

Suzanna Keithley  
*Rockland*

“Where did this hole come from?” Cole asked. “It wasn’t here last time, was it?”

Leigh glanced at the tear on the passenger seat cushion. Its white, cotton stuffing peeked through the gray fabric. Cole poked his finger through it.

“I think it was there; it’s just gotten more noticeable. It was probably that damn puppy—Dom’s sister’s. Dom told her I’d love to watch it for a day. It ruined the Coach purse Dom gave me for my birthday,” Leigh said. Despite the anger in her words, her lips turned slightly upwards, and a hint of approval coated her voice.

“Coach purse, huh? Doesn’t seem like you,” Cole remarked. The purse Leigh actually used sat by Cole’s feet—a floppy, purple bag with small red beads hanging from it. She had bought it from a woman who sold handcrafted accessories near Fisherman’s Wharf. He was right. She hated the six-hundred dollar purse from the very instant she saw it. She had practically forced the puppy to chew it.

Cole had shifted the seat as far back as possible to stretch his legs and had reclined it so that he was practically lying down. She didn’t recognize him at first when she saw him standing on the side of the highway with his arm sticking out and his thumb in the air; he looked skinnier than before. It was the big German shepherd by his side that caught her attention. Kerouac now lay across her backseat, sprawled out much like his owner.

“You never told me where you wanted to go this time,” Leigh said.

“Wherever you want to take me,” Cole replied instantly, as if out of habit. His eyes were closed, though the tapping of his foot to the beat of Bob Dylan’s “Dirt Road Blues” told her that he was still awake. His brown hair hung at the same length as it did four months ago, just below his shoulders, as if it had not grown at all. Like the previous two times she had picked him up, she wasn’t sure if his skin had been tanned from the sun or from the dirt that was clearly spread about his body, filling in his fingernails and nearly covering his forehead. He was twenty-two, three years younger than herself. She never asked him if

he had ever tried going to college or where his parents were. In fact, she didn't know much more about him now than the first time she had met him. Cole had the distinctive ability of always being able to turn the conversation on her, always avoiding answering questions about himself.

"So what's your excuse this time? Sick of home already?" Leigh asked, trying to prompt him into telling her something new about himself.

Cole merely nodded in reply. Kerouac yawned loudly. Cole opened his eyes and leaned forward, staring at her in a way she had become accustomed. His eyes gazed at her hands on the steering wheel.

"So the ring didn't fix things," he questioned. Leigh looked at the naked finger on her left hand. She shrugged. She wondered if she should tell him that her dress lay in her trunk, ready to be returned whenever she felt like enduring the humiliation of returning an unused wedding dress.

Dom had wanted to marry her. At least, he thought he did. But Leigh knew better.

She knew she'd be miserable in the city, and he'd eventually get sick of her constant complaining. She just wished she hadn't said yes to the proposal.

"So what's *your* excuse this time?" Cole asked, imitating her earlier question. "Did you actually have somewhere to go, or were you searching for hitchhikers again?"

Leigh smiled. In many ways, this was like the first time she had picked him up.

It had been a hot day, too hot for her to stay in her apartment with the broken air conditioner. Dom had cancelled their lunch plans as his boss had asked him to take notes at a meeting with a potential investor. This was a big deal, apparently. The boss didn't ask just anyone to go along to meetings with him. Any other day, Leigh would be busy working at the city library, but she had that day off. So she decided, without really giving it much thought, to take a drive.

At first, Cole was just a dot, far off on the side of the road. As she drove closer along the highway, unsure of where she was going, his form became more defined, more solid. The dog sat next to him,

staring at her expectantly with his mouth wide open and his tongue hanging out. She instinctively pulled over to the side of the road and motioned for him to get in. He opened the back door first and, before letting the dog in, reached into his bag and pulled out a blanket. He laid it across the backseat, then called the dog to get in. Leigh felt taken aback by his thoughtfulness. Once the dog was settled in the back, he opened the passenger door and once more reached into his bag, pulling out another blanket. Leigh's eyes widened in surprise. He set it down on the seat before sitting down. With a big grin, Cole looked at her and introduced himself. He then introduced the dog and promised it didn't have fleas. She didn't tell him that she thought the name Kerouac was a bit desperate, like he was trying too hard to be a Beatnik. She also didn't tell him that she was more worried about him having fleas than the dog.

Soon, he got quiet, which was pretty odd considering these guys usually never stopped talking. She told him that he was different than most hitchhikers. Cole turned his head and examined her with his light blue eyes.

"Have you picked up a lot of hitchhikers?" he asked.

Leigh shrugged. "More than most people, I guess."

This just seemed to prompt further examination from him. He tilted his head as if trying to see her from a different direction. Leigh tried to keep her eyes on the road, feeling a bit uneasy with his unabashed staring.

"More than most people? What, do you purposefully go out and look for hitchhikers?"

"Well, it's not like I'm going out, searching for them on purpose. But when I see one, I usually pull over."

"Usually? Like what, you pick up nine out of every ten hitchhikers?" he asked. Leigh nodded; that was probably about right. Cole opened his mouth, then closed it. He looked out the window as Kerouac let out another yawn and rolled over.

"Okay, sometimes I do," Leigh admitted.

"Do?"

"Look for hitchhikers. Purposefully. I don't know why. Well, no, I do. I do know why. I've been doing it for nearly ten years now, and

it's just kind of . . . habit." Leigh felt the heat at the tops of her cheeks and wondered if they had become noticeably red. "It sounds ridiculous, I know. I stopped doing it for a while, but then I moved out here with Dom, and he's working all the time, and I don't know anyone except for the ladies at the library, and no one's really making an attempt to get to know me, and it's just . . . hard, to have nobody to talk to. This is probably the only conversation I'll have all day. God, I'm rambling. Sorry."

Cole's eyes remained fixed on her. After a brief few seconds of silence, he said simply, "You're insane."

She stifled back a laugh. Though Cole seemed nothing like Dom, Dom had displayed a similar reaction the first time when he had found out.

"Why do you do it?" Cole asked.

"I told you, I don't know anyone, and..."

"No," he cut her off. "If you're so lonely, join a book club. No self-loving person would purposefully go out, searching for potential attackers."

Leigh glared at him. "So are you including yourself in that group, then?"

He smirked. "I'm as harmless as old Kerouac here. And he doesn't even chase cats. Sorry if I offended you. I'm just trying to figure you out."

Leigh took in his words, appreciating his honesty.

And then, the words spilled out of her mouth before she could give it a second thought. She told him about growing up in Arizona with her mom and brother. She told him that she never knew her father, that he was a truck driver who divorced her mother a year after she was born. She described the way her mother slowly fell apart—first by staying in bed for days at a time, then turning to the pills, then the binge-drinking, finally being taken away to rehab when a neighbor found her passed out in the front yard. She and her brother, Greg, were taken away. Greg was four years older than she. He left the foster home when he was sixteen. He hadn't said a word to her about leaving; he was just gone. Leigh left at eighteen. She used to play a game in her head; every hitchhiker she picked up was her

brother. Their story was his story. Greg wouldn't hurt her, she knew. The various men who had, at one time, sat next to her in the car were harmless as long as they were Greg. She dared fate to tell her otherwise.

But that had been ten years ago, Leigh told Cole, who hadn't taken his eyes off of her as she told her story. Now, she played a new game. Each person on the side of the road was her.

An uncomfortable silence filled the car once Leigh stopped talking. She wondered what he was thinking, if he thought she was crazy. She held back a laugh. Of course he did; even *she* thought she was crazy.

"So you're not just out searching for your next attacker?" he questioned.

Leigh shook her head. "No. I don't know what I'm looking for."

"Your brother? Yourself? Take your pick."

"Lord, are you a therapist or something?"

Leigh looked over at him as he laughed. She noticed a small scar on the top of his forehead, partially hidden by his hair. She asked where it came from. He didn't answer.

"So, you never told me where you're headed," Leigh pointed out. Cole leaned his seat back and laid back in it, then told her he'd go as far east as she wanted to take him.

She ended up taking him to Rockland, just north of Sacramento. She apologized for only being able to drive him a few hours east; they hadn't even made it out of California. But he assured her it was more than enough. She let him off at a gas station and offered to buy him something to eat before she left, but he politely refused.

That was fourteen months ago—before the engagement, before the break-up. Yet, she didn't feel like she had changed at all.

"So, how was home?" Leigh asked. That's where she dropped him off the second time she found him on the side of the road—to his home. Well, to a friend's house in his hometown, at least. Cole shrugged. Of course, no answer. He had resumed his earlier position, leaning comfortably against the seat.

"My wedding dress is in the trunk right now," Leigh admitted.

"You got that far into the process before backing out?"

"It was the right thing to do."

"They don't give you full refunds on those things, do they?"

“They have to give me a refund. I didn’t even wear it.”

“I told you it was a bad idea. You should have listened to me.”

Leigh sighed. Maybe getting him talking wasn’t such a good idea. Unfortunately, he was right. The ring was the first thing he noticed when he got in the car the second time she had picked him up, just four months ago. Instead of asking how Dom proposed or how she felt, he asked why. Why was she marrying him? Leigh avoided his questions by asking some of her own; why was he coming back? For something? Someone? Cole ignored her and proceeded to ask more questions about the engagement. Somehow, he had gotten her to admit that she was hoping it would fix things. Her relationship with Dom had been at a standstill. The engagement would move their lives forward, make things better. Cole told her that she was on a fast track to divorce.

“I did listen to you,” Leigh told him.

“Not in time to save yourself from buying the dress.”

“I bought the dress the week before I picked you up. I broke off my engagement the day after I dropped you off.” She avoided his gaze, embarrassed. It was the truth. Leigh and Dom had started dating when she was twenty-two, living in southern California. Two years later, he had received a job opportunity in San Francisco that he couldn’t say no to. He asked her to move with him, and she said yes. She tried to make San Francisco her home, but the fog and cold winds just depressed her. Dom tried to make her happy; he was making more money than ever at his job, meaning more Coach purses for her, unfortunately. Leigh wondered if Dom had proposed because he thought it would lift her out of her depression. Maybe she, too, thought it would make things better. He didn’t seem too upset when she broke the engagement off; he insisted on helping her find somewhere to live. She needed to get out of the city, but there was nowhere to go. So they found her an apartment to stay in for the time being. She still worked at the library, saving up money to go somewhere, anywhere else.

“And you still haven’t returned it?” Cole asked, not at all fazed by the knowledge that he had convinced her to break up with her fiancé.

“Not yet.”

“Has it been in your trunk this whole time?”

“I just haven’t had . . .” *No. There was no use in lying. He’d know*

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*immediately.* "I just haven't wanted to."

Cole nodded. "I don't blame you. That's pretty embarrassing."

"Thanks," Leigh said wryly.

Kerouac sat up from his sleeping spot and put his forelegs on the center console, standing between the two humans. He looked at Cole and whined softly. Cole reached into his bag and pulled out some dog treats. Leigh had a feeling he was feeding the dog better than he fed himself.

"Home was the same as it's always been," Cole said suddenly, surprising her. "The people were the same. The stores were the same. My dad was still drunk. My mom was still silent. I couldn't find a single thing that had changed. It was disappointing. I was looking forward to going home and feeling out of place. I had to get out of there." Leigh didn't know what to say. Finally, he had given her a small insight into his life, without her having to prompt him. She wanted to know more.

"We're almost to Rockland," she remarked. She caught her reflection through the rearview mirror; small, dark bags appeared under her eyes, over her pale skin.

"That's as good a place to stop as any," Cole said. The old dog, done with standing, lay back down in his spot. Cole threw some treats to the back for him.

A sweltering bubble of disappointment rose in Leigh's chest. Rockland suddenly seemed too close. Too close to home, too close to Dom, too close to the end.