

The Road to Cisco

Cammie wasn't thinking about the road. She was thinking about the tiny cardboard box in her suitcase.

It wasn't like she needed to be thinking about the road anyway. She had been driving since noon and it had turned mindless hours ago. She probably should have been thinking about her bank account, given that she had spent far more money at the pharmacy that morning than she had expected. Pregnancy tests were expensive.

No, she told herself. She wasn't going to think about the test. Or her bank account. And she wasn't going to think about how she lived by herself now or how low her paycheck was each week or how she had nothing in her pantry except Pop Tarts and moldy bread.

She had left her dingy apartment in Denver after lunch with her purse, a case of CDs, her cell phone, and the suitcase with the box in it. Denver was only a medium-size city and twenty minutes into the ride, the view behind her was swallowed up by the Rockies.

She wasn't sad to see it go. She hated Denver. But as her car struggled and groaned through the mountains, the engine heaving in the thin air and the speedometer climbing high as she coasted into valleys, she missed the flat roads in the city. Her blue Ford (nicknamed Bertha by one of her high school boyfriends) was nothing special, but it was hers and had come with her a long way. Plus, she hated the thought of breaking down on some steep slope and being crushed by a runaway tractor-trailer truck.

Every time she stopped, she was surprised by how cold it was in the mountain towns. The digital sign outside a bank told her that it was only 45 degrees, and the highest points already had snow on them in July. Or possibly still had snow from March.

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Her stomach had heaved up into her throat with every peak and valley of the mountain highway. She took one or two deep breaths each time and it made the nausea go away, but only for the moment. Opening the window didn't help – it just made her freeze. She told herself it was motion sickness. Or altitude sickness. Or carsickness. It was absolutely not morning sickness.

She could not be pregnant. The universe couldn't possibly be that unfair. She had nearly killed her ex-boyfriend's stupid cat Daphne (though, if she was being honest, forgetting to feed it for a week might not have been an accident) – how could she be expected to care for a child?

The mountains were all the same shade of pine tree green. They had been for three hours. They were giving her way too much time to think. She was nearly done with them, but her excitement was short-lived when she reached the sandy barren peaks of the high desert and discovered that they were actually worse. Grand Junction came and went in less than five minutes and from there, the scenery just continued to get more depressing and empty.

Moving to the Middle of Nowhere, USA had never been on her list of things to do, but she had also never considered that when her ex-boyfriend had asked her to move with him. *Colorado will be an adventure*, he had said. *We can get a place with a view of the mountains.* Then he had nibbled on her ear and ran his lips down her throat. *We can take romantic vacations and make love on the ski slopes. Please come with me.*

She should have listened to her parents and her sister and her sister's boyfriend and everyone else who said that moving halfway across the country with a guy that she had only known for six months was idiotic. Instead, Cammie listened to him. Now, a month and a half later, he was living with his boss's daughter in a high-rise on the other side of the city. He even had the nerve to leave her his cat. So far, she had managed to stay just on the edge of eviction, but if she had to start paying for doctor's appointments every few weeks and ultrasounds and all

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those vitamins pregnant women were supposed to take, her checking account was going to be empty before the next month's rent was due.

Not to mention paying fifteen dollars for a pregnancy test. That was just ridiculous.

The call from Megan couldn't have come at a better time. Of course, that was the way it worked. Megan always knew what to do. In elementary school, she was the one had held the swing set so that it wouldn't come out of the ground while Cammie tried to swing over the top bar. Megan was the one in middle school who said no to the things the boys started asking them to do and brought Cammie mouthwash when she first learned what swallowing meant. She was the one in high school who didn't lose her virginity to the first football player who smiled at her.

Cammie had no idea what Megan was doing in Moab, Utah – because, really, what did anyone do there? – but Moab was thousands of miles closer than Virginia and right now, that was all she needed. She would push her ancient car through the mountains and the high desert and the real desert if that was what it took to get to her best friend.

Her mind drifted again to the tiny box. Her stomach turned when she thought about it and there were no more roller coaster valleys to blame it on. The whole idea of having to pee on a stick disgusted her and she had wrapped the test in a paper towel as soon as she was done. Then she stuffed it back in its box, sealed the whole thing in a Ziplock and buried it in the bottom of her overnight bag. She had hoped that maybe if she hid it away, she would be able to actively not think about it.

But the high desert was so mind-numbingly empty that she could do nothing *but* think about it. She barely noticed as the cars around her got further and further between, or when the buildings off of the highway disappeared completely. All she could think about was the stick in the box.

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What was she going to do if she was pregnant? No one deserved to have her as a mother, at least not while she was living in Denver. A baby couldn't survive on Ramen noodles and frozen peas. She barely could.

Would her parents take her back? Lots of twenty-year-olds still lived with their parents. But to say that they had not been thrilled when she followed Zach to Colorado was an understatement. If she showed up on their doorstep with no money and a baby bump, she would just disappoint them even more. They should not have to take care of her anymore.

She squeezed the steering wheel until the tips of her fingers were numb. Maybe she wasn't pregnant. Maybe she was just sick. Women skipped their periods all the time, right? And even if she was, nothing said that she had to keep it. She had options.

That thought just made her feel worse. Maybe a crib would fit in the corner of her living room. Or a cradle. Or didn't babies sometimes sleep in dresser drawers?

A flash of blue caught her eye and she saw the "Welcome to Utah" sign fly past outside the passenger window. She brought her attention back to the road and realized how quiet everything had become. The whole state was silent. She flipped on the radio and got nothing but blaring static. No birds flew overhead. No insects splattered on her windshield. No tiny animals darted across the road. No houses or convenience stores or gas stations or even power lines broke up the landscape. Nothing but empty yellow plains that went on for miles in every direction.

She suffered through the emptiness for twenty minutes. The only signs that other people had ever been on the road before her were the occasional abandoned vehicles sitting on the shoulder, a blue or orange neon sticker on the back windshield. She wondered why some got blue and some got orange. As far as she could tell, there was no difference.

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It occurred to her that she should call Megan and let her know that she was in the same state, but there was no reception. Of course. For the first time that day, she smiled to herself as she dug around in her purse for the GPS unit that she had borrowed from Zach once and forgotten to put back in his car. She hoped it had been expensive to replace after he left her.

She switched it on and listened to the bright and chipper female voice that greeted her. There was a timer on the screen, but Cammie didn't bother to check. Honestly, she was nervous to get to Megan, because then the two of them would open the box and she would have her answer. She wasn't ready to know. Not to mention that Megan didn't even know that Zach had left her.

"In two hundred yards," the voice chirped, "exit right."

There was still no one else on the road and, as far as she could see, nothing right. Or left. Or anywhere. The yellow scrubby grass faded into grayish brown mountains on the horizon that stopped abruptly at the sky. But the GPS said go right, so she took the next exit.

The green highway sign warned that there were no services on this exit, which Cammie thought was stating the obvious. So far, Utah itself had no services. Didn't the people out here ever need to buy milk?

No, she reminded herself. Because there were no people.

"In sixty yards, turn left."

She turned left onto a road that led to someplace called Cisco. Leaving the highway ramp was a little unsettling, but this was the way to Moab. She had no choice. The road narrowed to a single lane and the asphalt gave way to tightly packed gravel. It spun up into a cloud behind her and kicked sharply around the car's undercarriage. Her gas was lower than she wanted, and since

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breaking down in the desert was only slightly better than breaking down in the mountains, she turned off the air conditioner and cranked open the window.

The heat rolled off the empty plains in waves and made her head spin. She broke out in a sudden sweat and the edges of her vision wavered. She jerked the wheel hard to the right and hit the brakes. There was barely enough time for her to throw the door open and lean halfway out of the car before her stomach clenched and she vomited violently.

It splashed on the loose pavement and the sound echoed into the vacant space around her. She was dizzy when it finally stopped and had to steady herself against the open car door to keep from trembling. A sour smell was already rising from the puddle on the road and she clapped her free hand to her mouth to keep from heaving again. On shaky legs, she climbed out of the driver's seat and maneuvered around the mess.

She paced back and forth across the empty road for a minute, gulping down deep breaths of the stifling air. Tears stung at her eyes as she ran her fingers through her hair. Adoption, abortion, single motherhood – all of the options overwhelmed her. The only thought that calmed her at all was that maybe, if she was pregnant, Zach would come back to her.

Her head had stopped spinning, but the more she walked to clear it, the more her body temperature crept higher and her stomach refused to settle. The sun beat down on her shoulders and her brown hair felt hot against her scalp. She ran to the edge of the road and retched again.

“You don't sound too good.”

She jumped and spun around to see a middle-aged man standing on the road with her, next to a brown Jeep. He was not dressed like a rancher – no overalls or t-shirt – but she had not seen a ranch since she drove through Kansas months ago, so she wasn't sure why that was what she expected. He was actually dressed nicely – a button-down shirt complete with a pen in the

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front pocket, tan trousers and glasses. The only thing that threw off the image was a pair of heavy-duty work boots, likely to discourage snake bites.

She shook herself out of her sartorial inspection. Confused, she looked around for a dust trail or tire tracks or anything, but saw nothing. How had she not heard him drive up?

He cocked his head as if waiting for her to reply. When she didn't, he asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said, and immediately turned her head to throw up a third time. The sound echoed in her ears and it was all she could concentrate on. Oh, she thought dimly. That's how.

The man chuckled and held out a handkerchief. "Here."

Cammie didn't think before wiping her lips, but grimaced after at the stain on the cloth. "Sorry," she said.

He waved her off. "Don't worry about." He craned his neck to see around her, his eyes settling on her car that still sported a Virginia license plate. "You're a long way from home."

A tiny alarm bell went off in her head. She wrapped her arms around herself. "Where'd you come from?" she asked.

He took a step toward her. "I'm out this ways quite a bit."

She backed up again, stealing a glance at her car with her purse and the suitcase with the box in it. It wasn't that far away. So what if the puke ruined her shoes? "Yeah? Well that's nice for you."

"Most people don't give this area a chance," he continued, still coming closer. "It's pretty if you really open your eyes and look."

"They're open," she said, giving up all pretense of being polite. "I hate it."

It was strange; she could have sworn that he actually looked sad. "That's really too bad."

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Cammie laughed nervously because it was the only thing she could think of to do.

“Yeah.” She was only a few feet from her car now. On impulse, she turned and ran for the door.

That was when he lunged at her. He was faster than he looked – though honestly, he looked like a redneck accountant – and he had his arms wrapped around her neck just before she reached for the handle.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered. The edges of her vision started to get fuzzy and dark. His voice was quiet and calm, almost soothing. “It will all be okay. I promise.” The last thing she did was wonder whether the small stick in the cardboard box in her suitcase said pregnant or not.

Two weeks later, a bored Utah state cop pulled his motorcycle over behind Cammie’s abandoned car and slapped a neon blue sticker on the back windshield.