

ROADSIDE ATTRACTION

ME. HIGGINS



Chapter 1

My dad always says, “You’ve seen one cactus. You’ve seen them all.”

I get his point. But at least the cactus are interesting. More interesting than the plants where we live. Knee-high brush that’s kindling by August.

Tumbling tumbleweeds.

Those are words from an old song. The kind of music my grandparents play at their store. Like there’s something romantic about tumbleweeds. Stuck in cattle fences, jammed under junk cars.

I don’t like disagreeing with my dad. But I like cactus. Especially saguaros, the tall green ones I’m driving by right now. They look like giant cactus people. Arms out. Palms up. Like they’re being arrested. “Stick ’em up, cactus *hombre*.” Mom took me to a park around here when I was ten. There were a zillion of them. A cactus convention.

The highway curves and the cactus people disappear.

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Tucson recedes in my rearview mirror. Traffic thins out. Now it's just me. Semis. RVs. Cars loaded with tents and suitcases. Kids in the backseat, whining, "Are we there yet?"

All those travelers equal money in my grandparents' pockets. Which equals money in my pockets. So I don't complain. I like the money I make. Can't wait to spend it on something now that I've graduated.

The landscape turns flat and barren. Distant mountains. Tumbleweeds not tumbling in the hot still air.

An hour later things get rockier. The signs start showing up. *Geronimo's Last Stand! Ten Miles Ahead!*

Two miles later: *Geronimo's Last Stand! See History! Gas! Sodas! Snacks! Souvenirs!*

I've just passed *Authentic Mexican Pottery! Geronimo's Last Stand! 2 Miles!* when I see a hitchhiker. Short cut-off jeans. Backpack. Thumb out.

Our eyes meet as I drive by. She's young, maybe fourteen or fifteen. Frowning. Short black hair with blue streaks. Flip-flops. No hat. It's over a hundred degrees. What is she thinking?

There's no way I'm picking her up. Never picked up a hitchhiker. Never will. I've heard too many horror stories. Seen too many freaky movies.

I turn up the radio. Flex my fingers around the steering wheel. Reach the final billboard two miles later. *Geronimo's Last Stand. THIS EXIT!!!! TURN NOW!!!!*

I turn and take the exit. But not because the sign tells me to.

I belong here.

The parking lot is full. Gas pumps busy. The facade of the convenience store looks like a town from the Old West. It's just a front. Fake. Supposed to add to the old-timey atmosphere.

I drive to the rear. Park next to the loading door. Grab two cardboard boxes from the back of the pickup and carry them to the storeroom.

Grandpa meets me there. "Hey, Logan. Did they hassle you about the return?"

"No, they were cool."

He grabs the box cutter from the workbench. Cuts through the packing tape and pulls out a T-shirt. It's bright blue. Outline of Geronimo's face in dark green. Green lettering underneath. *Geronimo's Last Stand. Ferris, Arizona.*

He studies it and nods. "Better than the last batch." He opens the other box. "Did you go see your mom?"

"No."

"But you said—"

"I never said anything. You assumed, like always."

He sighs and shakes his head. Pulls out a baseball cap. Same blue as the shirts. Same lettering and image. "Stock a few shirts in the store, will you? Especially extra large. We

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sold the last one this morning. Then we can use your help at the registers. I need to watch for a delivery.”

I carry a bunch of T-shirts into the store. Stack them on the shelves. The clothing aisle is near the restrooms. A string of women line up outside the ladies room. That’s why most people stop here—to pee. But almost no one leaves without buying something, even if it’s just a soda. Bag of chips. And they want to see Geronimo’s Last Stand, of course. All those billboards stoke their curiosity.

“Logan!” Grandma waves me over to the counter. Customers wait six deep behind her register.

I go over and help her. “Where’s Dad?”

“Taking a break.”

Dad needs a lot of breaks. He’s not really suited for this kind of work. But there’s not a lot else he can do. “Is he okay?” I ask.

“Just a bad day.”

I shouldn’t have gone to Tucson. It upset his routine.

I notice Melody get in my line. She’s holding Hannah, her baby daughter.

“I can help you over here, sweetie,” Grandma says to her. My line’s moving slower.

“That’s okay, Mrs. Monroe.” Melody flashes her sweet smile that makes my insides melt. Her light brown hair is pulled back in her summer ponytail.

I finish with my customer. Melody sets a Diet Coke

on the counter. Bag of pretzels. She shifts Hannah on her hip.

“No Snickers today?” I ask.

“I’m on a diet.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’ve turned pudgy since Hannah, as if you haven’t noticed. Hey, have you heard from Seth?”

I shake my head.

“Neither have we. Thought he might have texted you.”

“He just left Sunday. I’m giving him a chance to settle in,” I say.

“That’s what I told Mom and Dad. But ...” she shrugs. “They worry.”

I give Melody her change.

“You working here all summer?” she asks.

“Nothing else to do. Not with Seth at baseball camp.” I bag her stuff. Hand it to her.

“Well, see you around,” she says.

“Right. See you later.”

My eyes linger on her as she leaves with Hannah. She’s not fat. She’s perfect. A girl passes them coming into the store. Black hair with blue streaks. Cut-off blue jeans. Flip-flops.

The hitchhiker.

She scans us. I don’t think she recognizes me. Not that she would. I drove by at eighty miles an hour. She’s carrying that big backpack. Perfect for shoplifting.

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The registers have slowed. “Think I’ll follow that one,” I whisper to Grandma.

She studies the girl, same as I did. “Might want to get your dad up here first.”

I head to the staff room. It’s just a small space with a couch and card table. Coffee maker and small refrigerator. Broken souvenirs, or ones that never sold—fake kachina dolls, fake Indian blankets. A desert wildflower poster. Dad’s sitting at the table, hands folded in front of him. He jerks his head up when I walk in. Gives me a relieved smile. “You’re back.”

“Of course I’m back. Feel good enough to go up front?”

“Sure. Is it busy?”

“Not bad. Possible shoplifter I need to watch.”

“Then go ahead.” His knees shake as he gets to his feet.

“Are you sure? I can drive you home.”

“I’m fine!”

I give him a final glance before I go to the storeroom. Grab a handful of baseball caps. They’ll give me a reason to walk the aisles.

I look up at the fish-eye mirror near the ceiling. Don’t see the girl. Maybe she’s in the restroom. I stock the caps on the shelf, next to the snow globes and collector spoons. She leaves the restroom just as I finish. I wander slowly behind her.

A car backfires outside.

Someone screams.

It’s Dad.

Chapter 2

I rush to the counter. Dad's crouched on the floor, trembling so hard I think he might fly apart.

Grandpa's down there with him, his hand on Dad's back. "It's all right, Jimmy. It's all right." Grandpa coos like he's talking to an infant.

I'd ask what happened, but I know. Dad was having a bad day. Already stressed. The backfire sent him over the edge.

I move to go help them, but Grandma grabs my arm. "He's okay," she whispers. "Best not pay him too much attention."

She's right. It will just embarrass him more. I take a deep breath. Try to calm my pounding heart. Get behind a register. Wait on the next customer while still keeping an eye on Dad. Grandpa helps him up. Leads him back to the staff room. Customers stare and murmur to each other.

Then I remember. Hitchhiker. I glance in the mirror. She's at the cooler, slipping a bottle into her backpack.

Damn it.

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I quickly finish with my customer. "I'll be right back," I tell Grandma.

"Can you wait until Grandpa gets here?"

"No."

The girl is out the door already. Walking fast. I trot after her. "Hey."

She turns and eyes me. Keeps walking. She's past the gas pumps now, at the dirt strip near the access road.

"Hey!" I shout. "Stop!"

She stops but doesn't turn. I step in front of her. Her nose, cheeks, and forehead glow red with sunburn. Her brown eyes shoot sparks at me. "What?" she spits out.

"I saw you slip a bottle into your backpack. You didn't to pay for it."

"Are you a cop?"

"No. It's my store."

She looks me up and down. "*Your* store?"

"Close enough. Give me what you took and I won't call the sheriff."

She rolls her eyes. Stands there a second, deciding what to do. Finally she sets down her pack. Leans over and unzips it. Takes out a water bottle. Candy bar. Tuna sandwich. Bag of nuts. Sets them on the ground. Zips it back up and walks toward the highway.

I look at the pile of stuff. Except for the candy bar, it surprises me. Kids usually steal beer, soda, chips. Not

real food. I take a good look at her. She's small. Thin. Her legs and feet flame as sunburn-red as her face. Her hair is matted in the back. I wonder when she last combed it. When she last ate. "You shouldn't be hitchhiking!" I call after her.

She flips me off. Keeps walking.

I make a decision of my own. Grab the water, sandwich, and nuts. Shove the candy bar in my pocket. Trot after her. "Hey!"

She stops. Glances at what I'm carrying.

I hold it all out for her.

She meets my eyes. I think to see if I'm serious. She quickly opens her backpack. Shoves the sandwich and nuts inside. Holds on to the water. "What about the candy bar?"

"You don't need it."

She loops her backpack over her shoulder. Opens the water and takes a long drink.

"Why are you hitching?" I ask.

She shrugs.

"You really shouldn't. There are a lot of predators out there. Don't you watch the news?"

"I know what I'm doing. I can read people."

"Uh-huh. A trucker stops and offers you a lift. You can tell if he's going to rape you."

She takes another drink. Screws the top back on. "Yeah."

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“That’s not possible. You can’t read what’s in someone’s head.”

She gives me a long look. “Bye.”

I watch as she walks away. At her red legs and feet. The hot sun beating down on her head. “Wait.”

She turns. “What now?”

“I’m going to get you something. I’ll be right back. Just hang on a second.” I run into the store.

“Logan?” Grandma asks. “What’s going on with that girl? Should I call the sheriff?”

“Everything’s fine.” I grab a bottle of sunscreen. One of the new baseball caps. I’m breathing heavy by the time I reach her. She’s finishing the water. Tosses the empty bottle on the ground.

I hand her the cap and sunscreen. “Here.”

She hesitates before taking them.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

Pause. “Brooke.”

“I’m Logan.”

She slips the sunscreen into a side pocket of her backpack.

“Where you headed?”

Another pause. Longer this time. “None of your business.”

“I’m just curious how far you’re going.”

“Oklahoma City. To my grandmother.”

“That’s north. You should be on I-40, not I-10.”

She looks at the cap she’s still holding. “What’s with all

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Logan doesn't have time to dream. He works for his grandparents. Takes care of his dad. Crushes on his best friend's sister. Then a hitchhiker changes it all. Brooke. She's young. Too young to be alone. What is she running from? Logan soon realizes Brooke has a big-time problem. And what begins as a road trip ends with life-changing decisions.



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