

Prologue

Wendy was clipping along the Pacific Coast Highway, arguing with her mother over the Bluetooth about when she would have time to come to Detroit and see her father before he died, which was laying it on pretty thick, considering what he had was bursitis, when she noticed that the car in front of her had no driver.

“What the hell?” she said.

“What?” said her mother, her voice echoing inside the car. “What is it?”

She’d been following this car for nearly five miles now, heading back to her home in Santa Cruz after a business meeting in Pismo Beach. She didn’t normally take the Pacific Coast Highway, as she was doing tonight. She’d seen the view a hundred times— ho hum, there’s the ocean, big whoop— and the freeway was faster. And even if she’d wanted to take the extra time with the scenic route, there wasn’t any way to appreciate it when it was coming up on midnight.

But there had been a truck rollover in the northbound lanes of the freeway— Wendy got an advance warning on her Google traffic app— and so she had exited before the flow of cars turned into a standstill, and headed for the coastal road.

She had texted her mother before she left Pismo Beach, figuring she had gone to sleep and wouldn’t see it until the morning. But she must have woken up in the middle of the night, seen the text, and decided to call.

Wendy had been listening to CNN on the satellite radio. She usually ground her teeth while listening to pundits debate— no, more like shout at each other— about the latest shenanigans in DC, but instead of listening to news, Wendy had been rehashing in her mind her day of meetings, all to sort out permissions for a new subdivision. The locals were unconvinced that there was adequate water supply for the ninety proposed homes and Wendy had gone armed with various engineering reports.

And by the time she’d left, the locals were still unconvinced.

So she was deep in thought, thinking about what further documentation— and at what cost— would be required to change their minds, when her mother called. Wendy blamed the conversation on her failure to notice, until now, that this car she’d been following for about five miles had no one behind the wheel.

It was when light from oncoming vehicles illuminated its interior that she noticed something odd. It did not appear anyone was in it. No silhouetted head, or heads.

“What is it?” her mother asked again. “What’s going on?” “This car. In front of me. There’s, like, no one in it.”

Her mother laughed. “Maybe it’s your aunt Winona.” That made Wendy laugh, too. Her mother’s sister was so short that she could rarely be seen over the steering wheel. But, of course, it was not her aunt, who had given up driving years ago and currently lived in a nursing home in New Hampshire.

But this car in front of Wendy didn’t even have any visible headrests that might help obscure a short driver. She could almost make out the lights from the instrument cluster, the large touch screen in the center of the dash.

So maybe, she thought, this was one of those self-driving cars. Autonomous, they called them.

But there was still supposed to be someone behind the wheel, just in case something went wrong, wasn't there? That was the big thing that scared her about those vehicles. You let the car do everything for you, but you were still supposed to be ready, just in case something happened that the car didn't know how to respond to. Except, how were you to stay alert if ninety- nine percent of the time there was nothing to worry about? It'd be like those people working the airport scanners. Hour after hour, you look at X- rays of suitcases until your eyes cross, and then when a bag full of dynamite rolls past, you don't notice it.

Wendy wondered, did some of these high- tech cars like to take a spin without a passenger? Leave the owner at home? Do some cruising, hook up with a Cougar?

Wendy chuckled to herself. Good one.

"I'm gonna pass," Wendy said. "I gotta get a better look." "You be careful," her mother said.

She waited for a straight stretch without traffic. That might give her a better look. Curiosity wasn't her only reason for wanting to get by this car. It had been sticking strictly to the speed limit— further evidence that it was programmed to obey all the rules of the road— and Wendy had something of a lead foot. She wanted to get home.

The road ahead was clear.

"Here we go!"

She put on her blinker and shifted over into the passing lane.

As she got alongside the other car, she glanced over.

She was right. There was no one behind the wheel. How insane was that? This car really was out for a joyride! Or maybe, Wendy thought, the car could be summoned by its owner. You'd send a message from your phone, start your car remotely, tell it where you were and when you wanted it to pick you—

Hello.

A shirtless man suddenly appeared in the driver's window. He sat up suddenly, indicating the seat had been fully reclined. Half a second later, next to him, a naked woman— well, naked from the waist up, anyway— appeared. Wendy's sideways glance

lasted long enough to see the woman's wide eyes and open, stunned mouth. The naked woman dropped back, out of view, immediately.

"Oh my God," Wendy said.

Her mother, frantic, said, "Are you okay? What's wrong?" The shirtless man did not, however, drop back. He continued to glare.

"Shit," Wendy said, turning her eyes forward.

"Shit!"

There was a car coming straight at her.

Wendy did the calculations in her head in a millisecond. There wasn't time to accelerate and get in front of the self- driving car. So she hit the brakes, let the other vehicle pull ahead, then swerved back into her lane. The blasting horn of the oncoming car Dopplered past her.

Her chest pounding, Wendy aimed the car for the shoulder and slowed the car to a dead stop as the self-driving vehicle's taillights vanished into the distance.

"Wendy? *Wendy!*"

Wendy took a moment to catch her breath, and then she began to laugh.

"Asshole," Frank Silvio said, sliding back down onto the reclined seat once the other car had dropped back. He shifted onto his side so he could reach out and trace his finger along the jawline of the woman stretched out next to him. But she shivered at his touch and pulled back.

"What?" he asked.

Things had been going so well up to now. God knows he'd been as careful as he could about his behavior. If you were a movie producer in this day and age, and fucked an up- and- coming— no pun intended— starlet, you had to make the ground rules very clear. No more whipping it out. No more secret buttons under the desk to lock the office door. Christ, you had to be careful. So, when he'd met . . . hang on, what was her name again? Right, when he met Cheryl Garland, he told her right from the get- go, he was not considering casting her in anything. There was no quid pro quo, sleep-with- me- and- I'll- make- you- a- star bullshit. Just told her, hey, I like you, you want to hang out, come see my beach house, maybe go to a party and meet Ryan Gosling?

And she'd said yeah, sure, let's hang out.

So, none of that power dynamic bullshit, right? He wasn't dangling an acting opportunity in front of her, and just as well, because he'd seen her in one of those NCIS things— who the fuck knew which one— and her theatrical skills weren't worthy of a grade school Christmas pageant. She'd had, like, three lines playing a seaside restaurant waitress, parading around in a bikini, and it didn't take a genius to figure out how she got the part.

Her attributes were well on display right here in the car.

Silvio could remember, back in the day, when you had to *park* the car to make out. Now, you could do it while you were on the move. He had the 2021 Gandalf, top of the line. Man, what must they have had to pay the Tolkien estate to name this love boat after the fictional wizard, not that they wouldn't be able to cough up the money given what they charged for one of these beauties. But the name was totally apt. These wheels were nothing short of magical. Took delivery just three days before. Couldn't wait to take Cheryl for a spin, show her what it could do. And what they could do, while the car went about its business. What was that old Greyhound commercial he'd hear on the TV when he was still in short pants? "Leave the driving to us!" Yeah, except in a Gandalf, there were no diesel fumes, and you didn't get stuck sitting with some guy who hadn't bathed since the invention of the wheel.

"Frankie," Cheryl said.

"Yeah, babe?" He was circling her right nipple with an index finger.

"Can't we just go back to your place? I mean, the car's great and all, but I really can't relax, you know?"

As she finished the sentence, the car filled with light and, a second later, a deafening roar as a truck went past in the oppo-site direction. Cheryl flinched.

“Every time that happens I jump out of my skin,” she said.

“We’re totally okay,” he said. “If you don’t believe me, let me check.” He lifted up his chin. “Hey, Lola, everything cool?”

A mechanical, yet feminine, voice emanated from the speakers. “*All systems are performing at optimum levels.*”

“Lola?” Cheryl asked.

Frank Silvio grinned. “My ex- wife. When you set the car up, you can name it anything you want. I call her Lola because the real one never did a thing I said, but this one has to. Say, Lola?”

“Yes?”

“I guess we might as well head home. Let’s go back to the beach house and crash.”

“I will take you there,” Lola said.

“Hey, Lola, how about a blow job?” Frank asked.

Lola replied, “*I am sorry, but that does not fall within the parameters of my functions.*”

Frank grinned at Cheryl. “Okay, in that respect, Lola’s *exactly* like my ex.”

The car slowed. The turn signal came on by itself as the car moved onto the shoulder. On the touch screen that spanned the entire dash, several video images captured what was around the car in all directions. Lola, confident the road was clear, executed a U- turn and began to head back the way they’d come.

Frank leaned in and planted his lips on Cheryl’s. “Just getting my own motor running before we get back.”

She reached down and stroked the front of his linen slacks. “If we get a flat, I seem to have located the jack handle.”

The car, in addition to being a self- driving machine, was also fully electric, and whisked along the Pacific Coast Highway almost noiselessly.

Minutes later, they felt the car decelerating.

“Must be here,” Frank said without looking up. “If you feel the car turn right, then— ”

The car turned, and began to climb.

Frank nodded. “Yup. We’re back.”

His beach house was, as the name suggested, right on the beach. But it sat at the base of a sixty-foot- high cliff. At the top was a concrete parking pad that overlooked the ocean. Silvio’s other vehicle, a Porsche Panamera, and Cheryl’s Hyundai were already sitting there.

Christ, Silvio had thought when he’d first seen what she drove. *Broad needs an upgrade.*

He could feel the car making the gradual climb. As it reached the peak, it would slow. Once the Gandalf was parked, they’d have to walk down the nearly fifty steps to his place.

“Hear the surf?” he asked the actress.

“Um, yeah, I think?”

“That’s because the engine hardly makes a sound,” he said proudly.

Cheryl did not look as impressed as he’d hoped she would.

Perhaps if the Gandalf’s engine were noisier, it would have been more immediately apparent that the car was not slowing. It was, in fact, accelerating as it reached the top of the hill.

Silvio sensed something was not right. He rose up and looked through the windshield. Up ahead were his car and Cheryl’s, parked nose- in at the cliff’s edge on the far side of the concrete apron. There was enough space between the two for the Gandalf.

Lola’s going to hit the brakes just in time, he thought.

But they were closing the distance too quickly. The Gandalf was not slowing.

“Lola!” Silvio shouted. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Lola, calmly, replied. “*Back to the beach house and crash.*”

“Wait, what? I didn’t mean— ”

The car slipped between the parked cars as cleanly as the *Millennium Falcon* zipping sideways between two asteroids. And then it was airborne.

Cheryl screamed as the car sailed out into the air. Straight, for about two seconds, and then gravity kicked in, the car’s front end tipping downward, offering her and Silvio a moonlit glimpse of the rocks and the rolling waves below.

In the instant before impact, before the windshield shattered and the car filled with water and Frank Silvio and Cheryl Garland were no more, Lola had one final thing to say: “*You have reached your destination.*”