

DON'T TURN AROUND

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PROLOGUE

The smell hits her first: burnt rubber and gasoline. Then the pain comes. The roar of blood in her ears, the gurgled strangle of her breath.

She squints out of the splintered windshield. For a split second, she can't remember where she is. When she does, fear rushes over her, a black, suffocating wave.

And then she hears it: a long, shivering scrape of metal against metal.

She sees a face at the window.

It's him.

He's outside, and he's trying to get in.

LUBBOCK, TEXAS— 322 MILES TO ALBUQUERQUE

Cait kept the engine running.

She'd had the Jeep since college, bought it used the summer before her freshman year with the proceeds of hundreds of hours working retail at Richland Mall, and sometimes it acted up. Normally, she didn't mind. She relished popping the hood and peering underneath, knowing more times than not that she would be able to fix the problem. Her father had her out in the garage from the time she was six. But at this particular moment, there was no way in hell she would risk the engine stalling.

Outside, there was a glitter of frost on the lawn. The house wasn't what she was used to, though by now she knew that she should expect anything. Usually, the places were cramped and run-down, cinder block apartment buildings or chipped-stucco bungalows, in neighborhoods where she wouldn't want to linger after dark.

There was one place about a month ago, on the outskirts of Abilene, that was tucked behind the railroad tracks on Route 20. She drove straight past it the first time, despite the number 22 painted clearly on the side of the mailbox. No way someone lived there, she figured—it wasn't much more than a shack, and it looked

abandoned, the windows boarded up, a rusted-out pickup truck squatting outside, tires long gone. She followed the road another quarter mile, watching for the house, but there was nothing but empty farmland. She double-checked the address: it was right, though she'd known that already. They didn't make mistakes about things like that back at the office. So she turned around and parked outside the shack, and sure enough, a girl who didn't look a day over eighteen ran out from behind the house and climbed silently into the Jeep. Cait could still picture the girl's nervous smile, the long shining braid that fell down her back, the half-moons of dirt nestled beneath her fingernails.

But this place was different: a McMansion in a modern development, complete with a two-car garage and a light-up reindeer on the lawn. One of the tasteful ones made of wire and tiny white lights, not the inflatable kind her parents used to stick on top of their house back in Waco, two sagging reindeer pulling a bloated Santa across the roof. The house itself was built of red brick and topped with a series of peaked roofs, and there was a small paved path curving up to the imposing front door. Property was cheaper here than in Austin—most places were cheap compared to Austin—but this was definitely the house of someone who wasn't shy with a few bucks.

It threw her off a little, this house.

Cait scanned the street for any sign of movement. The windows on the houses were squeezed shut, and the only light came from the pretty streetlamps that lined the sidewalk. A child's red tricycle lay in a driveway, forgotten until tomorrow. She pictured a plump-cheeked toddler riding up and down the sidewalk, legs pumping, little fingers clutching the handlebars, wind rushing past as she sped up, shrieking with joy or terror, or maybe both.

The road had emptied out pretty quickly once she was out of Austin's sprawl, and soon it was just her and a few fellow travelers

driving along the long, flat, endless road. The view didn't change much, just empty plains stretching out as far as she could see, briefly interrupted by the green of watered lawns and neatly plotted houses that signaled a town.

Eight hours later, and here she was, waiting. She shifted in her seat, scratched an itch, stifled a yawn. She'd need to get coffee once they were on the road. She didn't want to stop until they were clear of the city.

She checked the clock on the dashboard: 12:10. Pickup had been at midnight, but she'd gotten there a few minutes early, just in case. She'd been waiting for a while now. It happened sometimes. People got nervous, had second thoughts. If they changed their minds, they were meant to give her a signal: flick the lights three times quick, and she'd know they weren't coming. Two flicks meant there was trouble and she should call the police.

So far that night, there'd been nothing.

She wasn't worried, at least not yet. She scanned the road again. All quiet in Pleasantville. Every car tucked up in its garage, every person tucked up in bed.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught something. One hand gripped the wheel, the other the gearshift. This could be it. Her heart pounded in her chest.

She watched a possum slinking under a thick hedge and shuddered. She'd grown up with possums, but that didn't mean she didn't hate them. They were cute enough as babies, but when they were full-grown, they were mean little suckers. Still, a possum wasn't going to give her any trouble.

Eyes back on the house. Still dark, still nothing. The clock read 12:15. She'd give it another five. They weren't meant to linger. Lingering attracted attention. If one of the neighbors happened to get up to use the bathroom and see a beat-up old Jeep parked out front, they'd call the cops quicker than a lightning bug in July.

And nobody wanted the cops involved in something like this. You never knew which way they'd swing.

One of the curtains in the house twitched, and a moment later, a light came on downstairs. This was it: now or never. She straightened up in her seat and wiped the mascara smudges from under her eyes.

Get ready. As soon as she gets in the car, you've got to go.

A few seconds later, a blond woman wearing a pressed white shirt and khakis emerged. She had a bag slung over her shoulder that looked expensive. Actually, her whole person looked expensive—slick and golden and whistle-clean. Cait watched the woman lock the door behind her, hesitate, check again that it was locked.

Sweat pricked at the small of Cait's back. *Comeoncomeoncomeon.*

The woman stole glances at the neighboring houses and hurried down the path.

Cait reached over and swung the passenger door open from the inside. The woman's face appeared.

"Hi, Rebecca?" Cait made sure to smile when she said the woman's name. It was important to put them at ease as quickly as possible. The woman nodded and climbed in. Her smell filled the Jeep, cotton and vanilla and sandalwood. "I'm Caitlyn," she said, though the woman would have known that already. "But you can call me Cait." The woman nodded again and pulled her bag tight to her lap. "The seat belt comes from the back," Cait said, and the woman frowned before reaching behind and snapping the belt into the clasp. She stared straight ahead, through the windshield, at the deserted suburban street.

Cait shifted into drive and pulled away from the curb. "Do you have a phone?"

The woman blinked.

"A cell phone," Cait prompted. Sometimes they got nervous and

froze. She had learned to coax them. “If you do, you need to turn it off.”

The woman’s eyes widened. “Why?”

“GPS.”

The woman’s frown deepened. “Is that really—”

“Yeah, it is. Sorry, I know it seems a little extreme, but—” She left the rest of the sentence hanging in the air. Both of them knew that these were extreme circumstances.

The woman fumbled around in her bag and pulled out her phone. Cait kept one eye on the road and watched until she’d switched it off.

“How long will the drive take?”

“About six hours. Maybe a little less. There’s bottled water in the back if you want it. Help yourself.”

Rebecca hugged her bag tighter to her chest. “I’m fine, thank you.”

In the rearview mirror, Cait saw a light snap on in a neighboring house and a face appear at the window.

Take it easy. Just drive normally; don’t read anything into it.

“Are you close with your neighbors?” She kept her voice casual.

Rebecca looked at her, surprised. “Not really.”

Cait’s eyes were locked on the rearview. The curtain fell back across the window, the light flicked off. She let out a sigh. “It looks like the kind of place where you’d all be friendly. Block parties, that kind of thing. Is there a neighborhood watch?”

Rebecca shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“Good.” She’d run into trouble with neighborhood watches in the past. Give a guy a fake badge and a pinch of authority and things could go sideways fast. The rest of the houses stayed dark. No cars on the road, either. They were almost out of the development. It would be easier once they got on the major roads. “Do you mind if I put the radio on? It helps keep me awake.”

The woman shook her head. Cait reached over and clicked on the dial. The drone of a talk radio host filled the Jeep—the great scourge of Texas. She flicked through the stations until she landed on the local Magic station. The crooning voice of Billy Joel came through the speakers, singing about drinking alone. She left it on. She figured she couldn't go wrong with Billy Joel.

The house was on the southeast side of Lubbock, so they had to pass straight through downtown to get to Highway 60. She turned onto Broadway and drove past a banner hanging in the window of a local law firm: WELCOME TO BEAUTIFUL DOWNTOWN! NO WIN, NO FEE! There were stoplights every other block, and all of them seemed to turn red as soon as they got close, plotting together to keep them within the city limits.

“C'mon, c'mon,” Cait muttered, hand tapping the wheel. She didn't like how quiet it was. That was the hardest part about these night drives: the quiet. It was easier to blend in if there were other signs of life.

A man dressed in a Santa hat walked past holding a filthy cloth in one hand and a sign in the other: HUNGRY, PLEASE HELP. He knocked on the window as they waited for the light to change. Cait tried to wave him away, but he mimed the action of cleaning and started wiping the cloth across the windshield, leaving streaks of grease on the glass. She glanced over at Rebecca, who was cowering in the passenger seat, knuckles white on the straps of her bag.

Cait rolled down the window and shoved a couple of dollar bills at him. “Thanks for the sterling work.” He took them with a tip of an imaginary hat and shuffled off just as the light switched to green. “You okay?” she asked Rebecca.

Rebecca nodded, but her jaw was set tight and she was staring straight ahead, her eyes glassy and unseeing. She hadn't so much

as blinked since leaving the house. “Almost out of Lubbock now,” Cait said.

The wide double lanes were lined with the cash-and-carries and the megachurches and the little Mexican restaurants advertising Taco Tuesday, just like every other town in Texas. Occasionally, a neon-lit billboard would flood a sickly light down on them, conjuring up strange, flickering shadows. The Christmas lights were out—multicolored stars and pale blue snowflakes, an angel strung high above the avenue, her wings sparkling gold—and the signs in the shopwindows advertised half-price champagne and cheap diamond bracelets.

Cait hated Christmas. It was amateur hour for drinking, full of awkward office parties and old guys looking to cop a feel after one too many whiskeys. Her old manager had insisted on hanging a sprig of mistletoe at the edge of the bar, and every time she’d go to open the champagne fridge, there’d be some guy lurking, hoping to try his luck. There was a new manager now, a woman, so maybe it would be different, though given that the staff uniform involved mandatory crop tops and Stetsons, she wasn’t holding her breath. At least the tips would be decent.

She stretched, winced. Her back was killing her already. She’d been driving for hours, pushing through rush hour traffic out of Austin and on to 183. She’d lived in the city for eight years and every year it seemed to get worse, the roads thick with pickup trucks and beaters and shiny new sports cars, clogging up the city’s arteries, strangling its heart.

Friends talked about leaving the city. They said they couldn’t take the traffic anymore, or the ever rising rents for ever shittier apartments, or the Tesla charging stations that had sprung up like dandelions and were perpetually full. It was all talk, though. No one ever left. Where would they go? Someplace like this?

They passed Church's Chicken and the Eleganté Hotel. The city was starting to lose its grip a little, pockets of land stretching wider between buildings and the buildings themselves growing longer and wider. Cait saw Rebecca's shoulders inch away from her ears and the grip on her handbag start to loosen.

Finally, they saw the sign for the Lubbock city limit. "We're out," Cait said. "The hardest part is over now." Rebecca cracked a smile.

They drove through Littlefield, past a John Deere dealership and a sign advertising vacancy at the Plains Motel. She'd done this stretch a couple times before—once with a sweet-faced college kid who spent the whole time cramming for her biology exam, and another with a woman from Odessa who wept for most of the journey.

That had been a tough one. But there had been worse.

Some of her clients—those who had jobs flexible enough to allow them a few days off, or partners who weren't breathing down their necks—stayed within state lines, and she ferried them to Austin or Dallas or Fort Worth. Most went to New Mexico, where the rules weren't so strict. It was a longer drive but quicker in the long run. Lubbock was in a dead zone: a five-hour drive no matter what direction she drove. It was the client's choice. Tonight she was heading west.

She glanced in the rearview. There was a tractor trailer behind them. She stepped on the gas, and its headlights receded. No tail that she could detect. She allowed herself to relax a little. It was always most dangerous nearest the home. The more miles they had under their belts, the safer they would be. Until they got to where they were going, of course, but that was a headache she wouldn't worry about until morning.

Cait had left in a hurry—late, as always—and hadn't managed to get dinner. Hunger was mixed in with exhaustion, gritting her

eyes and making her bones heavy. A cup of coffee and maybe a slice of pie would be enough to keep her going. “Do you mind if we stop once we’re over the border?”

Rebecca’s head snapped toward her. “Why?”

“I need a cup of coffee. I’ve been on the road since six o’clock.”

The corners of her pretty mouth turned down. “I guess. If you need to.”

“Thanks. It’ll be quick, I promise. I know you’re nervous, but we’re out of the danger zone now.”

“How do you know?”

“Ninety percent of all incidents occur within the first ten minutes of the journey. Most of the trouble I’ve seen has happened right outside the front door. Now that we’re out of Lubbock, it should be smooth sailing.”

Rebecca nodded but didn’t look convinced. She had the kind of profile that belonged on a Roman coin, all straight nose and firm jaw. Patrician. Cait smiled at her own description: it was good, she should write it down. Maybe she could use it.

In the meantime, she needed to work out that piece she’d been writing about labor conditions at the organic farm outside of Austin. The editor had been requesting the copy for weeks, but she hadn’t been able to land it. Not that he had much of a right to complain considering how much he was paying her, which was nothing. Still, she couldn’t risk pissing him off. It was rare that someone gave her a chance, especially these days.

A sign announced that they were leaving Littlefield. They were edging toward the desert now. Pretty soon there’d be nothing but scrub and sky. Her stomach rumbled. She couldn’t get to Clovis fast enough. It would be her last chance to get a decent cup of coffee that night.

She glanced over at the woman sitting next to her. “You comfortable? You want me to put the heat on or anything?”

Rebecca shook her head. "I'm fine, thanks."

"Just let me know. It's supposed to get down to the twenties tonight. They're saying it might even snow." She reached out and patted the dashboard. "Don't worry, she's good in the snow."

Rebecca gave her a weak smile. "That's good to know," she said, before turning her face back toward the window.

So she wasn't a talker. That was fine. There was plenty of time for that.