



OUT OF THE PICTURE

TRACY GARDNER

“**I** THINK THIS GUY IS FOLLOWING us.” Savanna checked the rearview mirror for what felt like the hundredth time in the last few miles.

Skylar turned around in her seat to look out the back window. “Really?”

“He’s been behind us for I don’t know how long.” Savanna turned off the radio and adjusted her side mirror, getting a better view.

“Are you serious?” Skylar stayed in position, watching the large, black SUV several car lengths behind them.

“Let me try something.” She signaled and moved over into the right lane. Besides her car and the one the behind them, there were only a few others in her line of sight.

The SUV changed lanes and stayed behind them.

Savanna slowed down and watched the vehicle maintain its distance, matching her speed. She looked at Skylar, beginning to feel tendrils of panic creeping up her spine.

“Okay, maybe you’re right,” Skylar whispered. “Why am I whispering? What do we do? Should I call the police?”

“I don’t know. And tell them what?”

“Um, I don’t know, that we have evidence of forged priceless paintings in our car and some freak is following us? How long has he been back there?”

“I’m not sure. I didn’t notice him until we got out of the city.”

Skylar checked the back window again. “Well...I mean, maybe it’s just coincidence. He isn’t trying to do anything. Maybe it’s just someone heading the same way we are.”

Savanna accelerated back up to the speed limit, and then past it—seventy-five, seventy-eight, eighty-two, eighty-four. Her little car rattled as she pushed toward ninety, and she saw Skylar reach for the hand grip above the passenger door.

“Too fast, Savvy! I get what you’re doing, but slow down.”

“He’s still behind us! He’s definitely following us.” She eased up on the gas pedal; she obviously couldn’t outrun the SUV.

“Okay,” Skylar said, “we’ll get off at the next exit. We’ll go into a store or a gas station or whatever we find. No one’s going to mess with us around a bunch of people. If he follows us off the expressway, we’ll call Detective Jordan. I’m sure he can do something. When’s the next exit?”

“A while, I think.” Savanna wracked her brain, trying to remember what they’d passed a few miles earlier. There were long stretches of nothing between Lansing and Carson.

Skylar was tapping the screen on her phone. “Oh my God. The next exit isn’t for another twelve miles.”

Savanna met her sister’s eyes. She was at a loss. “I mean, he isn’t technically doing anything. We keep driving, I guess. We’ll call the police if he tries something. Watch him.”

Skylar had turned around backward in the front seat, watching the SUV.

“Okay, that’s not safe. You need to stay buckled,” Savanna admonished.

“Really, Mom? That’s your biggest concern right now?”

Savanna shot her a look.

“I’m fine. See?” Skylar shifted sideways and made an exaggerated show of displaying the still-fastened seat belt for Savanna to see.

“Thank you.” They drove in tense silence for a while. Savanna signaled and moved back over to the passing lane to go around a slower car in the right lane.

“He’s staying,” Skylar said.

“What?”

“He hasn’t changed lanes to stay with you. Maybe we’re just paranoid, Savvy. Speed up. I think we can lose him.”

Savanna pressed the gas pedal. A quick check in the rearview mirror told her Skylar was right: the SUV was receding in the distance and still hadn’t changed lanes. “Okay, no one is following us. I’m sorry, I don’t know what got into me.”

Savanna kept an eye on the mirror, relief building as the vehicle got smaller and smaller behind them. This whole experience was making her jumpy. It was probably just someone on a long drive, not paying attention to their own speed but matching hers without realizing it. She was sure she’d done that before too, her mind wandering while behind the wheel.

“It wasn’t just you,” Skylar said. “I was running through possibilities in my mind, like, why don’t you have handfuls of thumbtacks in your glove box for us to throw on the road, or how fast would the police actually be able to find us if the guy tried to hit us? It was all that high security at the museum. It made us paranoid.”

Savanna laughed. “That’s probably it.” The landscape had

gotten hillier, and traffic continued to thin out. The SUV was nowhere in sight now. Besides Savanna's car, only one other was visible, up ahead.

"I think he's gone," Skylar said.

"So we keep going, right? We shouldn't get off now." Savanna pointed to a green sign bearing the words *Little Bear, pop. 3,205, ½ mile.*

"Right, keep going. Just in case, so we can make sure he's long go—" Skylar's words broke off and she grabbed Savanna's arm. "No. Savanna—is that him?" Skylar's voice rose at the end.

Savanna looked at her sharply and then at the rearview mirror. "No," she breathed. The black SUV was now behind her in the left lane, and gaining fast. Very fast.

"Get off. Get off!" Skylar shouted, pointing at the exit they were approaching.

Savanna made a quick check before switching lanes and moved over to the right, steering to follow the yellow car in front of them off the expressway. In her peripheral vision, she caught a flash of black, and the SUV was suddenly right beside them, next to Skylar in the passenger seat, driving on the shoulder and preventing Savanna from taking the exit.

The entirety of the vehicle had dark-tinted windows. Whoever was behind the wheel was barely visible to them. Savanna tapped her brake, hoping she could slow down enough to zip behind the SUV and still catch the exit ramp she was just about past.

The SUV immediately dropped its speed and veered over into her lane, hitting the passenger side of Savanna's car and sending her to the left. Savanna let out an involuntary shriek and wrestled for control, straightening out on the left shoulder just in time to avoid going into the trees in the median of the divided highway.