He eating like he grow up in Barataria,” my mom said to my dad, who grunted noncommittally and kept sipping his freshly made sorrel.

After dinner came the interrogation—Trini parent style. Which meant slow, methodical questions delivered between sips of tea and long, appraising stares.

“So... Jon,” my dad started, leaning back in his chair.

“What do you do for work again?”

“I’m retired navy, sir.” My dad nodded.

“Mmm. You ever plan to leave Idaho?”

“Not really,” Jon said.

“I like it quiet.” My mother tilted her head.

“So what you want with my daughter, who grew up with noise, traffic, and seasoning?”

I sipped my tea and pretended to study the pattern on the tablecloth.

Jon took a breath and said, “Well, ma’am, I love her and I think she’s the funniest, smartest, prettiest person I’ve ever met.

I don’t care where we live, long as it’s together.

” Cue dramatic pause. My mother blinked.

My dad’s eyebrows briefly disappeared into his hairline. I nearly choked on my ginger tea.

“Well,” my mother said, still smiling, “at least he not shy.”

After another round of food with a dessert of coconut drops and awkward silence, I gave Jon the tour.

“This is the theater room,” I said, clicking on the remote.

“Where my dad insists on watching Marvel movies and soccer.” Jon looked around at the massive screen, the surround sound, and the wall-to-wall La-Z-Boys.

“He got surround sound?” he asked, eyes lighting up.

“And Dolby Atmos? I could live in here.”

“Good,” I said.

“Because you might be living here if you flunk this visit.” Next stop: the boat dock, where we watched the sun begin to dip over the lake like a mango melting into syrup. The water glistened, still and lazy, as dragonflies flitted around us and Nacho barked at absolutely nothing, per usual.

“This is beautiful,” Jon said softly.

“Thanks,” I replied.

“My dad calls it his ‘escape from women. But we still show up anyway.’”

Back inside, it was time for the real test—the dog mafia.

Ranger, my ancient chihuahua-dachshund mix, was curled up like a grumpy cinnamon bun in his usual chair.

He opened one eye, sniffed, and went back to sleep.

Lilo, my mom’s loudmouthed black chihuahua, let out a shriek that could shatter glass the moment we walked in and then there was Cleopatra Belle, my dad’s twelve-year-old brindle corgi-dachshund mix, who eyed Jon as she’d just seen a UPS driver on her property.

“Don’t move too fast,” I whispered as Jon slowly approached Ranger.

“They smell fear.” Ranger blinked, gave one sniff of Jon’s boot, and—miraculously—let him scratch his head.

“Well I’ll be,” Jon whispered.

“He likes me.”

“He probably thinks you smell like jerky and grass,” I replied. “It’s a compliment.”

Upstairs, I showed him my lair—the room that had once been a teenage girl’s hideout and was now a guest suite meets memory lane. Old Sims games, a bookshelf of books I never finished, and a walk-in closet big enough to hide a small crime.

“This is yours?” Jon asked, setting our bags down in the corner.

“Every time I visit,” I said.

“They don’t come up here. It’s sacred territory. We’ve got it all to ourselves.” He raised an eyebrow.

“So... you mean...”

“Yes,” I said, slipping my arms around his waist.

“Privacy.” He grinned, leaned down, and kissed me, just slow and sweet enough to make my knees whisper a quiet prayer for strength.

“We better shower,” I said, breathless.

“Before I jump you in my childhood bed and scar my soul forever.”

Cleaned up and re-clothed, we headed back downstairs to regale the parents with tales from the road. “We started in North Carolina,” I said, curling up on the couch with a second helping of coconut drops.

“Drove through Illinois, and then to Vegas.”

“Vegas?” my dad asked.

“What you do there?”

“Lost \$40,” Jon said.

“Won a girl.” Smooth. My mother side-eyed him but didn’t protest.

“And then there was Patricia,” I added. My mom sat up straighter.

“Who?” I sighed.

“Blake’s girlfriend. Or... psych patient. We’re still unclear.”

I proceeded to tell them the entire saga: Patricia’s emotional breakdowns, her accusation that Jeanine put cat poop in Vance’s suitcase, and the fact that she tried to sage the microwave because she thought it was haunted, the meth lab accusations and my sex ring operation.

By the time I got to the part where she sobbed into her potato salad because someone made eye contact with her, my mom was fanning herself with a dish towel and my dad had stopped sipping his tea .

“She sounds like a real nutcase,” my mom said.

“She sounds dangerous,” my dad added.

“She’s both,” I confirmed.

“Well,” my mom said, finally breaking into a smile, “at least you bring home a man who could survive that madness.” Jon beamed.

“I like him,” she said finally, and I could’ve sworn the angels on the shelf nodded in agreement.

It was the tail end of September—still hot enough in Houston to make your thighs stick to leather seats, but just cool enough at night for my mother to start talking about “bush tea weather.” Jon and I had told them over dinner that we were going to start looking at townhouses soon.

You’d think we said we were moving to Mars.

My mother froze mid-sip of her ginger tea, her eyes widening as she’d just been told Carnival was canceled.

“This soon?” she asked, clutching her mug like it was an emotional support teacup. My dad looked suspiciously neutral, but even he paused the rerun of Law and Order: SVU he’d been half-watching.

“We’re just looking for now,” I reassured, squeezing Jon’s hand under the table.

“Not packing our bags tonight or anything.” She nodded slowly, then offered a classic Trini deflection:

“You both looking tired. Why don’t you go upstairs and relax?”

” Translation: I need to emotionally process this and maybe talk to your dad behind your back first. Tired was an understatement.

We’d just showered but still looked like two mildly traumatized travelers recovering from emotional jet lag and Patricia-induced PTSD.

So, we followed orders with tumblers full of ice and Coca-Cola—the kind that burns your throat just right—we trudged upstairs like teenagers sneaking off after church.

Ranger, my 14-year-old, a grumpy cinnamon roll of a dog, decided at that moment he was officially Jon’s best friend and life partner.

He waddled behind us with the determined huffing of an arthritic old man on a mission.

Nacho, of course, followed too because heaven forbid someone leave the room without his full emotional support.

By the time we got to my lair, we had a whole senior citizen dog entourage. We surrendered to our fate .

“Guess we’ve been adopted,” Jon said, scooping Ranger up like a baby and placing him on the bed next to Nacho, who had already claimed the left pillow.

I changed into my pajama shorts and one of Jon’s oversized T-shirts, while he wore gym shorts and that worn-out tank top he claimed was “good sleeping material.” We crawled into bed, dogs nestled between us like tiny, judgmental grandparents, and began the sacred ritual of programming the Roku.

“Babe, why does your dad have three different HBO logins?” Jon asked.

“Because he keeps forgetting his passwords but refuses to reset them. This is a generational curse. Just click the one with ‘Batman1961’ in it.”

Eventually, we settled in with the new season of Blue Bloods—a comfort show for people who enjoy cop drama and intermittent emotional breakthroughs between stoic men and their Irish Catholic trauma.

We’d barely made it through Jamie’s first monologue when Jon’s phone buzzed.

He looked at the screen, raised one eyebrow, and handed it to me silently. It was from Blake .

“Hey guy, just wanted to let you know that I love you like a brother, but I don’t want Delilah in the house again. Too many red flags, especially since she told Patricia that she shot at her ex’s car and he was an N-word.”

I stared at the message for a second, trying to figure out if it was a prank, an actual emergency, or just... Blake being Blake. Then I laughed. Hard. Like, bent-over, stomach-clutching, wake-the-dogs-and-maybe-my-parents kind of laughing.

“Oh my god,” I wheezed.

“This is gold. Blake is officially living in an episode of Cops mixed with The Real Housewives of Idaho.” Jon chuckled too, but his laugh had a weary edge.

“ Delilah. Shot at. Her ex’s car. ”

“ And told Patricia. Like it was a cute icebreaker!” I gasped. “Like, Hey girl, I like your nails. Also, I once discharged a weapon in a jealous rage.” Jon leaned back on

the pillow, running a hand through his hair.

“ And the N-word part ... just makes it so much worse. What the hell, man.”

“Why does Blake always find the women who come with a free crisis hotline and two active restraining orders?” I asked. “It’s like his dating type is ‘ Haunted. ’” Ranger sneezed, clearly unimpressed by our drama, and Nacho stretched across Jon’s chest like he paid the mortgage here.

We lay there, Blue Bloods playing quietly in the background while the glow from the TV made shadows dance on the walls of my childhood room—now transformed into a makeshift grown-up retreat complete with emotional support dogs, absurd texts from redneck friends, and the overwhelming comfort of being somewhere familiar.

I looked at Jon. This was a man who had followed me through tornado warnings, Vegas casinos, emotional baggage heavier than our suitcases, and family dinners where his mashed potatoes got seasoned against their will.

And now he was lying next to me, reading a text from his old navy brother Blake about a possibly criminal girlfriend with racial slurs and gunplay in her dating history and he hadn’t run.

Not once. I smiled, leaned over, and kissed his cheek.

“Welcome to the family,” I whispered. He smirked.

“I’m gonna need a drink.”

“We’ve got soda, curry chicken and two overly affectionate small dogs,” I said.

“It’s the Trini way.” He pulled me closer, Ranger groaned, Nacho farted, and

somewhere in the background, Donnie Wahlberg said something dramatic about justice. It was ridiculous. It was chaotic. It was kind of perfect.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:13 am

The Hospital Visit

Song : Rock And A Hard Place - Bailey Zimmerman

I must 've drifted off somewhere around episode four of our Blue Bloods binge, tucked under the weight of Jon 's arm and Ranger 's tiny snoring body wedged between us like a stubborn breadstick.

The room was dim, and quiet, just the faint blue flicker of the TV reflecting off my bedroom walls—the same ones still covered in old paint and a “ Live, Laugh, Love” decal my mom had insisted on sticking above the closet. Everything was calm. Until it wasn't.

A white-hot pain exploded in my left side so sharp and sudden it ripped me out of sleep like someone had stabbed me awake. I jolted upright, clutching my stomach, my mouth open in a silent scream. I couldn't breathe. I literally couldn't breathe .

“Babe?” Jon sat up immediately, blinking in the low light. “What's wrong?” I couldn't get the words out. The pain was consuming, pressing against my ribs, radiating across my entire torso like a fire had been lit under my skin.

“I—my stomach—can't—” I managed to gasp, hunched forward, my hands digging into my side as if I could pull the pain out with my fingers.

Jon jumped out of bed and turned on the lamp, flooding the room with soft yellow light.

My face was slick with sweat, and I could feel myself trembling uncontrollably.

Before Jon could even move toward the door, it flew open.

My dad stood there like he'd sensed the disturbance in the force from two floors down. Pajama pants, white shirt, military precision in his posture, eyes darting from me to Jon, to me again.

"She's in pain," Jon said, voice firm but panicked. "Like, bad pain."

Without missing a beat, my dad said, "We're going.

I'm driving. I'll take her to my urgent care—they'll get her stable and transfer if needed.

Jon, help her dress. Monica!" he bellowed over his shoulder, "Pack a bag in case they keep her!" The house ignited into chaos.

My mom's voice echoed from down the hall—"I'm coming, I'm coming!

"—followed by the sound of drawers opening, zippers unzipping, and Nacho barking in confusion, like why is everyone shouting at 2 a.m. and where's my snack?

Jon helped me into sweatpants and one of his oversized hoodies as gently as he could, his hands steady even though I could see the worry in his eyes. I could barely stand upright. Every step felt like a gut punch from inside my body.

Outside, the air was muggy and thick, the Texas night pressing against my skin like a damp towel. My dad's Tesla was already running in the driveway, headlights on, ready for launch. Jon buckled me into the passenger seat like I was made of glass.

“You’re gonna be okay,” he whispered, brushing a kiss against my temple.

“I’ll see you soon.” And then we were off.

My dad drove like a man with military clearance and no patience for red lights.

The city blurred past us—empty intersections, gas stations glowing like islands in the dark, the occasional 18-wheeler humming by on the highway.

I clutched the seatbelt with one hand and my stomach with the other, trying not to cry, trying not to scream.

The pain had settled into something fierce and constant like someone was trying to wring out my insides with a hot iron.

Every bump in the road felt like a thunderclap in my ribs.

We reached the urgent care in record time.

My dad parked right at the door, jumped out, and had me wheeled inside before I could even process what was happening.

The inside of the clinic was cold and sterile, the kind of place that smelled like alcohol wipes and freshly printed insurance forms. The overhead lights buzzed faintly, too bright, making everything feel surreal.

They got me into a room almost immediately—one of the perks of having a father who was also a frequent flyer at that very urgent care. Nurses swarmed like bees: checking my vitals, inserting an IV, taking blood, asking rapid-fire questions I could barely answer between gasps of pain.

“On a scale of 1 to 10?” the nurse asked.

“Fifteen,” I hissed.

“Maybe twenty.”

I saw her eyebrows raise slightly, but she didn’t argue.

Morphine was in my veins five minutes later, and I could’ve kissed her right on the forehead if I wasn’t too busy trying not to pass out.

Then came the doctor—late forties, brisk and polite, with the tired eyes of someone who’d seen too many worst-case scenarios in one shift.

“It’s pancreatitis,” he said, scanning my chart.

“And it’s not mild. We’re arranging an immediate transfer to Memorial Hermann. You’ll be admitted tonight. You’ll need fluids, rest, and close monitoring.” I blinked at him.

“Pancreatitis?” I whispered.

“Like... the organ?” He nodded.

“It’s inflamed and angry. You’re lucky you came in when you did.”

An ambulance was already en route. I heard someone calling ahead to the hospital, coordinating my room, my records, and my arrival.

It was all happening so fast—too fast—but also not fast enough, because my body still felt like it was punishing me for existing.

The morphine started to take the edge off.

I could feel it slipping through my veins like a warm wave, numbing the pain just enough for my brain to catch up.

I lay there staring at the ceiling tiles, breathing slowly, waiting for the next wave of panic or nausea or pain to hit.

The paramedics arrived with calm, practiced movements.

They strapped me onto the stretcher like I was something precious but breakable.

“Let’s get you comfortable,” one of them said. He had a kind voice, which felt rare at 3 a.m.

As they wheeled me outside into the humid night air, I caught a glimpse of my dad pacing beside his car, talking rapidly into his phone. I knew he was calling ahead to my mom and Jon —coordinating, advocating, and managing the crisis like only a Trini dad with Caribbean training could.

As the doors closed and the siren began to wail, I let my head fall back against the stretcher and took a slow, morphine-laced breath.

This was not how I imagined the week ending.

Not with an IV in my arm, and my pancreas throwing a fiery tantrum in my abdomen.

Not with Jon’s first visit to my parents’ house ending in a medical emergency and a hastily packed overnight bag.

But as the city lights flickered through the ambulance windows, casting long shadows

over my blanketed legs, I realized something strange.

I wasn't scared. I was in pain, sure. Drugged out, absolutely.

But I wasn't alone. I felt deeply, weirdly... loved .

The hospital room was bigger than I expected.

Private, thankfully, with pale green walls that looked like they were trying so hard to be calming but instead screamed "sad guacamole." A flat-screen TV hung on the wall with limited cable options (because obviously), and the bed—though equipped with all the trappings of modern healthcare—creaked like it had opinions about me being in it.

I was high on morphine, still in a hospital gown that did nothing for my figure, and somewhere between exhausted and emotionally stunned.

But I was alive. That felt important to remember.

Jon arrived about thirty minutes after I was admitted, followed closely by my mom who entered the room carrying three tote bags of essentials and a Tupperware of curry chana and roti like she was prepping me for an apocalypse.

My dad stood behind them both with his hands clasped behind his back like he was inspecting the room for military-grade weaknesses.

I half expected him to declare the floor clear and secure.

"The doctor advised that she'll need to be here for at least a week," the nurse informed them, which made my mom gasp and immediately start praying under her breath.

“A week?” I asked, stunned.

“What am I supposed to do here for seven days—crochet a pancreas?”

“They need to keep you hydrated, monitor your enzymes, keep you off food for a few days, and make sure it doesn’t escalate,” she said gently.

“You’re lucky you came in when you did.” Jon, bless his rugged redneck heart, pulled the chair up to the side of the bed like it was his permanent post now.

“I’m staying,” he said, already scrolling through his phone to see if the hospital had guest cots or if he’d have to MacGyver one out of a yoga mat and a hoodie.

My mom looked torn—one part thrilled by his loyalty, the other part trying to figure out if he’d need a bath towel and whether she should sneak one in under a trench coat.

“You sure?” I asked him, squinting through the morphine haze.

“This isn’t exactly a vacation.”

“Not leavin’ you here alone,” he said simply, like it wasn’t even a decision.

“You’re stuck with me, hospital bed or not.”

That hit me square in the chest. A flutter, low and warm. Even with IVs in my arm and no food in my stomach, the way he said it made me feel seen. Protected.

Eventually, my parents kissed my forehead and headed home—my mom mumbling something about bringing me stew peas tomorrow and my dad making my mom promise not to smuggle in any doubles .

“I’ll be back in the morning with proper food,” she called out dramatically, “because this thing”—she gestured at the sad tray of Jell-O and broth they’d brought me—“is not nourishment.”

When the door finally closed and the room quieted down, Jon kicked off his boots, flopped into the recliner, and pulled his cap over his eyes like a man preparing for war—or at least a very long nap in a very stiff chair.

“You okay?” he asked, peeking at me from under the brim.

“I mean, as okay as a person can be with a mutinous pancreas and hospital hair,” He smirked.

“Still beautiful, though.”

I rolled my eyes and picked up my phone, figuring I might as well scroll through social media to distract myself from the hunger pangs and the uncomfortable elastic wristband that now identified me as “CHARLES, DELILAH.” That’s when the idea hit me.

With seven whole days of nothing to do, and fueled by mild narcotics and intense curiosity, I decided to finally investigate Patricia’s Instagram.

The woman who’d come storming into our lives like a Walmart-brand hurricane, who moved in with Blake like she was auditioning for a role on The Jerry Springer Show: Live!

, and who managed to unravel every ounce of peace in the Idaho Falls household with the same energy as a toddler armed with a box of matches and a bad attitude.

She had to have left digital breadcrumbs. Chaos that loud always leaves an echo.

I typed her name into Instagram, my heart pounding a little from a mix of curiosity and morphine jitters. Her account was public. Of course, it was. Patricia looked like the type who wanted you to see her business. I tapped on her Stories first. They were—unsurprisingly—a dramatic circus.

Slide One: A black-and-white selfie with the caption “People think they can ruin you. But GOD knows the TRUTH.” With that font that screams “unstable but fashionable.”

Slide Two: A screenshot of a text message (with names blurred out but c’mon, we knew who) that said “Delilah Charles is a racist sociopath. Look at what she did to me and my family.”

Slide Three: A blurry picture of a car with a caption: “She shot at her ex’s car y’all! Look it up—Delilah Charles and her prostitution charges!” I nearly choked on my hospital air.

“JON.” He sat up so fast his cap flew off.

“What? What is it? Are you okay?” I turned the phone toward him and pointed.

“I’m now a racist sociopath with a felony record and a loaded firearm.” He squinted at the screen.

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered, then scrolled down.

“She posted a whole exposé on you like you’re a Netflix docuseries.”

“I mean, she used my full name. This is wild. I should sue her for defamation and aesthetic crimes.” Jon let out a low whistle and shook his head.

“She’s nuts. That ain’t just drama—that’s a mental illness with a Wi-Fi signal.” I lay back against the pillows, equal parts stunned and amused.

“What the hell do we do about this?” Jon exhaled deeply, clearly thinking. Then he got up, stretched his arms, and kissed the top of my head.

“I’ll go back tomorrow. Idaho Falls. Pack everything. I’ll drive to Hill Air Force Base and put our stuff in storage. I’ll give Blake his damn key back and tell him he can sort the mortgage out himself, and then I’ll be back here before you’re out.”

“Are you serious?” I blinked.

“You’d do all that?” He nodded.

“I said I’d handle it. This ain’t your fight anymore. You need to rest. Heal. I’ll deal with Blake, Patricia, and the whole circus show.” I felt my chest swell with something soft and warm, something like love but also gratitude so intense it made my eyes sting.

“You’re kinda amazing, you know that?”

“Yeah, well,” he said, scratching the back of his head awkwardly, “I ain’t got your pancreas, so I gotta be useful somehow.” I laughed, and it felt like the first real laugh I’d had all night.

He sat back down, took my hand, and laced his fingers with mine.

“When you get outta here,” he said softly, “we’ll figure out what’s next. Somewhere new. Somewhere without Patricia or Blake or medical emergencies.” I nodded, closing my eyes, the morphine starting to carry me off again .

“Just promise me one thing,” I mumbled.

“Anything.”

“If Patricia writes a tell-all book about me, buy me the hardcover.” He chuckled.

“Deal.”

And just like that, under the dull hum of machines and the faint glow of hospital monitors, I fell asleep holding the hand of a man who, without hesitation, would drive across three states and pack up our whole life just to get me away from crazy. Turns out, even pancreatitis has a silver lining.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:13 am

The Idaho Mission

Song : Livin On Love - Alan Jackson

Jon spent the night with me in the hospital, which sounds all romantic and noble until you realize it mostly involved me sweating through a paper gown, sipping lukewarm broth, and him trying not to make eye contact with my IV line.

He insisted on staying because watching me drift in and out of morphine-laced hallucinations while wheeled into the bathroom like a Victorian invalid was his idea of quality time.

“You don’t have to stay, you know,” I said, trying to pretend I wasn’t incredibly touched by it all.

“Oh, I know,” he said, settling into the world’s loudest recliner with the confidence of a man who had just claimed squatter’s rights.

“But where else can I sleep under a blanket big enough to cover a Chevy Suburban and be serenaded by your IV pump? ”

“Some people get roses and silk sheets. You? You get hospital-grade romance.” He held up the blanket my mom brought like it was a trophy.

“This thing is a fire hazard. I’m pretty sure I’m legally married to it now.”

I rolled my eyes and sipped my chicken broth. Or tried to. It tasted like sadness and

cardboard and absolutely no actual chicken.

“Mmm. Vintage. Hints of desperation with a morphine finish.”

“Sommelier says it pairs well with a side of crushing medical debt.” We both laughed. Or I tried to—until I nearly yanked my IV out and had to clutch my side.

Jon, being the responsible adult between us, took the opportunity to eat the curried channa and roti my mom brought. I watched him devour it like it was his last meal before execution. He moaned after every bite.

“You good?” He nodded, mouth full.

“I think I just saw God.”

“If you fart in this room, I will disconnect your soul from your body,” I warned.

He wiped his hands and said, “If I die, at least let me be buried in this blanket. And with the rest of that roti.”

While I was melting into my hospital bed and trying not to fall in love with him even more than I already had (rude), he stayed productive.

Between Law Jon: Just passed a town called Turkey, Texas. Population: 421. All of them judging me.

Me: Tell them I said hi. And that my boyfriend looks like a lumberjack who runs an Etsy shop.

Jon: I’m getting you a “Welcome to Turkey” magnet. For the fridge we no longer own.

We FaceTimed that night, and he looked exhausted but victorious.

“Storage unit is locked up. The truck’s intact. Didn’t die in the snow. I’ll be there in the morning.”

“Good,” I said.

“I’m starting to hallucinate Law & Order episodes that don’t exist.”

“You mean like the one where Olivia Benson becomes your maid of honor?”

“Don’t mock me. It was a beautiful ceremony.”

The next morning, like clockwork, Jon walked into my hospital room with a coffee in one hand and the same smug grin he wore the day we met at the airport. His beard was fuller. His eyes were red from the road. And somehow, he still smelled like cedar and recklessness.

“I’m back, babe,” he said.

“And I brought contraband.” He pulled out a bag of gas station beef jerky and a mini snow globe from a town called Canadian, Texas.

“Because you’re cultured.” I grinned, feeling the morphine haze lift a little.

“You’re insane.”

“You love it.” The doctor came in shortly after and gave us the best news of the week: I was officially being discharged. My body was stable. My chart had enough scribbles to fill a dissertation. And my IV stand had started leaning like it was also emotionally exhausted.

Jon all but leaped into action.

“Get the chair,” he said with the glee of a man who had waited his whole life to wheel someone out of a hospital with flair.

“Do not pop a wheelie,” I warned.

“I make no promises.”

He wheeled me down the hallway like it was prom night, nodding at nurses, dodging an overly ambitious janitor, and humming a dramatic version of the Titanic theme.

“You’re my Rose,” he whispered.

“If you let go of this chair, I swear—”

We pulled up to my mom’s front door just as the sun hit peak “Texas is trying to kill you” heat levels.

She opened the door, gave us both a once-over, and then said, “Don’t touch the thermostat.

” We made it inside. I collapsed on the couch with every pillow in the house and Nacho immediately climbed onto my legs like he, too, had been through it.

Jon settled beside me, his hand on my knee, his eyes already scanning the room for the remote.

I looked at him—my sarcastic, dusty, road-tripping man—and thought, This is what survival looks like.

Not always clean. Not always pretty. But full of effort.

Full of love. He turned to me and smirked.

“So... you wanna read me one of yo ur murder books?” I smiled.

“Only if you promise not to fall asleep before chapter five.” He winked.

“Deal. But if I have nightmares, I’m blaming you and Freida McFadden.” And just like that, we were home. Or, at least, the kind of home you build in borrowed living rooms with people who love you—even if they side-eye your instant noodle habits and threaten to take the thermostat remote.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:13 am

The Christmas Surprise

Song : You Should Probably Leave - Chris Stapleton

The two months after my unexpected hospital stay was a fever dream—equal parts Hallmark movie and true crime docuseries.

My parents and Jon had become obscenely close, like Christmas-card-worthy, casserole-swapping, finish-each-other ' s-sentences kind of close.

My dad, who previously thought all white men were either country singers or serial killers, had adopted Jon like a long-lost son.

And my mother? She was sending him videos of how to cook curry goat “the proper Trini way” and texting him good morning like they were in a WhatsApp group chat titled Family But Make It Spice.

Meanwhile, Patricia hadn't so much slowed down as leveled up in her campaign of digital terrorism.

Every morning I woke up to fresh material—photoshopped mugshots of me, hashtags like #TexasTrafficker, and full-blown exposés on her Instagram stories with headlines like “Delilah Charles: Criminal Mastermind or Satanic Witch?” (Answer: Neither, ma'am.

I can't even commit to a skincare routine.) Jon, who initially tried to ignore it, had since taken to sending me screenshots of her posts with captions like, “Babe, this is

better than Dateline.” He was also rapidly becoming Houston’s honorary redneck-in-residence.

I’d taken him on a grand tour of the city—from lazy strolls in Hermann Park to aggressively sweaty crawfish boils in Alief.

He even started referring to the Loop as “the Beltway thingy” like a true transplant. Thanksgiving was easy. I didn’t go.

Jon drove up to North Carolina in his new “Texas Edition” Chevy Colorado he bought for himself after trading old Lenore in to visit Aunt Becky and the kids, and I stayed home under the very valid excuse of “healing from pancreatitis” (read: I was in no emotional shape to be around a woman whose idea of comfort is offering you deer jerky and unsolicited commentary on your bra size) .

“You sure you’ll be okay, sugarplum?” Jon had asked before he left, cradling my cheek with one hand and a giant-ass cooler with the other.

“Fine. You go eat salmon cakes and vibe with your hillbilly ancestors. I’ll be here, recovering and watching Patricia lose her last brain cell on Instagram Stories.”

He kissed me goodbye and returned a few days later with a cooler full of bacon and something he called “red hots,” which looked and smelled like Satan’s Vienna sausages.

Now, with Christmas creeping in like a Mariah Carey whistle note and the air finally pretending to be chilly, I was leaning into my favorite season with the emotional stamina of a woman who’s survived both hospitalization and high-level internet slander.

In a twist of fate—or trauma-induced solidarity—I’d struck up a friendship with

Blake's ex-fiancée, Jeanine.

It started with a cautious DM that read, "Hi, I think we've both been attacked by the same lunatic," and evolved into a text thread called Survivors of Patricia (SOP for short).

Jeanine had just gotten married to a hunky real estate agent named Kaleb in Vegas.

I watched their elopement photos like they were reruns of Friends.

The best part? Not a single sighting of Blake or Patricia. Honestly? Iconic.

"I like her," I told Jon one night as we were laying in bed, eating the Christmas cookies my mom had made him "with real butter, not that vegan nonsense."

"She seems sane," he said between bites.

"That's rare for anyone connected to Blake."

"Oh, she's got a Taser in her purse now," He raised an eyebrow.

"That's the hottest thing I've heard all day."

Meanwhile, I'd been texting Valentina—Blake's daughter and future FBI agent in training. The girl was sixteen, sarcastic, and smarter than all of us combined. She sent me a text last week that read:

"Patricia took me around the house and pointed at corners saying that's where she saw meth coming from." I almost choked on my peppermint mocha.

"Meth. Corners. Of the house."

“She said it really serious too,” Valentina had added.

“Like she was on Breaking Bad.”

“She’s unwell,” I told Jon.

“Like, really unwell. She also told the kids I run a sex trafficking ring out of a Texas airport.”

Jon blinked at me from across the kitchen, where he was making scrambled eggs in nothing but flannel pajama pants. Heaven .

“That seems logistically exhausting,” he said.

“Also... where in the airport?”

“I think Concourse C,” I deadpanned. He snorted.

“Damn. And I thought TSA was the worst thing in Houston airports.”

But the truth was, Patricia’s lies were so insane they bordered on performance art.

If she’d said I was secretly a lizard woman who shapeshifted into flight attendants at night, it might’ve had more traction.

Her Instagram was like a narcissist’s manifesto crossed with a poorly-researched Lifetime movie.

Every accusation was just a detailed description of herself: lazy, uneducated, manipulative.

Her ex-husband even messaged Jeanine and me to say, “She’s like a Roomba—sucks the life out of a room, circles in chaos, and never does any real work.

” And don’t even get me started on Blake.

Blake had gone completely off the grid—no calls, no visits, no child support, nothing.

After Jeanine got a protective order against Patricia (a smart woman), Blake decided parenting just wasn’t for him anymore.

He ghosted his kids harder than a Hinge match with a neck tattoo.

Valentina told me, “He said he couldn’t come visit because of ‘court stuff.’ I said, ‘You mean the court stuff that keeps your crazy girlfriend away from us? That one?’” We love a teen with emotional clarity.

Meanwhile, I was trying to keep my blood pressure low and my Christmas spirit high.

Jon had wrapped the two Christmas trees my mom puts up every year in white twinkle lights that kept shorting out every time it rained, and I had spray-painted pine cones gold in what I thought was a whimsical Pinterest moment but ended up looking like a glittery squirrel funeral.

“Are we normal yet?” I asked Jon one night as we watched *Elf* for the third time that week and my mom walked in carrying a fresh batch of rum cake.

“Babe,” he said, pulling me into his chest, “compared to Patricia? We’re like the Kennedy’s.” Touché.

And so, surrounded by Caribbean food, fake meth allegations, and an absurd amount of Christmas lights, I leaned into the absurdity of it all. Because if life was going to

keep throwing curveballs, at least I had someone to catch them with—preferably shirtless, and holding a tray of bacon.

The week before Christmas, my parents announced they'd be flying to Switzerland for ten days to "relax, eat chocolate, and stare at snow-covered mountains like two boujee bond villains."

"You'll be fine, right?" my mom asked, casually packing a suitcase full of thermal underwear and eating rum cake.

"Of course," I replied, while internally calculating the probability of the house catching on fire, Nacho getting eaten by a hawk, or Patricia parachuting onto our lawn with a printed-out restraining order and a megaphone.

They were leaving us to house-sit. During Christmas.

With one neurotic dog, a possessed Roomba, and a hot tub that sounded like it was haunted when the jets came on.

We were also ushering Cleopatra Belle—our family's 15-year-old diva of a Corgi-Dachshund mix—into the afterlife.

Once regal, always dramatic, Cleo had lately taken to glaring at walls and growling at her own shadow.

She had also developed an aggressive form of cancer, and as much as we joked about her being a furry demon in a dog's body, she had been my loyal companion since my 20s.

The vet came on a cloudy Tuesday. A kind woman with a voice like warm tea and eyes that knew this wasn't just a dog—it was an era ending.

We lit candles. My dad played some soca music softly in the background (I suspect Cleo requested this telepathically).

We all sat on the floor, petting her velvet-soft ears while she drifted off, surrounded by the humans she'd bossed around for over a decade.

Even Jon, who had only known her for a few months, cried.

Big, silent Jon tears that he wiped away with the sleeve of his flannel like a rugged lumberjack caught in a Hallmark moment.

We had her cremated and placed her on the family pet shelf in the hallway—next to Mona Lisa (our childhood dachshund who had a temper worse than mine) and Adonis (my mom's beautiful baby who once bit Ranger ... maybe more than once)

After all the tears and sniffles and awkward family hugs, my mom still dared to check if I knew how to use the security system.

"I swear if you set it off again, the HOA will call."

"I've grown since then," I said.

"No, you haven't," she replied, zipping up her designer suitcase and kissing me on the forehead. And then they were off. Switzerland-bound. Leaving me and Jon in charge of the house, the cremated dogs, one unstable living dog, and the holidays. Which we nailed, obviously.

Jon was in full Southern Holiday boyfriend mode.

He had big plans: a smoked turkey that took up half the fridge, turnip greens with ham hocks simmering for days, and homemade stuffing with cornbread so moist it

could've written poetry.

I, naturally, was in charge of all the high-maintenance side dishes—mashed potatoes, mac and cheese, and my world-famous cranberry sauce that required an entire bottle of red wine and two hours of simmering while listening to George Strait.

“Do you think one turkey’s enough?” Jon asked me as he poked at the brining bird like a man interrogating a suspect.

“There are only two of us.”

“Yeah, but what if we want leftovers for, like, three weeks?”

“We are not pilgrims,” I said.

“We are not living off turkey and cranberry sandwiches until February.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:13 am

“Speak for yourself. I’ve already named the turkey. His name is Ralph.” I was genuinely concerned.

Meanwhile, Cleopatra Belle’s spirit lingered in the house like an old diva haunting her favorite theater.

The other dog—lilo, who had always been a bit “off”—was now entirely unhinged.

I think Cleo had been holding her sanity together with the sheer force of her disapproval.

Now, without that grounding energy, Lilo spent her days barking at the microwave and licking the couch like it held the secrets of the universe.

“Maybe she’s just grieving,” Jon suggested, as Lilo ran full speed into a closet door.

“Or maybe she’s possessed by Cleo’s ghost,” I muttered.

“Honestly, both feel plausible.”

Christmas Eve rolled in with the scent of smoked meat and buttered rum.

Jon wore his apron that said ‘ I’ll Smoke You Too’ and I played my “Home for the Holidays” playlist, which was mostly Boyz II Men, Mariah Carey, and a rogue appearance by Celine Dion because—icon.

We spent the afternoon dancing around the kitchen like idiots.

I accidentally dropped the cranberry sauce bowl and screamed like I'd shattered the Holy Grail.

Jon caught me mid-panic attack and said, "Relax, baby. Ralph would've wanted it this way. "

By the time Christmas Day rolled around, we were so full we debated skipping dinner altogether and just climbing into the hot tub downstairs with champagne and snacks like two characters in a mid-budget rom-com called Bubbles & Bacon.

The hot tub—this massive jacuzzi tub with jets that could exfoliate your soul—became our post-dinner sanctuary.

We brought a Bluetooth speaker, and wine in plastic cups (because I don't trust Jon with stemware), and Nacho sat on a towel like a lifeguard supervising our date .

"I can't believe we're alone in your parents' house during Christmas," Jon said, stretching one arm across the tub and the other across my shoulders.

"It feels wrong. Like we should be on a registry somewhere."

"Don't say registry," I groaned.

"My mom will appear out of thin air with a wedding binder."

We clinked glasses and stared up at the ceiling fan spinning lazily above us.

It wasn't snowing. There were twinkling lights outside.

No dramatic gift exchanges or carolers or magic snowfall.

But there was Ralph, resting in smoked glory on the kitchen counter.

There was Cleopatra Belle, finally at peace.

There was my ridiculous, redneck boyfriend and our dysfunctional pets, and me, soaking in bubbles, finally breathing without Patricia in my rearview mirror—for now.

“Merry Christmas,” Jon said, kissing the side of my face.

“Merry Christmas,” I murmured.

“Don’t let lilo lick the outlets.” He nodded.

“No promises.”

The day after Christmas, with our bellies still full of smoked Ralph and our pores infused with hot tub humidity, we decided we needed two things: a drink stronger than leftover rum punch and a gossip update stronger than the one my mom texted me from Zurich about a “snowy fondue accident.”

So naturally, we leashed up Nacho and Ranger—our trusty four-legged companions—and loaded them into the backseat like two very hairy toddlers on their way to preschool.

“I think Lilo’s gonna be fine here alone,” Jon said as we backed out of the driveway.

“I left her a sock, half a banana, and that singing fish toy your dad gave us that only plays ‘Funky Town.’”

“Great,” I said.

“So we’re either coming home to a chewed-up couch or a full exorcism.

” Lilo had taken to barking at the wall behind the TV and hoarding my fuzzy socks under the coffee table like she was building a shrine.

It was best to leave her behind on this particular adventure.

Our destination? O’Malley’s, the beloved neighborhood bar that sat in the corner of a strip mall between a vape shop and a psychic who once told me I had “the aura of someone haunted by my past.” O’Malley’s was where gossip flowed like Miller Lite and the regulars were 60% nosy aunt energy, 30% conspiracy theorists, and 10% barstools that should’ve been replaced in 2006.

We walked in with Nacho and Ranger like we were bar celebrities. The bartender—Tina, who wore a Santa hat with sequins and once told Jon he looked like a “soldier with feelings”—greeted us like we were long-lost friends.

“Is that the Navy guy and the Asian girlfriend?” she bellowed across the room, tossing us a wink.

“Get over here and tell me what y’all been up to. I heard something wild about a woman named Patricia and a meth ghost?” Jon obviously comes here way too much.

“Oh, it’s worse,” I said, pulling up a stool as Jon tied the dogs’ leashes to the chair legs and gave them each a treat from his coat pocket like an over-prepared dad on a zoo trip.

I ordered an old-fashioned Jon got a Bud Light and a shot of something brown and questionably legal-looking. We made small talk with the locals—like Janet-who-bakes-and-eavesdrops and Carl-who-thinks-Bigfoot-lives-in-Missouri. All in all, it was festive, cozy, and just the right level of unhinged.

By the time I was ordering my second drink—a stronger old-fashioned that Tina declared “ the kind that makes you rethink texting your ex ”—I turned around to find Jon gone.

At first, I assumed he was in the bathroom or making a nacho run (both realistic possibilities).

But then I spotted him. Kneeling. On one knee.

In the middle of the bar. Right between the jukebox and a dartboard that had a Sharpie heart drawn around Jeff Goldblum’s face.

He was holding up a ring. But not just any ring.

A teardrop diamond glistened in the amber glow of O’Malley’s overhead lights, which somehow made it sparkle even harder like a contestant on Dancing with the Stars.

Everything slowed down. The music faded.

Tina gasped. Nacho barked once in approval.

And Jon—this 5’8 -something man with a beard that could land him a role in a wilderness survival show—looked up at me with the softest eyes I’ve ever seen.

“I know it’s not the Eiffel Tower,” he started, his voice just loud enough to rise above the sound of Carl slapping his knee in delight, “and I know I don’t have a five-year plan or a Roth IRA... but I love you.” The bar collectively sighed. Even Tina wiped a tear while pretending she wasn’t.

“I love how you laugh too loud at true crime podcasts,” he continued, “and how you

feed everyone like it's your spiritual duty.

I love how you still check Patricia's Instagram just to roast her captions.

I love how you saved me from the mess in Idaho Falls, and somehow made me feel like I was coming home, not running away.

"He paused, and there it was—the most beautiful, delicate, elegant teardrop diamond ring I'd ever seen.

"Marry me," he said, "so we can keep roasting crazy people and making smoked turkeys forever. You and me, baby. With Nacho. And the other dogs. And maybe a bigger hot tub someday." I blinked. The room spun. My soul somersaulted. I choked out the only word in the english language that made sense:

"YES." He slid the ring on my finger, I dropped my old-fashioned directly on my boot, Tina screamed "MAZEL TOV!" like she was at a bar mitzvah, and Nacho did a celebratory sneeze.

We kissed. The kind of kiss that tastes like beer, salt, and a million days of chaos finally makes sense.

The kind of kiss that makes you forget you're standing next to a neon "J?ger Bombs \$4.99" sign while Carl tries to start a slow clap.

"I guess this makes us officially a team now," I whispered as we hugged, still dizzy.

"You mean besides being dog parents and emotionally entangled in Patricia's psychodrama?" he smirked.

"I mean like forever."

“Forever sounds good to me,” he said.

And right there, in a tiny bar tucked between a vape shop and a psychic, with our dogs at our feet and the faint smell of jalapeno poppers in the air, I got engaged to the love of my life.

After the bar proposal of a lifetime—which, by the way, is now known as The Day Tina Cried and Nacho Sneezed—we somehow managed to peel ourselves away from O’Malley’s, giggly and giddy and just a little bit tipsy.

Ranger was thrilled, Nacho was confused, and I was wearing the kind of smile that made my cheeks ache in the best way.

The next morning, we woke up in what could only be described as engaged bliss fog.

I twirled around in the kitchen like I was on a soap opera, my ring catching the morning sun as it had just been blessed by Beyoncé herself.

Jon stood at the stove, making sausage and eggs and I swear to God, the man had never looked sexier than when he was buttering a skillet of carbs for me.

And that’s when I got a text from my mom :

“Landing at 12:35 pm. Please don’t be late.” Classic.

So of course we took Jon’s truck to pick them up from the airport because it’s a big truck and my mom has probably bought half of Switzerland by now.

As soon as my parents climbed in—my mom in a black trench coat with sunglasses like a Trini version of Olivia Pope, and my dad trailing behind her with a paper bag full of airport snacks—I blurted it out.

“We’re engaged!” I said, holding up my hand like I was on *The Price is Right*. Jon leaned over the steering wheel like it was a confessional booth.

“Technically... also married.” Silence. I swear even the air conditioning took a break.

My mom turned her head in slow motion as if she just witnessed a raccoon wearing lipstick.

“Married?” she repeated, lips pursed.

“As in... legally?” My dad blinked twice. Then shrugged.

“Well. At least this one makes her laugh.” Cue my mom sighing as she’d just watched a YouTube tutorial on how to emotionally recover from impulsive children.

But after five minutes and a Diet Coke, she warmed up—especially once she realized this meant no massive wedding, no venue deposit, and no arguing over napkin colors with Auntie Carla.

But here’s the twist: We weren’t actually married.

Yet. Technically, Jon had only proposed.

But after the truck ride, and the emotional rollercoaster that was my mother processing things while texting Pastor Ravi, I texted Jeanine. Me:

“So Jon proposed at a bar. With dogs. And people clapped. I think I want to get married in Vegas.” Jeanine:

“That sounds like a spiritual rebirth. Also, Kaleb and I did Vegas. Highly recommend. Harrah’s has killer room service.” And that was it. Operation Las Vegas

Elopement was born .

Within hours, my parents were all in. Which, honestly, shocked me. My mom—Queen of Overplanning and Pinterest Boards—immediately whipped out her phone and started calling bakeries like she was casting a cake-based reality show. Fred’s Bakery agreed to do our wedding cake.

“Pick up January third,” she said like she was confirming an arms deal.

“And we’ll fly out the second. Your father and I already requested time off.” My dad? He took it one step further.

He offered to buy me my wedding dress. Cue waterworks. And by waterworks, I mean me crying in the dressing room at Ventura Bridal, holding a Kleenex and whispering, “This is better than prom, Dad.”

The dress was everything. Ivory satin with a deep V, subtle sparkle, and tea length. The minute I put it on, I knew. And my dad knew. He got misty-eyed and took a photo, which I can only assume he immediately added to his slideshow app of “Why I Love My Daughter.”

Meanwhile, my mom had arranged for a few of her top physics students—a.k.a.

responsible, nerdy babysitters who once built a robotic catapult for fun—to stay at the house and dog-sit Lilo, Ranger, and Nacho.

God bless them. If Lilo doesn’t chew through the drywall, they might get an extra \$20 in their thank-you cards.

Jon and I hit the mall for his suit and my wedding shoes, which was a whole romantic comedy montage in itself.

He looked edible in navy blue, and I found the perfect nude heels that wouldn't murder my arches.

I also snagged a little white clutch with the words "Wifey AF" in rhinestones, which I'm 90% sure made a woman in Claire's tear up.

The pièce de résistance? I made my veil.

Yes, me. With a hot glue gun, lace trim, tulle from JoAnn's, and a dream.

It was a vibe—half Etsy goddess, half Pinterest chaos—but it came out perfect.

Crooked in the best way. Like our love story.

So now, here we are. Three days from departure.

We'll drive Jon's truck there with the wedding cake waiting for us at Fred's in Vegas, my dress packed safely in a garment bag like it's the crown jewels, and Jon blasting country music while singing dramatically off-key to George Strait.

We'll be checking into Harrah's Las Vegas, where we'll live our rom-com dreams for a few days.

And on January 4th, at Love Story Wedding Chapel, I'll walk down a short aisle toward the man who kneeled beside a dartboard and asked me to love him forever.

And I'll say yes. Again. But this time in rhinestone heels.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:13 am

The Road To Las Vegas

Song : Mine Would Be You - Blake Shelton

The sky was a soft, watercolor blue with streaks of gold just beginning to stretch across the horizon.

Morning light shimmered off the hood of the car, and the air was full of that strange New Year's Eve tension—like the universe was holding its breath, waiting for something ridiculous and beautiful to happen.

I looked over at Jon, his left hand on the wheel, his right hand reaching for mine.

He had that stupid smirk on his face like he knew exactly how unhinged this was and loved every second of it.

“I still can't believe you proposed to me in a bar,” I muttered, half-laughing, half-shaking my head. He glanced at me sideways.

“Well, it was a nice bar. And you were lookin' at me like you wanted to marry me anyway.” I snorted.

“I was drunk.”

“You were in love.” I hated how right he was. And I hated how much I loved him for it.

Outside, the trees thinned into the open highway, the radio hummed with some country love song I didn't know, and We were on our way.

No fancy venue, no Pinterest board, no months of planning—just us, a dress, some bootleg liquor, and the kind of love that made absolutely no sense and every kind of sense at the same time.

As we merged onto I-10 West, I looked over at him—flannel shirt sleeves rolled up, sunglasses perched on his nose, a smug little smirk on his face as he'd just won the grand prize at a county fair—and thought, I'm really about to marry this man.

We stopped at Buc-ee's about an hour later because Jon said it was “a spiritual obligation,” which was how I ended up in the parking lot with two beaver-themed hoodies, a bag of ghost pepper jerky, and a deeply regrettable breakfast taco that tasted like regret and bathroom cleaner.

Jon bought a camo travel mug the size of a toddler and a BBQ sandwich that he described as “life-changing.” I wasn't convinced, but he looked so happy about it, that I let it slide.

Back on the road, we cranked up the playlist—90s R&B, early 2000s emo hits, and just enough Morgan Wallen to make me question my life choices—and settled into that strange road trip rhythm where time becomes a suggestion and calories don't count.

Somewhere near San Antonio, I made the mistake of checking Instagram.

That was when I saw it. Patricia. Again.

There she was, perched on a green velvet chair in what looked like a furniture store or someone else's very expensive living room, holding a wine glass like she was trying

to manifest a Real Housewives casting call. The caption read:

Patricia_purelight:

When you've survived narcissistic abuse, betrayal, AND cat poop hexes, you come back stronger, hotter, and spiritually cleansed ????

#Survivor #JusticeWillBeServed #DelilahTheDevil

"Is this bitch still talking about Jeanine's cat poop thing?" I asked, nearly choking on a Funyun. Jon sighed.

"What is it now?" I turned my phone toward him.

"I'm Delilah the Devil now." He shook his head.

"Honestly, that's kinda badass. You sound like a Bond villain."

"She's unraveling like a dollar store sweater, Jon."

"I mean, technically, she's already unraveled. This is just the fringe." I laughed, then added, "Should we be worried she's gonna show up in Vegas and throw fake blood on my wedding dress? "

"She can try," he said.

"I've got pepper spray and two fists of righteous vengeance."

We drove for hours, stopping only to stretch our legs and marvel at how endless Texas was. It was like the state expanded just to spite us. At one point, I turned to Jon and said, "Are you sure we're not just in a simulation? Like, what if we're still in

Houston and none of this is real?”

“If this is a simulation, it’s got terrible snack selection.”

By the time we hit New Mexico, the sun was beginning to droop behind the mountains, casting everything in that golden, cinematic glow that makes you feel like you’re starring in your own indie film.

We pulled into a little roadside diner outside of Roswell—because of course we did—called “Betty’s Galaxy Grub.

” The sign was flickering, the windows were foggy, and the waitress looked like she could beat Jon in an arm-wrestling match and still have energy left to chain-smoke a pack of menthols.

The food? Questionable. The coffee? More like caffeinated mud. The vibes? Immaculate.

Jon ordered a chicken-fried steak the size of his face. I got green chile enchiladas and tried not to think about Patricia. But just as I was dipping a tortilla chip into salsa that may or may not have been made in 1998, another notification lit up my phone. Another post.

Patricia_purelight:

Some of us don’t need a rushed Vegas wedding to feel loved.

Some of us actually respect the sanctity of commitment.

Enjoy your glittery mistake, Delilah.

#SomePeopleWillMarryAnyone #ProstitutionChargesPending #Tragic

“Okay,” I said calmly, setting my phone face-down.

“This woman needs a sedative and a hobby.” Jon just raised one eyebrow.

“Still think we should’ve brought Nacho? He could’ve sniffed out the crazy.”

“She’d try to kidnap him and teach him reiki.”

“She’d charge him for a chakra realignment.”

We were still laughing as we left the diner, stomachs full and hearts weirdly light.

The next stretch of road was long and quiet, the stars beginning to bloom across the sky like someone had spilled gold sequins across it.

Somewhere outside Gallup, Jon pulled into a suspiciously nondescript gas station with neon lights that screamed “We sell more than gasoline.”

“Uh, what are we doing here?” I asked, watching a man in a straw hat exit with a gallon of milk and a suspicious smile.

“I heard from Josh this is where the good gummies are.”

“Define ‘good.’”

“The kind that makes you hear God—or your ex-girlfriend crying from three states away.” I blinked.

“That’s a strong sell.”

Twenty minutes later, we were back on the road with a brown paper bag containing three packs of mushroom gummies in flavors like “Citrus Zest” and “Pineapple Enlightenment.”

“This feels wildly illegal,” I muttered.

“It’s not illegal if you don’t get caught,” Jon said, popping a gummy into his mouth.

“Also, it’s New Mexico. The laws are more like suggestions.”

By the time we reached the Arizona border, we were delirious from too many hours in the car, one too many psychic mushroom snacks, and a shared sense that we might actually be doing something kind of... beautiful. Unhinged, yes. But beautiful.

We detoured to the Meteor Crater just before dusk, because Jon was determined to see “the biggest dent God ever made.” The wind howled as we stood on the edge of that massive, gaping hole in the earth, our jackets flapping like cheap superhero capes.

“It’s just a hole,” I said, unimpressed.

“It’s a holy hole,” Jon replied, completely serious.

“A sacred crater of celestial violence.”

“You’re lucky I love you.”

“You’re lucky I haven’t pushed you in yet.”

We kissed at the edge because, of course, we did. The wind tangled my hair, and Jon’s beard tickled my cheek, and it was all so ridiculous and perfect I nearly cried.

Hours later, we rolled into Las Vegas just past 6 am.

The strip rose like a neon fever dream: glittering, obnoxious, and impossible to ignore.

Lights blinked from every direction. Giant digital screens advertised celebrity residencies and half-priced buffets with the same urgency.

There were people in sequined bras and feathers just casually strolling past us.

A guy in a Pikachu costume smoked a cigarette near a casino entrance like it was the most normal thing in the world. And then—finally—Harrah's.

We pulled into the valet line in our dusty, bug-splattered Chevy truck.

The valet gave us a once-over that screamed, You're not the first couple to show up here looking like roadkill in love, and you won't be the last. I grabbed the wedding dress from the back seat like it was a sacred object and followed Jon into the blinding lights of the lobby, dizzy and excited and dangerously close to happy tears.

Jon turned to me with that signature grin and said, "You ready to become my moonshine wife?"

"I swear to God if you say that at the altar, I'll walk." He kissed my forehead.

"Deal."

Tomorrow, we'll pick up my parents from the airport.

Tomorrow, I'd get the bachelorette celebration of my dreams (just Jon and I)
Tomorrow, we'd stand somewhere ridiculous and do ridiculous things...

But tonight? Tonight we were just two tired lunatics in love, standing under casino chandeliers with mushroom gummies in our pockets and a future that looked just as wild as the road behind us.

The air hit us like a wall when we stepped out of Harrah's—bright lights, flashing billboards, the smell of vape clouds and street tacos, and that familiar Vegas electricity humming beneath everything.

I'd swapped my sweatshirt for a cropped white tee that said 'Bride Vibes' in sparkly lettering, and Jon insisted I wear the rhinestone crown and white sash that said 'Bride to Be' like it was the law.

“You look like the bachelorette version of a unicorn,” he said as we walked toward the High Roller.

“Good. That's exactly the energy I'm trying to manifest.”

The walk to the LINQ Promenade felt like we were inside a glitter cannon.

Everything was loud and sparkly, and I lost count of how many people shouted, “Congratulations!” or offered unsolicited marriage advice, including one guy in a lobster costume who shouted, “Never go to bed angry! Or sober!” We grabbed our tickets for the High Roller and crammed into one of the massive glass pods, the view opening up as we slowly lifted above the Strip.

Jon stood behind me, arms wrapped around my waist, resting his chin on my shoulder.

“This city's nuts,” he murmured.

“Perfect place for us, then.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:13 am

The whole wheel took about 30 minutes, and by the end, I felt like we'd time-traveled through every impulsive decision we'd ever made.

Which, fittingly, led us right to Yard House for dinner.

The place was packed with the kind of energy you only get on a Saturday night in Vegas—half the tables were filled with birthday parties or friend groups in sequins and stilettos, and then us, a bride-to-be and her scruffy cowboy fiancé, looking like we just rolled in from a dusty rom-com.

Our waiter lit up when he saw my sash. “Congratulations!” he said, already pulling out his phone.

“Hold up—I’m gonna get you guys some shots on the house.”

And just like that, two lemon drop shots and one slice of chocolate cake appeared, with “Congrats!” written in icing. I’m pretty sure I cried, just a little.

“This is the best day of my life,” I whispered.

“You haven’t even seen me in a suit yet,” Jon replied, kissing the side of my head.

Dinner was a glorious blur of burgers, fries, more shots, and that ridiculous cake.

I stole half of Jon’s truffle fries and declared myself a culinary genius.

He stole half of my burger and said something that may have been a marriage

proposal or just him trying to get more sauce. Either way, I said yes.

We walked back to Harrah's hand in hand, the Strip buzzing with chaos and Elvis impersonators. Back in the room, I kicked off my shoes and flopped onto the bed like a Victorian fainting bride.

"I'm starving again," I groaned. Jon looked at me, deadpan.

"You literally just ate a half-pound burger."

"I've been drinking. That resets the stomach."

This is how we ended up ordering room service and receiving what can only be described as a pizza the size of Mars. It came in a box so big Jon had to tilt it to get it through the doorway.

"Are you feeding a soccer team?" The delivery guy asked.

"No, just two drunk lovebirds," Jon replied without missing a beat.

We each ate a slice—maybe two—and then my brain decided it was time for the next logical step: a steamy shower to sober up. I tugged Jon by the collar into the bathroom like some sultry soap opera villain.

"Shower. Now. It's tradition." He raised a brow.

"Pretty sure that's not how traditions work."

"It is tonight. "

The steam fogged up the mirror almost instantly, and the minute the water hit my

back, I sighed like I was melting.

Jon stepped in behind me, arms wrapping around me as the hot water poured over both of us.

My crown was long gone, my hair a mess, but he looked at me like I was a damn goddess.

His hands traced slow circles down my spine, and I leaned into him, the rhythm of our bodies syncing in that quiet, private kind of way that feels both reckless and tender.

Every kiss tasted like moonshine and anticipation.

Every touch was deliberate like he was reminding me that this—we—were real.

When we finally crawled into bed, skin warm and hair damp, we wrapped ourselves in the blankets, bodies tangled and limbs too lazy to separate.

We watched Blue Bloods reruns until the dialogue stopped making sense, and eventually, we passed out, full of cake, lust, and the dumb kind of love that makes you fall asleep smiling.

The next morning came with a surprisingly little hangover, which I considered a New Year's miracle. We downed greasy breakfast burritos from a café downstairs and drove straight to the Marriage License Bureau. The woman behind the counter barely looked up as she stamped our papers.

“Congratulations,” she said, sliding five glossy stickers toward us that read “Married in Vegas” in red and silver letters. I peeled one off and stuck it to Jon's flannel shirt.

“Official now.” He smirked and kissed the side of my head.

“Guess you’re stuck with me.”

“Only for life.”

From there, we wandered downtown to book our slot at the Love Story Wedding Chapel.

The place looked like a rhinestoned fever dream—heart-shaped archways, a pink neon sign that said Happily Ever Vegas, and a guy named Lou who wore a powder blue tux and took his job very seriously.

“Y’all are gonna look fabulous,” Lou said as he scribbled our names into the 3 p.m. slot for January 4th.

“I feel the energy. I feel the love.”

We left with a confirmation receipt, a bag of rose petals, and a ten-minute speech on soulmates from Lou that included at least three quotes from *The Notebook*. Around 6 p.m., we drove to McCarran Airport to pick up my parents. My mom texted us as soon as they landed: Mom:

"We're at baggage claim. Tell Jon he better be ready for a hug."

We pulled up and I spotted them immediately—my dad in a linen shirt like he was on a cruise, and my mom holding her phone up like a tourist who had never seen a ceiling before. I waved out the window.

“We did it,” I whispered. Jon leaned across the console, grinning.

“Time to tell ‘em.”

They loaded into the back of the truck, and once we pulled away from the curb, I turned in my seat and said, “Sooo... we got the license today.” My mom blinked.

“Wait. You mean...?”

“We’re officially booked to get married. January fourth. Love Story Wedding Chapel. There will be cake.” My dad just laughed.

“Of course there is.”

Back at Harrah’s, the hotel gods smiled down on my parents and upgraded them to a luxurious suite with a strip view, a marble bathtub, and a couch that looked more expensive than Jon’s truck.

Jon and I waved goodbye as they unpacked, and we crossed the street to Hell’s Kitchen for dinner.

I still had my sash in my purse but decided to give it a break for one night.

We dined on beef Wellington and lobster risotto, clinking glasses of wine like we were fancy people who didn’t eat Funyuns in bed the night before.

After dinner, we wandered back into Harrah’s and tossed a few bucks into the slot machines. Jon won \$20 on a machine with a cartoon buffalo. I lost \$40 on a sparkly mermaid-themed slot that I was emotionally attached to for no reason.

“I think I’ve peaked,” I said, staring at the spinning reels.

“You peaked when you agreed to marry me in a bar.”

We took our winnings (and losses) back upstairs and curled up in bed. I pulled the blankets up to my chin, and Jon flipped on the TV. Blue Bloods, again. Because of course. As the opening theme played, I sighed, deeply and happily.

“You know what?”

“What?”

“I’m glad we did this our way.” Jon slid his hand over mine.

“It’s the only way I know how.”

And that night, as we drifted off with the flicker of Tom Selleck’s mustache in the background and a whole Vegas wedding ahead of us, I realized something. This might be the most chaotic love story ever and it was perfect.

We woke up to golden morning light slipping through the blackout curtains and the unmistakable sound of my stomach growling like a wild raccoon. Jon cracked one eye open and groaned into the pillow.

“You hungry or is that a demon trying to escape again?”

“Both,” I mumbled, grabbing my phone.

“But mostly just starving. I want something massive. Something sinful.”

“Like your taste in men?”

“Exactly.”

So, we ordered a massive breakfast burrito from Guy Fieri’s Vegas Kitchen.

This thing was a meat-lover fever dream: sausage, bacon, scrambled eggs, hash browns, nacho cheese, and some kind of spicy aioli that made my eyes roll back in my head like I was catching the Holy Spirit.

Jon moaned like he was at church too. We ate it in bed in total silence, the way you eat something sacred.

By the time we wiped the last bits of burrito grease off our faces with hotel napkins, it was already late morning, and we had one mission before dinner—retrieve the wedding cake.

We hit valet and headed to the far side of Las Vegas where Fred’s Bakery lived like a hidden treasure.

My parents decided to skip the adventure and opted to explore the Strip on their own.

They had big plans—slot machines, mimosas, and the world’s largest chocolate fountain at Bellagio. Very on-brand for them.

We drove halfway across town, winding through neighborhoods and side streets until we arrived at Fred’s.

From the outside, it looked like nothing special.

But when we walked in, the scent of almond extract and sugar hit us like a nostalgic punch in the face.

And then we saw it. The cake. It was perfect—two tiers of red velvet amaretto magic, covered in smooth white buttercream icing, with “Jonathan & Delilah” piped in black and red lettering across the bottom tier.

On top sat a pair of playing cards: the king and queen of hearts, tucked into the frosting like a little Vegas love note. Jon got misty-eyed.

“It’s like it knows us.”

“I’m gonna cry on this cake,” I warned, already taking a thousand pictures.

“Do not drop it.”

“You don’t drop it. My hands are steady like a sniper.”

We gently carried the cake out to the truck like it was a newborn child and carefully placed it on the floor of the back seat, surrounded by towels and an emotional force field.

Back at Harrah’s, we maneuvered it up the service elevator and placed it in the hotel mini-fridge, which we’d already cleared out like cake-loving professionals. It barely fit.

“Okay,” I exhaled.

“That was the most stressful part of the wedding.” Jon raised an eyebrow.

“Says the woman who still has to do her hair, makeup, vows, and not trip walking down the aisle tomorrow.” I threw a pillow at him, but he caught it and pulled me into bed instead.

We collapsed into a nap, a pre-wedding siesta that felt half romantic, half necessary for survival.

When we woke up around 5 p.m., the sky outside had turned a dreamy pink-gold and

the Strip was already buzzing with neon energy.

I pulled on a white dress with delicate lace sleeves, slipped back into my rhinestone crown, and draped the “Bride to Be” sash across my chest like a beauty queen on a mission.

Jon looked up from tying his boots and grinned.

“You ready?”

“I was born ready. And slightly overdressed.”

We grabbed the truck from valet and drove to Maggiano’s Little Italy, right across the street from the Trump Hotel—which, fun fact, was now infamous for a guy blowing up his Tesla there two days earlier. Vegas was nothing if not dramatic.

Dinner felt like something out of a fairy tale.

We got a cozy booth, tucked near the window with a view of the Strip, and the waitstaff treated us like royalty.

My parents joined us, my mom in a glittery shawl and my dad already two glasses into the house Chianti.

We clinked glasses, told the story of the Great Cake Retrieval, and ate enough pasta to put a small country to shame.

Jon quietly slipped away mid-meal and returned with a bottle of champagne.

“For the cake cutting tomorrow,” he said, placing it beside me with a little bow.

“We’re doing this right.”

After dinner, we piled into the truck and cruised down the Strip, windows down, the lights of Vegas twinkling around us like a live-action postcard.

We caught the Bellagio fountains just in time, the water bursting into the air in choreographed waves as Andrea Bocelli’s voice filled the night.

I leaned into Jon’s shoulder, the wind catching my crown slightly crooked. “Can you believe we’re doing this?”

He turned, brushing a strand of hair from my cheek.

“I’d marry you tonight if you let me.” I smirked.

“You’ll get your chance tomorrow, cowboy.”

We dropped my parents off at the front of Harrah’s, waved goodnight, and headed straight to our room. The Strip still glowed outside our window, but inside it was calm. Cozy. Ours. I set an alarm for 8 a.m. and stared at the screen like it was my last countdown before becoming a wife.

“Sephora appointment’s at ten,” I murmured as I plugged in my phone.

“I gotta get my face snatched.”

“And you’re gonna look stunning.”

“Hair’s at one. Dress at two. Vows at three.” Jon smiled, pulling me into his arms as we sank into the bed.

“Then forever after that.” And as I lay there, head resting on his chest, I could feel his heart beating steady beneath my cheek.

My eyes fluttered closed with the comfort of knowing tomorrow, I’d be marrying the love of my life.

In Las Vegas. With a cake in the fridge and a crown on the nightstand.

Not exactly traditional. But perfectly us.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:13 am

The Wedding

Song : Die A Happy Man - Thomas Rhett

“Wake up, cowboy. It’s wedding day.” He groaned and threw an arm over his face.

“Do I get coffee before vows, or am I just expected to love, honor, and hydrate myself?”

“Both. But first, we’ve got to hit Sephora. A woman does not walk down the aisle without professional contouring.” Jon cracked one eye open.

“Do I need makeup too, or am I already devastatingly handsome?” I gave him a once-over.

“You’re exactly devastating enough for a 10 a.m. mall stroll. Come on, lover boy.”

The Strip was still quiet by Vegas standards—just a light buzz of leftover partiers, sunburned tourists, and one guy dressed like an avatar character who shouted “Happy Monday!” as we walked toward the valet.

The January air was cool but dry, and sunlight bounced off every mirrored surface like the whole city had been highlighted for TikTok.

We took the truck to Fashion Show Mall and, as promised, Jon disappeared like a dad into a Bass Pro Shop while I headed toward the glowing promise of Sephora.

Inside, the lights were blinding, the music just loud enough to trigger a minor personality change, and every surface was glistening like a freshly iced cake .

My makeup artist's name was Callie, and she was exactly the kind of girl who knew how to turn cheekbones into weapons. She gasped when she saw my "Bride to Be" sash.

"Oh my God, we're doing bridal glam? Say less." As she painted my face into a glowy, soft-focus dream, I texted Jon:

Me: "Still alive?"

Jon: "Bought a tactical flashlight and a Cinnabon. Thriving."

Me: "Do NOT eat anything that will stain your teeth."

Jon: "The Cinnabon is white. Ish."

Me: "Lord help us."

By the time I emerged, I looked like a woman ready to ruin someone's life in a perfume commercial. Jon whistled when he saw me.

"You look like you're about to walk into a soap opera and slap someone." I grinned.

"That's the vibe."

Back at Harrah's, I took charge of my hair—no glam squad required.

I curled, pinned, and twisted until my dark hair was up in a perfect bridal updo, dotted with pearl pins that sparkled in the light from the gold-framed bathroom

mirror.

I was almost done when I made the fatal mistake of checking my phone. Patricia had posted again.

Patricia_purelight:

“The sad thing about rushed Vegas weddings is you never know if it’s love or just a last-ditch tax write-off. Wishing peace and clarity to all delusional brides today.”

#TraumaSurvivor #PrayForDelilah #CursedLove

“Oh my god,” I muttered.

“She’s posting like we’re in a spiritual cage match.” Jon leaned in from the other room.

“That her again?”

“She just implied I’m marrying you for financial reasons.”

“Babe,” Jon called out, “if this is a tax write-off, it’s the sexiest damn one in IRS history.”

My mom arrived just as I threw my phone across the bed like it was cursed. She wore a flowing lavender dress that shimmered slightly when she walked and carried a small velvet box.

“Ready, baby?” she asked, eyes already misting.

I nodded. She helped me step into the wedding dress—strapless, with pearl beading

so delicate it looked like it had been sewn by angels on commission.

When she laced it up and clasped the pearl necklace around my neck, she whispered, “Something borrowed.” I blinked back tears.

“Something about to cry her makeup off.” My dad knocked on the door, dressed in a sleek black suit that somehow managed to say both “I’m a proud father” and “I will bury the groom in the desert if necessary.”

Jon was already downstairs waiting by the truck, looking like every ranch girl’s fantasy in his Wranglers, Ariat boots, that beautiful blue-and-white patterned shirt I picked out at Boot Barn, and—because of course—a silver-and-brown bolo tie and cowboy hat with a dark blue suit jacket.

He saw me and just whispered, “Damn,” like a reverent prayer.

We all piled into the truck and drove downtown to the Love Story Wedding Chapel, which was nestled between a tattoo parlor and a pawn shop like a pearl in a very gritty oyster.

Inside, it was pure kitschy heaven—pink velvet chairs, twinkle lights, and a floral arch that somehow managed to be both adorable and fire-code suspicious.

My dad walked me down the aisle to the gentle sounds of a prerecorded harp.

My mom beamed from the front row. Jon stood at the altar like he was seeing sunshine for the first time.

The officiant was a lovely old lady with blue eyeshadow and a voice like sweet tea.

As she read the vows, Jon and I held hands so tightly our knuckles went white.

Halfway through, my vision blurred from tears—and not just from emotion.

“Uh-oh,” Jon whispered.

“The mushroom gummy’s kicking in.” I barely choked back a laugh.

“Not now, Jonathan.” Too late. His pupils were the size of dimes, and I was suddenly very aware of how sparkly the lights were.

But we got through it—sniffling, giggling, clutching each other as if our lives depended on it—and when she said, “You may kiss the bride,” we did so like teenagers at prom.

Afterward, we took photos out front: me in my gown, him in his boots, us against a backdrop of LED roses and discount elation. The photographer was an old man with a limp who kept yelling, “Now look at each other like you’re about to get matching tattoos!”

We drove back to Harrah’s in a daze, like we’d just left a carnival ride. In our suite, we cut the cake—white icing over rich red velvet and amaretto layers, with “Jonathan & Delilah” piped in black and red icing and the king and queen card topper that made my heart hurt with happiness.

Jon popped the champagne, spilling half of it on the mini-bar, and we toasted to chaos, love, and the general madness of being alive together. Then came another Patricia post.

Patricia_purelight:

“Some people need glitter and cheap cake to feel real. But true love doesn’t need a hashtag. I’ll wait for the right one.”

#SoulTiesNotSlotMachines

#SpiritualWarfare #JonDeservedBetter

“Jon,” I said.

“She tagged you in this one.” He squinted at the screen.

“Is ‘Slot Machines’ a metaphor for your ass?”

I stared. “Jon.”

“I’m just saying—it’s curvy and bad with money.”

After my parents left our suite (and made us promise not to take any more mushroom gummies), Jon and I decided to walk the LINQ Promenade in our wedding attire.

The sidewalk sparkled under fairy lights, and every third person yelled “Congratulations!” or offered us free drinks.

At one point, a group of drunk women handed me a plastic tiara and said I was “the spiritual vibe of 2025.” We danced outside a karaoke bar, got mobbed by tourists who thought we were street performers and ate dinner—again—at Yard House, where they gave us another slice of cake and a round of free shots.

It took Jon fifteen minutes and two jokes about “undoing Fort Knox” to get me out of my dress when we finally returned to the suite.

We collapsed into the shower, steam curling around us like a warm fog, kissing and laughing and trying not to drown in each other’s joy.

Later, in bed, with his arm draped over my waist and reruns of Blue Bloods playing in the background, Jon whispered, “You’re my favorite bad decision.” I kissed his shoulder.

“I’m your wife now, cowboy.”

Everything I’d ever been through—every bad relationship, every tear, every crooked smile I used to hide behind closed lips, all the pain I’d packed away like old boxes in a closet—none of it mattered anymore.

Not with Jon. Somehow, with him, all the jagged memories softened.

The noise of the past faded until it was nothing but a distant hum behind the sound of his laughter, his footsteps beside mine, and the way he said my name like it was something sacred.

And right there, in that glittering city full of flashing lights and strangers and chaos, I had an epiphany.

Home wasn’t a place. It was a person. And mine had brown eyes, Ariat boots, and the kind of love that rewrote everything that came before.

And with that, I went to sleep as Mrs. Lassiter.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:13 am

Song : Where The Wild Things Are - Luke Combs

It had been four months since Jon and I returned to my parent's old house—four months of falling asleep to the croak of Texas cicadas and waking up next to the man who made every chaotic moment of my past feel like a faded photo.

We were happy. Genuinely, peacefully, deliciously happy.

Jon fixed things around the house with his cowboy know-how, Nacho had declared war on every squirrel in the zip code, and I—well, I was just trying to keep my plants alive and avoid heatstroke before noon.

But Texas summers don't just melt your skin off—they mess with your heart, too.

Ranger, my fifteen-year-old four-legged son, had been slowing down the past few months.

Stairs had become Everest, and naps were his entire personality.

But still, he was my boy. The one I adopted when I was twenty, with a crooked ear and eyes that always looked like he was judging you (because he was).

The one who'd slept by my side through every breakup, heartbreak, and bad haircut.

The one who never left, even when people did.

So when he got bit by a brown recluse spider in the garage, we thought it'd be a quick

fix.

A shot here, an antibiotic there. He was tough—he once stole and swallowed a whole chicken wing and walked it off like it was nothing.

But this time, the meds weren't working.

The swelling never went down. His bark got quiet.

His eyes lost that little spark. So we knew. We just... knew.

Jon had the truck running early that morning. "We'll just get the vet to drain it," he said gently, rubbing Ranger's head as he helped him into the back seat with a soft blanket.

"He'll feel better soon, baby." I nodded, pretending not to notice how still Ranger already looked .

The ride was mostly quiet, except for the local radio station playing 2000s country hits and Jon cracking a joke about the weather, which was so hot it felt like the devil's armpit.

We were five minutes away. Just five. I turned around to check on him.

And he was gone. Just like that—no warning, no sound. Just... stillness.

I think I screamed before I could even process what had happened. A raw, guttural sound ripped out of me that startled Nacho into the front seat and made Jon slam the brakes. "What? What is it?" he said, panicking.

"He's gone!" I cried, voice shaking.

“Oh my God, Jon, he’s gone, he’s gone!” Jon pulled over, right there by a Waffle House, and held me while I sobbed into his chest like the world had just split open.

My arms reached into the back seat, grabbing at his little sweater, his collar—anything.

Anything to make it not real. I called my parents, choking out the words:

“Ranger just died.” My dad was silent. My mom sobbed.

They’d loved him like he was one of their own.

Because he was. When we finally pulled up to the vet, the nurses were already outside waiting.

One of them, a soft-eyed woman with silver hair and a pink stethoscope, approached the truck like she was walking toward a funeral.

“We’ll take good care of him,” she said gently.

“You can say goodbye.”

They brought out a soft blanket and carried him in like he was royalty. I kissed his head. Jon whispered something into his fur. Even the vet cried. He’d been seeing Ranger for over a decade.

“He was a good boy,” he said, his voice catching.

“One of the best.” We signed the forms for cremation. They would place his ashes in a wooden box with his name engraved. I asked if we could include his favorite toy—an old rubber duck that barely had a beak left. The vet said yes. I nearly broke down again.

The drive home was excruciating. I didn't speak. I just clutched his collar and little blue sweater like they were oxygen. Nacho was quiet, too, as if he knew. I swear he did. He curled up in the back seat and looked out the window with eyes too sad for a dog who usually got excited about bugs.

Back at the house, everything felt wrong.

The air was too still. The silence was too loud.

And then I saw it: the boxes. All of them, stacked by the front door, are labeled in Sharpie.

Kitchen. Bedroom. Delilah's Chaos. We were supposed to be moving soon—leaving the heat and heartbreak of Texas for a place that felt like it was pulled from a dream.

Essexville. A small harbor town on Lake Huron with a white lighthouse, charming diners, and summers that didn't feel like you were walking on the surface of the sun.

It was perfect. Jon found the house—a two-story colonial with a wraparound porch, creaky wood floors, and space for the life we were building.

For Nacho, and Buttercup and Spice, my two ridiculous cats.

For the future. Ranger was supposed to go with us.

I sat on the floor, the sweater still in my lap, and just wept. Jon dropped next to me, wrapping his arms around me and pressing his forehead to mine.

“He knew he was loved,” Jon whispered.

“Every single day.”

“I just... I thought we’d have more time.”

“I know, baby.” He kissed my temple.

“Me too.”

As if the universe couldn’t let me sit in peace with my grief, my phone buzzed. An Instagram notification. Of course. Patricia.

Unhinged Post #1:

“I know for a FACT someone put pumpkin spice essential oil on my pillow to trigger my aura. I’m not saying names but it rhymes with Meanine.”

(Translation: Jeanine. Obviously.)

Unhinged Post #2:

“I had a dream that a golden retriever tried to tell me my chakras were off and then bit my knee. Dreams are REAL. Let that sink in.”

Unhinged Post #3:

“Not everyone who wears pearls is classy. Some people are just trying to suffocate their demons in designer.” I turned my phone to Jon.

“Your ex-step-sister-in-law has officially lost all grip on reality.” He squinted.

“What the hell does a dream dog have to do with chakras?”

“Exactly.” It made me laugh, for just a second. The kind of absurd, nose-snort laugh that bursts out through tears. Jon smiled.

“There’s my girl.”

Later that evening, my best friend Christine finally arrived in Houston. She’d been watching the cats for us while we prepped the move. When she walked in and saw my face, she just opened her arms.

“I brought snacks and wine and I’m ready to cry with you.”

We sat on the couch, the three of us—me, Jon, Christine—and Nacho curled up at our feet, watching us like he was the new sheriff in town.

I told her everything. She cried with me.

We laughed at memories of Ranger eating Jon’s socks.

Jon reminded me of the time Ranger chased a raccoon right into the neighbor’s pool and strutted out like a hero.

And then Jon said something that stuck in my chest.

“He was your first real constant,” he said quietly.

“But you’ve got a new one now. I’m not going anywhere.”

That night, I went into my room and lit a candle by the window.

I placed his collar next to it and whispered goodnight.

The house felt different. Quieter. Heavier.

But I knew he was still here. In every echo.

In every floor creak. In every hair that would never be fully vacuumed off the couch.

We'd be leaving soon. Headed for a cooler, softer place.

A fresh start by the water. Me, Jon, Nacho, Buttercup, and Spice.

But no Ranger. It was the saddest day of my life.

And also, somehow, the start of a brand-new chapter. To be continued...