

My foot mashed the gas pedal as far down as it would go, but the car still stuttered and stopped and started again in its struggle to climb the escarpment. The lady behind the rental car counter had laughed in my face when she saw what car I had chosen. “This will never get you anywhere.” A few clicks behind the screen and an upgrade to a bigger better vehicle later, she shoved the keys in my hand and pushed me out the door. If she’d left me with the car I’d chosen, I’m sure I’d still be at the bottom of the incline, futilely pressing the pedals and rolling back down to my starting point after only lurching forward a couple of feet.

Damp heat pooled around my armpits with every staggering shift of the car. I couldn’t be late for this interview. Too much was on the line. My career, my sanity, cash. Blasts of frigid air buffeted my face, wiping away any sign of accumulating sweat. The swamp building in my shirt signalled my nerves well enough. I tightened my grip on the wheel and urged the gas to handle the pressure more smoothly.

Eventually, the asphalt curved over onto a plateau. I eased the car into a much needed rest. Chain link fences loomed over me, threatening any intruders with their curls of barbed wire and black coating absorbing the strangling heat of the desert landscape. On all sides, the ground fell away to canyons with a sheer drop to the valley below. I could just make out clusters of buildings perched on thick fingers of rock jutting into nothingness.

A man in uniform lumbered away from security. With every step, the muscles of his thighs strained the edges of black seams punctuating his uniform. A few threads hung tattered at his knees. Tendons in his hands popped out from the backs of curled fists. I sank back in my seat. Career. Sanity. Cash. The words sloshed around in my head, coating panic regret escape in a defensive sheen.

Knuckles wrapped at the window. “Pop the trunk.”

A shrill whistle pierced the air. I squirmed to find the lever or knob that would force the car to comply with the order. A wave of heat assailed my back when I landed on the right one. Pointed ears and a sharp nose trotted to my now exposed rear end. The swoosh of a black tail bounced around my rear view mirror. Left, right, up, down. I swam in the swamp of my nerves. I agreed to this interview without considering the implications. The risks.

With a burst of confidence I hadn’t earned, I lowered the window an inch, two inches. “How much longer?”

“However long it takes.”

An impulse shot through my hand which settled on the handle of the door and my fingers curled around it. Panic had shaken itself loose. I shoved the door open, planted my feet, prepared for confrontation. A growl rumbled from the trunk.

“I have an appointment. With a very important person.” I locked my knees and rolled my shoulders back, stretched my neck for every inch of height I could offer. “He won’t like to be kept waiting.”

Heavy hands seized my shoulders. Hot metal seared my back. “You’ll wait. For however long it takes.”

My knees crumpled under the weight of those hands. My butt hit the seat. Cold air blasted my face. The door slammed shut. Trapped. My traitorous fingers caressed the keys in the ignition. If I couldn't go forward, I could at least go back. The dog would jump free once the wheels rolled. As I fortified myself to switch gears, a man in a neatly pressed pair of trousers strolled out from beyond the fence. He trod across the space with a calculated air to each placement of his polished wingtip shoes. The officer sprang to attention.

"I believe this is the guest I was expecting to arrive perhaps," the man glanced at his watch, "ten minutes ago."

"Doing my due diligence. Sir."

"Be that as it may, I do appreciate promptness. I would advise you to remember that and plan accordingly. Our guest is here for an interview and, as we have discussed previously, you know how important interview candidates are to my function here."

"Sir."

"You can call off the dog."

My guard might have been called off, but that didn't mean I wasn't rethinking my choices. One turn of the keys and I wouldn't have to contemplate my future regrets but then the light glinted off his \$50,000 watch and dollar signs flashed and the security had to be performative to protect such a lucrative exchange. My foot slid off the pedal and out of the car and my hand shot out to welcome a firm handshake with all the pressure I had to offer.

"I didn't want this," I said, bobbing my head towards my guard. "I wanted to be on time."