

# The Last Stop Before Dusk

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The train slid through Napa Valley like a polished thought—smooth, deliberate, indulgent. Rows of vineyards unfurled outside the wide windows, green marching into gold, the late afternoon sun laying its blessing over the land. Chris leaned back against the plush velvet seat and watched Dawn move around the suite with the unhurried ease of someone who had finally exhaled.

“This is ridiculous,” she said, pouring champagne into two narrow flutes. “People live like this?”

“For three days,” Chris replied, smiling. “Then they go home and brag.”

Their private suite was tucked toward the rear of the wine train, a luxury car with warm wood paneling, brass fixtures, and a bay window that made the rolling countryside feel close enough to touch. A small table sat between them, already cluttered with tasting notes, corks, and a half-finished cheese plate. The hum of the tracks beneath them felt almost like a heartbeat—steady, reassuring.

Dawn handed him a glass and raised her own. “To not checking email.”

Chris clinked his flute against hers. “To trains that stop at wineries and nowhere else.”

They laughed, and the sound felt different here—lighter, freer, as though the train itself carried it forward. It had been Dawn’s idea, this trip. After months of deadlines and missed dinners, she had simply looked at him one night and said, *We need something that moves*. Something literal, as it turned out.

The train slowed as it approached its first stop. A bell chimed softly overhead, and a voice came through the speaker system—warm, practiced, friendly.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are arriving at Rutherford Estates. Please take your time disembarking and enjoy your tasting. We’ll be departing in forty-five minutes.”

Chris stood and stretched. “Ready to pretend we know what ‘notes of oak’ actually mean?”

Dawn slipped her arm through his. “I’ll nod seriously. You say ‘interesting finish.’”

The stop passed in a blur of laughter, sun-warmed stone patios, and generous pours. By the time they returned to the train, their cheeks were flushed and their steps just slightly unsteady. The second stop followed, then the third. Each return

to the suite felt more intimate, like they were reentering a world that belonged only to them.

By the time dusk began to settle, the train was in motion again, no stop announced. The valley outside had darkened into long shadows and silver-green leaves, the sky bruised purple and orange.

Dawn kicked off her shoes and curled up on the couch beside Chris. "I don't want this to end," she said softly.

"It doesn't have to," he replied, brushing his thumb along her knuckles. "We'll just...stay on the train forever."

She smiled, eyes half-lidded. "I'd like that."

The thud came suddenly—hard enough to rattle the thin wall separating their suite from the next.

Dawn sat up. "What was that?"

Chris frowned. "Probably someone dropping luggage."

They listened. The train continued forward, the rhythm unchanged.

Then came the scream.

It was sharp and raw, slicing through the gentle hum of the tracks. A woman's voice—high, terrified, abruptly cut off.

Dawn's hand tightened around Chris's arm. "That wasn't—"

Another sound followed. A dull scraping. Something heavy hitting the wall.

Chris was already on his feet. "Stay here."

"No," Dawn said immediately, standing with him. "We're not doing that thing where I stay behind."

He hesitated, then nodded. He cracked the door open and peered into the narrow corridor. The lights were on, glowing softly. The hallway was empty.

"Hello?" Chris called.

No answer.

They stepped out together. The carpet muffled their footsteps as they approached the neighboring suite. The door was slightly ajar.

Chris knocked once, firmly. “Hey—are you okay?”

Silence.

Dawn leaned closer. “I don’t like this.”

Chris pushed the door open.

The suite was in disarray. A chair lay overturned. A lamp had shattered, its shade torn from the base. Red wine—he told himself it was red wine—splashed across the cream-colored wall in an uneven arc.

No one was there.

Dawn covered her mouth. “Chris...”

He stepped inside, heart pounding, scanning the room. The window was closed. No sign of forced entry. No bags. No people.

“Maybe they went to find someone,” he said, though the words felt thin.

Dawn shook her head. “After screaming like that?”

They backed out into the hallway.

“We need to find the conductor,” Chris said. “Now.”

They walked quickly toward the front of the car. Another couple’s door was closed, lights off. The attendant station at the end of the car was empty, a half-filled logbook resting beside a cold cup of coffee.

“This isn’t right,” Dawn said. “There should be staff everywhere.”

They moved between cars, the doors hissing open and shut behind them. The dining car was deserted—tables set, meals half-cleared, candles burned low. The bar car beyond it was silent, bottles gleaming behind the counter, no bartender in sight.

“Hello?” Dawn called, her voice echoing.

Nothing.

Chris pulled out his phone. No signal.

“Of course,” he muttered. “Train, valley, middle of nowhere.”

They passed another car. Empty. Another. Still nothing.

“Chris,” Dawn whispered, “where is everyone?”

He didn’t answer, because he didn’t have one.

At the door to the engine car, they finally saw a light. Relief washed through him.

Chris reached for the handle.

The door was locked.

“What?” He tried again, harder. “No, no—”

Dawn pressed her ear to the door. “I hear something.”

A low, rhythmic sound came from inside. Not the engine. Breathing.

Then a voice crackled weakly through the metal.

“...anyone...please...”

Chris’s eyes met Dawn’s, fear and resolve colliding between them.

The lights in the hallway flickered once.

Then went out.

And the train kept moving forward.