

**Running
the
Roads**

**by
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Prologue

It was a whirlwind courtship. Lisa doted on every word George said. He was dignified in his tailored suits, his hairdresser arranged brown hair. He was charming and witty if much older than she.

Lisa and her mother planned a small but lavish church wedding. Family and friends showered them with gifts. Her mother would store them until the happy couple returned from their honeymoon, a two week stay in the Bahamas. Lisa had persuaded George to rent a house near her parents as he had no family.

The plane touched down in mid afternoon. George escorted Lisa to a new pickup.

“Where’s your car?”

“I traded it in for this pickup. I’ve always wanted a pickup. We can use it to move with.”

“It’s a lovely blue.”

“You’ll love this little place I found for us to live,” George said as he pulled out on the highway.

“I thought we were moving into that house near my parents.”

“This is much nicer and not that far away.”

“Where is it?”

“It’s a cabin back in the woods. The area is beautiful, very private. You can draw and paint all day with no interruptions.”

Lisa hid her disappointment. She had looked forward to telling her brothers about the Bahamas that night. It would have to wait. She watched out the window as the miles rolled by.

George took an off ramp off the highway into a small town Lisa had never heard of. This wasn’t near home. She wondered where George was taking her.

“It’s late,” said Lisa. “Could we stop and get something to eat?”

“There’s food out at the cabin.”

George turned off the two lane road onto a smaller two lane road. Another turn took them onto a one lane gravel road. It wound around over hills and through valleys. There were other turns. Lisa had long since given up trying to keep track of where they were going.

“George, where are we going?”

“I told you. I found this nice cabin back in the woods.”

“I thought you said it was near town.”

“Oh, no. It’s very private.”

“I’ll have to call my mother and let her know where we are.”

“There’s no phone at the cabin. You can write her and I’ll mail the letter Monday when I go into town.”

“I suppose so. I can call as soon as we get a phone put in. Maybe you can get me a cell phone since mine got ruined on our honeymoon.”

“I’m so sorry about dropping your phone. Salt water really wrecks them.”

George pulled the truck up in front of a small cabin tucked in under big oaks. Lisa stared. He expected her to paint in this dark place?

“George, I can’t paint here. There’s no light under those trees. And it’s so small.”

“It’ll look better in the morning.” George got out and unlocked the cabin door leaving it open.

Lisa was still staring, stunned, when George opened her door. “Shall I carry my new bride over the threshold?” he asked as he slid her young slim body out of the pickup and into his arms, her long black hair falling over his shoulder.

Lisa didn’t answer. She was still looking at the cabin wondering if George was serious. He couldn’t be.

George carried Lisa up the step onto the tiny porch across the front of the cabin. “Welcome home, Mrs. Larson.” He carried her into the single room and set her down. Lisa stepped away from him and turned around, her mouth open as she took in her new home.

“You are joking, right? This is a surprise part of the honeymoon. We’ll spend a few days here then go back to town.”

“This is where we will live. I will work. You will stay here and paint.”

“Paint? How? There’s no room. I don’t have my art supplies. There’s no light. Is there a studio you haven’t mentioned?”

“This is it. There is a sleeping loft up those stairs.”

Lisa looked toward the wall. “Those aren’t stairs. That’s a ladder.”

“A ladder then.”

“I won’t stay here. I want to go to town now!”

“You are Mrs. George Larson, my wife. You will do what I tell you to do. This is your home now. You can make out a list of the supplies you need and I will get them this week while I’m at work.”

“Why can’t I go with you and pick out what I want?”

“My job is in another town. I’ll be staying there during the week and coming here on weekends. I’ll need a grocery list too.”

“What about me? When do I go to town?”

“You stay here.”

“No, I won’t. You can’t make me stay here alone.”

“You will do as I say. You are staying here until I say otherwise.” George walked out to the truck and brought in their suitcases.

“I won’t stay here!” Lisa went out and got into the truck.

Darkness settled in. Lisa could see George through the open door as he lit the kerosene lanterns. She realized there was no electricity or running water in the cabin.

George lit the wood cookstove. He opened some cans dumping their contents into some pans. Aromas of food wafted out. Lisa’s stomach growled loudly. She hadn’t eaten since breakfast.

Finally Lisa got out of the truck and went back into the cabin. George got up and closed the door.

Chapter 1 Birthday

A hand slid out from under the blanket groping for the alarm clock. One swift swat ended the assault on the ears. In the silence the sound of dishes clattering in the kitchen spoke of breakfast. Ridge turned down the sheet and yawned.

Tuesday. Another school day. Time to get up. Ridge stretched and relaxed playing with the idea of turning over, saying he was ill and staying home. Was there any reason he had to go to school?

What day was it? Oh, yes, Tuesday. Were there any tests? Probably not. The scent of waffles drifted into the room.

Waffles on a Tuesday? Those were a special Sunday treat. Why would Mom make waffles on a Tuesday?

Ridge's eyes popped open. It was his birthday! He was now sixteen. He could get his driver's license. He sat up and slid out from under the sheet.

There had to be some special presents downstairs waiting to be opened. Ridge had hinted at several things he wanted, all expensive. But he only turned sixteen once so one or more had to be waiting for him.

Ridge grabbed some clean jeans and a shirt. Shoes were next. In the bathroom he splashed water on his face and inspected it. No, he didn't need to shave that darkening fuzz. Tyler was only three months older but he had to shave everyday. He ran a brush through his unruly brown hair, rubbed some gel into it so it would behave and he was on his way downstairs. Maybe Mom would make his bed for him since it was his birthday. Otherwise he would toss the blanket up when he came up to get his books.

Bounding off the bottom stair Ridge scanned the living room. Sofa, chairs, end tables and entertainment center looked the same as the night before. No fancy boxes were evident. Disappointment gnawed at him as he headed for the kitchen.

"Morning, Mom."

"Happy birthday, Ridge," said Mom with a smile. "I thought you would like strawberry waffles for breakfast."

Ridge's stomach rumbled in anticipation as he scanned the kitchen. No boxes sat on the counter, table or chairs. His disappointment made the waffles seem like any other school day breakfast.

"Would you pour the juice? The waffles will be ready in a few minutes."

"Sure, Mom." Ridge opened the refrigerator door to get the carton of orange juice. He poured out three glasses for himself, Dad and Mom then put it back in the fridge.

Ridge set the glasses at their places on the table, sat down, picked up his glass of juice and started to take a drink.

"Happy birthday, Ridge," boomed Dad making Ridge jump and choke on his mouthful of juice.

"Thanks, Dad," whispered Ridge trying to clear his throat.

"Strawberry waffles, our favorite. Right, Ridge?"

"Yes." Ridge's voice broke as he tried to speak above a choked whisper.

Dad sat down reaching for his own glass of juice and drinking it. Mom set plates of waffles down in front of Ridge and Dad. After getting her own plate, she sat down.

Humming to himself Dad reached over to get the butter. After buttering and pouring strawberry syrup on the waffles around the strawberry jam and strawberries

topped with whipped cream, he sliced off a bite. He forked it into his mouth and flipped open a magazine to read.

Ridge finished his juice and added butter to his own waffles. He spread the jam and whipped cream over the butter. He slammed his fork through the waffles and started eating.

His mouth frowned. Mom and Dad both knew it was his birthday. There should be birthday presents around somewhere. Where were they? What was going on?

“Oh, Ridge, these seem to have your name on them,” remarked Dad taking two envelopes out of the magazine. He handed them over to Ridge.

It was too early for the mail. When had these arrived? Ridge wondered about letters with no stamps on them as he took the envelopes, looked them over seeing they had only his name on them and set them on the table beside his plate. “Thanks.”

Ridge started eating his waffles with more gusto. The envelopes were thin, didn't feel like gift cards. Maybe there was money in them. There had to be something good in them.

Mom stifled a laugh making Ridge look at her thinking, even at her age, she turned heads with her Playboy figure and bobbed dark hair. Doubts about the envelopes crept into his mind. Mom and Dad were up to something. His fingers itched to grab those envelopes and rip them open.

Ridge pretended to calmly finish his waffles. He helped clear the dirty dishes off the table. He got the letter opener off the counter, sat down and picked up the top envelope. He slit it open. A single sheet of paper slid out into his hand.

One sentence was on one side of the paper. Ridge read then reread it.

“What's it say?” asked Dad.

“Ticket to get your license on May 1.” Ridge looked at it. He did need permission to get his license but, since he already had a learner's permit and was driving around with Mom, he was going to get it soon anyway. This was stupid. What silly game was this? He shoved it back into the envelope.

“That's great,” said Mom. “I won't have to drive you around this summer.”

“Yeah, great.”

Ridge picked up the other envelope and slit it open. A single sheet of paper was in this one too. Evidently the other half of the sheet used in the other envelope. A single sentence was on this paper too. He looked at it and froze.

Ticket to buy a car on Saturday.

Ridge felt his mouth drop open. He reread the single sentence. A car. His own car. Saturday. He closed his mouth to swallow.

“What's it say?” asked Mom.

Ridge swallowed. “Ticket to buy a car on Saturday.”

“That's wonderful. Now you won't have to borrow mine this summer.”

“Do you mean it, Dad? I get my own car?”

“That's what it says,” said Dad. “Unless you'd rather turn these in to me for something else like those computer games.”

“No. No. A car's fine. A car's great. Thanks, Mom, Dad.”

“It's time for the bus,” said Mom. “You better get out there.”

Ridge put the paper back in the envelope, picked up the other envelope and raced for his room. As he ran through the front room toward the stairs, he was sure he heard

laughter from in the kitchen. What did he care? Let them enjoy their joke. He was getting his own car! Saturday!

Hurriedly Ridge tossed his blankets up so his bed looked like it was made, grabbed his book bag, stashed the envelopes in a desk drawer and leaped down the stairs two or three at a time. The bus was just pulling up as he sprinted across the yard. He sank into his usual seat letting his breathing slow down to normal, his heart stop hammering its way out of his chest.

Sitting on the hard seat staring out the window Ridge didn't see any of the houses going by or even notice when the bus jerked to a stop then lurched into gear picking up other students. A car. His own car. What car should he get? Should he ask his friends for advice? A car like the rally drivers drove was what he wanted. Mom would never go for that. Dad might.

The road rally was in town only a month earlier. Ridge wanted to volunteer but Dad said no, he wasn't sixteen yet. Dad wouldn't sign the waiver for him to work at the rally until he was sixteen. He began thinking about each and every car the drivers had.

Some of the cars had been wrecks the driver, his team and friends had fixed up. Ridge couldn't do that. Some of those were really great cars.

There were several models, some new, some old. What did the drivers tell him to look for? Clearance was one thing. The car had to be up off the ground to drive on the gravel roads.

Most of the cars had manual transmissions. Ridge didn't know how to shift gears or use a clutch. Mom's car had an automatic transmission. Put it in drive and push down the gas pedal. If he got a manual transmission, who would teach him how to shift?

There were the paint jobs too. One was in black rimmed rectangles with different colors inside them. There was that royal blue and lemon yellow car. That was nice looking. Another was green and yellow. He liked that too. He didn't remember seeing any regular cars with paint jobs like those. Maybe he would have to get all one color.

Someone jostled his leg going down the aisle. Ridge jumped. The bus was stopped in front of the school. Hastily he gathered up his book bag and followed the last of the students off the bus.

"Hey, Ridge!"

Ridge turned toward the caller. Tyler, Duane and Andrew were standing over to one side of the walkway. Should he tell them about Saturday? They would want to know what he got for his birthday. It would be great to drive up in his own car and surprise them.

Tyler already had his own vehicle. His family lived out on a farm so he had an old pickup. It was his Pa's old Ford king cab. Tyler could drive himself to work and had a job at the local market. Ridge thought maybe he could get a job there with his own car to drive himself there and home.

Andrew had gotten his license almost two months ago. He had to borrow the family pickup, a plain light green Chevy. He was trying to save up for his own car but couldn't work a regular job. The pickup was needed for farm work much of the time.

Duane still had his learner's permit like Ridge. He had another three months to wait for his sixteenth birthday. He was a big rally fan too and rode with Ridge and Dad to watch the rally stages. It was so exciting to watch the cars some of them fishtailing their way down the hills, making the sharp turns and speeding off down the road.

“Hey, Ridge, do you have some new games for us to play?” asked Andrew. “Which ones did you get?”

“Didn’t get any games,” said Ridge as the group headed into the building.

“No games?” said Andrew. “What did you get?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing!” said Tyler. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Mom and Dad were real sneaky. Dad gave me two envelopes. Each had one piece of paper in it.”

The bell rang.

“What was on the papers?” demanded Duane.

“I’ll tell you at lunch,” said Ridge tossing his book bag in his locker after taking out books and notebook for first period. Groans followed him as he sped down the hall and slid into the room and his seat as the tardy bell sounded.

Chapter 2 Car Daydreams

Ridge and time dragged through morning classes. He tried to pay attention but kept thinking about the different rally cars. When he should have worked on homework, he drew various dream cars. He listed the things he wanted on his car. Finally the lunch bell rang.

“So what was on those papers?” demanded Duane when the group sat down with their lunch trays.

“Yeah, tell us,” said Andrew.

“The first one I opened was a ticket -“

“A concert ticket?” said Tyler. “Who will you see? Was there only one?”

“Will you take me to the concert, Tyler?” asked a girl sliding a hand along Tyler’s shoulders as she walked by making eyes at Andrew.

“Hey, Susie.” Tyler grinned up at her. “I’ll consider it.”

“It wasn’t a concert ticket,” said Ridge. “It was a ticket to get my license this May.”

“What kind of birthday present is that?” griped Duane. “You have your learner’s permit. Why would they let you get that if you couldn’t get your license?”

“I think I was supposed to open the other one first. Maybe not as Dad put this on top. They had a joke going only I wasn’t in on it.”

“What did the other one say?” said Tyler. “Ticket to ride the school bus the rest of the year?”

“No. It was a ticket to buy a car this Saturday.”

“A car?” cried Duane. “Your own car?”

“What car will you get?” asked Andrew.

“All it said was ‘Ticket to buy a car on Saturday’, nothing else.”

“Didn’t you ask?” demanded Tyler. “Didn’t they tell you anything?”

“I had to make the bus. I’ll find out more and text you tonight.”

“Your own car,” said Duane. “I wonder if my Dad will spring for a car for my birthday.”

“It’s a real drag having to drive the parents’ pickup,” said Andrew. “They want me to save up enough to pay half and the insurance.”

“That’s what my Pa told me,” said Tyler. “He said I would take better care of my truck if I had to pay for it. I knew so I saved up last year working at the market. They got tired of taking me there and back so they helped out more.”

“Wish I could work there or somewhere,” said Andrew. “I can’t get a ride home after.”

“Once I get my car maybe we can both get jobs at the market,” said Ridge.

“The market’s not a bad place to work,” said Tyler. “They said I can even arrange my schedule a bit so I can haul hay over the summer. We made good money doing that last year.”

“Wish we’d done more hauling,” said Ridge. “The market is steady.”

“Of course, you may not get a job there.”

“When will you have your car? When can we see it?” asked Duane.

“I’m not sure what time we’ll get home. I’ll ask if you can come over for dinner Saturday night.”

“I’ll be there,” agreed the three.

Ridge tried to focus on school during afternoon classes. His homework was piling up as he couldn’t finish during class the way he usually did. His mind kept wandering off picturing and comparing cars in the middle of an answer.

After the final bell, Ridge crammed books into his book bag. He groaned at the weight. He groaned thinking about his favorite TV program being on that night and he had hours of homework to do. Why couldn’t he get more of it done today? He knew but that didn’t make him feel any better.

The bus ride home was noisy. Ridge stared out the window seeing rally cars. What kind of car should he get? What kind of car would Dad let him get? He was paying for it and would have plenty to say. Ridge pushed those thoughts out of his head.

Dragging the heavy book bag off the bus gave Ridge incentive to get his homework done before Dad got home. Dad would ask about it. He knew that would give Dad an excuse to not talk about Saturday. That and the TV program helped him focus so the questions quickly had answers. Only one subject was left when he heard Dad’s car pull into the driveway.

By the time Ridge came downstairs Dad had come in and gone out to work in the yard until dinner. Ridge fidgeted. Should he go outside? Mistake. Dad was working on a new raised flower bed for Mom for Mother’s Day. He would not be welcome or would be put to work getting things, not talking about Saturday.

“Mom, what kind of car does Dad have in mind?” Ridge asked as he set the table for her without being asked to her surprise.

“I’m not sure. He said something about some smaller car. Nothing too expensive. You’ll have to ask him later.”

“Could the guys come over for dinner Saturday night?”

“For dinner or to look at your car?” laughed Mom. “Of course they can come for both.”

Over dinner Dad talked about some incident at work. One of his clients couldn’t find some tax receipts but didn’t want to file for an extension. It seems the client’s dog had carried the papers off or eaten them. Then he discussed some details about the new raised garden bed with Mom. Ridge kept quiet but tapped the table with a finger.

Finally dinner was over. Ridge helped carry the dirty dishes into the kitchen as Mom brought out a birthday cake. His eyes widened.

Ridge knew Mom had made the cake herself. He looked at the rally car and banners on the cake. Where had she learned to do this?

“Wow!”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” laughed Mom. “I guess I learned a lot at the cake decorating classes I’ve been taking.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“It’s too pretty to cut,” said Dad. “Maybe we should wait on the birthday celebration and plans until tomorrow night.”

Ridge froze. Wait another day? Waiting all of today was bad enough.

“Thank you for the compliment,” said Mom. “The cake tastes better fresh. I took a couple of pictures of it so we can enjoy those tomorrow along with leftovers. Ridge, you can cut your cake.”

Ridge started breathing again. “I want to take a picture to send the guys.” He took his phone out of his pocket and snapped a couple of pictures. The phone went back in his pocket for later.

The main decorations were too nice to cut. Ridge picked the knife up deciding where to get pieces out leaving the decorations in place. Finally he cut a couple of pieces out of one top corner then another out of the other top corner. Mom handed the plates of cake out.

“Now we’re back to birthdays, let’s talk about that car ticket,” said Dad.

Ridge almost choked on a mouthful of cake then coughed as he swallowed it too soon making his throat itch.

“Mom said you were thinking about something small, not too expensive.”

“Not too sporty either.”

“Anything else?”

“Nothing too fancy. Probably used but not too old. You can fix it up later.”

“Andrew and I thought we’d get jobs at the market. You know. To pay for insurance and stuff.”

“My insurance will definitely go up with you on it. Maybe you can pay the difference once you get a job. And you’ll want gas. I can put one tank a month in it. You pay for any over that.”

“Smaller cars get good mileage.”

“We’ll go early Saturday. Not too early. Friday I will be at the office until late sending in the last returns and filing for extensions.”

“Mom said the guys could come over for dinner Saturday night.”

“They’ll expect to see your new car. What if you don’t find what you want?”

“I’m sure I will.”

“Nothing like confidence,” commented Dad.

Wednesday morning Ridge started a mental list of what he wanted in a car as the bus rolled along. He would be glad to have a car and drive to school instead of waiting for the bus. Classes seemed more normal and he focused on getting his homework done in class. He wasn’t lugging all his books home again tonight. Lunch would be time to dream about cars again.

“What did your Dad say last night?” demanded Tyler.

“Yeah, what car will he get you?” asked Andrew. “Is it set for us to get jobs and drive?”

“Didn’t you get the texts I sent?”

"I forgot to look on the way to school this morning," said Tyler. "You know we're in a dead zone."

"I saw the cake," said Andrew. "Your mother really did that herself?"

"She took this cake decorating class."

"About then my phone decided to delete your text. I guess I need a new phone. It's making a habit of doing that."

"I'm going to have Mother ask about getting my cake done like yours." said Duane.

"I want to be a cake decorator," said Susie coming up behind Tyler. "My specialty will be wedding cakes."

"Hey, Susie, see you this Friday?"

"Can't. Saturday?"

"Other plans."

"Another time then," sighed Susie walking off.

"Thought you were seeing Monica," commented Andrew.

"Friday."

The boys laughed.

"What car will your Dad get you?" asked Duane.

"Dad said a smaller car, used, not too expensive, not sporty. He's glad about the job. He says his insurance will really go up."

"Mine is plenty," said Tyler. "I have to keep my grades up for the discount or it would be even more."

"Oh, yeah, Mom said you were all invited for Saturday dinner."

"The weather's supposed to be warm," said Tyler. "Your Dad's barbecue is the best."

"I'll ask Dad. He does love to barbecue."

By Thursday Ridge had his mental list for his ideal car. Now he started checking off the things he really wanted to have and thought Dad and Mom would approve. He felt his ideal car slipping away.

Susie and Monica were standing by Tyler as Ridge and Andrew started across to their table. They laughed but straightened their faces as they got to the table. Gloom settled on Ridge again as he sat down watching the two girls walk away giggling with each other.

"Why so down?" asked Andrew as he sat down.

"Just thinking about the car my Dad will probably buy for me."

"You said he won't get you a rally car," said Duane.

"Mom would have a fit."

"Can't you at least get one you could fix up for rally?"

"Mom doesn't want me to drive rallies. I don't know how much I could do."

"You could call them safety features."

"She might wonder why you need to make it so much safer," said Tyler. "Ma asks me about everything I do to my truck."

"Dad would for sure. He mentioned insurance again last night. He's glad I'll try to get a job."

"Pa told me it added over a thousand dollars to his," said Tyler. "I pay eight hundred of it."

"That's a lot!" said Ridge.

"About all I make at the market."

“Pop said that’s why I can’t have my own car,” said Andrew. “He can’t afford it. And a ticket will really make it go up.”

“Dad mentioned that too. He’s worried I’ll speed like the rally drivers if I get a sporty car.”

“They only speed during a stage, not when they’re driving,” said Duane.

“That’s what I told Dad. Then Mom started in about texting and driving.”

“Mom’s always reminding me to not text and drive,” said Andrew. “I tell her I know that already but she does it anyway.”

“Ma reminds me about seat belts.”

“Rally drivers always wear seat belts,” said Ridge. “Mom knows that so she mentioned it once and let it go.”

“Parents sure do push the safety stuff about driving.”

“There was Chad last summer,” said Tyler.

“And Joe the summer before that,” added Andrew.

Talk died away as they remembered students killed or hurt in car crashes. The bell rang.

Ridge had trouble getting to sleep Thursday night. All night he dreamed about driving in a rally. Every stage ended in some disaster.

Friday morning Ridge was wondering if he should turn the car ticket in for some computer games. Riding the bus wasn’t so bad. Having free time after school and weekends was nice. He could find a summer job and save up to get his own car in a couple of years, in time for going to college.

“Pick you up tonight, Monica,” Tyler was saying to a girl as Ridge sat down.

“What about Susie?” teased Andrew.

“She had other plans, remember?”

“We are still meeting at your place for barbecue and to see your car, aren’t we Ridge?” asked Andrew.

“Barbecue sure. I don’t know about the car. Maybe I should forget about the car.”

“Forget your car?” asked Duane. “That’s crazy!”

“Why? I don’t have to get a job to pay insurance. Mom might even pick me up from work at the market and I could save up the money for college.”

“Using the family pickup is a drag,” said Andrew. “I’d love to have my own car so I could go whenever I wanted to.”

“It does cost a lot of money,” said Tyler. “There’s insurance and oil and fixing things on it. After that there’s gas money.”

“You don’t have to schedule when you can go somewhere,” griped Andrew. “I can forget going on dates. Pop always seems to need the pickup for farm work when I want to go somewhere.”

“I do want a car, my car,” said Ridge. “But if Dad buys it for me, it’ll be the car he wants, not what I want.”

“But it’s your car,” said Duane.

“He’s paying for it. And college is expensive. I need to save up.”

“Pop says I don’t need college to work in the woods,” said Andrew. “He makes enough money at it so maybe it’s not a bad deal. Then Mom gets after him so he urges me to go to college.”

“Ridge, what car do you want?” asked Duane. “Maybe you can get what you want and still make your Dad happy.”

“A Subaru would be great. Manual, except I’d have to learn how to shift. Good clearance. A great paint job or maybe metallic green or yellow, maybe white. Lots of power.”

“Wouldn’t your Dad go for that?”

“The Subaru maybe. Automatic. Little car with good gas mileage. Some plain color.”

“You are going to get the car?” asked Andrew. “I do want to get a job and have to have a ride.”

“You are going to get your license?” asked Duane.

“Sure, next month.”

“You need a car to go with it.”

“I guess.”

Excitement began to build again as Ridge decided the car, even one Dad picked out, was better than computer games. Classes dragged yet flew. Homework was impossible to focus on. He could do it Sunday night. His ideal car flew along the roads beside the bus on the way home. It ran through his dreams that night.

Chapter 3 New Car

Saturday was the day Ridge usually slept late. He would miss breakfast showing up about time for lunch. Color was just fading from the sky when he woke up this Saturday. It was too early to get up but he couldn’t go back to sleep. He stretched thinking about his ideal car. And the clock said nine the next time he looked.

Ridge almost fell on the floor trying to get up out of tangled sheets. Now it was late. How could he go back to sleep like that? Where was the nearest Subaru dealer anyway? Where did Dad plan to go looking?

Mom handed Ridge his breakfast plate as he barreled through the kitchen door. At least scrambled eggs, biscuits and gravy were easy to eat. He choked on a bite too big to chew.

“Slow down,” said Mom. “You have time for breakfast.”

“Where’s Dad?”

“Outside.”

“I’m done. Thanks, Mom. See you later.”

“Wash your face. You have gravy on your chin. Brush your hair while you’re at it.”

Ridge groaned and headed for the bathroom. Dad would send him back in so he might as well do it now. At this rate they’d never get to the car dealer.

Dad looked Ridge over when he came out of the house. He noted the damp hair and face. He carefully didn’t smile. Ridge stiffened under the scrutiny but his clean jeans and shirt passed.

“Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?” asked Ridge noticing Mom was already in the back seat.

“I thought we’d check out a couple of used car places first.”

Used thought Ridge. Not new. But Dad had said used. His shoulders slumped a bit. How used did Dad mean?

“A new car loses a lot of value as soon as you drive it off the lot. Sometimes a new car gets turned in for some reason. Maybe we’ll get lucky that way.”

Used but not old. Ridge straightened up again. Something like that would be as good as new. "That sounds good."

"Forget the rally car. You're too young and speeding would be too tempting. We're looking for good, reliable transportation to and from school and work."

"Yes, sir."

"If you get a speeding ticket, the insurance goes up," added Dad.

"Yes, Dad."

"You know I don't want you to race?" said Mom.

"Yes, Mom."

"I'm thinking maybe a Ford or Chevy, four door," said Dad. "Or would you rather have a pickup like Tyler?"

"A car. What about a Subaru?"

"Don't know much about them except for that WRX advertised at the rally."

"No rally cars," insisted Mom.

"Subarus get good gas mileage," said Ridge. "They're not all rally cars."

"That would be a good idea. I'll only buy one tank of gas a month. If you run out, you ride the bus."

"Yes, Dad."

"There won't be much choice but, what color would you like?" asked Dad.

"The cops watch for red or yellow. That's what the guys said. White gets so dirty."

"Black is worse at showing any speck of dirt."

"It does? Maybe there's a brown the same color as dirt."

"I've never seen a brown car," laughed Dad.

"Me neither. They should make one. Maybe metallic blue or green."

"Any color, just so you have a car?"

"I guess."

Dad turned into a big car lot and parked.

"I'll wait here in the car," said Mom. "I brought a book to read. You two know more about cars than I do."

"I don't think we'll be here long," said Dad. He and Ridge hadn't looked at many cars before a salesman introducing himself as Ed asked them what they were looking for.

"A car for my son. Something not too fancy but nice. Reliable. Good gas mileage. Low mileage. Maybe a Subaru."

The salesman walked them around showing them this car and that. Ridge perked up at a couple but Dad walked on by with comments on the price, too fancy, mileage too high. Ridge's shoulders started sagging.

"I don't think you have what we want," said Dad at last. "Come on Ridge. Let's try someplace else."

"You didn't see anything?" asked Mom putting her book down.

"No," said Ridge slouching in the seat.

"There are several other places to try," said Dad. "We have all day to look."

Ridge shrugged.

"You thought you'd find a car right off?" laughed Dad. "We may have to go looking again next weekend."

Ridge groaned. Waiting this week was bad enough. Waiting another whole week made him shudder. And the guys would want to see his car tonight. What if he didn't find one? There were so many cars to look at. His had to be there somewhere.

The next car lot had more cars on it. Ridge and Dad stood looking down the rows.

"They look so much the same," commented Ridge.

"Cars do. You thought yours would be special?"

Ridge shrugged. He followed Dad down the row looking the cars over. He didn't like any of them much. They had nice lines but were so close to the ground, just inches of clearance.

The salesman came walking over as Dad stopped in front of a metallic blue car.

"What do you think, Ridge?"

"It looks nice. I wish it had more clearance. You know Andrew lives out that gravel road. He was going to get a job because I could give him a ride home."

"That is a good point."

"Pickups have lots of clearance," said the salesman.

"My son wants a car. Do you have any with more ground clearance?"

The salesman frowned. "I don't know about cars like these. But those SUV's have lots of clearance."

"Are there any Subarus? Ridge, didn't you say they have more clearance?"

"Most of them do."

"I don't think we have any. We have a couple of Hondas. They're older, with higher mileage."

"Let's take a look."

Ridge trailed Dad and the salesman over to look over the Hondas. He swallowed looking at them. No way, he thought. Please, Dad, not one of them.

Dad walked around the first one looking inside at the odometer. He stood up and shook his head. Ridge let his breath out.

"I don't think so. Come on, Ridge. Let's keep looking."

"It's about time for lunch," said Mom as Dad started up his car.

"I'll stop at the sandwich place down the road."

"Getting discouraged?" Dad asked Ridge as they ate their sandwiches.

"There are so many cars. It gets confusing."

"Well, that ground clearance point was something I hadn't thought about. Don't both Tyler and Andrew live out gravel roads?"

"Yes. Tyler said something about helping with hay again this summer. We made good money stacking hay."

"I remember hearing how hauling hay is hard, hot, dirty, itchy work," said Mom.

"I know but the money's good."

"I thought you wanted to work at the market," said Dad.

"I do. But Tyler said the market would arrange his schedule so he could do both."

"You can try it. I know about three more car lots around town."

"I looked them up in the phone book," said Mom. "Here's the list."

"A lot of these will be small, not have much," said Dad.

"Isn't this one just down the road?" asked Ridge.

"It's close," said Dad. "Let's try there next."

Two lines of cars faced the road. Dad drove in and stopped between the rows.

“There doesn’t seem to be any place to park. I guess we’ll stop here. Come on, Ridge. Let’s see what they’ve got.”

Half of each line was pickups. Ridge and Dad ignored them. They walked down one line of cars and back up the other. They were back in the car by the time the salesman came out.

“Where’s the next one?” asked Dad.

Mom gave him the address. Dad drove down and turned a corner. The car lot here was on both sides of the road. There seemed to be places to park beside the building with big front windows and new cars on display inside.

Dad and Ridge had barely started looking before a salesman walked up introducing himself as Tim. Dad explained again what they were looking for.

“I might have just the car,” said Tim. “It’s back over that way.”

“What are those cars?” asked Ridge.

“We have a garage back there. Some cars are being serviced. Some are trade ins being checked out before being put up for sale.”

The group arrived at a hatchback. It was a Subaru. It had good ground clearance. Ridge read Forrester on it.

Dad started looking the car over. Soon he was talking with Tim.

Ridge’s shoulders slumped. It was a Subaru. It did have good clearance. It looked like some family car, nothing exciting, nothing like what he really wanted.

Ridge stared out over the car lot. Dad seemed to like this car. He would have to get used to the idea of driving it. Dad would insist. After all, it was what Ridge said he needed.

A black grille appeared to Ridge. He blinked and focused. It was an oval, a bit flattened. It had a hungry look to it.

Then Ridge noticed the headlights. They wrapped around the front corners, narrow like cat’s eyes. This was a rally car, focused, hungry, ready to run.

Ridge found he was walking away from Dad and Tim drawn by this car’s visage. Only when he got over to it did he look at the car.

The base color was white. A big flame, yellow on the outside, orange then cold blue like the flame on a Bunsen burner flared out over the hood. Smaller flames in the same color scheme arched back on each side.

Ridge’s hands caressed the car sliding up the hood over the roof and down the hatchback. He looked down. The car was up off the ground, good clearance. It was wide so it would be stable on the road.

Inside Ridge saw the shift. It didn’t look like an automatic. There were three pedals on the floor. It was manual.

“Ridge,” called Dad. “Where are you?”

“Over here. Come and look at this car.”

Dad and Tim walked over. Dad glanced at the car. He looked at Ridge.

“Your mother will not approve. Anyway, this car isn’t for sale.”

“It’s a trade in,” said Tim. “It came in a couple of days ago. The boy didn’t want to give it up but his Dad told him he had to. The boy got too many speeding tickets. He ended up with an older little car.”

“You hear that, Ridge?” asked Dad. “Too many speeding tickets. This car begs to speed. If you get a speeding ticket, you are grounded. Back on the school bus. Back to your mother taking you places.”

“Yes. Please, Dad. This is the car I want.”

“I thought you wanted a Subaru. That one over there is really nice.”

“It’s all right. This one is perfect.”

“Your mother will see that paint job and flip.”

“I’ll get her. Maybe she’ll say it’s okay.”

Ridge left Dad talking to Tim about the car. He heard something about it being a Ford Fiesta. All he knew was he had to have this car.

“Mom, I found my car. Will you come see it?”

“You did? That’s wonderful.” Mom got out and walked back with Ridge.

Mom stopped and stared at the Fiesta. Ridge swallowed. She walked around the car.

“This is some car. It’s a bit fancy, isn’t it? You won’t be tempted to speed in it?”

“I won’t speed. Please, Mom. This car is exactly what I want.” Ridge found he was touching the car again. Inside he froze waiting. She had to let him have this car.

Mom walked around the car again. Ridge’s eyes followed her. She frowned a little, looked up and smiled.

“It looks like you have your car.”

Chapter 4 Dream or Nightmare?

Ridge’s breath slipped out. He stifled the urge to yell. Dad was watching him. Dad had to agree too. He was buying the car.

“Since your mother approves, I guess this is the car. You remember what I said about the speeding tickets?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, you know this car has a five speed manual shift?” asked Tim.

“I thought it was a manual,” said Ridge.

“Do you know how to drive it?” asked Dad.

“No, but I’ll learn.”

“I can’t teach you,” said Mom. “I only drive automatics.”

“I’ll teach you,” said Dad.

“Thanks, Dad.” Ridge cringed inside. Mom was a much better teacher than Dad.

Dad turned to Tim. “I guess this is the car. You said it came in a couple of days ago. Is it for sale yet?”

“Our mechanic was checking it over before it went on the lot. I’ll go in and check with him.”

Tim walked inside the garage then back out with a man with Jack on his shirt. Jack was all smiles.

“This is one great little car,” said Jack. “It’s in good shape, nothing wrong with it that I could find. You picked a real nice car, young man.”

“It’s special,” said Ridge.

“It is that. Tim, this car is ready to go. I changed the oil. The tires and battery are like new. I checked the fluids and engine. It just passed inspection.”

Dad and Tim headed for the office to discuss price and fill out paperwork. Ridge circled the car again, his car.

"I'm glad this car is going to someone like you who really likes it. I heard the other owner just wanted to show off his so-called rally car to impress the girls. Do you like rally?"

"I love rally and want to drive someday. But not with this car. Rally drivers don't speed when they're just driving." Ridge peeked over at Mom.

"You have to get good at driving before you speed up. Otherwise you're in trouble."

"I don't like this rally talk," said Mom. "Maybe you shouldn't get this car."

"Please, Mom. I won't speed or do anything bad. Please."

Mom looked at Ridge. "All right. I won't change my mind. I'm going to go back and wait in the car. You should go in and see what's going on inside."

Ridge walked over to the office building. Inside he found Dad and Tim signing papers.

"Hello, Ridge," said Tim. "Sit down and join us. I take it this is your first car?"

"Yes. Those flames are great. They're a wrap, aren't they?"

"All the fancy stuff on cars now is done with a wrap. It's a lot better than a special paint job. You do know to wash it with soap and water and no wax?"

"I didn't. Thanks."

"Here are your keys Ridge, said Tim. "Enjoy your new car."

"I'll take those for now," said Dad as he snagged the keys. "Town isn't the place to start learning how to shift. I'll drive home."

"How hard is shifting?" protested Ridge. "It can't be that hard."

"Slow down, Ridge," said Tim. "No, shifting isn't that hard once you get the hang of it. Your Dad's right about learning in town. It's a lot better to get out of town so you have time and no traffic."

"We don't want to stall out in the middle of a highway intersection," added Dad. "You take the paperwork and put it in the glove box."

Great. I have a car I can't drive, thought Ridge. This will be fantastic when the guys come over tonight. "Can you take us for a ride?" "No, it's my car but I don't know how to drive it." He looked down but followed Dad out the door to Dad's car.

"Honey, I guess you'll drive our car home. Ridge and I will drive his car."

"Unless you need me to follow you, I'm going to take the car and leave," said Mom. "There are some stops in town I want to make."

"Fine. We'll be stopping at the insurance office and the license office before getting home. No, it's Saturday. We'll stop for some car supplies then go on home."

"Do I get a chance to drive my car on the way home?" asked Ridge.

"Once we get on the residential roads on the way home, I'll let you give it a try."

Mom got into the driver's seat, started the car and drove off.

"Let's go try out that car of yours," said Dad smiling. "I haven't driven a shift in years but always enjoyed shifting."

Ridge stiffened. What if Dad liked his car? Would he keep it? Fear dampened his palms as he opened the passenger door to his car. Dad couldn't keep it. This was his car.

Dad slid into the driver's seat and adjusted it. He adjusted the rearview and side mirrors. He rolled down Ridge's window so he could see better to adjust that mirror.

"Ridge, lean back a bit so I can see the mirror. Mom did tell you how important it is to adjust the mirrors?" Dad finished and rolled the window back up.

"Yes, Dad."

“Pay attention, Ridge. There are three pedals on the floor. The right one is the accelerator. The middle one is the brake. The left one is the clutch. See them?”

“Yes.”

“The clutch lets the transmission move between gears. To drive the car you must balance the clutch and the gas. Too much clutch and the car doesn’t accelerate. Too little clutch and the car stalls. Understand?”

“Why doesn’t an automatic have a clutch?”

“It does. It’s in the transmission so you don’t have to engage it.”

“How do I engage the clutch?”

“You step on the pedal with your left foot. Every clutch is different, releases at a different place. You have to feel it, get used to how it releases to drive the car smoothly.”

Ridge’s face went blank. “Release what?”

“The gear. When the clutch isn’t engaged, the car is locked into a gear. When you engage the clutch, you unlock the gears so you can move to a different one.”

“Like a key, sort of.”

“Close enough. Now, to start the car you push down the clutch pedal to put the car in neutral. If you’re on a slope, the car will start rolling. Turn the key and wallah!”

The engine roared into life. Rumbling vibrations caressed Ridge through the seat. This wasn’t like Mom’s car. Even though he wasn’t driving, he smiled.

“That engine sounds nice. Now, with the clutch down you slip the stick into first, ease up on the clutch and push down the accelerator. And we’re off!”

The car rolled smoothly across the lot to the driveway. Ridge’s smile widened with pleasure. He looked out the window at the highway.

“Ridge, notice the pedals. You have to push the clutch in as you stop or the car will stall.”

Ridge looked down making his face look serious. “I see.”

Dad looked at him. “I hope so.”

“You push the clutch in to start and stop the car or it will stall.”

“You use the clutch to start, stop and change gears. It puts the car in neutral.”

“What is a stall? The car stops running?”

“Right. The motor stops, you lose power, you coast to a stop trying to start the engine again. Traffic behind you honks their horns or doesn’t notice and rear ends you. Stalling the car is serious.”

“Oh.” Ridge shifted in his seat.

Dad looked up and down the highway. Traffic cleared and he pulled the car out into the right lane.

“Watch the pedals.”

Ridge looked down seeing Dad push the accelerator then let up on that pedal, push in the clutch, move the stick, release the clutch pedal as he pushed down on the accelerator again. The car sped up. Ridge started to look up when Dad did the same routine again moving the stick into a different location.

“Now we’re in third gear. One more and we’ll be to drive.”

“Didn’t Tim say there were five gears?”

“The fifth one is a highway gear.”

“How do you know where to put the stick?”

“See the diagram on the knob? It tells you where they are. But you still have to feel where each one is when you move the gear shift.”

Dad had shifted into fourth even as he explained this to Ridge. The car now moved easily with the other traffic. The car approached a traffic light turning yellow. Dad stepped on the brake pedal then started to push in on the clutch.

“You can push the clutch in all the way as you stop. It’s called free wheeling and is dangerous. The car is coasting along in neutral and all you can do is stop it with the brakes. It’s better to wait to push the clutch until you are actively braking, so you don’t free wheel too long.”

Ridge swallowed. Maybe shifting was harder than he thought. Maybe it was too hard. Dad glanced over.

“Shifting isn’t that hard. It takes practice. You have to pay attention to the car and how it’s running. That’s all.”

Ridge shifted in his seat again. “I guess.”

“We can take the car back now and get an automatic.”

“No. No, I want this car. I’ll learn to shift.”

Dad smiled as he started the car moving again through the intersection, turning onto the highway heading out of town. Ridge stared down watching Dad’s feet move the accelerator and clutch pedals up and down. He tried to feel how the car felt before and after Dad shifted. All he really noticed was how the engine seemed to roar a little just before Dad shifted then return to a grumbly roar afterwards.

“Now we can coast along in fifth gear until we get to town,” said Dad. “What do you do when you start the car?”

“Put in the key. Adjust the mirrors and the seat. Turn the key and push on the accelerator.”

“Your car just stalled. What did you forget?”

“The clutch.”

“What about when you stop?”

“Start braking. Push in the clutch and stop.”

“It’s a good idea to shift back into first while you sit at the light.”

“Oh.”

“If you forget and try to drive off with the car in fourth...”

“The car will stall.”

The car seemed to fly down the highway. Dad looked down at the speedometer and eased back on the accelerator. “Oops. This car likes to move. You’ll have to keep an eye on the speedometer or risk a ticket.”

Ridge busied himself opening his window to hide a smile. Wind rushed in and by. He relaxed feeling the car rush down the road. His car.