

Mendocino



California, 1976

*Desire, danger, and a life
without permission*

Don Detrich

Mendocino

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She came to Mendocino to avoid going home.

In the summer of 1976, Claire Elwood has a key to a dead poet's cottage, a few checks in her bag, and no plan beyond the fog. Allie's house is still filled with books, letters, records, and the traces of a woman who chose art over permission. For Claire, it feels like evidence that another life is possible.

Then she meets Tod, a horseman who knows the coast, the woods, and how to build freedom with his own hands. He also has a final marijuana crop hidden in the redwoods, and he needs someone no one will recognize to make supply runs.

Claire agrees once. Then again. Soon the secret camp, the work, and the man feel more real than the future waiting back East. But Tod's freedom rests on secrecy, criminal money, and a crop other men are willing to take by force. When intimidation becomes gunfire, Claire and Tod flee with what they can carry and leave innocence behind.

California, 1976: Love, danger and a life without permission

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PART ONE
THE ROAD NORTH

Claire

I grew up in Montclair, New Jersey, among tulip beds, bay windows, and houses with names. My father was a business executive, a man of ambition and contract law. My mother was a housewife with a shelf of cookbooks she rarely opened. She ran the house with the same efficiency he brought to his office. Everything was clean, polite, precisely in place.

My name is Claire Babbitt, and I was pampered. Let's not pretend otherwise. We had money. Not mansion money, but pool-in-the-backyard money, horseback-lessons-on-Wednesday money. I boarded my own horse at a private stable and took lessons from a woman who wore jodhpurs like armor. I learned posture before I learned grammar. I had dresses from Bloomingdale's and a social calendar full of ice-cream socials and cotillions, the sort of parties that were really training grounds for charm.

I was popular. Not because I was loud or beautiful — though I could pass for either when needed — but because I knew how to be liked in a quiet way. I knew how to be what people expected.

My problem was I read too much.

It started young. Little Women. Big ideas. Books cracked the varnish of suburbia and whispered that another life was possible, perhaps even worth the risk. The more I read, the more I saw through the polite masks of our neighbors. I asked questions at dinner. I wrote poems in the margins of my Latin homework. I still made perfect grades, always honor roll, always overachieving, but some part of me had begun looking for the door.

When I was seventeen, my father made the mistake of telling me I could go to any college I wanted. He said it with pride, thinking, of course, I'd aim for Yale or Radcliffe or maybe Wellesley if I was feeling radical. A straight line from there to law school, diplomacy, or whatever bright future daughters of executives were meant to pursue.

Instead, I chose Mills College, a private women's liberal arts college in California with a serious arts tradition.

He blinked. Twice. My mother made a noise like she'd bitten into something sour. But I stood firm. I barely had to stamp my feet.

I wanted a different kind of education. I wanted more than facts or credentials. I wanted to be shaken. I wanted to be in the sun and in a city of Beat poets and in a place where women ran the room. I wanted poetry that didn't rhyme and history that wasn't written by winners. I wanted to be far enough away to grow into someone new, maybe someone truer.

Looking back, maybe I was already falling. But it was a fall I chose.

* * *

I arrived at Mills in the fall of 1969 with a suitcase full of corduroy, journals, and naïve certainty. I had never been to Oakland. I didn't know what eucalyptus smelled like. After rain, its sharp medicinal tang rose around the pale stone buildings. Mills was a world unto itself, a cloister but not a convent, feminine but not fragile.

I lived in Warren Olney Hall, third floor, with a view that stretched across the tennis courts and dipped into the hills. My roommate wore her hair in a braid that reached her waist and read Anaïs Nin in the bath. We weren't rebels, not exactly — but we weren't quiet, either. We read Adrienne Rich and

Susan Sontag and argued about art. In seminar rooms scented with chalk and sandalwood, I learned how to hold my ground. How to speak, not with volume, but with conviction.

I majored in writing because it was the only thing I ever wanted to do. Mills let me go feral with it. My advisor let me submit long, braided essays instead of traditional research papers. I wrote poetry in the margins of everything — receipts, syllabi, even the occasional textbook. I took a class called “Women in Literature” that cracked something open in me I didn’t even know was sealed. We sat cross-legged in circles and talked about stories like they were sacred texts.

* * *

In the spring of 1970, I was angry in that well-read, well-fed, vaguely guilty academic sort of way. There was a protest in Berkeley. Jules said it was our duty. Wendy called it sacred. Ana was recording interviews for a journalism class she’d probably drop. I mostly listened, scribbling notes. Nixon had ordered American troops into Cambodia, and People’s Park was still a rallying cry.

So we went. We took a crowded bus across Oakland. Jules brought her tambourine.

The closer we got, the more the crowd swelled. I watched the edges: police gathering along the streets, a low hum beneath the cheering.

We marched with signs raised and arms linked. We still believed resistance could work. Near the park the air grew heavier. A phalanx of police stood at the entrance, helmeted and silent.

Someone shouted, “Stay calm!”

That’s when it fractured.

The bottle broke. Then a scream. Then the hiss of tear gas. The kind that climbs your throat like wire and makes you forget your own name. I lost Jules in the scatter. Wendy was behind me, I thought, but then she wasn’t. Someone grabbed my shoulder. I spun and ducked. Cops were moving in from both ends of Telegraph. No one was singing anymore. People ran, stumbling. Boots hit pavement.

I tore down side streets and through back lots, past a man who fell and didn’t get up. Behind a laundromat I crouched with one hand over my mouth, my heart kicking at my ribs. A bullhorn sounded in the distance, then a chant, another crash. I later wrote that it sounded like the country coming apart one brick at a time. It was only my illusions cracking.

When I walked back to campus, past broken windows and burning dumpsters and students sobbing into each other’s arms, something in me had changed. I still believed in the cause. Of course I did. Vietnam was a disgrace. The racism. The greed. The lies from Washington. The rot that seemed to stretch through every institution. I believed in change. But I no longer believed that screaming in the streets was the path to transformation.

That was the trap, wasn’t it? Provoke us into fury, then call us animals. We gave them the image they needed. And I didn’t want to play a part in someone else’s narrative.

Because it wasn’t just the cops that were the problem, not really. The rot went deeper than the riot gear. It was in the quiet, in the shoppers who kept shopping, in a country that could bomb children and still sleep at night, shrug, change the channel, and vote for more of the same.

I wrote it all down. Every detail. That day became my senior thesis, not just the events, but a kind of elegy. For hope, maybe. Or for innocence. For the belief that shame could reform a machine built on denial. It couldn’t. But that didn’t mean you stopped trying.

The real revolution wouldn't be televised because it wouldn't look like one. It would look like shared power, people feeding one another without shame, stories told without apology. Equal rights not as theory but as daily practice. Art that unsettled and healed. Hands in dirt, voices at the table, lives built on something other than conquest. That was the revolution I came to believe in: quiet, persistent, human.

So I started looking for the quiet revolutions — the ones that take root in gardens. In books. In kitchens where women choose different words than the ones they were given. I started to believe in culture, in art, in stories that didn't need to end in blood.

I graduated. Not broken. Just... less dazzled. I left the banners behind. I packed my notebooks. And I went in search of a life that could hold contradiction, a life that didn't need fire, smoke, or slogans to feel real.

* * *

I should've been on a plane back to New Jersey, back to Montclair, where the air sticks to your skin and every neighbor has an opinion about your shoes. But instead, I was on Highway 101, heading north. The road unwound ahead of me in slow coils, as if trying to forget something. My old Volvo, a small tank of a car, hummed beneath me with the stubbornness of a protestor and the lungs of a smoker. It wasn't fast, but it believed in its mission. The map beside me was a faded Mobil Oil foldout, cracked along the creases. I'd circled Mendocino in pencil.

I'd lucked out, though I didn't know it at the time. Jan's aunt had died the week before, unexpectedly but not tragically, the way some women in their eighties do: quietly, without drama, leaving behind a house full of a lifetime's objects that hadn't been moved in years. It was in Mendocino, a town I couldn't have pointed to on a map before, somewhere up the coast where fog had its own language. The family wasn't ready to sell. Too many papers, too much sentiment. But they needed someone reliable to keep the house from going ghost. Jan said trustworthy, and somehow that meant me.

Free rent for the summer. That was the deal. A place to stay, no strings, just water the plants and don't burn it down. I nodded like I knew how to do that.

Jan had said, "It's just the way she left it, Claire." She gushed about the charm, the light, the bookshelves reaching the ceiling. She made it sound like a mossy dream, half witch's cottage, half writer's retreat. I smiled and nodded, but part of me suspected mildew, mothballs, and a slow leak no one had mentioned. I didn't ask for details. At that point in my life, mystery felt more useful than information.

I had no real idea what Mendocino was like, hadn't even seen a photo, hadn't bothered to check. Jan claimed it was beautiful, that kind of North Coast beautiful that makes you believe in poems again. But I didn't trust people's adjectives. Everyone said "beautiful" when they meant "foggy," "quiet." When they meant "nothing to do." Still, I said yes.

Because it was summer. Because I had nowhere else to go but home. And because some part of me, the quiet part, the part that watched more than it spoke, wanted to know what happened when you followed a road with an unknown destination.

I'd just graduated with a degree in writing, which felt both wildly impractical and strangely holy. My parents were just glad it was over and had marked the occasion with one clipped phone call and

then financial silence, the kind that isn't loud, but echoes anyway. No more checks. No more safety net. Just a suggestion to "come home and figure things out," which was their way of saying "start living the life we already picked for you."

But the life they had in mind looked like surrender. Beige walls, dependable men, a job in some city where no one read books unless they were digest-sized and on a coffee table. There would've been a Daniel or a John, probably both. Men with nice teeth and no internal weather. They'd say things like "sensible investment" and mean it. I wasn't built for that. Or if I was, I didn't want to find out.

I still had a few checks folded into the coin pocket of my bag — one from the campus office gig, two graduation cards from great-aunts who thought I was headed to law school. It wasn't much. Enough for gas, coffee, and a few months of dented cans and quiet decisions. Enough to be irresponsible with a trace of flair.

I was broke, technically.

No expectations. No one waiting. Just me and the road and a northern town with a name that sounded like a wind spell.

The hills softened the farther I drove, until the world felt like the inside of a thought. Somewhere up ahead was a house I hadn't seen, just an address scribbled on a scrap of notepad paper, handed off by a friend. There was no lease, just a key. Just a promise of a summer by the sea.

And that, for now, felt like enough.

The Road

The road rose without hurry, curling into the hush between pines until the sun became a whisper. Light sifted through branches in torn veils. The air softened, and so did the sky.

The scent changed first: pine and something older, resinous. Then the trees opened on a valley washed in late gold. Vineyards lay below, neat and dreaming, their fruit not yet ripe.

The air warmed, grew thick with bloom, sweet with what the land was willing to give up. But the road kept going. Kept curving. Kept changing its mind. It didn't stop to look. It didn't settle. As if it knew beauty was only the skin of the thing. As if it had somewhere deeper to be.

* * *

The redwoods found me without announcement, sudden and solemn, as if they had been waiting for me to quiet down. The light vanished into bark and shadow. The road narrowed. Something in me quieted with it.

They rose out of the earth like old gods wearing bark instead of crowns, too tall for sky, too still for time. They didn't sway. They didn't whisper. They held the air the way a cathedral holds silence, not out of habit, but like they'd been born knowing how.

I pulled off where the road curved low and loose along the Navarro River, a ragged little campground with no sign, just a clearing and the hush of it. Killed the engine. Stepped out. The door clicked shut behind me but even that sound fell soft, as if the trees had taken it, swallowed it whole.

No words came. Just the feeling that breath itself was enough — that to stand there and still be warm and living was ceremony enough for them to allow it.

I'd seen redwoods before — lean ones strung out behind gas stations or clustered near highways, the kind that had learned how to survive small. But not this. These were different. These were not survivors. They stood the way silence stands when it's ancient and sure of itself, when it doesn't have to earn its hush. They didn't ask to be understood. They just were — vast, dark-veined, unmoved.

I reached out and touched one, a thick-limbed monolith mottled with moss. Just to say, I'm here. And whatever had been unsettled in me stilled. Not peace, exactly. Not grace. But the beginning of something like it.

The river was down a short path, past a slump of fern and loam. I walked slow, slow enough for the hush to wrap around my ankles, low enough to hear the water before I saw it. The river was narrow there, dark with fallen needles, thick with the cold. It spoke in a voice steady, sure, unconcerned with whether or not I was listening.

I sat on a smooth stone and didn't think. Just let the sound move through me, the way truths do.

Time changed shape. It thinned, folded, paused. I stayed longer than I meant to. Could've stayed longer still. But the light began to shift, slow and silver, as if memory itself were loosening its grip. I stood. Walked back up through the dark-breathing trunks, let the door shut behind me again.

I drove west.

The river followed for a while, curling beside me, pulling the forest apart seam by seam. Trees fell away in pairs. Then alone. Then none. Just hills. Just air.

* * *

The Pacific spread below the thinning fog, wide and muscular. Light moved across its back. Far below, cliffs braced themselves while surf hurled itself against stone, again and again, persistence without witness.

The wind came up from the water fast, salted, filled with some deep memory that didn't belong to me. It touched my skin, then something inside me. I rolled the window down. Let it reach in and rattle the loose things. Let it say whatever it came to say.

There were houses. Scattered in clusters like someone had thrown a handful of small white bones across the cliffs. People lived in them. They kept their lives there, made soup, fought, aged. But I couldn't see them. Couldn't imagine what they believed. From where I was, it was only the road and the sea and something quiet rising between them. Not silence. Not emptiness. Just a kind of stillness that moved.

I drove slow, like I was trying not to wake the day too suddenly. One hand out the window, palm open, fingers spread wide so the wind would take hold and lift me, give me wings or something stranger. What I had wasn't freedom. Not yet. But it was close. It was the part right before the breaking. A beginning with no ceremony. A door swinging open where no door had been.

And somewhere between the last river curve and the drop where the cliffs turned mean, I felt it. Not arrival. Not escape. Something thinner than both. A moment that didn't demand.

A moment I belonged to, without trying.

I rounded a slow curve and there it was — sudden, complete — laid out across the water like a painting. Mendocino. The town perched at the edge of the cliff, set piece by piece, all white trim and clean angles, soft blues and yellows bleached gently by salt and time, tucked into the headland as if it had grown there.

From where I sat, high on the curve where the river mouth bent open to meet the sea, the whole town looked delicate. Buildings shoulder to shoulder, their faces turned to the Pacific like they were listening for something only the waves could say.

Below it, the cliffs dropped hard, black rock streaked with gold and moss, their bones exposed. And beneath those, the beach stretched pale and smooth, caught in the long arms of the bay. The river came in slow and clear, curling around sandbanks, its surface thick with light.

The Enchanted Cottage

Fog had settled over the village. Mendocino's salt-weathered Victorians carried the history of the old logging town, while galleries, bookshops, and the Art Center spoke of the painters and craftspeople who had remade it. Older histories remained in the Presbyterian church, the Kwan Tai Temple, and the surviving homes of loggers, merchants, and immigrant families.

Mendocino still remembered those early artists who first arrived in the late 1950s and shaped it into a colony of dreamers. Bill Zacha's Mendocino Art Center still pulsed with the energy he stirred into being. I imagined artists like Charles Stevenson settling into studios, paint on their hands, trying to turn cliffs into canvases of memory.

The village felt held in amber, its former loggers' homes spindly and elegant, their frames weathered by wind and sea.

From my vantage, I could trace the curve of the bay as I headed to my summer refuge. I found the address on Main Street. Gravel parking and a narrow path led to the small house tucked back from the road.

I walked the last stretch in silence. Gravel crunched underfoot. I passed through a tall wooden gate, and the ocean view stopped me in my tracks. I stepped onto a deck rough with salt and years. I stood there breathing in air that was salted and sweet, alive with the hush of something old. Pines held their limbs high as if listening. Below, the garden tangled into itself, green and gold and wild with purpose rather than decoration.

Beyond the garden, the land dropped off into a small miracle: white sand curled into a crescent, a hidden bay, as if the earth had cupped its hands around a secret. The surf unloaded itself in rolling breakers on the other side, crashing, receding, crashing again, a relentless heart beating against the shore.

The ocean wasn't a view. It was a presence. It held its body still, blue-gray and muscled, light sliding across its back like breath. And in the stillness between those waves, in the way the wind moved through the pines without asking anything in return, I felt something shift in me.

* * *

It looked like the house was grown, not built. As if the wind and sea had shaped it over time the way water carves stone, soft and slow, until it becomes something true. Wood faded to a salt-kissed gray, windows sunlit and wide-eyed, the roof sloping into the sky like it had once been a boat. The garden around it wasn't tended so much as trusted, wild and blooming, tangled with memory, every path a loose sentence trailing off into green.

From the front, the house leaned gently toward the bluff, offering its face to the ocean, catching the last of the light. It didn't flaunt itself. The sea was its backdrop, its rhythm, its reason. Big windows drank in the view, and in the space between porch rail and cypress limb, you could feel how long this place had been listening, to waves, to gulls, to the silence.

From the side, you saw the bones of the place more clearly. The old fence leaned inward, the garden curled tight around it like it was protecting something. A bench waited under a twisted tree, half in sun, half in shadow. Flowers grew the way thoughts come—unruly, unexpected, full of color.

* * *

I fumbled with the key, a thick old thing, brass and slightly warm from my palm — and stepped inside what could only be called another world. The door gave with a sigh, and the kitchen greeted me like a woman who had lived long and well and wasn't ashamed of the clutter she'd gathered along the way.

The kitchen smelled of time and thyme: bread crust, woodsmoke, lemon peel in a bowl too chipped to be precious and too loved to discard. Light came through gauze curtains stitched with faded red flowers. Beyond them, the garden was not arranged so much as allowed.

Everywhere, there were layers. Not mess. Stories. Basket upon basket hung from the ceiling, some woven tight, others loosened by years of use and disuse, their bellies hollow, dreaming of apples. Copper pots dulled to a rose-brown shimmer crowded the stove, and above them a long shelf held saints and dogs and pitchers painted with strange, joyous birds. One wall bore a clock too tall for the room and too proud to care, its hands stuck or stubborn, chiming something not even close to the truth.

The cabinets didn't match. Some were deep cherry with glass fronts fogged over; others were scratched pine, green with age and still clinging to their knobs. A hundred teacups perched on hooks, each one different, each one seemingly collected by mood, not purpose. They looked like ears listening.

At the center, a table, heavy and long, draped in striped cloth the color of dusk and candlelight. A vase held whatever had been blooming that morning, now wilted. Wild yellow things. Maybe something cut from the side of the road.

This wasn't a kitchen built for show. It was a place that had grown by feel. A place that remembered everything — every meal, every heartbreak, every late night laugh — and still had room for more.

The living room was warmer, thick with old wood and wool. Its walls carried colors no catalog would have named: melon, clay, bruised blue. A sea-glass bookcase bowed under lives read and reread. Hardcover leaned into paperbacks. Cookbooks flirted with poetry. On the top shelf, behind a porcelain dog, a stack of letters slept under dust.

Lamps glowed low and golden. One wore a fringed shade with birds stitched along its hem. Another bloomed with flowers that weren't quite right, the colors just a little too loud, which made them perfect. The couch was striped and tired, arms worn, covered with a patchwork of throws and tasseled pillows that looked like they'd traveled continents to rest here. One cushion had beads, another a tiny stitched lamb. The effect was something between a memory and a lullaby.

There was no space without texture. Velvet met tweed, lace pressed against wool, brass nestled into carved wood. A rocking horse stood in one corner, its paint cracked around the eyes, the red of its mouth faded to a soft blush. Nearby, a small table slouched beneath a silver tray and a week-old newspaper, both catching the amber light like they knew they were being watched.

The ceiling angled slightly, as if the house had shrugged itself into shape over years of wind and waiting. Framed paintings climbed the walls wherever they could find room — ships, saints, a single cow. One corner held a guitar resting beside an armchair whose velvet had turned to ghost. Everywhere, something leaned, something perched, something slept in shadow.

This wasn't décor. This was a mind made visible — layered, tender, just a little wild. I didn't sit. Not yet. I stood there, quiet, as if I'd stepped into another life.

Through the tall, clean panes of glass — each one catching the sea light differently — the world opened wide. Not just a view, but a reach, a gesture, like the room had been built not to contain anything, but to let it spill. The ocean lay just beyond, a stretch of blue brushed with silver, like

someone had taken their time laying it down. Pines framed the edges, their long dark trunks crossing the light like brushstrokes on linen, rough and necessary.

And even with all that brightness — the gleam off the water, the sky so pale it seemed poured from porcelain — the room behind me held steady to its weight. Baskets still hung in corners, their shadows soft on the wood. Books still leaned like tired shoulders against shelves. Velvet armchairs, patched and plush, watched quietly from the back wall, as if they didn't mind not being the center of things.

The room held the saved and beloved; the windows held the endless and changing. Between them, the glass gave old wood a horizon and the sea a way in. Looking out, I did not feel separate from it. I felt home.

As though the view belonged to the room, and the room — somehow — had decided I could belong too.

* * *

I stood there too long, just watching.

Fog drifted slowly across the water beyond, breathing like something asleep and ancient. And all around me, her world. Aunt Alice. A teacher. A poet. Reclusive, yes, but not lonely. Not if these walls meant anything. Not if the corners had even half a memory.

Notebooks were stacked on every flat surface, margins packed with quick cursive, looping and urgent. The kind of handwriting you have when the thought arrives faster than the hand can carry it. Cookbooks weren't shelved; they were lived in, flour-streaked, oil-softened, and stuffed with letters, some still in envelopes. I found records beside the fireplace, Joni, Miles, Van, Nina, their sleeves worn at the edges.

Inside cupboard doors, old clippings had been pinned like relics: gallery flyers, faded Polaroids, articles peeled from magazines. One photo showed a half-naked commune gathering on Albion Ridge — bare skin and bead necklaces, everyone grinning like the sun had forgiven them. Another: Alice herself on the porch just outside, wind-tangled hair, a cigarette burning low in her left hand, a drink clutched like scripture in the other.

I wandered room to room, rummaging, touching. Palming drawer pulls. Letting my fingers find the smoothed-down corners of her life. The books weren't in order, not by alphabet, not even by genre — they followed some private map, some inward logic that made perfect sense if you didn't try to understand it. The typewriter sat quiet in the corner — a Royal, green keys, the "e" worn bare.

There was space inside the house for every kind of quiet, daydream, sorrow, the slow ache of being alone in the right way. You could feel the woman who once lived here in the angles of the rooms, in the way the light pooled near the door, in the handwritten notes still tucked behind books on the shelf.

I stood by the window, tracing the curve of the bay with my eyes.

I imagined the town, Main Street's little galleries, the artists who had once wandered here with paint and hunger.

I thought of the wild-eyed vision that turned Mendocino into a place where dreaming counted as currency. Thought of all those others whose brushes had trembled at this same horizon line, believing that to make art, to live close to the wind, was enough.

This wasn't just a house. It was a held breath, a lived life, a sanctuary layered in years. And now, for a season, it was mine. A place to drift, to write, to listen.

* * *

“Hello?”

“Hi, Mom.”

“Oh, Claire! It’s so nice to hear from you. Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. How about you?”

“We’re well, dear. Have you made your flight reservation yet?”

“Not yet. I’ve been thinking I might stay here a little longer.”

A pause. “Oh?”

“Yeah. A friend of mine had an aunt who passed away and left behind this house, right on the coast. They need someone to house-sit for the summer. It’s free. Just for a couple of months.”

“It’s beautiful, Mom. Peaceful. I figured, why not? Just for the summer. And it’s free.”

Silence, then: “Oh... well, that’s unexpected.” She sounded as if she were rearranging her face.

Another pause, longer this time. “You know your father and I were expecting you home. I’ve got your room all fixed up.”

“I know, and I really appreciate that. It’s just... this came up, and it felt right. I promise, I’ll be back in the fall.”

I heard her cover the receiver. Muffled voices in the background. My father’s was low and tight. She was filling him in. He didn’t sound happy.

“Claire?” His voice was crisp, controlled.

“Hi, Dad.”

“So you’re not coming home.”

“I am—just not yet. I found this place, and it’s free for the summer. It seemed too good to pass up.”

“Well,” he said, a quiet sigh leaking through, “I think it’s time you found a job and a proper place to live. You’ve had your four years.”

“I know. And I will. This is just for the summer. I’ve got a little money saved, and the house doesn’t cost a thing.”

“You understand I’m not sending more money. That was the agreement.”

“I understand.”

A pause. “You’re still welcome here, Claire. That hasn’t changed. But I’m disappointed. I thought we had an understanding. You are coming home in the fall, right? Your mother is very worried about you.”

“I’ll be home in the fall. Promise.”

Another beat. “Here’s your mother.”

“Oh, honey... if you’re sure it’s safe. Are you staying with someone?”

“No, Mom. But it’s a very nice house in a safe neighborhood. And I’ve been living on my own for a while now. I can handle it.”

“I suppose... well, if it’s only for the summer. But be careful, dear.”

“I will. I’ll check in soon, okay?”

“All right. We’re still disappointed, but... we’ll talk soon.”

“I love you. Bye, Mom.”

* * *

I didn't want to disappoint them. I really didn't. I wasn't one of those kids who needed to rebel. I loved my parents. I loved the way they meant well. They'd built a careful world with clean edges and warm dinners and the assumption that their daughter would follow the same bright, sensible path they had. And for the most part, I had.

But something in me had shifted. Slowly, like erosion. Or maybe all at once, in the tear gas of Berkeley. Either way, I knew the path they wanted wasn't mine. I didn't want to become someone else's careful story. I wanted to write my own.

Still, I hated the sound of disappointment in my father's voice. The clipped tone. The quiet betrayal of expectation. He'd worked hard for the money that had sent me to Mills. He'd believed that, with the right education and the right discipline, I'd come home polished and grateful, ready to step into whatever version of adulthood they'd imagined for me.

But that version was a dress that didn't fit. It was stiff at the shoulders, tight at the throat. I was learning that my life — whatever it was becoming — couldn't be explained in a single phone call or soothed with polite agreement. There would be a reckoning. I could feel it, like the hum before a quake. I wasn't trying to be cruel. I was just trying to be free. And freedom, I was starting to understand, often sounded like disobedience.

So I lied, a little. Or bent the truth into something easier to swallow. "Just the summer." "Just house-sitting." "Of course I'll be home." Maybe I even believed it. But part of me knew I was already gone.

Mendocino

The next morning, I walked the quarter mile into town. Mendocino looked like a painting left in weather, its edges softened and colors deepened by time. It did not rush. It leaned into the wind.

Main Street sloped gently, bookended by the sea and the hills, both impossibly close. The clapboard buildings rose neat and storied, each one painted like it had chosen its own color on purpose. White, butter yellow, weather-washed green. They didn't match. They belonged. Cornices curled like lace. Bay windows held the sky. You could tell someone had cared for each building, not with polish, but with patience.

I passed a café with chairs set out crooked on the boardwalk. Two women were laughing, each with a cup wrapped in both hands, steam catching the morning sun. Farther on, a gallery door was propped open with a piece of driftwood. I stepped inside and was met with quiet and light. Paintings lined the walls — sea cliffs, moons, rusted hinges. The woman behind the desk had silver braids and a voice like chamomile steeped too long. She told me the artist lived just up the hill. She said there was a poetry reading Thursday nights in the church hall and a potluck that sometimes followed.

I wandered. Every storefront was a little world. A bookshop where I found a signed copy of Snyder. A clothing store full of linen and wool and soft, worn indigo. A tiny tea shop with glass jars lined in rows, dried herbs and little hand-lettered tags: mullein, wild mint, love-in-idleness.

People spoke to me as if they had been waiting. Not with insistence, but with that old stown grace: eyes meeting yours, a pause before moving on. A man in a felt hat asked if I'd made it out to the headlands yet and said the tide was low enough to see the sea caves. A girl at the bakery gave me two cookies instead of one and told me there was live music at the inn on Saturdays, "the good kind, with fiddles and someone who's lived a little."

And all the while, the town kept turning gently, letting the wind fold around its corners, the smell of sea and Bishop pine stitched through the streets, with gulls overhead and surf reaching even here. There was something rare in it. A beauty that didn't lean in but stood back and let you notice it, if you were willing to go slow.

I passed a store with a weathered sign that read "Open When It Feels Right." I passed a fence draped in wool scarves, a painted bench with three names carved into the slats, and a cat sleeping in a sunbeam like it owned the deed to the whole town.

And I thought: I could stay here. I wouldn't need much. Just a room, a pen, the fog rolling in on time. A place where dreaming didn't feel foolish. Where people still made things with their hands. Where every corner held the possibility of a story.

* * *

I walked down a gravel path toward the headlands and the sea, the morning sharp and salt-tinged, the light still deciding where to fall. The path narrowed as I went, shouldered on both sides by wild scrub and ferns that reached without apology, brushing my legs, catching small seeds in my clothes. The wind moved through everything — through the grass, through my sleeves, through me — as if the land itself was exhaling.

Every step felt like a shedding. The town behind me, its paint-chipped porches and picket fences, fell away. Out here, the land was raw and soft all at once. The grasses bowed, the bluffs stood watch. I could feel the weight of the sky stretching down toward the cliffs, that pale, infinite hush.

The cliffs unfurled, dark and raw, broken open in places by the constant teeth of the Pacific. Water churned below — not violent, but tireless — as if it had somewhere it was trying to go. It kept pressing, whispering, insisting.

The trail curved toward a bluff, and I followed. From there I could see them, those thick black sea stacks that rose like the backs of old creatures, slow and waiting. One of them held an arch cut straight through its middle, a stone eye open to the horizon. The tide surged through it, slipping in and out with the rhythm of a lung.

The cliffs themselves were layered in rust, ash, and moss, striped with sediment and history. Sometimes I stopped just to touch them. Lichen clung tight to the stone, and in a few places, tiny flowers bloomed without ceremony, as if daring the wind to knock them loose.

Down below, tucked in a curve of bluff, a narrow beach held the bones of driftwood, pale, bleached clean by sun and time. Children ran there, their shouts scattered by the waves. A dog barked once, then forgot why. A few people walked the edge slowly, heads bowed as if looking for something they'd lost in a dream.

The ocean here didn't sparkle. It roiled, it surged. It breathed in deep blues and shadows. And yet — somehow — the water near the coves burned turquoise, impossible and sudden, as if someone had spilled paint into the deep. Kelp forests swayed beneath the surface, each long ribbon moving with patience.

I kept walking. The town behind me faded to a handful of rooftops, to fences barely holding back the land's long lean toward the sea. Out here, it was just me and the path and whatever the ocean decided to say.

* * *

The bench was not tucked away, not hidden, just there, waiting in plain sight like something that understood patience. It looked as if it had grown out of the bluff, driftwood bones smoothed by tide and time, knotted and silvered, the grain lifted and speaking. The back rose tall and solid, blocking the wind with the quiet pride of something that had held its ground through years of salt and storm. The seat itself faced the sun, warm even now, catching the gold in the afternoon. Someone local had made it, that much was obvious. But it wasn't just a place to sit. It was a place to pause.

I sat carefully. From there the sea was whole, layered in slate, ink, and silver. The cliffs curled away in both directions. Behind me the painted houses gathered as if keeping one another warm.

I thought of everything I'd carried with me here, the weariness, the too-long silences, the should-haves I'd folded up and packed alongside my sweaters. And then I thought about this summer. This whole season I'd been gifted without asking. The house. The town. The slow drift of days that didn't demand anything of me. The walks. The sea. The fog. The kindness of strangers who called me by my first name as though I had always belonged.

To be here — to be held here — felt impossible. Like I'd stumbled into a version of my life that someone else had dreamed for me. Like I was sitting inside the sentence I'd been trying to write for years.

There was no plan and no next. Only the bench, warmth on my cheeks, waves below turning like thoughts too large for language.

And I knew — not with certainty, but with stillness —
that I had come to the right place
at the right time
in the only way I could have.

* * *

I followed the cliffside trail as it leaned closer to the edge, the sea below blinking sunlight in slow flashes. The wind had softened by then, more breath than push, and the land fell into quiet rhythm, the shuffle of earth beneath my boots, the long hush of waves rising and folding, the small rustle of something winged in the grass. Ahead, the path broke from the bluff and curved inward, narrow and green at the edges, half-shadowed by leaning cypress and the long arms of pine.

And then I saw it — a way down.

The trail turned to sand and old steps, leading me lower, until the cliffs opened. I pulled off my boots and stepped out barefoot onto the beach.

It stretched wide and bright beneath me, clean and white, rippled in places by the breeze. The sand felt both warm and cool, holding the memory of morning fog and sun alike. And scattered across it, like bones left behind by some kind and ancient creature, lay the drift logs, massive, silvered, water-worn, soft at the corners. Some curled in on themselves, twisted like sleeping bodies. Others stretched long and flat, as if waiting for someone to sit and tell the truth.

In this protected cove the surf met the shore in gentle repetitions, not crashing but arriving, soft declarations of presence. Water slid over sand in thin, shimmering sheets, pulled back again with a faint hiss, like silk being gathered. Seabirds hovered at the tide line, stepped forward, stepped back. A few called out. Most just walked, purposeful and priest-like.

To the right, the cliffs rose again, darker here, streaked and shadowed. Water ran in thin threads from their tops, dripping slowly from ferns and moss, trailing along the vines of succulents that clung to the rock like small, persistent miracles. Tidal caves had hollowed themselves into the base, shallow and dark, breathing out salt and coolness. I stood at the mouth of one, hand on the stone, watching a small crab dart sideways across the wet rock, vanishing into shadow.

It was the kind of place you don't leave quickly. The kind of quiet that invites a person to explore and listen long enough to hear themselves. The waves, the birds, and the dripping cliff layered together like a hymn.

I stayed until the tide shifted, until the sun tipped low and gold onto the hills behind me. And when I finally turned to climb the trail again, I looked back just once — at the white sand, the scattered driftwood, the stillness I had been allowed to enter — and I whispered thank you.

Reflecting

Two weeks passed, not in squares on a calendar but in light, wind, and the changing tone of fog. The house taught me its rhythms: when the kettle hissed before the sky cleared, when the porch warmed enough for bare arms, when the tide turned.

I moved through the rooms like someone learning a language they already knew. The floors creaked in certain places. The windows stuck but always opened. And she was everywhere — not in the haunting sense, not in ghost or shadow — but in presence. In intention. The way she left a shell on the windowsill, a dried flower between pages, a note in the margin: this still matters.

At first I told myself I wouldn't dig. I told myself I would live here lightly, respectfully. But the drawers opened too easily. The boxes unfolded without resistance. Her handwriting greeted me like an old friend. And whatever line existed between curiosity and trespass dissolved.

Guilt came softly, a hesitation rather than a warning. It faded as I read. The poems, journals, and unsent letters were not hidden. They had been arranged with quiet deliberateness, as if Alice knew someone might come who needed her voice.

She wrote like someone who refused to be silenced. Long, spiraling reflections about freedom and solitude and what it means to choose your life without apology. Notes on books. Notes on lovers. On silence. On women she taught and women she let go of. Her handwriting tightened when she was angry, widened when she was hopeful. I traced the ink with my fingers more than once.

* * *

She wrote:

You can spend your whole life polishing your edges,
trying to become the sort of woman they'll invite to dinner.
Or, you can let the wild stay in your teeth.

— Alice

*I write it down
so I don't forget
how far I've come
from the girl who thought
being good
meant being quiet.*

— Alice

She had been a teacher, but also an artist. A builder of rooms, both literal and figurative. She had started something here, an art circle, a gallery co-op. She fed people. Housed them. Argued with them about meaning and mercy and form. I found invitations to exhibits she'd helped mount, programs with her name listed low. And photos: her laughing, cigarette in hand, leaning back into a couch full of painters and musicians and women in long skirts who looked like they made their own rules.

I sat with those images for a long time. Let them sink in.

She wasn't trying to be remembered. She was trying to live right up against the edge of what she knew — to press into the world with both hands and leave a shape behind. Not loud. Not large. But deep.

She wrote:

*She had a voice like a velvet bruise.
We sat too close in the rowboat.
Neither of us mentioned the oar
resting in my lap,
wet with river water
and the want we would not name.*

— Alice

And I, a stranger and not a stranger, was beginning to feel shaped by her. As if her life had extended its arms across time and found me. As if she'd lit a lantern in each room and left the door open on purpose.

I had come here broken in a quiet way. Not shattered, just muted. But she, Alice, she made space for that. For me. Without ever knowing my name. Without needing to.

*He asked what I wanted.
I said:
to be ruined beautifully.
He didn't know what to do with that.
But he tried.*

— Alice

She became my permission, not a muse or a memory but a woman who had lived as if her life meant something. Without knowing me, she gave me room to begin.

She wrote:

*He was beautiful in the way
old trees are beautiful.
Wounded and wise.
I would've married him
if he hadn't needed
so badly to be the one
who saved me.*

— Alice

I continued to explore the town and the land around it. It was less an effort than a slow unfolding, permission granted layer by layer. Most mornings I walked the headlands, the wind catching at my sleeves as if it remembered me. The cliffs, salt-bright air, and breathing tide became a ritual I could lean on. Some days I walked until the sun shifted and my legs ached in that good, simple way.

By then the house and Alice's papers had given the summer an inward shape. The next turn came from outside, on four hooves.

I met people, slowly. A few at first. A woman at the bookshop who wore silver rings on every finger and told me about a local art opening.

A barista with a crescent moon tattoo and a lopsided grin invited me to a play — a community production in the old church hall, half the town in folding wooden chairs, the actors glowing with something close to joy. It was imperfect and deeply moving. I clapped until my hands stung.

And then, one night, there was the beach fire. I hadn't planned on going. But a painter — Reed, or maybe Reid — waved me over at the gallery with a paint-smudged hand and said, "You're coming, right?" like the answer had already been decided.

I followed the sound of guitar strings and wind-laced laughter down a narrow trail. It was so close I could almost have seen it from the house. The beach was dark except for the fire, which sent sparks climbing into the night.

There were people draped in blankets, passing around bottles of red wine. Someone handed me a joint without asking my name. I took it. It felt like the right kind of soft rebellion. Smoke, sea, and fire, all tangled together. The marijuana gave the night a new edge, tender, a little mythic.

They talked loudly, laughed louder. About art, about old lovers, about dreams that had changed shape but hadn't disappeared. I listened more than I spoke, but I wasn't outside of it. I was inside, finally, the warmth of the circle brushing against the cool of the night, the soft hush of being let in.

He sat beside me. Dark hair, worn denim, a voice that hovered low and warm. We talked. Not deeply. But the air between us pulled tight and easy, like a thread of desire waiting. He smiled like he recognized me. I let myself smile back. He wasn't the one. But the need was there, and I didn't flinch from it.

It happened without ceremony. I became part of the town's art-woven rhythm. I was no longer only a visitor. I was becoming a woman who said yes, stayed late, and walked home barefoot through sand, high on pot and wine, shoes in one hand and her heart opening into its own wild shape.

PART TWO
THE INVITATION

Riding Horses

I was out in the grasslands on my morning hike, moving slow, letting the wind do its work through the tall heavy stalks. The ocean wasn't far — I could hear its low hush behind me — but here the air was dry and gold, and the light came at a slant that made everything seem older, quieter, more deliberate. I heard them before I saw them, the steady rhythm of hooves over packed dirt, that particular cadence of weight and intention. The creak of leather shifting, breath moving through nostrils. Then they came, rounding a bend in the trail just ahead, two horses, one ridden, the other trailing loosely behind, tethered with just a halter and line.

The rider eased them down to a walk when he spotted me. Then stopped altogether, letting them settle.

He tipped his chin in greeting. "Good morning." His voice was easy, low. "Didn't figure I'd run into anyone out here. Hope I didn't startle you."

"Not at all," I said, smiling. "It's a good spot for a ride."

He looked the part without trying. Sun-browned, trail-dusted. His shirt was faded and sweat-dark at the collar, his hat pulled low enough to shade his eyes but not hide the curve of his grin. He had that quiet-seat stillness I recognized immediately — not lazy, not stiff — just present. He rode like he lived in his body. Like the saddle was his true north.

The horses held me. Arabians, unmistakably: deep bays, high necks, black-tipped ears tuned to every movement. Even under dust their coats shone. The mare had the dry, refined face I had always loved, her eyes intelligent and unguarded. The gelding moved as if waiting for the next cue.

"Arabians?" I asked, not quite reaching for them yet.

He reined the mare slightly, nodding. "Purebred. Brother and sister. She's mine." He patted her shoulder, a casual, familiar touch. "Name's Tess."

"They're..." I looked again, deeper. "Beautiful," I said. And meant it.

He chuckled. "They are. Don't usually get that kind of compliment when I'm the one sittin' on 'em."

I grinned. "You don't exactly dress like a show barn."

"That's the idea," he said, the smile curling a little wider. "Keeps people guessing."

I moved closer, slow and quiet, angled just enough to let the mare catch my scent. She flicked an ear, reached her nose toward my hand and brushed it, not skittish, not guarded. Just curious. Confident. I stroked the length of her cheekbone with the back of my fingers. "She's got a kind eye. And she carries herself like she's already made up her mind."

"She has," he said. "And I'm lucky she keeps letting me prove her right."

"You breed them?"

"No. Just ride." He looked down at Tess, fond. "Traded for her brother. Sage. This one's been mine three years now. She knows me better than most people."

I nodded, still watching the gelding shift his weight. He had that catlike balance that only comes from good training and smart handling. A horse you could trust with your life, but not your ego.

"You ride?" he asked.

"Since I was ten," I said. "Not lately. Not since I got here. But yes. Enough to know what I'm looking at."

“That shows,” he said.

The gelding let out a soft breath, snorting once, like he was making his own judgment. I watched the way his body moved — ready, but grounded. Nothing wasted.

“You want to ride him?” the man asked, like he was offering a second cup of coffee. “He’s saddled already — just trying to give them both some work. Easier with two riders.”

I blinked. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. You’ve got the seat for it. I can tell.”

I stepped closer to the gelding. “What’s his name again?”

“Sage,” he said. “I’m Tod.”

“I’m Claire.” I reached for Sage gently, letting him read me. He met my hand with a quiet confidence, ears flicking once, then forward again. I rubbed the length of his neck, spoke to him low and soft. Just to check. I shifted my weight near the stirrup, laid a hand on the saddle, and mounted smoothly. He took it in stride, legs square, body loose but alert. Trained. Listening.

“He’s got some fire,” Tod said. “Just a heads-up.”

I settled into the seat, picked up the reins. “Good,” I said. “So do I.”

Tod kept Tess to a walk, giving me and Sage space to settle in. The gelding moved under me with that coiled readiness, not tense, just aware. Every step felt measured, alert to my seat, to the weight in my hands, to the smallest breath I let out. Tod was right, this horse was ready to go. Not green, not hot, just tuned.

“He’s sensitive,” Tod said, glancing over, voice low and steady. “But honest. He’ll tell you what he needs.”

I nodded, letting my hips follow the rhythm of Sage’s stride, giving him a soft half-halt to test the brakes. He listened. Shifted. His ears flicked back toward me and then forward again. He was waiting — not impatient, not pushy — just waiting for me to let him stretch out.

We came to a wider stretch of trail where the land opened and dipped gently toward a patch of dry meadow. Tod looked over, gave me a quick grin. “If you want to let him out a bit...”

I gave Sage his head and closed my leg. He lengthened beneath me as if he had been holding his breath. Tess surged beside us, her tail streaming. Grass blurred at the edges of my vision, and the ground beat through hooves and heart.

I screamed a laugh — not politely, not self-consciously — but full-bodied, throat open to the sky. The kind of laugh that surprises you by how much space it takes up.

We slowed together, horses easing down from their gallop like they’d choreographed it, neither fighting, neither rushed. Sage came back under me light and sure, his breath steady, a sheen of sweat just beginning to rise at his shoulder.

“God,” I said, grinning, breathless. “I forgot how much I love that.”

Tod was smiling too, his face looser now, younger in the way joy makes everyone seem younger. “Yeah. That look on your face, that’s why I ride.”

We let the horses walk it out, the saddles creaking in time with their breath, hooves soft against the dry trail. The sky was stretching wider above us, and the scent of eucalyptus came in sharp from the trees edging the path. It felt like we’d cracked something open — not just the speed, not just the ride — but something in the day itself.

We kept going, not talking much. Just following the trail as it bent through the coastal scrub, past thickets of wind-stunted pines and sunburned thistles. The sea glittered to the west, barely visible through the slope of land, but you could feel its presence in the air, salt-heavy, alive.

Sage flicked his ears, still keyed to every shift of my body. I reached down and rubbed his neck, murmured something quiet. He was a good horse — one of those rare ones that made you better just by letting you ride him.

We rode like that for a long time. Not rushing. Just moving. Side by side. Each of us letting the land speak in its own slow way.

* * *

“Let’s take them down to the beach,” Tod said, glancing toward the break in the headlands where the trail dipped steeply through brush and shadow.

I turned in the saddle, followed his line of sight. The ocean had come into full view, all that impossible light, the blue gone silver at the edges, waves folding themselves onto the shore.

“Hell yeah,” I said, already gathering the reins.

Tod gave a low whistle and nudged Tess forward, guiding her toward the narrow trail that twisted down. I let Sage pick his way behind them, loose and balanced, his shoulders moving easily under me. He handled the descent like he’d done it a hundred times, light on his feet, sure on the turns. The trail was steep in places, washed out in others, but neither horse hesitated. They knew the way. Or maybe they just trusted us to mean it.

The cliffs rose high on one side, layered with ferns; small rivulets of water carved paths down through moss. The light thinned and dappled, the air thick with shadow, until suddenly the world opened again and we were at the edge of the wide, pale beach.

The sand stretched long and smooth beneath us. We paused just before the flats. The horses breathed deep, ears forward. Waiting.

Tod looked over at me, his grin crooked, his eyes narrowed against the sun. “Ready?”

I didn’t answer. I just shifted my weight and gave Sage a nudge.

We took the length of the beach at a gallop, flying low across the sand, the horses stretched out, their strides throwing clouds of sand behind us, wind tearing at our shirts, our faces, our breath. The waves crashed just beyond reach, white foam exploding against rock, and I could hear Tod whoop once — wild, pure — and I laughed again, because something in me was burning clean.

When we finally slowed, the horses came back to a trot, then a walk, sides heaving, but not blown. Just worked. Just alive.

We let them cool out along the tide line, hooves sinking slightly with every step. Gulls lifted and wheeled overhead, the light beginning to tilt gold as the afternoon stretched thin.

I reached down and patted Sage’s neck. “God, he’s incredible.”

“And he knows it,” Tod said, chuckling. “But he likes hearing it anyway.”

* * *

We found a spot near the curve of the dunes where the sand was warm and dry, just above the tide line. The horses stood quiet nearby, reins looped loosely over a bleached drift log, heads low, tails flicking.

Sage had one hip cocked, eyes half-closed, the picture of earned ease. Tess, ever watchful, kept one ear on us, the other on the wind.

Tod dropped his saddlebag and dug around. “Hope you’re not picky,” he said, pulling out a deli sandwich wrapped in crinkled wax paper, a crumpled bag of potato chips, and two sweating bottles of beer. He held one out to me.

I took it with a grin. “I hate to take your last beer.”

He leaned back against the log with a long exhale. “It’s a sacrifice,” he said, unscrewing his own cap, “but go ahead.”

The sandwich was slightly crushed and warm from the ride. He gave me half, his fingers brushing mine, rough and calloused. I didn’t flinch, but I noticed. I noticed everything. The way his clothes held the heat of the day, the faint ring of sweat along the collar of his shirt, the dust baked into the creases of his jeans.

“Thanks,” I said. “And thanks for the ride. That was...” I trailed off, watching the horizon. “God, I forgot how much I love it. I really miss it.”

He nodded, mouth full, chewing slow like he had nowhere else to be. “It’s good to miss things,” he said, not looking at me. “It means your heart’s still working.”

We ate in companionable silence, the kind that doesn’t need filling. The waves moved soft across the shore, each one arriving like a thought just barely formed, then slipping away again. A gull drifted low above the surf. Sage shifted his weight, sighed.

Out of the corner of my eye, I looked at Tod more closely. He was good-looking, in a rugged, unbothered way — jawline sharp beneath the week-old scruff, cheekbones browned by sun, eyes pale beneath the brim of his sweat-stained hat. But there was grit to him. Literal grit. His fingernails were dirt-blackened, his jeans stiff with wear, his boots scuffed to hell. He smelled like horse, not offensively, just accurately. A mix of leather and sweat and sun-warmed animal.

Not exactly my type. I liked clean lines. I notice things like fingernails.

But still — I liked the ease of it. The solidness. The way he didn’t try to be charming. The way he didn’t care if I thought he was. He felt like a friend.

I tipped my beer toward his in a quiet toast. He clinked the neck of his bottle against mine, eyes squinting with something between amusement and interest.

The sun arced lower, and the shadows stretched long over the sand. The horses dozed, the ocean kept breathing, and for that small window of time, everything in the world felt just exactly as it should be.

* * *

“So, you’re staying in a hotel?” he asked, glancing sideways at me, brushing a crumb from his jeans. His tone was casual, uninvested, but the question held a flick of curiosity.

“No,” I said. “Staying at a friend’s house. I’m here for the summer.” I sipped my beer, watching the light shift over the surface of the waves. “And you?”

He leaned back against the driftwood, stretching his legs out in the sand. “I’m just around for a few more days. Camping out in a little stand of trees up on the headlands.”

“Really?” I turned to him. “You can do that?”

He laughed, a low, easy sound. “No, not really. But nobody’s said anything. I just roll out a tarp, sleep on the ground, eat in town. It’s not bad. Plus, Mendocino has some good restaurants.”

I smiled, half amused, half wondering how long you could live like that before the charm wore off. “I haven’t eaten out anywhere,” I said. “Too expensive.”

He nodded like he got it. “I stay at the Cove Motel sometimes,” he added. “They’ve got a place for the horses out back. It’s simple, but it works.”

He tipped the last of his beer into his mouth, tossed the bottle into his saddlebag without looking. Then, casually: “Like to ride some more?”

I hesitated. It wasn’t the question. It was the moment. The sun still warm on the backs of my arms, the horses half-asleep in the shade, the trail open behind us. I wanted to say yes. But something in me pulled back — not from him, exactly, but from the softness of it. The simplicity. Maybe I didn’t trust things that asked nothing of me.

“I’ve got a few things to do,” I said lightly. Though I wasn’t sure what they were.

He didn’t push. Just nodded. “Fair enough.”

There was a pause — not awkward, just quiet.

“Well,” he said, brushing sand from his hands, “how about tomorrow morning? That’s my favorite time to ride anyway. Before the wind picks up, before town wakes.”

He said it with a shrug, no pressure in it. Just an open door.

He hadn’t come on to me. No lingering glances. No suggestive phrasing. Just calm. Present. I didn’t get a bad feeling from him, and I usually did if there was one to get.

“Yeah,” I said. “That sounds great.”

He smiled, just a small tug at the corners of his mouth. “Cool. By that stand of eucalyptus up on the ridge? Say, eight?”

“That works,” I said, rising to my feet, brushing the sand from the back of my legs. “I’m going to walk home now — it’s not far.” I paused. “Thanks again for the ride. I really needed that.”

He stood too, slow, like he’d wait as long as needed. “Glad you came.”

I smiled and stepped in for a quick hug — polite, not too close. He smelled like horse, sweat, and beer.

As I walked up the trail, shoes in hand, the last heat of the day still pressed into the soles of my feet, I thought about the feel of Sage’s stride, the wind in my hair, the way the sand had given beneath his hooves.

I really was looking forward to tomorrow.

The Invitation

We rode again the next morning, same trail, same horses, same wind through the grass, and it felt new. The excitement had changed from lightning to current, less dramatic and more certain.

We rode until the sun climbed high and the horses slowed, breathier now, more dust in their steps than fire. The tide was going out by the time we made it to the beach again — the same curve of sand where the logs leaned at soft angles and the breeze moved like breath across the water. The place was becoming a kind of shared memory already. Ours, in a way. Familiar, but still just wild enough to matter.

I'd packed this time. A real lunch. Two cold beers sweating in a paper bag, potato salad I'd pieced together from odds in the cottage fridge, ham and cheese sandwiches, and cookies that had more oats than chocolate but still counted. A makeshift feast, but it felt good to feed someone. It felt even better to be with someone who appreciated it.

He raised a brow as I unpacked the bag, watching like I'd just revealed a hidden talent. "Well, damn," he said, lowering himself onto the sand beside me. "If I'd known you were bringing a picnic, I might've worn something nicer."

"You mean, like a shirt without a hole in the elbow?"

He looked down, pinched at the fraying fabric. "Damn. I've only had this about ten years."

We passed the beers and ate from the Tupperware. Our fingers brushed once or twice, neither deliberate nor quite accidental. Gulls paced the surf for scraps. We did not hurry to fill the silence; trail miles and saddle creaks had already shaped it for us.

I told him a little more, not the whole story, but the contour of it. That I'd grown up back east, among woods and winter. That my life had once orbited barns, sand rings, and clean boots. I'd just earned a degree from Mills College. That I'd studied writing because it was the only thing that held me. That there was always pressure to be good, to come home, to follow the path already drawn. Not with force, just quiet insistence, like not sending any more money.

He listened. Really listened. Not the way people listen when they're waiting for their turn to speak. He wasn't nodding or offering affirmations. He was taking it in. Like he was turning over the pieces in his head, seeing how they fit with what he already knew about me. It felt strange and deeply kind.

"I get that," he said, picking at the label on his beer. "I grew up in Danville. Suburbs of Oakland. Two acres, two horses, enough land to pretend we lived in the country, but close enough to Safeway that it didn't count. My folks were neat. Liked the illusion of freedom. Not the mess of it." He took a swallow of beer.

"Went to UC Davis. History major. Made it about three years."

"What happened?"

"Tired of it. I figured I could just read the books and form my own opinions. Without tuition. Or cafeteria food."

I laughed. "That's not wrong."

"I've been here about five years," he said. "Work construction. Paint houses. Put in windows. I like it. It's honest. I got good at fixing things that don't want to be fixed. Pretty good money in that."

He sat back with a half-warm beer. "The rot didn't start last year. It's old. Manifest Destiny with strip malls. We tell stories about liberty while the gears of ordinary life turn under noise and plastic."

He picked at the label. “History was the gateway drug. Then systems, feedback loops, entropy. You start seeing them everywhere: cities, economies, marriages. America keeps chasing endless growth with a brain built for the local and slow. Of course it breaks down.”

“The suburbs teach you comfort is safety. Own a grill, vote every four years, call yourself free. Underneath, everyone’s screaming in their cars.”

He leaned forward. “Here there’s friction. You feel weather. You notice time. You saw wood and your back aches, and you know you’re here. It isn’t utopia. It’s real.”

He laughed, almost apologetic. “Maybe the revolution isn’t flying cars or lunar colonies. Maybe it’s people learning to sit still, plant things, ask questions without easy answers.”

I smiled. “No, not nuts. Just awake in a world that rewards sleepwalking. You see the seams. Most people don’t, or won’t. They’d rather stay comfortable. You’re trying to hear a signal through all the static. That’s rare.” I looked at him and thought there might be more to Tod than I had realized.

We finished the cookies while the tide edged in, licking closer with every lull in conversation. The light softened around us — more gold than white now, casting long shadows over the driftwood and deepening the color of the sky.

He leaned back on his elbows, squinting out toward the horizon, like he was tracking something that only he could see. “So listen,” he said after a while, voice low but steady. “There’s this place in town I like. Good food. A little overpriced, but worth it. I was thinking maybe I treat you to dinner.”

I looked at him.

“Not a date,” he added, lifting a hand like he was surrendering. “Just good company. Good food. I may even take a bath.”

That made me laugh, harder than I expected, the kind of laugh that surprises you with how easily it comes.

“I trust you,” I said with a chuckle. And I did. That surprised me.

Whatever guard I’d walked into this summer carrying — the measured distance, the habit of weighing people before handing them too much of myself — it had loosened. Not fallen, not vanished. Just softened. Dropped somewhere along the trail, maybe. Or between the rise of Sage’s stride and the way Tod had looked at me without asking anything in return.

“Seven,” he said. “Mendocino Hotel?”

“That works,” I said. “I’ll meet you there.”

He tipped his bottle toward mine, and I clinked it. The sound was small and round between us.

We stayed there a long time, not touching but closer. The distance between friendship and something else had narrowed.

Something had shifted.

Something had begun to lean.

* * *

I showered, pulled on clean jeans, brushed the tangles out of my hair. No makeup. No drama. It wasn’t a date — just dinner. Just Tod. I didn’t overthink it.

I walked to town in the dimming light, the air still warm, everything lit in that slow-burn that makes even the sidewalks look holy. I got to the Mendocino Hotel a little early and ducked into the lobby, cool and wood-scented. He wasn’t there yet, so I grabbed a two-top by the window. The view

was absurd — ocean stretching out like a sigh, cliffs catching the last light. The kind of view that made you forget to speak.

Only a couple people sat at the bar, quiet and content with their cocktails.

I looked up.

And — Jesus.

It was him, but it wasn't.

Tod was clean-shaven, hair down — long, loose, combed but not tamed, the kind of curls that looked like they came with a soundtrack. He wore low-slung bell bottoms, fitted and stylish, like he'd walked out of an album cover and into my actual life. There was a line of sun still on his cheekbones, and his shirt, fashionably open at the collar, fitted at the shoulders. It made him look impossibly composed for someone who usually smelled like a horse.

He saw me, grinned wide. "Surprise," he said, laughing as he walked over.

I stood, a little dazed. We hugged — friendly, light, but I still felt the shape of him against me. Solid. Warm.

"Is this Tod?" I asked, looking up at him like I genuinely needed to double-check. "No. It can't be."

"Sad but so, I'm afraid," he said with a mock bow. "This is my alter ego. My 'nearly normal' disguise. Don't take it seriously."

"No," I said, circling him with my eyes. "I kinda like it. You clean up well. Let me smell." I leaned in with a theatrical sniff. "Soap. But no cologne."

"Don't fucking push it," he deadpanned, one hand to his heart as if I'd wounded his cowboy honor.

We both burst out laughing, loud and open. Nobody turned.

He said I looked "casually dangerous" as the waitress arrived. We ordered a beer for him and a gin and tonic for me. This version of Tod was not false, only another light on the same man.

And yes, I was smitten. Fully. I liked Tod already, and now that he was standing in front of me looking like a poet who'd wandered into a Vogue shoot by accident, I had to admit I liked him more.

We chatted about nothing for a while — horses, the view, the old man at the bar reading the Wall Street Journal.

Then Tod leaned in, a little more serious. "Look," he said. "I'm still the same guy who rides horses and sleeps under a tree. I make no apologies for that. That is me. But I'm not one-dimensional. I'm also this. I work. I do business. I like good food. I read books. And I'm not poor."

I blinked. Not surprised exactly, but... moved. Like he was handing me something. A truth, not an invitation.

"No, Tod. I'm the one making assumptions," I said. "People aren't always what they seem."

He nodded once, then smiled, but something flickered there. "That especially goes for me," he said, his tone quieter now. Almost too casual. There was something behind it I didn't know how to name.

Before I could ask, he lifted his glass. "Let's move to the dining room. I'm starving."

He handled the dining-room reservation as if he'd done it a hundred times, calm and unshowy. The hostess knew his name and led us to a small table near a bay window, half-shadowed, candlelit, private without trying too hard. Romantic, absolutely, but Tod didn't make a thing of it. He pulled out my chair with a half-grin and a mock flourish.

"Wow," I said under my breath, easing down onto the velvet cushion. "Chivalry's not dead. It's just wearing bell bottoms."

He settled into the room without fuss. Clean-shaven and well dressed, he treated linen and crystal with the same ease he gave a saddle. Setting, not character.

The menu read like poetry, everything seasonal and local: fennel, wild mushrooms, salmon, herbs from nearby gardens. I ordered the salmon, citrus-glazed and perched on a nest of something green and complicated. Tod ordered the filet mignon rare, without a second's hesitation.

I lifted my glass of wine, letting the stem roll slowly between my fingers, and gave him a look across the candlelight — not just a glance, but one of those long, deliberate looks that says I'm paying attention.

"Thank you, Tod," I said, my voice pitched just enough toward the teasing side to keep him guessing. "This is lovely. And very romantic."

He didn't rush to answer. Just arched one eyebrow, the smallest upward flick.

"I get the feeling you might be flirting with me," I added, smiling in that polite-but-unreadable way, and held his gaze.

He didn't blink. Didn't even shift in his seat. "Only if you want me to be, Claire," he said. Calm, even. "I value our friendship. I like riding horses with you too much."

It was the right answer — ambiguous, generous, open-ended. The kind of reply that leaves the door unlocked without making you walk through it. I smiled wider, let the warmth rise behind my cheeks, but I didn't look away.

"Meanwhile, back at the ranch — it's chow time," I said, dropping my voice into my best twang just to see what it would do to him.

He laughed — big, full-bodied, the kind of laugh that gets the attention of the next table whether you mean it to or not. I laughed too, probably louder than I intended. The waiter arrived just then, setting down our salads with the kind of flourish that made you think he believed in his own performance.

We dug in, still grinning.

"I've been doing remodels lately," Tod said, once the clink of cutlery had settled into the background. "Buy a place, strip it down, put it back together. Sold one last month. Picked it up in the fall, spent the winter on it."

I looked up, fork paused halfway to my mouth. "So you're saying you don't just smell like a cowboy. You've actually got capital gains?"

The corner of his mouth tugged up — not a full smile, just enough to register. "Something like that."

I chewed slowly, filing it away. This wasn't some guy who'd drifted into town on a whim with a saddle and a hat. He'd bought a house. Gutted it. Put it back together. Sold it. And now he was sitting across from me, buying dinner without a blink. He hadn't lucked into freedom — he'd engineered it. And then chosen to spend it playing cowboy. It wasn't just the money that impressed me. It was the self-possession. Not to sound like a gold digger, but Tod's stock was climbing.

"You know the house I'm staying in?" I said, setting my fork down. "It's going to be sold at the end of the summer. Right on the water. I've told you about it. I don't think it's been touched since... ever. Still exactly the way Alice left it."

His eyebrows lifted slightly, eyes narrowing just enough to show interest. "Seriously?"

"Seriously."

He leaned back, the move unhurried, thoughtful. “That’s the kind of place I look for. I might be interested. Could be out of my range — right on the beach, probably. But if the bones are good...”

“I don’t know about good bones,” I said. “But it’s untouched, old in a just-abandoned kind of way, and beautiful. It sits just above the beach. Huge windows, an incredible view, gorgeous grounds. I love it. I wish I could stay forever. Seriously.”

“Even better,” he said. No hesitation. “That’s where the value lives.”

Before I could respond, the entrees arrived — fragrant, gleaming, artful. The salmon was perfect. The filet looked like it could’ve walked itself to the table. We both paused to admire our plates like civilized animals, then dug in, eating and talking in that effortless way that only happens when the company’s right, the food is good, and the air between you has nothing to prove.

By then the candle had burned halfway down. The ocean outside had gone dark, just sound now — rhythmic and slow, as if the whole world were breathing in its sleep.

And across from me, Tod — still Tod, but not the same — was slowly becoming someone I very much wanted to know.

Welcome

“Thank you. That was delicious,” I said as we stepped out of the Mendocino Hotel, bellies warm, cheeks flushed, the last glass of wine still humming gently in my blood. The night had settled into itself, quiet and dark, the fog holding back enough to let the moon shine and the stars blink through in scattered patches.

He slipped his arm around my shoulder without hesitation, and I slid mine around his waist just as easily. Like breath. Like it had always been that way.

“I’m glad you liked it,” he said near my ear, voice low and satisfied. “I’ve got a list of spots, but that one... it’s kind of the gold standard.”

“I see why. The food was incredible.”

“The salmon did something to you,” he teased. “I watched your eyes roll back.”

“Almost spiritual,” I said, leaning a little closer. “They should warn people.”

We cut back down to Main Street and drifted along the boardwalk. The shops were shuttered, the streetlights buzzing faintly, casting long golden pools on the wooden planks. The town was asleep. It felt like the night had agreed to pause, to hold space just for us.

At the end of the boardwalk, we stepped off and walked down the middle of the street. No cars. Just the hush of our footsteps, the distant rumble of waves folding into themselves.

We didn’t speak for a while. The silence between us had changed. Not tense, not uncertain. Just full, charged with something unnamed. Every brush of his hand against mine felt like a decision waiting.

At the corner, I stopped.

“Would you like to see the house?” I asked, casual, but not flippant.

He looked at me. “Yeah,” he said, hand to mine, steady. “I would.”

We both knew what we were doing. And truthfully, it had been a month since my ex-boyfriend left college with his complicated heart and his carefully packed bags. I wasn’t aching. I wasn’t in mourning. I was just alive. Present. And Tod — with that clean shave, the undone grin, and that voice that knew how to wait — was looking more than good. He was looking... welcome.

I fumbled with the key just long enough to feel ridiculous, then the door swung open on its old hinges, and we stepped inside. I flicked on the light.

“Wow,” he said, just past the threshold. His voice went softer, more reverent. “This is just how she left it, isn’t it?”

I nodded.

He stepped inside slowly, touching the counter and the edge of a cupboard door. “Original tongue-and-groove. Turn of the century, maybe older. You’d need special permits to touch it.”

I smiled. “You sound like someone in love.”

He chuckled. “I’m a sucker for old wood. Especially redwood when it’s still holding up.”

We wandered through the rooms, taking the shape of things.

He walked to the front windows in the living room and stood there in stillness, as if the view would reveal itself even in the dark.

“You can see the ocean from here?”

I nodded again. “Come on,” I said, unlocking the side door. “Step out.”

We walked out onto the deck, and he took a sharp breath.

“Jesus,” he whispered. “It’s right there. You can hear it.” The ocean shone in the full moon. “You can walk to the beach,” I added. “Though the path’s a bit overgrown.”

He pulled me closer. I didn’t resist. We kissed, long, slow, warm. Then just stood, his chest against my back, taking in the night.

When we came back in, he wandered the living room, tapping on walls and making notes to himself. “Lath and plaster,” he murmured. “Redwood beams... you’d have to gut it carefully, if at all.” He turned slowly. “This place is going to be worth a fortune someday.”

Then he stopped talking. Just stood and looked. I watched his face shift.

“It’s like stepping into another time,” he said. “Another life.”

“She was another life,” I said. “Alice. She was... so much more than I ever could have imagined. I’ve been reading. Digging through her papers. Letters. Journals. Gallery flyers from the fifties and sixties. She helped start the art collective in town. She taught at the high school. But that wasn’t the half of it.”

He turned to me, curious. “You said she was a poet?”

“She was. And not just poems, but fierce, strange work. She had this eye for beauty that was a little brutal. Sharp. Honest. She didn’t make things sweet. She made them real.”

He listened. Sat down on the arm of the old chair near the fireplace.

“She ever publish?”

“Some small press books. Mostly chapbooks. A few pieces in old journals. But the writing I’ve found in the house, that’s the good stuff. That’s where she let go.”

“It seems like you know her,” he said.

I paused. “Yeah. In this weird way. Like I’m building a bridge between us one sentence at a time. She’s in everything, the books, the scraps, the house, the way the light lands in the corners of the rooms. It doesn’t feel haunted. It feels... inhabited.”

“I like that,” he said softly. “Inhabited.”

We went upstairs. I showed him the second bedroom, the one I hadn’t touched. Still full of her things, her colors. It had a sloped ceiling, caught morning light, and smelled like cedar.

We stepped into the front bedroom. I didn’t turn on the light. The full moon was enough, soft, slow-moving, poured across the bed and the floorboards like breath. The air felt tight around my skin. It didn’t matter what we said next. Everything had already been decided in the way we walked down the street. Close. Silent. On the edge of something neither of us needed to name.

He stood just inside the doorway, watching me.

I turned toward him and peeled off my shirt, unhurried, not slow for effect, not teasing, just the kind of unhurried that comes from knowing what’s next and not needing to rush. Fabric slid over my skin, a whisper that fell to the floor between us. His eyes stayed on me the whole time, quiet, certain, a stillness that felt like possession without touch.

He crossed the room, stopped in front of me, close enough for the heat from his chest to touch my bare skin. Still, he didn’t speak. The silence between us was thick.

My fingers found the hem of his shirt. He let me unfasten it, one button at a time, my knuckles grazing the warm flat of his belly as more of him came into view. His skin was bronzed, his stomach tight, collarbone cut sharp under the warmth that rolled off him. When I reached his belt, the metal

clicked free under my fingers. He exhaled then, long, heavy, and already hard against the press of my hand.

When we kissed, it wasn't soft. It wasn't sweet. It was the kind of kiss that feels like no way back, deep, locked, necessary. His mouth moved over mine like it had been here before, in another time, and knew there wasn't room for gentleness.

We didn't fumble. Our bodies found each other without question. Hands on my waist, sliding to my hips, lower. His mouth found my neck, the line of my jaw, the hollow behind my ear that pulled a sigh from me before I knew it was coming. His breath was uneven now.

I leaned back against the bed frame. Outside, the tide was working its way in, slow and steady, each wave a breath that matched our own.

He looked at me then, shirtless, moonlight washing over his chest, his eyes steady. His hands came to rest on my hips, warm and sure. Thumbs sliding under my waistband, easing my jeans down over my hips, slow enough to make me aware of every inch revealed. It was a strip. It was an unveiling. And I wanted him to see everything.

When the last bit of cloth was gone, I stepped free of it and lay back, exposed. He dropped to his knees, close enough that his breath grazed the tender inside of my thigh. He exhaled there, and the heat of it made my muscles tighten.

"I've been thinking about this," he said. His voice was different now, lower, rougher, as if it came from somewhere deeper than his chest.

Then his mouth was on me — my pearl — heat and tongue and the slow pull of breath. No asking. No bargaining. No expectation. Just giving. His lips closed over me, his tongue moved in measured circles, patient enough to make me ache.

I let myself take it. Let my body loosen into it, head back, eyes closed, breath falling apart. His hands anchored my hips, holding me, drifting as the pressure built. He moved like he had nowhere else to be, like every second of this mattered.

He was learning me. My rhythms, my edges, the small stutter in my breath when I was close. And when it came, the heat spilling fast, my body arching, my voice breaking, he didn't let go. He held on, carrying me through the shudders that wrung every muscle tight, through the long exhale that finally left me slack.

When it eased, he stayed there, mouth still soft against me, letting the aftershocks taper on their own. It felt less like an ending than like he'd found a place he meant to return.

He pulled me under him, and I opened without a word. My body arched on instinct, every nerve already aware of where he was headed. He moved like he had been here before, not this night, but inside a memory I kept in my skin.

When he moved in me, my breath caught sharp and low. I gripped his shoulders, pulled him closer until I could feel all of him, the weight, the length, the heat, the full press that made my pulse kick. It was slow, filling me like there was no time, then deeper, enough to set off something in me I had never touched.

It wasn't sensation. It was recognition. The feeling of being met exactly where I was, exactly how I needed it. I let the sounds come, not polite, not tucked in the back of my throat, but open, shameless. I wanted him to hear me. I wanted the truth of it to be as loud as it needed to be.

He moved with a control that wasn't careful, the kind of rhythm a man finds when he knows exactly how far he can hold himself back, exactly how close he can bring you before you'll beg him not to stop. My palms traced the slope of his back, the rise of muscle under my touch. My mouth found his shoulder, heard the small, unsteady break in his breathing. My knees rose, wrapping him in, taking more.

His lips grazed my throat, light, fleeting, hot enough to burn a mark under the skin. And through it all, his eyes stayed open, fixed on me, holding me in place without a single word, devouring the shape of me.

The rhythm between us tightened, faster, harder, until it was pure need. "Yes," I said, breath ragged. "I want it now." It was a command and a prayer.

He submitted gratefully. I felt the tremor move through him, a long, shuddering surrender, his breath breaking hard against my neck. He stayed inside, hovering over me for a moment, eyes locked to mine, then dropping to where we were still joined, still pulsing. He didn't speak. He just studied us, the place where his body was still inside mine, the heat still pouring through me, as if committing it to memory.

When he finally rolled to his side, the bed dipped and the sheets twisted. He collapsed into the pillows beside me with a groan that was part relief, part wreckage.

"Daaang," he said, breathless, his voice half-laugh, half-confession.

The laugh that came out of both of us wasn't planned. It bubbled up from someplace below the ribs, loose, honest, tinged with disbelief at how good it could be.

We stayed like that, skin damp, legs tangled, hearts finding their slower rhythm again. The sheets still warm, smelling of sex, holding the outline of what we'd made. The air was thick with it.

The ocean tide built slowly in the silver moonlight, then the white edge broke in sudden bright collapse before folding into the sand.

* * *

We slowly woke. After a few minutes, I stretched, the slow, catlike kind that lets every muscle remember what just happened. My hair fell forward into my eyes, and I pushed it back with the back of my hand. I leaned over and kissed his shoulder, warm, still carrying the salt of skin.

"You ready for some breakfast, cowboy?" I asked, laying it on thick, dragging out the vowels like I'd been raised on whiskey and porch swings.

He didn't bother opening his eyes. Just that sideways smile that looked like it had been stolen from a card shark.

"Yep," he said, voice still gravelly from sleep and the kind of exertion you can't get at the gym. "Hot brown and plenty of it."

I laughed, loud enough that the sound bounced off the ceiling fan. "Coffee and pancakes, Tod. That's what I got."

"Mm-hmm," he said, without moving. "Coffee."

The smell of last night still lingered on the sheets. The air between us was easy, loose, the kind you can only earn with skin and sweat and nothing left to prove. His hand found my hip without him even thinking about it, just resting there like he wanted to make sure I didn't drift away before the coffee came.

The Offer

We were finishing lunch on the beach — the tide creeping closer, gulls circling low. We hadn't touched each other much since mounting the horses, but the closeness hadn't faded. It was still there. Quiet, settled. Like heat banked under the surface. My body still held the imprint of the morning ride, loose and open, a little sore in the best way.

He shifted beside me, brushing sand from his hands, then rested his elbows on his knees and looked out toward the water. I saw it before he spoke, the change. That little collapse of posture. The flicker of something careful behind his eyes.

"I need to confess something, Claire," he said, voice lower than usual, not quite meeting my gaze. And there it was.

My stomach dropped — just slightly, just enough.

Here it comes, I thought. He's got a girlfriend. Or worse, a wife. A kid. A whole double life parked in a driveway somewhere off 101.

I turned toward him but didn't speak. Just looked. Waiting.

He exhaled hard through his nose, then spoke again. "You might've wondered how I've got the cash to invest in houses. Or, you know, why I'm camping in the trees with two Arabians. Which, if you know what to look for... is kind of a giveaway."

I tilted my head. Still quiet.

"I'm a pot grower," he said. Dramatic. But not joking.

There was a beat, and then I laughed, quick and loud with relief.

"Oh, thank god," I said. "I thought you were gonna say you were married."

He looked startled, then amused. He let out a breath, almost a laugh, almost a sigh. "Didn't expect that response."

I leaned back on my elbows, looking at the surf, trying to recalibrate. "A pot grower. Huh. I... didn't see it. Not exactly on my radar. But yeah, now that you say it... the whole cowboy hermit vibe, the horses, the cash flow... I guess it adds up."

"I try not to advertise," he said with a crooked smile. "But it's not a secret either. And honestly? It's coming to an end. This is my third season, and it's my last."

"Why stop?" I asked, more curious than judgmental.

He shrugged. "The market's changing. It's not like it used to be. The risk isn't worth the reward anymore. I've made good money, but it's time to change course. I'm making more now flipping houses. Growing was a means to an end, capital, you know? I'm not trying to be Scarface. It's strictly business."

I nodded slowly, trying to let that settle somewhere real. The truth was, I didn't know a damn thing about growing weed. Not beyond the joints passed at beach bonfires. I'd never thought much about where it came from, and certainly never imagined it connected to someone like him. I felt naïve.

Of course I had no problem with people smoking pot. That was never the issue. The laws were absurd — outdated, cruel, designed less for justice than for control. Everyone knew it. They weren't about public safety. They were about punishment. A quiet kind of revenge on the young, the loud, the ones asking too many questions. The New Age. The counterculture. Black and brown communities who never had the luxury of protest.

But more than that, pot had become a symbol. A stand-in for disobedience itself. A flag waved by people who refused to play by the rules. And that's why it was hunted, not because of what it did, but because of what it meant. Because it made you harder to scare. Because it let you imagine other ways to be.

"Still sounds scary," I said eventually. "I mean, isn't it risky? The cops?"

He looked out at the water, thoughtful. "Not really. Not around here. Everyone knows someone who's doing it. Half the county either has a grow or works one. And no, the cops don't bother most people, not unless you're dumb or greedy. But I don't kid myself. Things are changing. That's part of why I'm out. I'm not trying to test fate."

I sipped the last of my soda, eyes tracking a gull as it dipped low over the waves. "Yeah. I get it. I guess I'm not exactly the outlaw type."

We both laughed at that. Maybe a little too loud. Maybe to cover what wasn't being said.

He leaned forward again, elbows on knees. His voice softened. "I know this changes things. I probably should've told you sooner. But I didn't expect us to click like this. Didn't think it would matter. And then, once we started spending time together..."

"You weren't sure how I'd react," I said.

He nodded. "I didn't want to screw up whatever this is."

I studied him, the lines of his face, the way his jaw flexed when he was thinking hard. I was dubious about the whole thing and disappointed.

"I appreciate you telling me," I said, slower now. "I do. And I don't know... it doesn't change everything. We are still friends. But it makes me pause. That's all. Do what you gotta do, and we can see how things are in the fall."

He nodded again. "Fair enough."

I looked out at the horizon, let the wind thread through my hair. My instincts were flickering, not fear, just caution. Not judgment, but the quiet old voice that always told me not to fall too fast.

I still liked him. That hadn't changed. As a friend, absolutely. Maybe more. Maybe later. But for now, I felt myself draw in, a recalibration. A return to center.

He saw it, I think. The small shift. He didn't push. Didn't fill the silence with excuses. He just sat there beside me, boots dug into the sand, letting the waves do the talking.

I was a grown woman. The riding had been glorious, and the sex had been one night, not my first. I was not going to wait around for him.

He fidgeted, then said, "To complicate things even more, I'm leaving the day after tomorrow. And I have... an offer to make you." His eyes were down, and he brushed sand from his palms as if it might help him find the words. "This might sound strange. Hell, it is strange. But it's too obvious not to mention."

I went still. Not outwardly, but something in me snapped to alert. That shift again, the tilt of tone, the way his voice dropped, grew serious in a way that had nothing to do with feelings. I watched him. I was wary now. Fully.

He looked out at the water like it might say what he couldn't. Then he turned back toward me.

"I could use a courier," he said. "Someone to deliver supplies, groceries, tools, whatever, once a week. You'd do the buying and drop it at a spot I'd show you. I'd pick it up with the horses. That's it."

No names. No maps. Nothing illegal in your hands. If anyone did see you, I'm just a guy living rough in the woods."

I blinked. Just once. Then shook my head.

"No," I said flatly. It came out before I could smooth it.

Because I knew where this was going now. And I felt that little sick drop in my chest, that betrayal, the weight of it like a cold stone in the middle of all the warmth we'd just shared.

Is this why he was so charming? So generous? So available? Had I just been auditioning for the role of friendly outlaw accomplice with a pussy and a station wagon?

He didn't seem surprised by my reaction, but he did look pained.

"I'd pay you," he added too quickly. "Two hundred a week. Plus, I'd cover all your groceries, anything you pick up for yourself on the run. Cash. And after I harvest, a thousand-dollar bonus."

My eyebrows lifted before I could stop them. "Jesus," I said. "That's a lot of money."

And it was. In 1973, in my world, it was a small fortune. Eight hundred a month was the pay for a decent full-time job, tax-free. Rent, food, maybe even enough to buy a decent car. A runway. A little breathing room from the long shadow of my family's expectations. The number alone made something tighten in my gut, a strange mix of curiosity and caution.

But I couldn't let that show too much.

I narrowed my eyes. "What's the catch?"

"No real catch," he said, "but a few more things you need to know."

I nodded, but barely. Still watching him through the fog of my suspicion.

"You'd do the shopping in your car," he said, "but make the delivery using my truck. That way no one ties your vehicle to anything. We keep it quiet. Clean. You park the truck in town, out of sight between drops, and use it only when needed. I already have a spot, a discreet backwoods rendezvous. The grow site is set up and dialed in, tents, irrigation, gear. It's mostly food. Maybe a tool now and then. Duct tape. Flashlight batteries. That kind of thing."

I crossed my arms, legs stretched out, boots buried in the sand. "Yeah. And?"

He hesitated. The space between us went taut.

"This part's important," he said. "The bigger risk than cops is rip-offs, guys who catch wind of a grow, wait until harvest, then take everything. I've seen it happen. You'd need to keep it quiet. Be sure you're not followed. Don't tell anyone. Not even your friends."

I stared at the ocean. Let that roll through me. The surf kept its rhythm like it didn't care what kind of decisions got made in its presence.

"This is more than a bit much," I said finally, my voice tighter than I wanted it to be. "Tod... did you plan this? From the beginning? Is that what all this was about?"

I turned toward him then, really looking at him. His face shifted, not defensive, just tired. Honest, maybe, in that way people are when they know they've already complicated things beyond repair.

He let out a breath. "I admit it crossed my mind. When we first met, yeah. I thought, maybe you'd be a good fit. But I didn't plan anything. Honestly, I figured it was going to be a one-night stand. I didn't expect us to click. I didn't expect us to become friends. Or lovers."

He paused, searching my face for something, understanding, forgiveness, I don't know.

“But once it did become something... I started to feel guilty. I didn’t want to fuck it up. I debated whether to even ask. I probably shouldn’t have. But the problem is, it’s just too fucking obvious. You’re here. You’re smart. You need the money. I trust you. I had to ask. It’s too obvious a fit.”

We both sat in silence. The seagulls had moved on, and the tide was starting to creep up over the driftwood. The light had changed too, not quite gold yet, but softer. That late afternoon haze where everything looks a little less solid.

My chest was tight. I wasn’t angry, not exactly. I was something else, conflicted, suspicious, drawn toward the idea and repelled by it. I turned it over in my head like a stone in my palm, trying to find the sharp edge. But there wasn’t one yet.

The truth was, I could picture it, driving into town, shopping like normal, maybe once a week. Nothing that screamed criminal. And that money... it would change things.

I let the silence stretch between us a little longer.

“I’ll think about it,” I said finally, voice dry. Neutral.

“Absolutely,” he said quickly. “You should. And Claire, if you decide not to, I get it. Really. No hard feelings. I hope we can still hang out. Ride. Whatever this is... it’s real for me. I feel something with you. I’m sorry if this complicates it.”

His voice cracked a little at the end. That caught me off guard.

I nodded slowly. “We better go.” I started gathering things.

He stood, brushing sand from his jeans. “Yeah.”

We didn’t touch on the ride back. Didn’t speak.

I could feel the whole afternoon shifting, still soft on the outside, but hardening underneath. I had twenty-four hours to decide whether I was the kind of girl who could say yes.

Doubt

That night, I couldn't sleep. Or rather, I refused to try. I sat at the old table in the kitchen, barefoot, still in my jeans, hair unbrushed and loose around my shoulders, a mug of lukewarm tea beside me. The lights were low, just one lamp lit, the soft hum of the refrigerator filling the silence like an afterthought.

I kept playing it over in my head. The offer. The delivery. The money. Tod's voice when he said my name.

I was disappointed. Not shattered, not naïve enough to expect a clean romance from a man I met on the headlands. Still, something in me wilted. It wasn't only what he asked but what it revealed: he had seen me as a woman and as a possible instrument.

And yet — and yet — it wasn't that simple.

I didn't feel used. Not entirely. There was still too much tenderness between us, too much friendly ease in the way we moved together. He hadn't tried to hide it. In fact, he seemed ashamed. Not desperate. Not manipulative. Just tangled up in something bigger than he wanted to admit. And maybe I was, too.

I believed him. I think. As much as you can believe anyone. He was honest in the ways that counted, and vague in the ways that made me nervous.

Still, the offer made a certain twisted kind of sense. It was clean. Low risk. No involvement in the crop itself. No transporting anything illegal. Just food. Batteries, whatever. Groceries in a truck I didn't own, delivered to a man who might just as well be camping in the woods. As far as the world knew, as far as I knew, he was.

And then there was the money.

God, the money.

Two hundred a week. Eight hundred a month. A thousand at the end of the season. Groceries covered. No rent. With what I was spending, I could bank almost all of it. The money was not merely income. It was escape velocity.

The ache of that longing rose like a tide in my chest.

I wanted to stay. More than anything, I wanted to stay.

I thought of Alice. Or maybe it was more accurate to say I felt her, not in any mystical way, but in the grain of the wood beneath my hand, in the way the windows framed the dark like a painting still wet with possibility. Her legacy wasn't grand, but it was persistent. A steady thread of selfhood running through everything she left behind. Her notebooks. Her notes to herself in the margins of books. Scribbles full of fire and argument and longing. Some pages were just fragments. A grocery list beside a line of verse. A scrap of poem, a half-formed thought, a sharp confession scrawled like it couldn't wait for a clean page. I picked one at random, a green spiral notebook worn soft at the corners, its cover curling. Her handwriting slanted right, the ink bleached by time.

* * *

The lines read:

"I sit with it for a while, the flicker of doubt, the tremor under the sternum when you step toward something unproven. I was raised to be careful. To map things out. To choose paths that had already

been walked and swept and lit from both ends. But that never taught me how to listen when the road curled away into bramble.

So much of what I want—what I’ve always wanted—doesn’t announce itself with a guarantee. It comes quiet. Crooked. Wearing another name. And sometimes the only way to know if it’s yours is to reach for it anyway.

Trust. That’s the word I keep circling. Trust in the yes that arrives before the reasoning does. In the look someone gives you across a kitchen table. In your own pulse when it quickens for no good reason except that something in you is waking up.

It’s not recklessness. Not the leaping-off-cliffs kind of faith. It’s the long study of your own hunger. It’s letting yourself want without apology. Risk, yes. But not without calculation. Not without choosing it. That’s the difference.

Sometimes I think the whole world is built to shame women for wanting too much. For saying yes before they’re given permission. But I’m done waiting for the rules to bless my decisions. I want the life that answers me back. The one that looks uncertain and feels right.

And if that life includes risk—so be it. I’ll take the chance. Because I’ve come to understand: the only safety that matters is the kind you carry with you. And I trust mine now. I trust it enough to follow it, even into the wild.”

— Alice

I thought about that.

She had stayed here and made something from this place, something that looked like her. She had been deliberate, wild in her own way and principled too. I could feel it. Neither ghost nor warning, only a quiet insistence: you get to choose who you are.

I leaned back in the old chair and let my eyes drift closed.

What was I afraid of, really? That I’d get caught? That I’d disappoint people I didn’t even believe in anymore? That I’d get a little dirt on a life I hadn’t yet bothered to define?

Tod’s offer was illegal, yes. But it was also simple. Practical. Weirdly... respectful. He wasn’t asking me to carry drugs or lie for him. Just groceries. In a borrowed truck. To a man I already knew could saddle two horses and disappear into the trees.

And it wasn’t just about the risk. It was about trust. In him. In myself. In the possibility that something unexpected could also be right.

Because that was the other thing tugging at me, the part that had nothing to do with weed or money or logistics. The part that had started long before Tod made his offer. I wanted to stay here. Not just for the summer. Not just to write. I wanted to belong. To build something. To grow into myself the way Alice had, with a little art, a little grit, and the courage to make hard choices when they mattered.

This felt like one of those choices.

I wasn’t saying yes. Not yet. But I wasn’t saying no, either.

I’d ask more. I’d be careful. I’d leave the door cracked, just wide enough to see what might walk through.

Maybe.

For now, that was the most grown-up word I could manage.

The Supply Run

We didn't ride the next day. I slept late, let the sun warm the room before I even stirred. When I finally stepped outside, the fog had already lifted and the air smelled faintly of kelp and black coffee. I walked down to the café near the corner, the one with the mismatched chairs, and Tod was already there, standing awkwardly near the door like someone unsure if they were being forgiven or sentenced.

He hugged me, soft, uncertain. He looked rattled. Hair flattened on one side like he'd slept on the wrong pillow. There were tight lines around his mouth. He hadn't shaved. I noticed but didn't mention it. We ordered quickly, avoiding eye contact through the ritual. Two coffees. I added a slice of something dense and sweet. We took it all outside to a quiet table in the sun tucked behind the railing and just out of earshot of the others.

He didn't wait.

"Look, I apologize," he said, the words arriving too fast. "I shouldn't even have asked."

"Oh shut up, Tod," I said, not unkindly. That stopped him. "You did ask me, and I'm a big girl."

His face flickered, confused, then surprised. I seemed to be full of surprises.

"I'm interested," I said. "Cautiously. I've got questions. I want to see the truck. And the drop spot. All of it."

His eyes widened. He probably thought I'd come to say no, or worse.

He looked so startled I couldn't help but laugh, because it was funny. He just looked puzzled.

"Well, uh, okay. If you're sure," he said, cautious now.

"No, I'm not sure," I said, steadying my cup. "But I'm interested. Maybe."

We talked, if you could call it that: mostly him outlining rules and me picking them apart one by one. He was tight-lipped, but he loosened as I nodded along. When the cups were empty, we stood and walked to the Cove Motel, where his truck sat parked under a leaning pine.

It was a decent truck, newish, not new. Silver-gray, with a contractor's shell, metal doors along the sides, each with its own lock. It was the kind of truck that could belong to a plumber, or a carpenter, or someone who didn't want questions.

He drove. Out of town first on a paved road, narrow but decent. That lasted about half an hour, twisting through trees, old fencing sagging off the shoulder. Then came the gravel, rough, washboarded in places. We kept winding for another twenty or thirty minutes. He said 22.4 miles total, like he'd checked it more than once.

We passed only one car, and that was near the start of the gravel stretch. After that, nothing. Just trees and shadow and the whine of dust under the tires.

Eventually he slowed. There was a tiny pullout, barely wide enough for one vehicle. A giant fir tree marked it, old-growth, its trunk wide enough that you'd need three people to get around it. He pulled the truck off the road and bumped forward twenty or thirty feet. No path, just an opening that looked like it might have been cleared once and left to grow wild again.

We got out.

"This is it," he said. "I'll see the truck coming and meet you here. If you see anybody in the last five miles, anybody at all, turn around. Go home. Come back in two days. That's the rule."

He was rehearsed now, like he'd practiced it in the mirror. Or maybe in his head while trying to sleep.

“We unload the truck, pack the horses, and you’re gone. No delays. No changes. That’s it.”

He looked almost proud. Like he’d built the whole plan from nothing.

“Okay,” I said. “Seems pretty straightforward. Then you give me a list for next time.”

“Yeah,” he said, still watching me. “That’s all there is to it.”

I nodded. Turned away. Walked a few steps toward the road, looked up and down it like I was trying to burn the shape of it into my head. No signs. No markings. Just dirt and green and the same kind of quiet that hums in your teeth if you stand still long enough.

When I came back, I didn’t say anything. Just held out my hand.

“I’ll drive.”

He blinked, then handed over the keys without a word.

I didn’t talk much on the drive back. Just kept one hand on the wheel, the other brushing over the gear shift, watching the trees slide past like a story without sound. He was quiet too, fiddling with the hem of his sleeve, checking the side mirror like he expected someone to be following.

* * *

We made it back to town before lunch and were sitting in the coffee shop, halfway through eating, when three rough-looking men walked in. Locals, by the look of them, boots heavy, voices too loud for the room. They ordered coffee to go.

Tod stiffened, eyes on his plate like it had something new to say.

One of them peeled off and walked over, wearing a friendly grin.

“Hey, Tod. How’s it going?”

“Good, Jim.” Tod didn’t smile.

“So, ya back at it this year?”

“No,” Tod said, meeting his eyes. “Just doing construction.”

Jim held the grin a second longer. “Really. Well, that sounds great. Good luck with that.”

He nodded at me, polite, then grabbed his coffee and herded his friends out.

I didn’t ask.

Tod exhaled slowly, lips pulling tight. “Just some guys I know,” he said, the smile not quite reaching his eyes.

On impulse, or maybe instinct, we drove the seven miles up to Fort Bragg, just to kill the last of the silence. Bigger town. Two hardware stores, both with parking lots half full and fading signs. We circled them but didn’t stop.

“Okay,” I said, once we were back in Mendocino, parked with the windows cracked and the day still soft around us. “I’ll do it. On a trial basis. Month to month. Pay and expenses upon delivery. Any bullshit, any heat, and I’m done.”

He let out a breath. Not quite relief. Not quite joy. Just the pressure gone.

“Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely,” he said, as if the words were a promise and a prayer. “Thank you.”

I turned to look at him.

“And no more sex,” I said, flat.

His face dropped. It was involuntary and strangely sweet.

I laughed out loud. Like something breaking.

“Well... maybe,” I added, softer.

He perked up, grinning like a man who finds a twenty-dollar bill he forgot in his pocket.
I kissed him on the cheek.
Then we drove to my house.

* * *

I drove him to the hotel just after first light, the world still cool and silver, the streets empty except for gulls and a lone delivery truck backing into the bakery. He was quiet, looking out the window like the sky might tell him something he'd missed. His duffel was already packed, his crumpled old hat low over his eyes. He'd be riding out with the horses that morning, taking the narrow trail east to the grow site, and I could feel the weight of it in the cab, more a shift in the air than in the conversation.

At the motel, he leaned in, and we kissed, slow and sure, like people who didn't want to say goodbye but knew better than to make it more than it was.

"Good luck," I said.

"I'll see you in a week," he said.

And I did.

* * *

No detours.

No heat.

Just business.

I brought food, mostly dry goods. A soft cooler with meat wrapped in plastic and aluminum foil. Coffee. Salt. Beans. Flour. Vegetables. Coke. Beer. Whiskey. All the essentials. He had already picked up a tarp, wire, and new latches for the bins. All basic. All dull. Nothing that needed to be discussed.

The drop went easy. No one on the road. No tire tracks but mine. We didn't linger. We kissed, soft, short, more habit than hunger, and that was all. No tangled limbs, no soft moans in the cab, no dirt on our knees. Just a kiss and a nod.

Then I turned the truck around and drove back to town with the windows down, one arm out, hand slicing air like a blade through water. I didn't think much. Just let the road pull me home.

That was it.

Same the next week.

And the third.

By then I was convinced he was right, it was safe. Clean. Tight. Nobody followed. Nobody watched. I never passed another car once I left the pavement. The drop spot stayed just a spot, unmarked, unwatched, unchanged.

PART THREE
THE HIDDEN SEASON

Curiosity

By the fourth week, though, curiosity was getting its fingers in me. The slow burn that starts behind the ribs when you want to see the thing you've only been orbiting. I figured a quick trip down to the grow site couldn't hurt. Just a look. Just a little deeper in, then out.

Besides, a little private time with Tod was sounding pretty damn good by then.

So the next time I showed up, I asked him.

"I don't know if I want you involved," he said. "It's a big step. You have no legal involvement at this point. Why change that?"

"Because I'm curious, that's all," I said.

"Doesn't sound like much of a reason to me." He sounded like a father.

I decided to play the sex card, to use my womanly wiles. Rubbing against him, my hand on his cock, I said, "And I want a little private time with you." I batted my eyes like a two-bit hooker.

He laughed. "So the truth comes out. You just want me for my sexy body, you hussy."

"Please," I said.

He grumbled. "We have to hide the truck somewhere else. Let me move the horses." He drove about a quarter mile to a place where the vehicle disappeared from the road, then walked back. We mounted and headed toward the grow site.

We walked, leading the horses loaded with the supplies. It was mostly downhill, the trail narrow and slick in places, roots twisting up from the duff like things that remembered. It took over an hour. Finally, we led the horses up a hush of tan oak and madrone until the ridge broke open to sun, warm air rising off the slope like breath.

"Cutover country," Tod said, nudging his hat back. "They logged this out hard in the fifties. Never replanted. It just... grew back weird."

The ridge swept south in a gentle arc, perfect for long bright afternoons and cool maritime nights, that magic blend of heat and hush that made Mendocino pot taste like pine and stone fruit all at once. I counted a hundred plants, maybe more. None of them in rows. Each one was set behind a clump of brush or a charred stump left like a landmark, scattered just so. From the sky, it would read as nothing but scrub and understory. No pattern. No plan.

The sun came full over the ridge, warm and clean, lifting mist off the ground in long, slow coils. You could feel the heat begin to build in waves, rising from the mulch like music.

The camp itself was simple — functional, worn-in. A lean-to made of rough cedar slabs beneath a canvas tarp faded the color of rain. Bedroll. Propane stove. A battered blue enamel coffee pot sat on a stump, still half-full. A radio hung from a nail, the kind with a bent antenna you had to sweet-talk to get signal.

At night, the ridge fell silent except for the horses cropping meadow grass, the slow tick of water in the barrel, and Boone's low circle around the camp.

Tod's dog, Boone, had come trotting to meet us as we'd crested the ridge, all alert muscle and purpose, half shepherd, half something meaner. He sniffed the horses, licked my palm once, and took up post by the lean-to like he'd been expecting us.

He didn't bark. Didn't pace. He just watched.

Later, I'd learn he patrolled the perimeter twice a night, never straying far, never sleeping deep. You could set your watch by his path, down by the creek, past the plant line, a slow half-moon back through the brush. Tod didn't call him a pet. Called him "the partner that doesn't talk."

The whole operation fit inside a single acre, yet inside it felt as wide as any kingdom I could imagine, green currency rising leaf by leaf.

Tod let the horses drink from the trough, a barrel fed by a pipe from a spring I hadn't yet seen. Boone stood nearby, head low, ears flicking with every sound in the brush. The whole place felt... private. Not secret, but intentional. Like it belonged to the trees and didn't ask permission.

"This spring's the heart of it all," Tod said, nodding uphill. "She runs cold even in August. I dropped a line from the shale outcrop up there, let it gravity-feed through drip lines. Quiet. No power. No pumps."

I followed his hand with my eyes, tracing the black poly down the slope.

He smiled, but not smugly. "Been refining it a while. Head pressure builds up in the barrels during the day, and by dusk I can soak a whole zone without lifting a finger. All passive."

I crouched by one of the plants, broad-leafed, resin just beginning to pearl near the stem. The mulch was still damp. Not muddy. Just right.

"You mix this yourself?" I asked, brushing the soil with my fingers.

Tod knelt beside me. "Forest loam. Horse manure from last winter, after it cured. Bit of kelp meal. I dig wide, big as a feed tub. Keep the soil airy. Roots go deep that way, not wide. Helps with drought later."

"And the slope?"

"Fifteen percent, give or take. Holds water without slumping. And south-facing, so the fog clears fast. I set the holes where they get ten to twelve hours of direct sun. That's what outdoor cannabis needs to reach full vigor."

It was a strange thing, standing there, listening to him rattle off ratios and nutrients and timing, so matter-of-fact, so grounded. He could've been describing tomatoes or grapevines. Except this wasn't a garden.

It was a hidden life. A whole economy rooted in shade and silence.

"You live here full-time?" I asked.

"From May to harvest," he said. "The rest of the year I've got a place in town. But this"—he gestured around him—"this is where the real work gets done."

He walked over to a hanging row of tools: mattock, pruning shears, shovel. They were clean, oiled, hung with care.

"Rust comes fast out here. Coast eats metal like sugar."

I kept walking the perimeter, slower now, seeing more. The little details: the way some of the plants leaned toward open sky, the trimmed branches low for airflow, the dark sifting of pest dust circling a gopher mound. All of it spoke of rhythm. Not just effort — attention.

"Every fifth day I brew a tea," he said. "Manure and kelp. Feed before dawn, so the smell sinks by morning. Sounds gross, but it works."

I looked at him then — really looked — standing with dirt on his boots, his shirt sticking to his back, Boone curled in the shade behind him like a guardian carved from shadow and loyalty.

And all I could think was he built a world here. Quiet, unsanctioned, alive.

Not legal.
Not safe.
But alive.
And I had stepped straight into the middle of it.

* * *

We were sitting around a fire that didn't need to be big, just enough to give the air a heartbeat.

We talked politics because that was the scaffolding our generation had been built on. We hated the war, the lies, the death, the whole machine of it. I said it felt as if we had been born into a country that had already decided what kind of people we would be, and Tod nodded.

The fire had settled into itself, low and rhythmic, like it was breathing with us. No crackle now, just the slow shift of wood collapsing inward, orange coals like something ancient.

Tod stared into it, arms folded over his knees. "You ever think how the start of everything was fire?"

I looked over. "Everything?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Not the wheel, not language. Fire. The first rebellion against the entropy of the universe. We took it out of the sky, from a burning branch, and said, this is ours now. This thing that burns. This thing that can kill, but also cook, warm us in the night, keep the shadows back and the monsters away."

I watched the flames curl around the last piece of oak. They moved like thought, never still, always becoming.

"We didn't just survive because of fire," he went on. "We became because of it. It changed our guts. Gave us larger brains. Let us eat meat, sit still, talk longer. Gave us night, and stories, and gods. It was the first technology."

I said nothing. The coals shifted again, letting out a soft sigh. I had never thought of fire like that. The first technology.

"It's strange," he said. "How something that consumes can also be what allowed us to build. Fire's not a tool. It's a threshold. Crossing it made us human."

"Or maybe made us think we could control what we never really could," I said.

He smiled at that, half-lit by the glow. "Yeah. That too." We laughed.

I watched the flames move, slow and folded. He watched the sky.

He took a sip from the bottle and passed it to me. I drank. The wine was warm but sweet; it tasted like plums left too long in the sun.

"Do you think the world can change?" I asked.

Tod shrugged, pulled his legs up, knees bent, feet on the edge of the chair frame.

"People can change one by one," he said. "Humanity is harder. Every empire rises on someone else's ruin. We build, dominate, consume."

I let that sit. The fire cracked once, sharp. A moth dove and didn't return.

"Read enough history and you stop asking why things fall apart. You ask how they held together so long. Rome. Britain. Us. Color television and birth control don't change the engine underneath: greed, fear, the need to stand above someone else."

He looked over at me, his face softening.

“But that doesn’t mean we can’t find another way.”

I felt something hitch in my chest. That quiet turn his voice made.

“We don’t have to fix the whole world,” he said. “We can make a life. A few houses, some land, room to breathe without becoming the worst parts of what we came from.”

“You sound like a man with a blueprint,” I said.

He laughed. Low. Honest.

“Yeah,” he said, “but I’m not interested in tearing it down just to watch it burn. I just want out. Not off-grid, not some libertarian fantasy. Just... something our own. Something that doesn’t require us to sell our souls by Tuesday.”

He talked about houses then, the way you could take something wrecked and remake it. Buy cheap, put in sweat, flip it just enough to live. Not to get rich, but to not be owned. He saw the bones of places the way I saw the bones of stories, lines beneath the mess, something that could be saved.

“It’s not escape,” he said, pulling his jacket tighter as the wind picked up. “It’s permission. To build the thing we were promised and never got.”

I asked him if that was hope. He didn’t answer right away.

Tod leaned forward. The firelight caught his eyes and made his face look older.

“I like people,” he said. “It’s humanity I can’t stand.”

And I knew he meant it. Not as a quip, not as a half-clever dig, but as something settled deep. Something studied. He’d read all the books. Tod carried centuries in his bones the way some men carried scars.

“People can be funny and kind when it’s personal. They help a neighbor, mourn a dog, leave soup at a door. Humanity is war, greed, repetition, the same mistakes in different hats.”

I didn’t say anything. I let him go on.

“We change the tools and keep the hunger. Clubs become airplanes. We still kill for dirt and belief.”

He threw another stick onto the fire. Sparks leapt like startled birds.

“But art,” I said quietly. “Love. You can’t discount that.”

“No,” he said, and his voice softened. “I don’t. That’s the part that hurts. That we can be beautiful. We make a Monet, a Mozart, and then build bombs. We create medicine and then hoard it. We write poems and then elect men who don’t read.”

He turned to me then, serious.

“That’s what I study: why we keep doing it. We can make science, then panic at footsteps behind us. All this technology, all this power, and the animal underneath is still afraid.”

I felt the weight of it. The fire cracked. The trees stood silent.

He leaned back, eyes on the stars that hadn’t quite emerged yet.

“History’s not a guidebook,” he said. “It’s a warning label.”

I looked at him, the fire painting his face in gold and shadow. There was something in that moment, not comfort, not despair, but recognition. He’d read too much. I’d felt too much. And here we were, still trying to find a way forward that didn’t require forgetting what we knew.

We didn’t say much after that as the light pooled soft. Just sat in the hum of pine and crackle of the fire, the stars watching.

* * *

The next morning, we rode Tess and Sage back up the trail, still damp from fog, soft with pine needles and loam. Tess moved slowly and deliberately, as if she understood that the world did not need hurrying. Sage was more restless, shoulders twitching, eyes sharp, as if he were listening for a starting bell. The saddles creaked in the hush of the woods. I let the rhythm settle something in my chest.

When we reached the turnout, where the truck waited under the lean of a wind-bent pine, we dismounted in silence. The forest opened just enough for light to spill through, golden and tired, like it had stayed up all night.

We kissed. Slower this time. Deeper. Not out of hunger, but out of knowing. It wasn't a goodbye kiss. It was a this-is-real kiss. Like we both recognized what had changed, even if we hadn't spoken it aloud.

"I'll see you next week," I said, my fingers grazing the hem of his shirt, reluctant to let go.

And I did see him.

The weeks folded over one another. I stayed two days, then four, then five. Soon the question was not when I would visit but when we needed supplies. I stopped moving by schedules and began moving by weather, tide, creek, and moon.

I belonged to it now.

Boone accepted me by degrees. At first he watched every movement. Then he began sleeping near my boots and following me to the spring. Tess was slower, but some evenings she lowered her head into my hands and stood while I worked dust from her coat. I did not know then how much those small permissions would cost me.

Not just to Tod — though there was that, too, the way we reached for each other in the dark, the way our hands found each other without needing light — but to the work, the rhythm of it, the good ache that came with labor that asked everything of you and offered quiet in return.

I no longer packed a bag. I had clothes there, boots, a toothbrush that never made its way back to town. I knew where the coffee was, which irrigation line always got plugged and needed jiggling. I wasn't playing campground. I was living a life. One weeded row at a time. One kiss. One dusk. One borrowed morning.

And just like that, I wasn't passing through anymore. I was part of it, the dirt, the horses, the hush of late August evenings, the green hum of the grow.

Boone trailed me like a second thought, a low growl coiled behind his teeth, always alert, always ready. He didn't make a show of it, but I knew. If anything came for me, he'd be there before I could speak. His loyalty wasn't loud. It was bone-deep. Steady. Fierce in that quiet way only the wild seems to understand.

He belonged to the rhythm of that place—the dirt, the sweat, the work that stretched out with no clock to answer to. Boone wasn't just a dog. He was part of the unfolding, part of the story we were carving into the hillside. Not asking for anything but to be near it. Near us. A witness, a guard, a heart on four legs.

* * *

The grow site wasn't much from a distance, a smudge of green tucked into a cradle of manzanita and light, half-hidden from sight, shaded just enough to look like nothing. But once you stepped in, it opened like a hand. Scattered rows curling out from the center like fingers reaching toward sun, the

whole place pulsing with intention. An outgrowth of plants, thick and fragrant, their stems arched with purpose, their leaves catching light like belief.

I learned the rhythm faster than I expected. Up early, before the birds got confident, before the sun peeled itself over the trees. I'd slide into jeans stiff with old dirt and a shirt I didn't care about ruining, one I'd found in Tod's pile, soft at the seams, smelling faintly of cedar and sweat. Coffee came black and brutal, boiled too long over a propane flame, poured into tin mugs that burned your hands just enough to feel like penance. Bitter. Sacred. It was our liturgy.

My hands found the soil like they'd been there before. Like some part of me had always known how to press fingers into the earth and mean it. I trimmed with quiet care, worked close and steady, leaves falling in soft flutters like feathers. I learned the names of things — not just strains but temperaments, how some plants stretched tall and wild and others hunched low and dense, hoarding their secrets. I learned to spot mites before the leaves curled, to read thirst in the lean of a stalk, to feel resin between thumb and finger and know if it was ready.

We weeded out the males without sentiment. Sinsemilla was the goal, no seeds, just clean, potent bloom. Female only. Every unwanted pollen sac was a threat to the entire field. There was something ruthless in it, but necessary. Like editing. Like pruning away every lie to get at the truth.

It wasn't pretty work. My nails stayed black no matter how hard I scrubbed. The backs of my shoulders burned under the wide sky, then peeled. My knees bruised. My arms grew ropey from carrying buckets and bending down again and again. But there was joy in that ache, a clean kind of tired that had nothing to do with appearance or approval. Just usefulness. Just care.

Sometimes we worked in silence, the radio too far away to matter, the world reduced to shears and rustling leaves. Other days we talked, Tod going on about sun angles or what to do if the sheriff started sniffing too close. We had a lookout point halfway up the ridge, Boone always posted, his tail a metronome of trust and warning.

I liked the smell of the place. Sharp and green with a shadow underneath — resin and sun and something feral. You couldn't bottle it. You could only live inside it long enough to know it by heart.

Lunch was mostly meat at the start of the week, thick slabs of ham or leftover roast, smoked salmon from a guy Tod knew in Fort Bragg. Cheese while it lasted. After that, beans and potatoes, tortillas fried in a pan with salt and oil. Whatever we could string together until the next resupply run. Resupply day was its own kind of feast: part necessity, part celebration. We'd eat under the lean-to Tod had rigged, our knees knocking, sweat drying on our necks, hands still dirt-grimed but mouths too hungry to care.

At some point, I made Tod build a better shower. Nothing fancy — just a tarp, some black tubing, and a spigot we could heat in the sun — but it did the job. And I told him plain, use it if you want to sleep beside me. He did.

And in those slow, blistered hours — in the heat and hush and ritual of it — I found something I didn't know I'd been missing. Clarity, maybe. Or just the absence of everything that wasn't real. No clock ticking. No one watching. No voice demanding what came next. Just the plants, the work, the man, and me.

I had come to Mendocino to disappear from the life written for me. Without permission or plan, I had rooted.

Not as a guest.

As a grower.

As a woman in love.

The Parker Brothers

I was making a supply run. Nothing unusual. The crop was close to harvest now, maybe a week or two. The truck was full: feed, groceries, a few replacement parts. The road curved ahead, dust rising behind me. I was thinking about dinner, about a letter I'd half-written, about nothing that mattered, until I came around the bend.

Another truck. Coming the other way. Too fast.

I slammed the brakes, the whole load shifting with a hard thud. We both slowed. I tried to edge over, tight to the ditch, but he wasn't giving me room. We were side by side.

Then I saw them.

The same three men from the café, the ones we'd seen months earlier. The tall driver was the one who had spoken to Tod. He leaned out the window, recognition lighting his face as if it were a goddamn reunion.

"Well, hey there," he called, smooth and too friendly. "How's Tod doing?"

My mouth went dry. "I haven't seen him." The lie came too fast.

He smiled wider. "That so?" He tipped his head. "Funny, you're driving his truck."

I must have turned three shades of red. They laughed.

"Well," he said, "say hi... if you see him." More laughter, low and knowing. Then they finally moved over, just enough for me to squeeze by.

I passed them, eyes fixed on the road ahead, but every part of me was humming, humiliated. My heart thudded in my ears. I checked the rearview again and again. Nothing. They could've dropped back and followed my dust from a distance. I couldn't tell.

Tod was waiting when I reached the drop. He stepped out of the trees before I'd even come to a full stop. His whole body was alert, not panicked, but keyed up, ready.

"Those three guys—" I started.

"I saw 'em," he said, cutting in. "Keep going. Don't stop. Drive another few miles, turn around, and go home. Come back in two days, first thing in the morning." His voice was steady, but his eyes were on the road behind me.

Then he turned and disappeared into the trees without another word.

I did what he said. I drove on five miles, maybe more, before I finally turned around. The whole way back, I checked the mirror, scanning the road. I never saw them.

But I didn't relax.

I did not relax when I reached the highway or when I pulled into town. Something that had felt solid had cracked enough to let cold through.

I told myself I wasn't in danger. I told myself Tod knew what he was doing.

But that night, the dark felt darker.

I slept in. Had a big breakfast. Tried to relax. Told myself it was no big deal; they still didn't know where the grow site was. Who were they, anyway? Why did I even think they were a threat? Well, Tod sure acted like they were.

Two days later, after much agonizing, I made the supply run. I left while it was still dark and arrived just after sunrise. Tod was waiting. We loaded the horses, and he took special care to erase the tire tracks leading to the truck's hiding place.

After the supplies were stashed and the horses fed, we sank into our usual chairs. The enamel mugs warmed my palms, but not much else. The steam curled between us. We sat for a while in a silence that wasn't companionable, not this time. There was weight in the quiet, like something coiled between us, waiting to be acknowledged.

"So," I said finally, voice low. "What's going on, Tod?"

He didn't answer right away. Just stared into the trees like the answer might drift out on the mist. Then he exhaled, long, heavy, a breath full of unfinished thoughts.

"I know those guys," he said. "Not well, but enough. Two are brothers, Jim and Ray Parker. Loud, high-profile, the kind who drive too fast on back roads and flash bills at the bar. The third is Billy Johnson, a hanger-on. They call themselves growers, but nobody sees them doing the work."

"Dangerous how?" I asked. My stomach tightened as I spoke.

He rubbed a hand over his jaw. "Rip-offs. That's the word. Last season, they suddenly had money. New truck, new gear, buying drinks for everybody at the Wharf. But nobody ever saw signs of a grow. They were around town too much instead of out tending one. Just cash. That doesn't happen by accident. Word is, they hit someone's site just before harvest. Came in quiet, took the whole load while the grower was out. That's why you should never leave your site, especially at harvest time."

I stared down into my mug. The coffee had gone cold, but I held it like it might still offer comfort. "But they don't know where we are. Right?"

He turned to me slowly, his eyes bloodshot and tired. "I want to believe that," he said. "But they're locals. They know the backcountry. They know where the springs are, where the good soil is. And I've been riding in and out of this canyon for three seasons now, and they saw you. Maybe they put it together. Maybe not. But I wouldn't bet the crop on it."

He paused, then looked away. "Look, I'm sorry. I never should've pulled you into this. You were doing me a favor, and now there's risk. Real risk. You've done enough. I can finish this alone."

My whole body stiffened.

"No," I said, flat but sharp. "No fuckin way. I'm in this now. I've earned my share. And I'm not walking away."

He studied me, silent.

"You need me," I added. "You've said so yourself. You need at least two people to get this harvest in. It's ripe. It's ready. You need me."

He looked down into his mug and nodded once, slow. "Alright. Then we start today. No more waiting. We get this harvest in before anyone else gets curious."

* * *

We spent the rest of the day moving like machines. No talking. Just the rhythm of work. Tod showed me how to read the plants like a map, how the trichomes turned milky when the THC was peaking, how the pistils curled, rusted, faded from white to amber. The ripe flowers glistened in the light like sugared fruit.

We started at the crowns, those big, heavy colas that leaned toward the sun like they knew their time was up. We gave the bottoms a couple more days to catch up. We clipped clean and careful. The scissors got sticky fast. We wiped them with alcohol and kept going. The plants weren't pretty

anymore; they were giants, wild and unruly, easily twelve feet tall and eight feet wide, all muscle and scent. Earth, pine, resin, fruit. A jungle of green gold.

We bundled what we clipped and packed it onto Tess and Sage. Then we walked them, slow and quiet, to the drying site, a camouflaged grove tucked into a swale about half a mile away. We strung lines high in the trees and hung the branches upside down. The buds glistened with trichomes. The horses stood off to the side, watching us work as if they understood the weight of what we carried.

By nightfall, it looked like we had barely made a dent in the crop. Not enough. Not even close.

The next day we started again at first light. A quick breakfast, black coffee and motion. The clippers never stopped. By dusk, the muscles in my hands were cramping and Tod's back was seizing up. We ate in silence, half-asleep, then fell into our bedrolls like dropped stones.

The morning after that was more of the same.

* * *

I was just tying a bundle onto Tess's saddle when Boone growled. Low. Guttural. The sound stopped my heart mid-beat.

Then came the bark.

Then the shot. One sharp crack that echoed off the ridge and split the air in two.

I dropped the bundle. Instinct took over. I ducked behind a thicket of manzanita and crouched low, heart banging in my chest like a trapped bird. I didn't breathe. I didn't move. I waited.

Minutes passed.

Then footsteps. Careful. Measured.

Tod appeared, rifle in hand, his face pale but steady. "It's all right," he said, scanning the trees behind me. "I saw someone. Just a shape, watching from the trail. I fired a warning shot. They bolted."

I stood slowly. My knees felt weak.

"Was it them?" I asked, my voice barely audible.

He looked at me. "Could've been a hiker," he said. "But I don't think so."

We stood there for a long moment, the silence louder than the gunshot had been.

"Well," I said, still breathless. "I guess we better hustle."

He nodded once. "Yeah. Time to jam."

And we did.

No more breaks. No lingering. Only work and the knowledge that someone was watching from the trees.

The Attack

We worked well into the night. Lantern light flickered along the edges of buds and bundled stalks. Our hands were sticky with resin, our knuckles scraped by brush, the ache of muscle threaded through our arms like wire. We slept for a few hours, and in the morning it looked as if we were only halfway through the harvest. Maybe. It felt endless.

By mid-afternoon, Tod was off at the drying site stringing the last of yesterday's cuttings, and I was alone at camp getting twine. Tess and Sage were tethered in the shade, swishing their tails, and Boone was making his rounds.

I was crouched near the supplies, sorting through burlap sacks, when I heard Boone bark, a full, visceral warning. My stomach dropped. Then came the furious barking, and before I could even stand, Boone took off into the trees.

I followed the direction of his charge and saw them.

Three figures, crashing down the path toward camp. Fast. Armed.

My heart stopped. It was them, the same three men from the café, the same men from the truck on the road. Now they were charging down the ridge like wolves while Boone charged toward them, unafraid.

"Boone, no!" I shouted.

But it was too late.

Three shots cracked the stillness like a snapped bone. One, two, then the third, sharp and final. Boone yelped, high and human in pitch, then silence.

I felt the sound hit my body like a blow.

And they kept coming.

I turned to run, but the lead guy — the mouthy one — caught me by the hair and yanked. I went down hard, shoulder first in the dirt, gravel cutting my palm as I scrambled.

"Look who we have here," he sneered, dragging me up. "We just keep runnin' into each other."

The others laughed. It was the kind of laughter that makes your skin crawl.

They surrounded me in a loose circle, adrenaline slicking my skin with sweat. I was angry, but terrified. I didn't dare speak.

"Keep an eye out for Tod," he barked at one of the others.

But before anything else could be said, a single rifle crack rang out from the ridge.

One of them dropped instantly. His leg folded like rope, and he hit the ground screaming.

"Fuck! I'm hit! Jesus, my leg!"

They scattered, firing wildly into the trees, bullets slapping bark and slicing the quiet. I didn't wait. I ran, breath sawing in my chest, limbs pure instinct. I was halfway up the other ridge before diving into cover beneath the ferns.

I looked back.

The guy who got hit was bleeding fast, shot through the calf, from what I could see. One of the others was tying off his thigh with a belt while the third kept swinging his rifle toward the brush, eyes wild.

"Fuck you, Tod!" the mouthy one screamed into the woods. "I'm coming for you, motherfucker!"

But they didn't know where he was. Their panic gave it away.

They hoisted the wounded man, half carrying and half dragging him up the trail before he bled out. Within minutes, they were gone.

Gone, but not gone enough.

Boone was dead. Tod was still out there. And I was shaking, hiding, afraid, furious.

And it wasn't over.

I went back, carefully. Tod showed up, moving quiet as mist. We retrieved Boone together. He lay stiff and heavy in the shade where he'd fallen, one eye still half open, muzzle caked with dirt. I sank to my knees beside him. Cried like I hadn't in years.

It wasn't just Boone. It was everything, the fear, the shame, the helplessness, the rage. I sobbed until my ribs ached. Tod didn't say anything. Just stood there with one hand on the dog's flank, jaw clenched like stone.

"We're fucked," I finally said, the words catching in my throat. "Those guys are coming back. And soon. They're gonna kill us."

Tod didn't argue. He stared down at Boone like the answer might be written in the bloody fur. It was.

"They won't be back today," he muttered. "Too far to the hospital. They'll need to regroup, take care of their buddy."

Then he turned toward the clearing and the crop, still heavy with green, still half uncut. His eyes sharpened.

"He's coming for me, huh?" he whispered, more to himself than to me. "Well, I'm coming for you, motherfucker."

His anger came fast, not loud, but coiled. A hot, steady pulse in his neck. I could feel it rise between us like smoke.

"We're just gonna give them half our fucking crop?" he growled. "After all this? Fuck those scumbags."

"Yeah, fuck 'em," I spat. I was on my feet now, shoulders squared, breath coming sharp. My face was still wet, my chest still raw, but the fear had twisted. "We did the work. We fed the land. They shot our dog, Tod. And now they want to walk in and collect? Fuck that."

He looked up from Boone's body and really saw me. Not just the fury, but the woman beneath it. The one who was scared and done pretending not to be brave.

A slow grin cracked across his face. Not mockery. Something more like admiration.

"You're a feisty bitch when you wanna be," he said, voice low.

I blinked, startled. Then I laughed, sharp and sudden. He joined in.

The laughter cut through everything. For a moment, it was just sound and breath, and the worst had already happened. The rest — we'd meet it head-on.

"We harvest fast, everything we can. Hide it at the drying site. Carry out everything we can. Work all night and leave at first light. But it's risky... that's probably what they'll expect."

I saw him weigh it, the time, the distance, the risk. He exhaled, sharp and final.

"No," he said. "We have to leave before first light."

"Let's do it," I said, full of fire now.

* * *

So, we worked. No breaks. Little food. Just cutting, bundling, tying, and stacking. No trimming. No hanging. Just stashing every pound we could at the drying site. Tess and Sage hauled until their flanks were slick with sweat.

The sun fell fast behind the ridge. But we didn't stop.

We worked through dusk. Through dark. Under starlight and lantern glow. And somehow, before the gray edge of dawn, we had it all but a handful of green still in the ground.

It was still dark, with only the faintest glow on the eastern horizon. I was strapping the last bundle onto Tess when Tod froze, rifle already in his hands. Two flashlights moved down the trail.

"Go," he said. Low. Urgent. "Get the hell out of here. Don't go to the drying site. Head northwest."

Then he raised the rifle, aimed and fired.

Not a warning this time. He was aiming for blood.

I spun around, heart kicking. Sage was already circling, wide-eyed and wild, snorting with panic. I lunged for the reins and caught them, tried to swing a leg up, but he spun again, and my foot missed the stirrup. And again.

"Goddammit," I hissed, chest heaving.

Shots cracked behind me.

I launched myself belly-first across the saddle, hit hard and held on, hand clamped around the horn. Sage bolted.

Clinging for life, breath gone, arms burning. Dirt hitting my face, stinging my eyes. Finally, I managed to get a foot through a stirrup and swing up into the saddle.

I glanced back for the first time and saw gunfire flashes. Tod was on horseback, firing a pistol, riding behind me.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I whispered, kicking Sage harder. "Please be okay."

We thundered down the trail in the dark. Every step could've broken a leg. Every breath could've been the last. But we kept moving.

Eventually, the shots stopped. Just vanished into the still-dark air. I slowed Sage to a canter. Then a trot. My whole body shaking.

Only my breath. Only the horse's hooves in the pine duff. Only the ache in my hands from gripping so tight.

Then — hoofbeats behind me.

Fast. Reckless. I spun in the saddle, heart in my throat.

"Tod!" I shouted, half sobbing, twisting around in time to see him cut through the trees, silhouetted in the pale light. Dirty. Wild-eyed. Grinning like a lunatic.

"You okay?" I yelled, voice cracking.

"Yeah," he called, slowing to match my pace. "You?"

I nodded, breathless. "Yeah. I think so."

"They're on foot," he said, pulling up beside me, reins tight. His chest heaved. "The wounded one won't be with them. Those two aren't keeping up now."

"I thought you were dead," I said. The tears uninvited. "I really thought you were fucking dead."

He shook his head, still laughing from pure adrenaline. "Yeah, well, I was wondering myself. I could hear the bullets," he said, eyes wide. "Like bees. One hit a tree right next to me. It was fucking crazy. Terrifying, but I'm okay."

“Did you hit anyone?”

He shrugged. “Hell if I know. I tried to.” He laughed at that.

And suddenly we were both laughing, panicked, breathless, stupid laughter that came from that dark place where the terror had just started to drain.

I bent over my saddle, shaking my head. “We made it. We’re still alive.”

“Yeah,” he said, smiling through dirt and sweat. “Now we just have to hope they don’t find the drying site.”

We didn’t say anything for a long moment. Just rode.

The world was shifting. The trees were no longer black silhouettes but soft gray shapes. The eastern sky was blushing, the first threads of morning tugging the shadows apart.

The trail widened a little. We let the horses slow.

“We’re going to make it,” I said finally, and I wasn’t sure who I was trying to convince.

Tod reached over and touched my arm. Just a light touch. Steady. “Yeah,” he said. “We just might.”

And we kept riding. Past the worst of the night. Toward whatever came next.

Escape

We pushed on, fast but cautious, eyes over our shoulders. The adrenaline was burning off, replaced by a raw-edged ache in every limb, a throb in my hands where I'd gripped the reins, and a heavy, pulsing grief that hadn't yet found its full shape. We were too strung out to process it. We just kept moving.

The trail narrowed, pressed in by brush. I dropped back a little, letting Tod lead. That's when I saw it.

"Oh no, Tod," I called out. "I think Tess is bleeding."

We both jumped down. I stepped forward, brushing her left flank gently. A dark smear of blood glistened in the morning light.

"Shit," Tod whispered. He crouched and took a closer look. "Yeah... that's a bullet wound. Low velocity. Probably a pistol. If it was a rifle, she'd be down already."

"Is she going to make it?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"I don't know," he said, standing slowly. "Best we can do is keep her moving. Get her to Mendocino. There's nothing we can do out here."

So we kept going. Slower now. Watching her. We shifted nearly everything from her to Sage, and we were walking, not riding.

For the first hour she kept up, though she limped. By the second, it was worse, her breathing uneven. By the third, we had to stop every ten minutes. She strained, stumbled, and finally could not go on.

Tod walked over to her slowly. Laid a hand on her shoulder. Felt along her side.

"She's not going to make it, Claire. Not four more hours."

I nodded. I knew. But it didn't stop the tears.

"Goddamn it. Those fuckers." My throat was raw. "It could've been one of us."

I walked forward and stood beside her, stroking her forehead. She looked at me, eyes clouded, breath coming fast. "You were the best, girl. Brave. Beautiful. I'm so sorry."

Tod led her gently off the trail to a shallow depression, a dip of green where the ferns softened the ground. She lay down easily, as if she already knew.

I couldn't watch. I walked back into the trees, holding my breath.

He couldn't risk the sound of a gunshot, so it had to be the knife. When he came back, I didn't ask. I just saw the blood on his hands and the tears on his face. Neither of us said a word.

Later, we turned off the trail into a thicket, where a giant gnarled Douglas fir leaned over a cold stream like it had been waiting for us. We slid the bundles off Sage and stacked them behind a log. Tod unsaddled him and led him to the stream where he drank and grazed, calm as ever.

We laid the saddle blanket in the grass, sat down, and leaned against the saddle. We passed a canteen, split an apple and a sleeve of crackers, then, without speaking, fell asleep.

It was Tod who woke me, maybe an hour later. His voice was soft but firm. "We gotta keep going."

I groaned, every bone and muscle screaming. "I can't."

"You can," he said. "Come on."

We left the crop under the tree, stashed, not secure, but hidden. Tod saddled Sage again and helped me up. I could barely swing a leg over. But we got moving.

By midafternoon we reached the edge of Mendocino. Tod left me near town and disappeared into the brush.

I walked the rest of the way into town, trying to look normal. At the house I found bruises blooming along my ribs and thighs, cuts I had not felt in the dark. I washed dirt and blood from my hands until the water ran clear, then kept washing.

What frightened me most was not that I had crossed a line. It was how quickly the line had disappeared when survival took over.

I packed food, water, clean clothes, and a fresh shirt for Tod, then drove back in my car to the rendezvous.

He stepped out when I pulled up. Covered in dirt, eyes hollow, but he smiled when he saw me. We embraced.

“Come back in three days,” he said. “Just after light. I’ll set up a new drying site deeper in. Try to salvage what we left. You know what to get.”

We held each other for a long minute.

“It’s not over,” he said. “But we’re close. I love you.”

Tears filled my eyes again. This time, they were quiet. “I love you too.”

* * *

It was like stepping back into a dream that remembered me, the feel of my bed, the hush of old floorboards, the smell of salt and stove coffee laced into the corners of the kitchen. Home. I slept like the dead. Curled like a child. Ached like I’d aged a decade in one night. My body gave in completely. Hours passed like mist. I woke in fits, dreaming in flashes: Boone’s bark. That single shot cracking the air. Flashlight beams bobbing like angry fireflies through the trees. The sound of Tod’s voice, urgent, just before everything tore loose.

Each time I woke, it was with my heart pounding and a film of sweat on my neck. I’d sit up too fast, blink into the half-light of the room, and repeat it to myself like a spell: I’m safe. I’m home. This is over.

But it wasn’t, not really.

By late morning I had moved to the chair by the fireplace, wrapped myself in a blanket I did not need, and lit a fire. The crackle helped, but the house kept answering with Boone’s bark, rifle shots, and flashlights moving through trees. Safety had become a word rather than a fact.

I kept wondering about that girl, the one who showed up here in June, fresh out of college with her bags full of clean laundry and her careful little plans. Where the hell had she gone?

* * *

The following afternoon I pulled myself together and drove into town. Groceries, I told myself. A supply run, just like before. I parked near Mendosa’s and went inside with a shopping list and a resolve that felt like paper in my hand.

I was halfway to the produce section when the door jingled and the three of them walked in like they owned the place, bruised, battered, but still swaggering. One of them had a cast on his leg, the loudmouth had his arm in a sling. They looked like the back end of a car wreck. My heart jackhammered in my chest.

I ducked immediately into a narrow back hallway marked “Employees Only,” and tucked myself behind a rolling cart of bulk rice. My breath came short. I peeked through a gap in the shelves, praying they hadn’t seen me.

A few minutes later, a short, round, middle-aged store clerk with teased blonde hair and a name tag that read “Doreen” stepped into the back and jumped when she saw me.

“Jesus, honey! You scared me.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered. “I’m hiding from one of those guys out there. He’s always hassling me.”

Her eyes narrowed, instantly maternal and fierce. “Them? You mean those Parker boys and Billy Johnson?”

I nodded, wide-eyed. Not a lie, exactly. Just not the whole truth.

She puffed up like a hen before a storm. “You stay right here, sweetie. As long as you want. I’ll handle those little bastards.”

“Thank you,” I said.

Doreen touched my arm, soft and warm. “You’re safe now. Those assholes aren’t welcome in my store.”

“Who are they, anyway?” I asked, playing dumb, my voice low and conspiratorial.

“Trouble, that’s who. Fort Bragg trash. Been runnin’ around here since high school, lifting shit and causing problems. The older two are brothers, mean as snakes. They’ve all done time or should have. You just let me know if they give you any more grief.”

I watched her march out like a general. She posted herself right by the register, arms crossed, eyes locked. Hovered as they paid. Didn’t say a word, just stood there glowering. It worked. They squirmed under her glare, fumbled their cash, and practically tripped over each other on the way out. She followed them all the way to the door, made damn sure they saw her watching.

I had to laugh. I waited until their truck pulled out of the lot, then Doreen came back and waved me forward.

We hugged like old friends. I didn’t even hesitate.

“Thank you,” I whispered into her shoulder.

She pulled back, her expression fierce but kind. “Don’t you worry, sweetheart. They’re nothing but hot air and broken bones. You’ve got more backbone than the lot of ’em.”

If she only knew how dangerous they could be.

I smiled, nodded, bought my groceries, and walked out of that store like I had an army behind me.

* * *

We met at first light, mist still hanging in the trees like breath. I helped load the supplies onto Sage, cinching the last strap tighter than it needed to be.

“I’m coming with you,” I said, steady.

Tod hesitated, one hand on the saddle horn. “Claire... you don’t have to do that.”

“I know,” I said. “I want to. I need to finish the job. It’s like falling off a horse. You get back on.”

He looked at me for a long second. Something shifted in his face, maybe trust, maybe admiration. Then he nodded.

“Okay. Park the car back home. I’ll wait here.”

When I got back, we started the long walk in, two hours at least. Deep woods. Still air. Pine and redwood so thick it felt like walking underwater. We didn't say much. Just the sound of our boots, the soft jingle of Sage's tack, and birds calling from far away like they didn't want to get too close.

He'd stashed the bundles well, strung them high, dry, safe. The real question now was whether the ripoffs had found the drying site. I didn't think so. I would've felt it.

"I saw those assholes at Mendosa's," I told him. "They didn't look like they were celebrating."

I told him everything, the sling, the cast, their sad little limp down the cereal aisle. How the store clerk had turned full mama bear and stared them right out of town. When I told him their names — the Parker brothers and Billy Johnson from Fort Bragg — he laughed so hard he doubled over.

"Goddamn," he said, wiping his eyes. "You're a fuckin' trip, Claire."

But I could see him working through the information, filing it away.

* * *

The next morning, he rode out alone to check the site.

I stayed behind, trimming the pot we already had.

The next day, late in the afternoon, Tod walked into camp leading Sage, who was loaded down like a pack mule.

"All there," he said, grinning.

"Oh my god!" I screamed, half laughing, half crying, and ran into his arms. "We're rich!"

We twirled like idiots, high on adrenaline and disbelief. That night we broke open a bottle of bourbon and sat around the glow of the kerosene lantern. No fire. Too risky.

* * *

The process felt almost meditative, stripping the fan leaves, clipping buds, sorting them into loose-weave burlap sacks so they could keep drying without turning to mush. Plastic was death. It would make the whole batch rot.

The next afternoon he came back with another load.

"One more," he said with a grin. "Just one more."

"Oh my god," I gasped. "It's so much."

"Gotta be at least four hundred pounds," he said, beaming. "Better than I hoped for. No mold, no mites. Healthy as hell. But you were the difference. I never could have done it on my own."

I flushed. Not just from pride. From the way he looked at me when he said it, like I was something rare. Like I belonged out here just as much as he did.

We trimmed for four days straight. No breaks longer than sleep and food. Then, just as I was stacking a sack, I caught movement through the trees.

"Tod—" I said, voice low.

He was up in an instant, rifle in hand.

Two figures. A man and a woman. Young. Shaggy hair. Dusty packs. They stopped when they saw us. Hands raised a little, like we might be dangerous.

"Fuck. Just hikers," Tod muttered. "You go talk to them."

"Me?"

"You're less threatening."

I gave him a look, but I stood up and brushed my hands on my jeans.

“Hey, we don’t want trouble. We’re just hiking. Sorry,” the man said. They were young, long-haired, and clearly frightened.

“No problem. We don’t want trouble either. We’re locals, putting by a little stash for winter.” I laughed, hoping they couldn’t see the mountain of sacks. “Didn’t mean to scare you.”

They relaxed. “Cool. We smoke, and we know people growing. We live a few miles away. We won’t say anything,” he promised.

She smiled. “Yeah, we’re cool. You just scared us. Some of the new people aren’t so friendly.”

“Great. Sorry again. Have a good hike.” Then I called after them. “Wait. You want some?”

“Yeah, sure.” They laughed.

I ran back, grabbed a double handful of choice buds, and returned. Their eyes widened.

“Oh, wow. Thanks.” They laughed as they stuffed the pot into a day pack. It barely fit.

“Far out. Choice buds!” The exchange turned into a small celebration.

“Maybe I’ll see you around town sometime.”

“Yeah. See you.” And then they were gone.

I came back to find Tod squinting after them, skeptical.

“We’re all best friends now,” I said brightly.

“Mmm,” he grunted.

“Just hippies. Glad to get some free pot.”

“Maybe,” he muttered. Then his tone changed. “But we’re out of here tomorrow night. No more delays. Either we finish trimming today or bag what’s left and go.”

I nodded. “Great. Let’s finish it tonight.”

And we did finish, with blisters on our fingers, resin in our hair, and the scent of marijuana victory thick in the trees.

PART FOUR
WHAT GREW

Home

We started hauling loads to the transfer site just outside town. The whole thing made me nervous, but Tod had scouted a good spot tucked deep in a thicket of coyote brush. From the trail you couldn't see a thing. We made five trips back and forth, the sun going low and orange. By the time we were done, it was almost dark, and I was itchy with nerves and burrs.

It took hours for Tod to walk back to the house, trade my car for the truck near the old route, and return. I waited among burlap sacks, counting imaginary footsteps in the brush.

It took forever to pack the truck. The smell was a punch in the face: fresh-cut weed, resin sharp and unmistakable. We stank too, our hands sticky, our shirts holding the scent like memory. I was sure the neighbors could smell it from two blocks away.

* * *

Back at my place, I opened the garage. It hadn't seen a car in decades. I'd cleared it out last time I was home, moved everything into the house or scattered it across the lawn like a yard sale explosion. Still a mess, but we squeezed the truck inside. Barely. I had to guide Tod in like a ground crew at an airport. When the mirrors finally cleared, he cut the engine and climbed out through the window. We shut the door and locked it twice.

Then we showered, separately and silently, and slept like the dead. I think I dreamed of Boone and branches and money in a duffel bag, and when I woke, it was late afternoon and the air smelled like soap and leftover adrenaline.

We went to the Mendocino Hotel for dinner. Candlelight, cloth napkins. I wore mascara and tried not to look over my shoulder.

* * *

I woke him with my mouth, slow, certain, deliberate. No warning, no preamble. Just breath and lips and the slow pressure of my hand coaxing him into the day. The weight of him grew under my palm before his mind had even joined us.

A sound came low from his throat, rough with sleep, the kind that says yes without a single word. His body answered before his eyes opened, thick and ready in my hand. There were no questions in him, no resistance. Just the surrender that comes when sensation takes over before thought can catch it.

I took my time. Let my tongue move over him in slow, steady laps, pausing to draw him deeper, to feel the heat pulse against the back of my throat. My free hand pressed against his hip, holding him where I wanted him. He let me lead.

When I finally climbed over him, it was one long, unbroken slide — thighs opening, knees braced at his sides, the warmth of him pressing into me as I sank down. The stretch, the fullness, the way my body adjusted around him — it all made my breath catch in the small space between us.

He was more than ready now, thick and hard inside me, his heat matching mine. I moved over him in a slow, deliberate rhythm, that early-morning kind of insistence that doesn't rush, that builds the way light does through a window — steady, unstoppable.

His hands found my waist, holding me for a beat before sliding up, following the curve of my spine, thumb grazing the dip at the small of my back. His mouth brushed mine — not a kiss, just a catch, like he needed to feel my breath as much as I needed to take his.

We didn't speak. The only language was the shift of hips, the quick hitch in breath, the faint slap of skin on skin as the pace deepened. It was different from the first time, looser, easier, as if we'd already burned through whatever restraint we thought we'd need. This was pure muscle memory now, our bodies finding each other without hesitation.

When release came, it wasn't a sudden break but a slow flood, heat curling deep in my belly until I couldn't move, only hold him inside me and let it take me. His own release followed close, the muscles in his stomach tightening under my hands, his breath catching against my mouth.

After, I stayed draped across him, skin slick, sheets kicked down around our ankles. My cheek rested on his chest, the thud of his heartbeat slow and steady now, matching mine. The room was warm with the scent of us, the air thick with what we'd just done.

Neither of us spoke. We didn't need to. We stayed in that post-everything float, our bodies still touching in every place they could, letting the quiet be the only thing between us.

* * *

Tod made the call. I sat on the floor near the phone, legs crossed, listening. He and the guy, his connection, sounded like old drinking buddies. There was laughter. Inside jokes. The occasional pause that made me wonder what wasn't being said. They set a meeting spot for the next day, different from the year before. Tod scribbled the address on the back of a notepad.

"All set," he said, like he was announcing the weather.

I looked at him. "That's it? Just... ready to go?"

"I've used him the last two seasons," he said. "I trust him, mostly."

"Mostly?" I said, catching that slight hesitation in his voice.

He grinned. "Yeah, well. Only as much as you can trust anyone when there are tens of thousands of dollars on the table."

"Jesus Christ, Tod. That's not very comforting." I stood, pacing now. "You're saying we're walking into a drug deal with a guy you don't fully trust."

"Welcome to being a drug dealer," he said, still smiling. "This is the easy part."

* * *

The next morning, we left early and drove straight through. I insisted on coming. No way I was sitting at home biting my nails while he vanished into a drug den with a man named Tony or Dingo or whatever.

"Should I bring a gun?" I asked.

Tod gave me a long, sideways look. "No."

But I wanted armor. I wanted to feel dangerous. So I wore black jeans, bad bitch boots with a stacked heel, and a black leather jacket that hugged my shoulders like a dare, even though it was already pushing ninety and the sun was glaring where we were going.

Tod looked me over when I stepped out of the house.

"That looks kind of hot," was all he said.

I tucked a pocketknife into the inside pocket of my jacket, just in case. I didn't know what I would do with it, but it felt good to carry something lethal.

We didn't dare stop on the drive down. The truck reeked, not faint, not maybe-if-you-sniff, but thick and musky and unmistakable. A green cloud so strong I imagined we were trailing it like exhaust. Tod obeyed every traffic law like he was on camera, both hands on the wheel, eyes steady, jaw set. I didn't even breathe too deeply. Just stared out the window and tried not to imagine the kinds of headlines we'd make.

The Drug Deal

The warehouse stood alone in a gravel lot among sun-faded tractors and rusted discs. It looked like a place that sold irrigation fittings. Two men waited beside a silver Porsche, posed like an album cover.

We pulled in beside them, tires crunching on gravel. Tod cut the engine and stepped out. He and the thinner guy — Scott — did a long, familiar handshake, then hugged like they hadn't seen each other in years.

“Jesus, Tod,” Scott said, stepping back. “I can smell it from here.”

They all cracked up. I gave a polite smile and wiped sweat from my neck. The black leather jacket had been a mistake. I was boiling alive inside it.

“Yeah, hard to stay under the radar,” Tod said, shrugging. “We drove straight through.”

“Well,” Scott said, clapping his hands together, “let's get this baby inside. I'm dying to see it.”

He and the other guy — Paul — led us to a side door that opened into a small, dusty office. Beige walls, a metal desk, a fan turning slowly overhead. Another door led into the warehouse proper, vast and empty, the air cool and slightly metallic. Scott hit a button and a massive garage door groaned open. Tod backed the truck inside with slow precision. When the door closed behind us, it felt like we were inside a vault.

They all gathered at the back of the truck. Tod unlatched it and lifted the door. The smell hit like a body wave. Sharp and earthy, pungent enough to feel on the tongue. The entire bed was packed tight with burlap sacks, stacked like feed grain.

“Goddamn,” Scott said, laughing, eyes wide. “Tod, this is... this is serious weight.”

Tod grinned and opened one of the sacks. Buds spilled out, sticky, green-gold, glistening under the fluorescent lights. Paul stepped forward first, lifted a handful, held it to the light.

“Look at this,” he said, almost reverently. “Beautiful structure. Cured just enough. God, the nose on this... damn.”

“Yeah, very nice,” Scott echoed, nodding. “No mold. No flattening. Trimmed clean.”

Paul crouched, unzipped a side pocket of his pack, and pulled out a glass pipe. “Mind if I try it?”

“Go ahead,” Tod said, waving.

“Think I'll stay straight for now,” Scott said. “How much do you think is here?”

Tod scratched his beard, eyes glinting. “Hell if I know. Came outta the field just last night.”

They laughed again, this giddy ripple between them like they were kids pulling off a heist.

“All right, let's weigh it,” Scott said. He rolled a heavy-duty scale from the corner, its wide platform beneath a bright red dial. Bag after bag landed on it. Paul and Tod kept a tally on a yellow legal pad, opening each sack and inspecting the buds, their fingers sticky with resin. I leaned against the wall, sweat curling in my bra, watching as if it were a stage play.

After the last sack landed with a soft thud, we stepped into the office. Scott punched numbers into an old calculator with dramatic flair, then held it up like a game show host.

“Three hundred sixty-three point seven six pounds,” he said.

“Holy shit,” we all said at once, and the room burst into laughter.

“Jesus, Tod,” Scott said again, still staring at the number. “That's a lot of fucking weed.”

“I told you,” Tod said, almost bashful. “Perfect season. Zero pest loss. I added more plants this year, too. It wouldn't have been possible without my partner here.” He turned toward me.

Suddenly all eyes were on me.

I blushed — actually blushed — and gave a tiny, sheepish wave. “I carried buckets,” I said, shrugging.

Scott and Paul both grinned. “Hell of a bucket brigade,” Paul said.

Tod looked over at me with something warmer than pride. Gratitude, maybe. Respect.

It wasn’t lost on me. None of it was.

“Well, we want it. Right, Scott?” Paul said, practically bouncing on his toes, looking at Scott like a kid nudging a friend in front of the ice cream truck.

“Hell yeah, we want it.” Scott grinned, eyes glinting, face flushed with heat and resin and capital-D Delight. They certainly weren’t hiding their enthusiasm.

They turned to Tod. “How much?” Scott asked, already bracing for the number.

“Three-fifty,” Tod said, calm as a preacher with a checkbook.

Scott glanced at Paul. “Three hundred?”

Paul gave the smallest nod. A negotiation in a blink.

Tod paused, then smiled like a man playing poker with a hand full of kings. “Alright, make it three twenty. We got a deal.”

“Yes,” they both said, at the exact same time, and then everyone started laughing. It felt ridiculous. And giddy. Like prom night with weed and duffel bags full of money. My laugh cracked high, nervous, and I had to sit down right there on the warehouse floor, legs buckling under me. I peeled off the leather jacket, damp with sweat. I felt like I might pass out.

Scott and Tod ran the numbers, heads together, passing the calculator back and forth like a shared cigarette. When they landed on the total — \$116,403 — I said nothing. I just blinked. I could feel the blood draining from my face, and the walls swayed ever so slightly.

“I brought a hundred thousand,” Scott said, as casually as if offering wine. “I didn’t expect this much. Take it now, then come to my place for the rest. Stay the night if you want.”

He looked at Tod. Then me.

Tod looked at me. And by that point, he could’ve said we were flying to Jupiter and I would’ve nodded. I was high on the moment. On all that money. I nodded.

* * *

Scott’s house nestled in the redwoods like a whispered secret, wood-shingled and quiet on the hillside above Mill Valley, the kind of place that made you want to speak in hushed tones even when you were laughing. Stained glass filtered the early dusk into patches of amber and moss. Tiffany, his girlfriend, or muse, or possibly a high-end ghost from the pages of *Vogue*, greeted us at the door with a radiant, unbothered smile. She smelled like jasmine and peppermint tea.

I felt absurd. My boots were dusty. My fingernails, chipped and dirty, still rimmed in trim residue. But she hugged me like we were old friends. Warm. Breezy. Acting totally uninterested in what I was wearing, or what we might be doing.

Tod lugged in two suitcases. One with our toothbrushes. One with a hundred grand in soft, worn bills.

We still stank of fresh-cut green, so Tiffany showed us to a private room with its own cedar-slat bath. I scrubbed my arms until they stopped itching and changed into a dress I’d packed on a whim,

something soft and light that made me feel vaguely human again. When I came down, the smell of Chinese takeout hit me like a memory from another life: sesame oil, hoisin, the bright umami smoke of wok-fried vegetables. I hadn't had anything like that in months. Not in Mendocino. Not unless you counted soy sauce at the diner.

Scott had offered to take us out, but Tod didn't want to leave the money unattended. Understandably.

So we feasted. Laughed. Drank cold plum wine out of delicate little glasses. I remember laughing so hard at something Paul said, something about his dog getting stoned on spilled shake, that I had to set my food down to catch my breath.

After dinner, Scott led Tod into a back room that smelled of cedar and printer ink and expensive leather. When they came out, Tod was holding a shopping bag filled with money. We stuffed it into the same suitcase as our socks and underwear.

Tiffany didn't ask any questions. Or maybe she already knew and chose not to care. I liked her for that.

* * *

We reached Mendocino after noon, cracked open with relief.

Then came the hibernation.

A week of stillness followed: sleep, sex, and long stretches on the couch where neither of us spoke. I moved like a woman thawing after winter, every muscle aching, every part of me tender and real.

Then we divided the money. My thirty-percent share came to \$34,921. In 1973, that might as well have been a million. Enough to do something impossible. Something brave.

By then it was late autumn. The fog came earlier, the tourist traffic thinned, and the summer that was supposed to be temporary had hardened into a life I could measure in cash, scars, and keys.

I called the family who owned the house and made an offer. No realtors, just a local title office, a few phone calls, some back-and-forth letters, and me scribbling numbers in a notebook. We negotiated the old-fashioned way.

The inspection confirmed what Tod had guessed: dry rot in the rafters, a roof that needed replacing, and a cracked but solid foundation. The house was modest, with two small bedrooms upstairs, one bathroom downstairs, and an old-fashioned kitchen that looked more like a museum than anything built for modern life. But the setting was priceless.

I offered \$18,000, with \$5,000 of it in cash. They countered at \$22,500. We finally shook hands at an even twenty. Everyone seemed satisfied.

That may sound like nothing now, especially for a house above the beach in California. But in 1973, Mendocino was still built on the bones of fishermen's shacks and millworker cottages. Fifteen thousand dollars was a more typical price. No one was talking about a real-estate boom yet. No one saw it coming.

The house was mine.

And Tod moved in.

But there was one last thing to take care of.

Revenge

It wasn't only Boone, Tess, or the money. They had tried to kill us. That fact stayed hot in me. So did their certainty that they could take a season of labor without consequence.

We had the cash. But it wasn't safe. We'd seen them in town, lurking, following Tod like they were casing his shadow. They weren't exactly subtle. Not smart enough for subtle.

So, we made a plan. Quiet. Careful. And mean.

* * *

First, we dealt with the cash. Tod and I opened several bank accounts and kept individual deposits modest. The Bank Secrecy Act had created reporting rules for cash transactions above ten thousand dollars, and neither of us wanted attention. Whatever we didn't deposit went into safe-deposit boxes, locked away and quiet.

But the Parker brothers didn't know that. And we wanted them to think we still had the pot, that it was stashed somewhere out in the woods, vulnerable and waiting to be lifted.

That was the bait.

We took leftover yard trimmings and packed them into three burlap sacks. On top of one sack, we put a little over a pound of trimmings and actual bud, just enough to give it that unmistakable look and smell. And to make it a major felony.

When the day came to spring the trap, Tod loaded the three fake bags into the truck and set out. As expected, the Parkers followed, as predictable as ever. I followed them, hanging back just enough. Everything was going as planned.

Tod was heading for a specific pullout where he would drop the bags. As soon as I saw them turn down that road, I knew it was time. My job was to make the call.

As soon as they turned onto Dobbie Lane, I pulled into a gas station near the corner and called the sheriff's office.

The hard part was knowing when to make the call. Too early, and the cops might catch Tod. Too late, and they might miss the Parkers altogether. And it wasn't like the Mendocino deputies were known for lightning response. It was a gamble either way.

I was at the gas station on the corner. I waited five minutes, took a breath, and dialed.

"Hi," I said, trying to sound rattled. "I live down on Dobbie Lane, and I think there's some kind of pot deal happening right now. I just saw the Parker brothers carrying bags in and out of the woods. I'm sure it's marijuana. I'm afraid of those guys, honestly. They've caused trouble around here before. I think this is a regular thing. I just thought you should know." I paused, then added, "They're there right now if you want to catch them."

"No," I said when asked my name. "No, I can't. I'm sorry. I'm scared."

I didn't wait for more questions. "Thank you," I said quickly. "I'm hanging up now." The line clicked dead.

By then, Tod had parked at the turnout and begun unloading the sacks, just visible enough to tempt greedy eyes. He stashed them about a hundred yards into the trees. When he returned, he saw the Parkers watching. Tod drove away, and the brothers took the bait. They pulled in and went looking for the pot.

Tod watched from a hidden spot down the road. And waited. And waited. Finally, they came back, hauling out the bags, their faces bright with dumb luck.

But where were the cops?

They were just about to leave when a sheriff's car pulled up.

Busted.

There was a real moment of confusion. The deputy opened a bag, found a few real buds, then a mess of twigs and yard clippings. He looked at the Parker boys. The Parker boys looked at each other. Then Jim Parker figured it out.

They'd been played.

A week later, I got a call from a prosecutor in Ukiah. One of them, I didn't ask which, had named Tod and me as the dealers. I stayed calm. I told her one of the men had been sexually harassing me, showing up where he wasn't wanted and trying to intimidate both of us. I suggested jealousy. They could ask Doreen at Mendosa's; she knew. It wasn't the first complaint about the Parkers. Maybe he was trying to shift the heat. The prosecutor's voice softened, like someone closing a file drawer.

I never heard back.

Months later, the newspaper landed on the porch. In the crime column, small print and no photographs, it said the men had received nine-year sentences, the new drug case compounded by prior burglary and assault convictions.

I clipped the article. Not to gloat. Just to remember that sometimes — not often, not cleanly — justice sneaks through the cracks.

* * *

Four years later, Tod and I finally married. No courthouse. No fanfare. Just a few friends, on a bluff overlooking the sea, and vows we hardly needed to speak aloud. We'd already lived them. We had made it through fire and fear, laughter and loss. We had built a life with our hands, and when we spoke the words, it was more of a confirmation than a beginning. The wind was soft that day. The waves below sounded like applause.

I took my share of the money and fixed up the house slowly, with care. Tod made it happen, but I was the keeper of its soul. I preserved the tongue-and-groove walls, the uneven floors, the stone fireplace that had kept me warm through all those uncertain nights. I left the good kind of worn things worn. But I added what we needed, a bath upstairs, new wiring, appliances, decks that caught the late light. It was a work of love. And I think Alice would have approved.

I kept busy. I did the books for Tod's construction company, volunteered at the art center, and wrote most mornings in the upstairs room, where the light came through the same lace curtain Alice had once mended. I worked with a mug of tea beside me, in the quiet hour before the town stirred.

With the family's blessing, I documented everything before I changed it. Took photographs of the house just as it had been, even the cupboard doors, where Alice had pasted notes, prayers, recipes, quotations. I catalogued all her paintings, her letters, her journals, her poems. Then I went looking for the people she'd known. Those who loved her and remembered her. There were more than I expected, artists, students, lovers, friends. They told stories over coffee and wine, sometimes through tears. I took notes in the margins like she used to do.

And in time, I wrote her book. Not just a biography, but a kind of hymn to her, to this place, to a way of living that didn't always fit in boxes, and to how she had made it seem possible to be brave and strange and full of fire.

It didn't make the bestseller list, but it sold steadily through the local bookstore and by word of mouth. People passed it around. Teachers kept it on their desks. Locals nodded when they saw her name and said, "I remember her." I think that mattered more than a bestseller list ever could.

I don't recommend the path I took. Not the hiding, the danger, the adrenaline disguised as freedom. Too many end up like the Parker brothers, thinking the world owes them something, desperate, angry, full of bad luck and worse choices.

But I won't apologize for the choices I made. They were mine. And they led me here, to this small life with its big sky, this house that still smells like salt and woodsmoke, this man who still makes me laugh. The world was different then. The opportunities narrower. You had to carve out your freedom like a secret garden.

Now that it's legal, folks talk about cannabis like it's a commodity. But for us, back then, it was more than product. It was a path. It wasn't just about the weed. It was about rebelling, about believing in a different kind of life. Something hand-built and a little wild. Something that smelled like pine and earth and hard work. Something that could bloom, if you were willing to try. Not just money — though yes, we needed that — but a different way of being in the world. A way that honored the land, the rhythm of seasons, the hope that we could make something grow without selling our souls to do it.

It was a different time.

Somehow this life, this home, this peace, grew in the quiet after the storm.

Coda: From an Undated Notebook by Alice

Among Alice's papers I later found this undated page. It read less like a message to me than a message she had left for whoever came next.

I watch them. The bold ones, the brilliant ones, pulling dreams from the sky like kites and trying to anchor them in the real. I admire them. I want to believe in them. I want to believe they can do what we couldn't. That they can rebuild what's been broken for so long.

They move fast, think faster. They understand the game. They know the systems are rigged, but they still play, not to win, exactly, but to change the rules. They believe in the future like it's still up for grabs.

And maybe it is.

But I feel history coiling in my chest like a low, familiar ache. It whispers caution. It reminds me of other bright-eyed crowds, other revolutions that bloomed into empires. I've read the stories. I've lived the tail end of a few. It's always the same, the dream gets big enough to scare someone, and then the fear does what it always does.

Still, I see something in them. Not perfection — not even close — but something unyielding. There's a fire that keeps surviving, even after all the times it should have gone out. I don't know if it's hope or just human stubbornness, but it's there. It's always been there.

And me? I'm not just watching. I'm part of this, whether I meant to be or not. I'm still here teaching, writing, creating art, reminding them that some maps are lies and some traps are built from pride. I don't have their speed or reach anymore. But I have memory. I have story. I know the weight of consequence.

Maybe they'll make something better. Maybe they won't.

But I won't get in their way. I won't be here. I'll keep the door cracked. I'll hand them what I have. I'll believe, not in utopia, but in the quiet revolution that still matters: care, art, decency, the choice not to pass the damage forward.

This is how change comes. Not with banners. But with persistence. With joy.

— Alice

Don Detrich website and blog:

www.detrich.com

Other books by Don Detrich:

Bitter Honey

Flawless Sin

Mendocino

New Light

Copper Springs

The Sky Report

Collision Point

The Turning Point of History