

One Thousand Miles

“Not fair,” I shout. “It’s always Doug.” Slamming the front door, I pull out my cell, hit autodial, and start walking. “Kim, it’s me, Darcy. Mom did it again—not going—can’t. She gave the car to Doug.”

Kimmie shrieks, and I inch the phone away from my ear.

“I know, I know. Can you believe it? He played the *I’ve got a date* card again. I’m sick of this crap, tired of begging. Today is the day. When I get my car, I’m gonna drive and drive—one thousand miles—and never look back.”

Kim picks me up, and we drive in silence. She’s driven me too many places not to know I’m upset. The trip to Russelton is long, but it helps me collect my thoughts before the big purchase: driver’s license, money, Blue Book.

“Pull in here,” I say, pointing to a gas station beside the road.

She parks beside one of the pumps and scans the sprinkle of fields, trees, and homes along the road. “Is it safe?”

“We’re not in the boonies,” I say, knowing the only place Kim feels safe is the mall. “My Aunt Shar lives here.” I point to a yellow two-story house with a garden in the front yard. “It’s where I babysit my cousin, Maddy.”

“I still can’t believe you’re doing this without your mom,” she says, checking her lip gloss in the mirror. “Want me to stay?”

“Nahhh, I’m fine.” Hopping from the car, I watch her drive away before trudging down the road. Crossing a narrow creek bridge, I walk past several red-brick homes before passing Lowber’s farm. The walk calms me. Wedging my bag under my arm, I can’t help but smile. Who would guess that after two years of scrimping and saving, it would be Gram’s graduation gift that made me cash ready. Wow, can’t believe it—a car—today.

At a fork in the road, I turn left and stop at a picnic area where purple iris dot the creek’s bank. Across the street and hiding behind several low-hanging trees is a sign. *Big Bob’s Auto*.

My heart dances.

Lucky for me I made a wrong turn last week, or I’d never have known it was here—my perfect car.

The lot is small, surrounded by trees, and decorated with flapping red flags. On the left are two rows of cars, parked nose to nose waiting to be noticed: red, blue, green, black. A silver car, all buffed and shiny, is displayed out front in a place of honor.

“Almost brand new,” the salesman says, waddling forward.

Trying not to show any enthusiasm, I keep my eyes on him.

Arnie, as his shirt states, is dressed in blue. Embroidered under his name and on his matching hat are the words *Big Bob’s*.

“This here’s a mighty good find,” he boasts patting a belly that sags over an invisible belt.

“Only got one thousand miles.”

“What’s the year?” I ask, looking at the window’s information sheet: Jetta – Sedan – Reflex Silver – 2WD – 4 CYL – Automatic – No Warranty.

What’s 2WD? Not knowing much about cars, I read it again. Is that good? Bad?

I like the color.

“The year don’t matter much,” Arnie says, grinning. “Not when it’s only got a thousand miles.” Opening the driver’s door, he waves me forward. “Go ahead, check her out.”

The interior is gray leather. No rips or scuffs.

I ignore him and head for the back bumper. Tilting my head, I make little ah-huh noises like I know what I’m doing. “Can I see the engine?” I ask, standing beside the rear lights.

Arnie chuckles and opens the front hood.

My cheeks tingle. Aren’t Volkswagen engines in the back? I slink forward, making a head bob. Not knowing what to do next I kick a tire, and the man’s grin breaks into something big and toothy. Bad move. He knows I’m clueless.

“What year?” I ask again, trying to regain some dignity. Sliding into the driver’s seat, I grab the steering wheel and a tiny shiver travels my spine. The seat feels like a luxurious sports car.

“It’s a 2005,” he says. “Best car fer the money.”

“How much?”

“Fer you, Little Lady—three thousand.”

What? My mind screams, three thousand bucks? I know it is worth more. My hands shake. “What’s wrong with it?” I ask, hoping he’ll say nothing.

“Not one dern thing. The owner jist wants rid of it. Said she’s need’n more space in her garage. Do we have a deal?”

We shake hands, and I pull out my envelope—my car savings—all cash. With taxes it takes every dollar. Luckily, Arnie springs for gas.

“Don’t worry none,” he says, signing his paperwork. “This here car gets great mileage.”

With the odometer reading one thousand miles, I turn the key and insert my new *Layers of Stone* CD. Pumping up the volume, I zip out of the lot and drive down the road. Drums rock. Guitars jam. And me? I sing “White Buffalo” the way the band intended—loud.

I can’t wait to show my brother. Seeing Doug’s eyes bulge will be worth every penny. So with the windows open and my hair bouncing in the breeze, a wave of contentment fills me. Never again will my older brother get first dibs. Yep, this car is mine. Darcy Deaver is free.

Maybe it’s the excitement of the sale or the singing, but somewhere along the way I make a wrong turn. How? I’m not sure. I know the area, babysit weekly. Pulling off the road beside a big farm, I look for a street sign. Cumberland Road. How did I get here? Turning around, I backtrack.

Trouble is, it happens twice.

Driving home, a third time, I speed past fields, trees, and a weathered picnic table beside a creek. I stop the car and get out. The Big Bob’s sign is . . .

Gone.

Is this the same rest stop?

I search for the purple flowers.

None.

Glancing at my watch, I gasp. What? An hour? How? The drive home is only twenty minutes. Returning to the car, I turn the CD player off, and drive.

Uphill.

Downhill.

The ride is fast.

The ride is smooth.

The Jetta purrs.

That's when I see it—the farm.

Every hair on my body tingles. My heart races. Glancing at the gas gage, I'm relieved to see the needle still signaling full. Except for the other two times I'd passed the farm, nothing looks familiar—trees, road, landmarks. What's going on?

Backing up, I turn around in the farmer's driveway and take a different route. I drive down a country lane that is barely paved. Stones rattle the car's undercarriage, as my foot grows heavy. My Jetta speeds around corners like the sports car it isn't.

I want home.

I need home.

Crowding the wheel, I look out my window and search for anything familiar—a tree, rock, bush.

Nothing.

Not until . . .

The farm.

My heart thumps wildly in my chest. I hear throbbing in my ears. My breath catches in my throat forcing me to gulp in air. Shivers race up my spine. This can't be happening. Another forty minutes have passed. I check the gas gage—full. I fumble in my bag for my cell but get no signal.

Why? There's always a signal.

Whipping the car into reverse I head for the picnic area. Dark clouds tumble in from the north, and I secretly wish Doug was here. Trees look bigger, wilder. I concentrate on every turn, every bump. I don't pass a single car. Where is everyone?

When I get to a dilapidated picnic table and broken bench, I gasp. "What's happening? What's going on?"

I drive for another thirty minutes hunting for anything familiar. The road has no buildings, no signs, no wildlife.

"This is crazy," I mutter, glancing again at my phone.

No bars. No service.

I don't stop or turn around. Keeping the car pointed away from the lot and away from the farm, I take the bends slow and gas it on the straights. I look for cars, houses, anything familiar. When I come to a fork in the road, I turn right. The trees, they look familiar.

"Yes," I say recognizing the driveway. I swing in and am half-way up the lane when I slam on my brakes.

No crops.

No animals.

No cars.

The farm.

My breath rushes from my lungs, and I make a little gasping noise. How can I be at the farm? I drove away from it. I grab my phone. No service.

“What’s happening?” I shout, gripping the steering wheel. Glancing at the odometer, a wave of nausea smacks me. “No, no, no,” I cry, jumping outside. “It can’t be. No!”

One thousand miles.

I circle the car, glancing at my watch. Two hours? My stomach flutters as my body shakes. Tears trickle down my cheeks. “What’s going on?”

Dark clouds rumble as the wind howls. Rain pelts the earth. Lightning flashes.

Getting back inside the car, I hide my face on the wheel. “Doug where are you?” I mumble, wishing he was here. Hailstones pummel the roof.

My eyes stay closed until a clump of mangled leaves smack the windshield. Resembling a disfigured face, the blob warps into hideous distortions. The eyes droop. The mouth opens in a silent scream. I hit the wipers and look away until it’s gone.

Trees bend and sway. Shingles fly from the roof. A banshee wind screeches, tossing lawn chairs from the porch. My car shakes. The engine sputters. A young man’s face flashes beside me and I shriek. The car engine dies.

“Help her;” the radio whispers.

Goose bumps creep along my spine. I push buttons but the radio is off. No power. I grip the wheel and turn the key. Nothing. The wind rages and more shingles fly.

“Help her.”

The voice haunts me. It's tinny ring echoes in my brain.

When my car door flies open, I scream.

Wind swirls around me, and a hand touches my shoulder.

I screech again and leap outside. Twisting to look behind me, I'm alone. The hand returns to my back and pushes me forward. I try not to move, but my feet don't obey. They slip in the mud like a child being pushed on skates. When I reach the porch, the howling stops. The wind dies.

"Please," a voice whispers. *"Help her."*

I climb the stairs and ring the doorbell.

No one answers.

"Help her," the voice repeats.

Turning the knob, I step inside. "Hello?"

The living room smells of cinnamon spice and is full of colorful quilts and crocheted afghans. Pink. Purple. Blue.

"Hello?" I say again.

Lingering a bit too long, I feel the hand guide me onward.

"Is anyone home?" I say, my fear fading.

A thump vibrates from the floor above, so I take the stairs two at a time. Lying on the floor, face contorted in pain, is an elderly woman.

"Help," she says, voice raspy and weak.

"Are . . . are you okay?" I say, running forward.

"It' my hip," she says. "Think it's broke."

“Do you have a phone? Because mine . . .” I pull out my cell and four bars appear. I call 911. “Hello, I’m at . . . what’s your address?” I ask the woman.

“Four hundred, Cumberland Road,” she groans.

I repeat the address and answer the emergency operator’s questions. When I’m done, I ask the woman if I should call her family.

“All gone,” she mumbles. “Praying to join them, I was. Hoping my son and grandson would be there with arms open. Best boys around, those two. Took care of me, they did. Just don’t understand the workin’s of the Lord—taking my two babies before me. Johnny, just a young-un, too. Died years back in the Gulf. A hero he was. Miss him. Miss his dad. Both good boys.”

I hold her hand and listen for the siren. The clock ticks—ten minutes, twenty, while rain taps the windows. Tick-tap. Tick-tap.

When the ambulance arrives, the rain stops, the sky clears.

“Do you need a ride?” a paramedic asks.

“No, I have a car,” I say. “Can you wait until I start it? I had some trouble earlier.”

The man nods.

I follow the woman to the ambulance, then walk around to my

Gone.

My car is gone. I turn in circles. “Where is it?” I ask. “It was right here.” I point to the spot. “Did you guys move it?”

“Not us,” a paramedic says. “The lane was empty when we arrived.”

“Empty?” I look around the corner of her house and climb the porch stairs for a better view. “It can’t be,” I mumble. “I just bought it.”

Did I leave the keys in the car? Was it stolen? I check the other side of the house.

No car.

“Guess I need that ride,” I say, lip quivering. Climbing in beside the woman, I see her hand open for mine.

“Something wrong?”

“No. It’s only . . . my . . . my new car . . . it’s gone.” I try to remain calm, but my eyes sting. “I just bought it at Big Bob’s.”

“Big Bob’s?” she says. “My son worked there before his heart attack. Good place. Good people. My grandson bought a car there before he went to war. I’ll tell you what, Honey. If you can’t find yours, I’ll give you his.”

“No, I couldn’t.”

“Now, now, I don’t want to hear no such thing,” she says. “Not when it’s just sitting there taking up space.”

My throat tightens as a tear escapes my eye. I can’t speak. How could I worry about a car, when this woman’s been through so much? I sniff and open my bag for a tissue. Rummaging deep, I feel something bulky hit my hand. I gasp. Instead of finding a flimsy money envelop, I find one bulging with one hundred dollar bills.

How?

“I . . . I . . . don’t understand,” I say, looking at the paramedic. “I bought a car at Big Bob’s, but the money . . . it’s . . . it’s right here.”

“Not Big Bob’s,” the man says, pumping a blood pressure cuff. “That place closed seven years ago.”

“He’s right,” the woman says. “It closed after my son, Arnie, died. Had himself a heart attack shortly after selling our Johnny his car.”

Arnie? A shiver ripples up my spine.

The woman’s eyes close.

“Did she say, Arnie?” I whisper.

The paramedic nods.

“But that’s impossible. Arnie is the man who sold me my car. A big man—round belly.”

The woman smiles. “That’s my Arnie,” she says, eyes still closed. “Sure liked them sweets. Don’t you worry none about that car, Honey. When I get home, you can have our Johnny’s car. It’s no good sittin’ there. I think Johnny would like that. It’s perty too. Silver. Good condition. Jetta. Only got one thousand miles.”