

Lana looked down at her speedometer through watery eyes. Eighty-five flashed back at her in a bright, ominous green as she maneuvered her car through the winding woods. The summer air was cool as it blew through the open window, whipping her brown hair around her face and her tears towards her ears. She flipped her brights on, slowing down slightly in order to better control her car. What am I going to do? she asked herself. What if I don't get there in time?

Her brother had said on the phone that their father had only a few more hours to live. The three stab wounds shouldn't have been fatal. But the last one had done...what? She couldn't remember now. Severed a nerve, pierced a lung, or his heart, or a vital artery?

"Hurry, Lana, hurry," her brother had said, his voice tight with anxiety. So she had jumped into the car and hurried along a Colorado expressway, hurried through Colorado mountains, and was now hurrying through Colorado valleys. And something was beeping at her. What could possibly be the matter? She slammed her palm against the steering wheel in frustration while scanning her dashboard. Her eyes came to rest on the flashing gas gauge. Fifteen miles worth of gas was left in her tank. That's just excellent, Lana thought. Of all things...But if her memory served her correctly, there was an old gas station just around the next two bends.

Ah, here it was, just up ahead. She squealed into the gravel parking lot of the station and parked. She leapt out, filled up, and ran inside. Lana recognized the cashier as the owner of the station, an ancient black woman who looked like she should have died a long time ago. She reminded Lana of the three Fates, or the prophetess of Delphi, or some other legendary old woman. Her permed hair crowned her head in large wrinkles and her flowered muumuus always seemed too big. Her watery, yellowed eyes glittered with antique knowledge, a sense of intuition, and she had an incredible photographic memory. Lana had seen her seven or eight times in her life, yet the lady always remembered her. Lana didn't even know the woman's name.

"Good evening, Lana dear. Your father will be okay," said the woman. "That'll be seventeen twenty-two."

"What?" Lana hadn't been listening. "Oh, seventeen twenty-two. Thanks," she mumbled, fishing a twenty out of her purse.

"Who's the boy, if you don't mind me asking?" said the lady, winking mischievously.

"Boy?" Lana asked, confused. "What boy?"

"The boy in your car." The woman waved an arm towards the vehicle.

Lana whirled around and regarded her car, a puzzled look creeping over her face. "There's nobody in my car, ma'am." She wondered if the old bat was getting senile after all these years.

"Oh yes there is," the old woman chuckled behind her.

"And he looks pretty unhappy right now."

Lana looked again. The lights in the gas station hit the car in a way that she could see all the seats, and nobody was impatiently waiting for her; there wasn't another soul even close to the parking lot. "I'm sorry, but there's no one there," she smiled condescendingly at the woman and handed her the bill.

"I'll go ahead and pay for the gas now, if you don't mind."

"Oh no, child, I don't mind, but the young man's got you covered. You're good to go."

What the heck is she talking about? Nobody paid, nobody's in my car, and I don't have the time to sit and argue about this! "All right then," Lana said through gritted teeth, "just keep this as a gift. I'll be on my way." She put the twenty on the counter, just so the lady wouldn't be

cheated, and strode out the door to the sound of the woman's laughter. That was just plain creepy, she thought, shuddering a little. If I ever get that old, I'll have someone shoot me and put me out of my misery.

The sound of her cell phone brought her out of her reverie. She whipped it out of her purse and answered, climbing into her car.

"Lana!" her brother's voice came through. "How close are you to the hospital?"

"I'm pulling out of that one gas station we always stop at. I only had about thirteen miles left."

"Well, hurry," he replied. "Lana, he's...he's..." His voice cracked and he took a long breath. "He's not going to last much longer."

Lana's heart skipped a couple beats. "Oh, oh my gosh, just, ah, just tell him to hold on for me. I should be there in about twenty minutes." She locked her car doors as the tiny gas station faded in the distance. "What did the doctor say?"

"It's basically hopeless. Nothing can be done now."

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing." He paused. "Lana, who's in the car with you?"

"What?" Lana thought back to the old lady at the gas station and almost laughed.

"There's nobody in the car but me."

"Then who's that talking?" her brother asked.

"I don't know, maybe you're picking up somebody else's phone. That or you're hearing things."

"No," he replied, "it's definitely a man, and he definitely just said your name."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Lana responded. This was getting a little spooky.

"Lana, if you want to bring someone with you that's fine. You don't have to hide him," said her brother.

"Look, if there were someone in the car with me I would tell you." Lana was getting frustrated. Was this some kind of joke? "I don't have the time, energy, or patience for—"

"What did he just say?" Her brother sounded shocked.

"What?" Lana was flustered. "What?"

There was silence as if he were listening to something. "Why does he not want you to talk to me?"

He listened again.

Lana sighed, "Look—"

"Lana, I don't think you should keep seeing this guy." His tone was hushed, as though he didn't want anyone to hear.

"I'm not seeing anyone. There's no one in my car." Lana put her foot on the brake as she neared a curve. "Look, I can't talk and drive at the same time, so I'll let you go."

"That jerk!" her brother exclaimed. "You tell him that he can't threaten my sister and get away with it! I swear I'll kill him if he so much as touches you! Tell him that!"

Dear God, help. Lana took a deep breath. "I'm gonna hang up now, okay?"

"Okay, but be careful!"

"Give Dad my love." Lana snapped her phone shut and concentrated on the road. Her father was dying, her brother going crazy, and there was apparently some "phantom visitor" in her car making threats and paying for her gas. She rolled down her window to distract herself a little.

Suddenly a deer leapt in front of her car. Lana screamed and slammed on her brakes, barely missing the animal. Her heart was pounding and all the blood had rushed to her head. She stopped the car and took a moment to catch her breath. Lana looked to her left and jumped. That's odd, she thought, I didn't see that guy when I came around the corner. She watched as the man hefted his pack on his shoulder and stuck his thumb out, looking straight in her eyes. She

shook her head sadly and tapped her watch at him. Probably an escaped convict, she thought. She put her foot back on the gas pedal.

Around the next curve there was another hitchhiker, a man probably in his mid-thirties, whose eyes glittered in Lana's headlights. His appearance was unsettlingly similar to that of the first man. He looked harmless, but that was a must in order to snag a ride. It could be an act or it could not be. She felt sorry for him, but she didn't slow down. He looked frustrated and shook his fist at her when she passed him. Yup, definitely escaped convict country. Funny, there's never been a problem with them here before.

A mile or two down the road there was another man, one who could have been the previous man's twin but for the cast he wore on his lower leg. He was sitting on a rock and holding a large cardboard sign. THINK TWICE, PLEASE STOP, she read. "Oh my gosh, it's a hitchhikers' conspiracy," she groaned to no one in particular.

"Or just one." The voice was deep and angry.

Lana's heart sped up. Who had said that? She shook her head. "Now I'm hearing things." The sound of her own voice was somewhat reassuring.

But she turned a curve and there he was again, only now with a bandage around the arm that held up the sign. OR MAYBE NOT. Or maybe not? What is that supposed to mean? It could either be in reference to the previous sign, or it could be a response to her statement about hearing things. She desperately wanted to believe the former, but a small part of her brain told her that this wasn't just coincidence. "Focus on Dad," she told herself. "You're only fifteen minutes away."

Another bend in the road brought another hitchhiker, a copy of the ones before but with an extra wound and another sign. This one was too clear to be happenstance. YOU'LL NEVER REACH HIM IF YOU DON'T PICK ME UP. There was a rush of adrenaline to her head and her hands started shaking. Lana was breathing hard now. What was this? The same man, over and over again but with new wounds each time, replies to her thoughts on a piece of cardboard, and a voice in her car that most likely belonged to her invisible passenger.

This time she was looking for the sign and slowed down in order to read it better. PLEASE. FOR YOUR SAKE. Lana's thoughts raced through her brain, fevering and festering. What would happen if she really did pick him up? Should she? What if this was a sign? Or what if the voice was trying to protect her from the hitchhiker? But the voice had apparently threatened her. What could the hitchhiker do about it, if anything? Or what if her trauma over her father was causing her to imagine things? She was going insane.

The next man, instead of simply staring at her and holding out his thumb, was waving a bandaged hand at her. His face was panicked and he pointed wildly at his sign. DEAR GOD, LANA, STOP! This terrified her so badly that he slammed on her brakes and spun one hundred-eighty degrees on the road, sliding into the ditch on the other side. The hitchhiker was to her left, limping toward her as fast as he could. She could hear him yelling.

"Get out of the car! Hurry! Get out of your car!" He pulled a knife out of his pocket.

Frightened beyond all logical thought, Lana flung her door open and launched herself out of her car. She landed hard on her hands and knees, but not before she felt a hand grab her thick ponytail.

A knife flashed and someone behind her screamed. Lana scrambled forward, pulling against whoever was latched onto her hair, ignoring the pain that shot through her scalp. Something different flashed again and pain exploded in her left shoulder. It was as if she had just been stabbed. She cried out, clutching at the knife that wasn't there.

The hitchhiker was reaching for another knife; he seemed to have several of them tucked into his clothing and bandages. Suddenly he leapt at her, brandishing his knife. Lana screamed at the top of her lungs and tried to crawl away from him. There was a ripping sound and her hair came free from whatever had been holding it. She rolled and ran to the other side of the road,

realizing as she did that the ripping sound had been that of her hair. The man had cut her hair to free her. She started to turn around when she heard his voice.

"Don't turn around, Lana! Run! Don't stop until you reach the main road. RUN!" Then there was a nasty thud and the wet snap of breaking bones. Somebody was cursing and shouting. Lana ran.

Heavy footsteps followed her, then she heard the limping steps of the hitchhiker begin. Fear coursed through her veins and pulsed through her brain. She ran faster and faster, ignoring the pain in her shoulder and her burning lungs. The footsteps were getting closer.

"Left!" shouted the hitchhiker behind her.

She swerved to the left, stumbling a little, feeling a pinch of satisfaction when she heard the thud of a body landing on the pavement and a loud "Oof." She continued to run, but her thighs and calves were burning and her lungs felt as if they were about to implode. Run, Lana, she told herself. For Dad. She pushed forward, hearing the hitchhiker and her pursuer grappling. She ran. The main road was in sight. Head pounding, lungs on fire, she put her head down and pumped her arms and legs for all she was worth.

"NO!" yelled the voice she had heard in her car.

Lana almost looked back when she heard the hitchhiker cry out in pain; he screamed and the pursuer laughed. The footsteps resumed farther back, but gaining. With one last burst of adrenaline Lana dashed towards the entrance onto the main road. Blood hammered in her brain, pulsed behind her eyes, rushed to her hands and feet. Her pursuer was closing in on her.

But wait, what am I supposed to do when I reach the main road? The thought darted through her brain. Hitchhike? I can't keep running, I'll run out of energy. My shoulder is killing me. She looked frantically for some sort of transportation, anything to get her off her feet, when a semi stopped at the sign.

"Wait!" Lana shouted hoarsely. "Wait! Help!" A thrill of hope gave her renewed energy as the driver climbed out. "Please, I'm being chased!" she cried. Dear God, please don't let me die before I reach him. The driver answered her call by pulling a rifle out of the cab. Oh my gosh, he's going to shoot somebody. Lana swerved to her right, hoping that the gun wasn't trained on her. And heck, if it was, she was doing her darndest to be a difficult target.

The rifle boomed and struck, forcing a strangled cry from whoever had been hit. It boomed again and a loud curse was emitted. That, she knew, was her pursuer. She sped towards the truck driver and his rifle.

"Get in the cab," said the young driver, surprisingly calm. Lana scrambled in as the driver jumped in and locked the doors. He floored the gas and sped towards the highway to the left. Lana sat back, gasping for breath and clutching her wounded shoulder. So she really had been stabbed. The wound wasn't deep, but all the blood running through her body had kept it from clotting. She looked at her savior beside her, whose mouth had set into a grim smile. He looked back at her, grinned, and redirected his attention to the road.

Only then did Lana glance back. She gasped and paled at what she saw.

"The old lady was right, your dad will be okay. You'll see him in heaven, you know," the driver said smoothly.

Lana wasn't listening. Oh, God, she breathed a prayer. He shot the hitchhiker... She glanced back at the trucker, only he wasn't there. Her breath caught in her throat.

"Yes," she heard the driver say, "you'll see him in heaven." Moonlight reflected off the knife and Lana screamed.