

THE VAN

John Boston

Jennifer Radke was waiting for the light to turn green when she saw it. It was raining out, not a downpour, but not drizzle. More like a steady, slowly soaking rain. She lit up a cigarette and was looking out the window when she saw it. A white cargo van pulled up next to the bus stop, stopped just for a few seconds, and then sped off. Jennifer was about 90 percent sure there had been a little girl standing there only a minute before when she stopped for the light because she had noticed the girl's backpack and was hoping to get one for her daughter. The girl was now gone. Jennifer had a very uneasy feeling come over her. She was reasonably sure the young girl had just been kidnapped. The light turned green and instead of heading down the street to work, she made a life-altering decision and decided to follow the van. It was probably nothing, but on the chance that it really turned out to be a kidnapping, she needed to get as much info as possible for the police.

She couldn't believe it. It just wasn't happening. It was a busy intersection. It was a busy bus stop. Someone else must have seen it. She figured she'd tail the van for a few miles and then she'd see half a dozen police cars with their bar lights on pull up in front of her and stop the vehicle. She expected it to happen, but after following the vehicle for more than five minutes, she began to realize it just wasn't going to happen. She was on her own.

Last night, she left her cell phone at her office. She had done it before, but now it had come back to bite her in the ass. She couldn't believe that the only time in her adult life when she really, really needed a cell phone, she didn't have it. She passed by another intersection, the one she should have turned on to go to her office. It would have to wait today. Sometimes there are more important things than going to work. She had to get close enough to at least get the license plate, then she would back off. There were a few cars in front of her blocking her view. She figured if she could at least get the license plate, she would still be of some help if she were to lose the van.

Of course, she could be wrong about all of this. Maybe it was the girl's father giving her a ride to school. It was raining out. Maybe he was a contractor who showed up at the job site this morning and when it started raining, maybe the boss told them all to go home. It made sense.

Then again, maybe it was a kidnapping. Maybe the guy who took her was a convicted sex offender who was going to do horrible things to her before he finally killed her and hid her body. She thought of her own daughter and got angrier. Anyone who would kidnap a child deserved no less than the death penalty. People can be the scariest monsters of all.

The van turned right down the main avenue towards downtown. Traffic was usually heavy this time of the day. It was usually bumper to bumper until they got to the highway exit. If he got on the highway, she was screwed and so was the little girl. She thought about stopping and getting help at a gas station or something. Of course, if she were wrong and there was no kidnapping,

well she would look like an idiot. Maybe she would just call 911 and report it, not giving her name. That might be her best and only option at this point. The more she thought about it, the more she realized that the little girl's best chance of survival was for her to tail the van until they stopped. If she lost the van before the cops found it, the girl was toast. She couldn't let the van out of her sight. She also reasoned that if it was a kidnapping, there had to be more than one of them because the driver never got out of the van. He just pulled up alongside the curb. Someone else had to be inside and grab the little girl. That meant two or more people in that van. So, if the van stopped, what the hell was she going to do? She might be able to fight off one, but two or three of them was another matter entirely. They were probably armed as well.

Her heart was now racing as she followed the van onto Lakewood Avenue, past the Target and Burger King. She knew there were several more lights and several more intersections before the Freeway exits. That must be where they were going. It made the most sense. Grab the girl then get the hell out of town as fast as they could. She was torn between stopping at the gas station and staying close behind the van. Maybe at the next intersection, she could just hop out and confront the driver. That was her best plan. She wasn't sure what she was going to say, or how she would say it, but as soon as she confronted the driver, she'd have her answer. Then again, what if the driver shot her dead? There were a dozen cars in all directions. She assumed somebody would see it and call 911. Still, it might not be her best plan. She really should just leave it up to the cops. That's what they get paid to do. If she was wrong and there was no kidnapping, oh well, she just wasted a morning. If there was a kidnapping, she could be the only thing standing between that girl and pure horror.

The van stopped at a light. She was now only two cars behind the van. She noticed a crew of workers on the side of the road putting in some kind of traffic control sign. She was only about thirty feet from them. She opened her car door and had one foot on the ground when the light changed. She got back in her car and slammed the door shut. The van took off, not fast, not slow, just enough to keep up with traffic. The van turned onto a makeshift dirt road that was being used to reroute traffic. She followed the van and drove right past the flagger. She rolled her window down, but he just waved her on by. She lost sight of the white van and started to panic. She turned the corner and was relieved to find it in front of her. She decided just to follow the van as long as she could. Once the van was stopped, she'd make her move. She looked in the back seat for anything she could use as a weapon. She saw the tire iron she had used the other day to change her flat tire. It was all she had. It was going to have to do.

She had been following the van for just over twenty minutes. They were going down Richards Ave, the busiest street in the city. Going a mile here can take over an hour. Much to her dismay, the traffic was moving along at a pretty good pace. She had gotten close enough to the van to be able to make out the first two letters of the license plate and to see a Jesus Fish sticker on the bumper. It was a start, but still not good enough. She had to get behind the van if nothing else. Maybe the plates were stolen, maybe not. If they were stolen and did not belong to the van, then they were useless to the cops and useless to the girl. The more she thought about it, the more she concluded that her only real option was to follow the van for as long as she could. She had no idea what she would do once the van was stopped. Maybe they'd have to stop for gas. Maybe they'd go home and take the girl with them. There were a thousand different options at this point and none of them were going to be much use to the girl if she lost sight of the van. She looked at her gas gauge and noticed that she had only a quarter of a tank left. The way her SUV went

through gas, she figured that was eighty miles until she was dry. She just had to hope and pray they stopped before then. She figured if she got them out in the open and then called the police, the chances of finding the van were much better. They could flood the country roads with cars. Here in the city, there were more cops, but many more places to hide. They could pull into a lonely garage or building and just disappear for a few days. Change vehicles and be on their way. You just can't underestimate somebody nowadays.

The van was stopped at a light near the pier. Maybe they were going to put the girl on a boat and get her out of the country. That made even more sense. Out in international waters where the US can't touch them. They could have an entire pedophile factory out there. She was now several cars behind the van. She wanted to stay close but not too close. She saw a man on a bicycle pull up next to her. He was riding an expensive bike, decked out in cyclist gear. He was even wearing cyclist shoes. She rolled down her window.

"Sir.....sir I think that white van up there has just kidnapped a little girl. Can you call the police, I don't have my cell phone."

"What?" he asked. She realized with all the construction and rain, he couldn't hear her.

"That van up there, the white van. I think they just kidnapped a little girl. Can you please call the police and give them a description?" she said louder

"Who got kidnapped?" he asked leaning closer to her window

"CALL THE GODDAMN POLICE, PLEASE," she screamed.

He looked at her confused for a moment, then pulled out his cell phone and held it up. The light changed color and the van started driving away. She took off after it, nearly colliding with the car in front of her.

The van went down the street until they came to the freeway exit. She knew she was in trouble. It was now or never. If they got on the Freeway, she might as well just give up and go home. She was three cars behind the van. Her heart was racing. She opened the car door and got out and walked up to the van. Just as she was about to turn and see who the driver was, the light changed color and the van started speeding up. She ran back to her car. The asshole behind her kept honking his horn and then tried to go around her, but got his truck stuck on the highway divider. He got out and started screaming at her. She knew she had no choice.

"I'm sorry. I can't lose that van," she said and floored the SUV. She knocked the bumper of his truck and manage to squeeze through. The guy went nuts and tried running after her. She hoped and prayed that he got her license plate number and was calling the cops. She also hoped that the cops would find her quickly before the van could get away. She just hoped this nightmare was going to end soon. She just wasn't cut out for this kind of thing. Not that it mattered now, she was in this whether she wanted to be or not.

The van didn't seem to be following a route that made any sense. She thought they would just get on the freeway, but they passed both the freeway exits and continued driving around the city. Maybe they were lost, or perhaps they were looking for another victim. It kept a steady pace,

neither speeding up nor slowing down. She had been tailing them for almost an hour and was almost out of gas. She had a fleeting thought that maybe they knew she was following them. She had kept her distance, but she had been behind them for over an hour. If they did grab the girl, they were bound to be looking out for anyone following them. Maybe they had seen her when they grabbed the girl, maybe not. She tried not to think about what they might be doing to the girl in the back of the van. It would be difficult to do much of anything in the back of a cargo van while it was in motion. She knew she had to make a move and make it soon before she ran out of gas. The van just kept driving. It turned onto Charles Street, past the car dealerships and multi-million dollar houses, and then got on the Shorefront drive. Shorefront Drive went on for nearly forty miles. It was a busy road, but there were plenty of secluded places and parks to turn off and hide. She figured that was their plan. They would have to be happy with just one victim. She didn't recall seeing any stop lights on Shorefront. If she were to lose them, she should be able to catch right up to them. She noticed a bus stop with several people waiting for the bus. She pulled over in front of the bus stop and got out. There were three teenage looking boys and one girl all plugged into their electronic devices, completely oblivious as to what was happening.

"Hey, I need help. I think I just saw a young girl get kidnapped by that white van that just drove by. I don't have my phone with me, can one of you please call the police and tell them where we are?" she pleaded

Two of them pulled their earbuds out of their ears, the other two didn't even seem to acknowledge her.

"What did you say?" asked one of the kids

"I think somebody's just been kidnapped by the people in that white van....they grabbed a little girl at a bus stop. Call the cops and tell them where we are. I don't want to lose the van." she said and ran back into her car. She sped off, praying she didn't lose the white van.

The two kids looked at each other. Both of them had been arrested before and the last thing they wanted to do was to get involved with the police. The girl walked over to them.

"What did that woman want?" she asked them

"She said she thought some girl got kidnapped and wanted us to call the police."

"That's weird. Are you gonna call?" she asked

"I hate cops. I gotta get to class. You want to call them, go ahead. She said it was a white van." said one of the kids.

The girl was going to dial 911 when her boyfriend called her. They had just broken up and her heart leapt when she saw his number on her call screen. She picked it up and started talking. Within two minutes, she had completely forgotten about calling the cops, or what the woman had wanted in the first place.

Jennifer was speeding now, going almost 90 in a 55 zone. She was praying that a cop would pull her over. No such luck. She was weaving in and out of traffic. On this morning, there were no

police patrolling Shorefront Ave. After being on the road for five minutes, she began seeing trees and grass. She was leaving the city. If she didn't find them soon, she might as well give up. She slowed down when she saw the van at a rest stop. She turned onto the embankment and made a very dangerous U-turn. She made another one and almost got the SUV stuck in the muddy grass. She got back onto the highway and pulled into the rest stop. She pulled the space behind the van. There was a car blocking the space between them. It had to be the same van. It had the same cargo rack on the roof and the same hubcaps. She grabbed her tire iron and opened the door. She ran up to the cargo door and put her hand on the handle. The van still had its engine running. She pulled the van door open and was expecting the worst. Instead, she just found a bunch of electrical equipment. Sitting on the floor. The driver was talking on his phone and turned around quickly when he heard the door open.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?" he screamed and opened his door. He got out and ran around to the other side of the van.

Jennifer looked at the back of the van. There was no Jesus Fish in the bumper. She had the wrong white cargo van.

The man stopped when she saw her holding a tire iron. He looked like he was ready to make a move, but at the last minute, he stopped himself.

"I'm sorry. I have the wrong van. Can you please call the cops and tell them that a little girl was kidnapped by a white cargo van with a Jesus Fish on the bumper. They must still be on Shorefront Ave.....please."

The man said nothing as he looked at her. He quickly dialed 911. He calmly told the dispatcher what Jennifer had just relayed to him.

"The dispatcher wants to talk to you," he said and handed her the phone.

"I've got to find that goddamn van before they kill her. I'm the only chance she's got," she said and ran back to her car. She got in and drove away. In her rearview mirror, the guy was still talking into his phone, trying desperately to get Jennifer's license plate number. He did give the dispatcher a pretty good description of her vehicle. Unfortunately, at exactly the same time, there was a very deadly six-car pile-up a few miles back. That was going to tie up law enforcement for the time being. Nothing was going right for Jennifer today. The dispatcher had put out a BOLO alert for both her vehicle and the white cargo van on Shorefront Ave.

She was doing nearly 100 mph on the Street. She had tears coming down her eyes as the realization that she had let the van getaway began to sink in. She thought of her own daughter and the girl's parents and the devastation that it would cause them if the girl was killed by these freaks.

Two Highway Patrol Vehicles flew past her on the other side of the divided road. They didn't even slow down. They were on their way to the wreck behind her. She couldn't believe it. They didn't even seem to acknowledge her. She slowed down when she realized she had lost them. She was sobbing now, realizing that if there was a kidnapping, she had let the kidnappers get away. She decided it would probably be best to pull herself together and try to explain to the police

what she had seen and to give as much detail as she could about the cargo van. It was definitely a work truck. It had to belong to a local contractor. It looked almost exactly like the one her father had used on his job when he was working for the power company. It had a large cargo rack for ladders. It was probably used by a company that specialized in electronics or electrical work. One that didn't want their equipment to get wet. It was just speculation, but it was all she had at this point. She knew people would be second-guessing every decision she had made that morning. She was going to have to get used to defending herself. People would say she should just have stopped and called the police as soon as she saw the kidnapping. Problem was, she still had no idea if there was a kidnapping or not. It was only a possible kidnapping. A possible anything is still really an actual nothing. She probably should have just stopped and called the cops, but she didn't. it didn't matter now anyway. What mattered was the here and now.

Her Low Fuel warning light came on. She slowed down even more. She had to get some gas and fast. She had maybe ten minutes of driving left.

She was in the middle of a rural island in the big city. There were just trees and the famous Mt. Waters State Park up ahead. Maybe she could get some gas from the park rangers. It was a long shot, but there was no way she could make it back to the city in time to fuel up before she was empty.

She took the wrong road for the park. Her road was for the bike trail and walking path. She was only a few hundred feet off the highway when she saw the van parked in the empty parking lot. The Columbia River was right next to her. She drove by and saw the Jesus Fish on the bumper. She knew she had the right van. She also knew that they had kidnapped the girl. Any doubt she had was now gone. She parked her car, but left the engine running in case she had to make a fast getaway. The van was rolling from side to side. She put her hand on the sliding door. When she heard what sounded like a girl screaming, any fear she had just melted away. Pure, unadulterated rage took over. Up until her 34 years on this planet, Jennifer had never even considered herself being able to kill another person. Right now, she could kill whoever was inside that van never lose a night's sleep over it for the rest of her life.

Before she could open it, the door slid open and a man got out. As soon as she saw his pants down and him holding a knife, she made her move. She swung down as hard as she could with her tire iron and hit the man's hand that was holding the knife. She heard his wrist crack and he instantly dropped the knife. She swung again and hit him in the face. He had partially deflected the blow with his hand, but it had still hit him right in his nose, shattering it in pieces. She then hit him in the face again and the man dropped to his knees. She kicked him several times and then pushed him out of the way. She kicked him once more when he was on the ground,, until he stopped moving. She looked inside and saw the girl with her hands tied behind her back. She was shaking and her eyes were stained red from her tears. Jennifer reached out her arms.

"Come on honey, let's get out of here!" she said and grabbed the girl.

The girl could still walk, but her hands were still tied behind her back.

She helped the girl out of the van and then heard the driver's side door open. She grabbed her tire iron and ran over to the other side of the van ready to unleash hell on the driver.

She stopped in her tracks when she saw who the driver of the van was. The driver was her father. They looked right at each other with the same look of shock. Jennifer felt like she had just been shot. Her father's eyes went from that of a monster, filled with some kind of twisted rage to looking as if he were going to cry, in fact, that's exactly what he did.

Jennifer started crying as well. She was scared, confused, and angry all at the same time. Her father, the man she had known and loved all her life, was really a monster. The man that used to tuck her in at night and read her stories was a child killer. She dropped the tire iron on the ground.

Her father started sobbing.

"I'm.....I'm a very sick man, angel. I never wanted to hurt these girls. I just had to go with him to make sure he didn't hurt the girls.....I love the girls, I really do.....I'm so sorry angel." he said with tears in his eyes.

"Come on, honey.....let's get out of here," she said and picked up the little girl.

The young girl watched her father stand motionless behind them. He got in his van and pulled it out into the road. He got out and stood on the side of it. Jennifer watched all of this from her SUV, which was beginning to sputter. She used a toenail clipper to break the girl's zip tie that was holding her hands behind her back. Her father just waved at her and made a motion to come forward. Jennifer understood what he wanted. She was more than happy to oblige.

"I need you to get out of the car honey. I want you to run over that hill and back to the highway, do you understand. I have to help my father with something, okay?"

"Your father is a very bad man." said the girl angrily

"I know he is honey. I'm so sorry for what he's done to you. I hope one day you can forgive him." she said.

The girl climbed out of her vehicle and started walking up the hill to the edge of the busy highway. It would only be a matter of minutes before some motorists stopped and reported the girl to the police. Within twenty minutes several deputies had arrived and had begun questioning the girl. That was half an hour from now. Right at the moment, Jennifer had something else to take care of. Her father waved at her from the side of the van. She thought of all the time he had spent with her growing up. He coached her softball team and was the leader of her girl scout troop. He was such a good father. That's why this had to be done. So she could remember the good ones. Not the ones she would have to endure once he was arrested.

She backed up to the edge of the road, put it in drive, and sped towards the van. By the time she made an impact with her father and the van, she was doing almost eighty miles an hour. Her father was caught in a sandwich between the two vehicles. He was killed instantly. The impact knocked the van over and spun it around, sending it back almost fifty feet. The airbags took most of the damage. Jennifer had a bloody nose and some cuts, but that was about it.

The bad men had been stopped.

She was only half-conscious. She remembers seeing cops and cops and more cops. She was loaded onto a stretcher and taken to the city hospital. She had round-the-clock protection. She didn't make a statement until two days later. She told the detectives that the driver of the van was her own father. They told her that had been a suspect in at least two other disappearances. They also found it hard to believe that she just happened to be at the right place and the right time to witness the whole thing. The chances had to be about a million to one. They were skeptical. It was hard to believe, except it happened, exactly like she had described. It was what one of the detectives told her, something so simple, yet something she would carry with her for the rest of her life.

"You just never really know someone, until you know them," he said.

"Yeah.....ain't that the truth," she said to herself.

THE VAN VERSION II

Jim first noticed the odd-looking white passenger can at a little truck stop outside Wellington, Kansas. They were filling up at the pump as he pulled in. There was really nothing unusual looking about the van. It was a white, cargo van, probably from the late 80's or early 90's. It appeared to be in good shape. He didn't pay much attention to it, after all, why would he? This was the first time he could recall seeing the van. He did not look at the license plate and wasn't certain if the van even had one. Driving on a major interstate without a license plate was begging to be pulled over. Antonia was still asleep. He went inside, paid for his gas, and bought two coffees. He knew how she liked hers and she knew how he liked his. That was one of the small perks of being married. If your husband or wife didn't know how you liked your coffee, then they didn't really know you at all, or so he figured.

When he got back to the van, Antonia had just woken up. His princess did not like to get up early.....like anything before 9 am was iffy. Jim was up most mornings by six. He came from a ranch family in Canada and was used to getting up at the crack of dawn. That was about the only source of friction in their brief marriage. Other than that, things could not possibly be any better. She had come to the country for the PHD program, just like he did. They sat next to one another on the first day of classes and have pretty much been inseparable since. She was his *queridaas* they would say in Brazil.

"Oh, it's hot. You know I hate warm coffee," she said as she took the cup.

"One cream and one sugar. I even stuck it in the microwave to keep it hot," he said as he climbed in.

He did not notice if the white van was still there or not. He pulled out of the truck stop and got back on the highway. They had a very long drive ahead of them. They planned on stopping overnight in Scottsbluff at a motel. They had a lot of road between them and the motel. Antonia did not drive. Not just in Brazil, but anywhere. She was happy to be his navigator. She was a good navigator. In this case, the navigation was pretty easy. They only had to change highways once in Nebraska. You could use a road map and still get home to Jim's house.

Jim was in awe of her. She had come to the country two years ago not being able to say more than a dozen words in English. She could now speak almost as fluently as a person born and raised here in the United States. He was still coming to grips with the basics of Portuguese. Learning a new language was not easy, especially since it was so easy not to learn it. He knew from their first date together that this was the person he was going to spend the rest of his life with. They had traveled back to Brazil for the wedding. She came from a large and very prominent family in Sao Paulo. Many of her family spoke English. Her father had worked at the Brazilian Embassy in Washington for some time. It had been a dream of hers to come to America ever since she was a young girl. They were both going to graduate in the spring with their Ph.D. in cellular and molecular biology. Like most PhDs Jim would go to work for the government, or so he figured. He knew they had to have a very difficult talk about their futures once they were out of school. He figured she would want to go back home to Sao Paulo. She knew he wanted to go back home to the Regina area. He just hoped somehow, they could meet in the middle. If he could just learn to speak Portuguese, it might make moving to Brazil a whole lot easier.

Antonia held his hand as they traveled the interstate across the giant state of Kansas. It was the end of Thanksgiving and they were on a ten-day break from class. Somehow, the weather for this time of year was unseasonably warm in the great plains. They were only going to encounter some ice in North Dakota. When they left their apartment in Oklahoma City, the temp was almost seventy degrees.

"You have to really love living out here. It can be seventy degrees one day and snowing the next," he said.

"I still want to see snow. I have never seen snow before. We haven't had any since I've come here." she said, sipping her coffee.

"I'm sure you'll see some at home. We get lots of snow."

"These fields.....they seem to go on forever," she said

"Honey, I'm sorry to be the one to have to tell you, but this is about all you are going to see for the next several days. One giant, empty field right after the other."

"That's fine. I always said I wanted to see America. Now, I'm going to see America and Canada. How many miles is it from our apartment to your parent's house?"

"One thousand seven hundred and eighty-five."

"So, why didn't we just fly there?"

"Fly there? And miss all this?"

She just rolled her eyes at her husband. She too, knew it was love at first sight. They would have study dates, which would quickly turn into real dates. It only took about two weeks before they were only seeing one another. Jim was the most handsome man she had ever seen. He had wanted to play professional hockey, but a knee injury derailed his plans. Within a few weeks after meeting him, she was head over heels in love with him. He wasn't just the most handsome man she had ever seen, he was also the nicest. At her wedding, he sat with her grandparents and held her dying grandmother's hand for almost an hour. He knew how much she loved her grandparents and this was very important to her. All of her family loved him, even if their conversations were limited. The fact that he still found time to learn her language on top of his busy schedule was amazing. She just had no idea what was going to happen once they left college. She wanted to go back home and so did he. This was not going to be an easy conversation. She couldn't stand the thought of being away from her family and longer. She also couldn't stand the thought of losing Jim. He was the love of her life. Her *sweetheart* as they would say in America.

They pulled into a truck stop just outside of Belleville. They both got out to stretch their legs. Antonia loved food, but truck-stop food in America was definitely not her cup of tea. She had packed sandwiches and drinks for the long trip. She even had her favorite Brazilian restaurant in Oklahoma City make some meals for her. Antonia did not like to be unprepared.

"Huh. That's weird," said Jim as he spotted the white van.

"What's weird?"

"That white van. They were at the last truck stop too."

"That's not very unusual. I'm sure lots of these cars were at the same truck stop."

Jim suddenly got a very uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach as he passed by the white van. Something about it just wasn't right. He couldn't see anyone inside. He walked by on his way inside. He paid for the gas and bought two sodas. He knew she only drank sugar-free soda and he loved Dr. Pepper. He bought two sugar-free Dr. Peppers. He walked back to his truck to pump the gas and noticed that the white van was now gone. He tucked away, into the back of his mind and pumped his gas. He gave Antonia her soda. She had occasionally thought that they had gotten married way too early, but then she realized he was the one she was supposed to be with for the rest of her life, so it didn't matter when they got married. Only Jim would know she only drank sugar-free sodas. It was as if he could read her mind.

Something about that van bothered Jim. Something about it wasn't right. He wanted to see how was driving and what they had inside. He didn't want to upset her, so he decided to just keep it to himself.

She was busy talking to one of her relatives on the phone in Portuguese. It bothered him that he really had no idea what she was saying and she was saying it right in front of him. He really needed to learn how to speak Portuguese. He looked at his phone and saw a red message. He pulled into a rest stop to read it. He couldn't believe it. The I-80 was now closed in both

directions in two different places. Both accidents were fatal. That meant very long delays. One was outside of Kearney, the other was about an hour west of Kearney. He knew that meant detouring through the sand hills until they got to the I-70 junction. From there, they could take the I-85 all the way home outside of Cheyenne. That meant some extra driving, but he did not want to get stuck for hours in traffic. He also knew Grand Island was going to fill up quickly with all the cars turning around and spending the night in the city. He had driven through the sand hills of Nebraska once before. It's hundreds of miles of absolutely nothing, with just some small outposts of civilization scattered between.

"Bad news babe. We got to take a detour," he said. He wasn't even sure if she heard him or not. She could spend hours on the phone talking to her friends and family.

They stopped at a restaurant outside of Grand Island. Jim did not see the white van, nor was he really looking for it. They were lucky to get a table, as news of I-80's closure was spreading fast. Most, if not all motels were booked for the night.

They had a pleasant meal and were just happy to spend time with one another. Jim had overestimated his ability to drive for long hours. He just wished they could stay in Grand Island for the night, but there were no rooms available. It wasn't a particularly big city and though it was on a busy highway, there were only so many rooms available.

"It's three o'clock right now and it's five hours to Scottsbluff. We have to be in Regina on Saturday afternoon for the wedding. What do you want to do?"

"You think we take the back roads to Scottsbluff?"

"Yeah, there isn't much between us and Scottsbluff, but I didn't pay fifty thousand dollars for a truck that will let me down, either."

"It's an adventure. I'm sure it will be fun."

"I just hate driving out there in the dark. I came through there a few years ago on my way to Oklahoma City. I could count the number of cars I saw on the road with one hand."

"I'm sure we'll be fine. It's Nebraska, not the moon," she said as she finished her salad.

They finished their meal and got back on the highway. They crossed I-80 and got on Rt 2. About half an hour into the trip, Antonia said she had to go to the bathroom. Jim found a rest area off the road and pulled in. As he pulled into the parking lot, he saw the same white van, parked in the lot.

"Now, wait just a second. That's the same van I saw earlier today. I know it is. He's following us, he has to be. I'm going to say something to him."

"What are you going to say?"

"Babe, he's been following us since we left our apartment. Now, he's out here with us in the middle of nowhere."

"He hasn't even said anything to us."

"He's following us. I know he is."

"If he's following us, then how does he manage to get here before we do? How did he know we were going to stop here?"

"I don't know," he said, realizing she had a very good point. He was always stopped before they were. One could turn this right around and say that they were following him. He followed her into the restrooms and waited for her. There was an elderly man walking his dog on the grass outside. Maybe that was the owner of the van. He certainly looked harmless enough. There was another car parked in the lot, it could have been his as well.

She came out and they walked back to his truck. She was right. His paranoia was absurd. Maybe he was going back to Regina as well. Maybe they even knew one another. Jim knew pretty much everybody there was to know in the city. They were about five miles down the road when it occurred to him that he had never actually seen the white van pass them on the road. Not once. How the hell did they arrive before them if he never saw the van on the road? He wasn't looking for the van, but this was only a two-lane road. He should have seen something. The more he thought about it, the more upsetting it became.

They stopped for gas in Broken Bow. Sure enough, the white van was stopped at the gas pump next to them.

"Okay, now can I freak out?" he asked

"Honey, he's getting gas, so what?"

"So what? Antonia, did you see that van pass us on the road? We've been driving for over an hour and I did not see him once on the road. We pulled out before he did. So if we didn't see him on the road, then how did he get here before us?"

Antonia looked confused. Jim made a very good point.

"I don't know, I wasn't paying attention to the road, I was reading."

"It never passed us. So, how did he get here before us?"

"Maybe there's another road to Broken Bow?"

"Maybe, but this is the fastest route. No way could he do eighty miles an hour on some of these back roads."

"What do you want to do?"

"Let's just try and talk to him. Maybe it's all just a big misunderstanding. Maybe he's trying to get to Canada too."

Jim walked over to the van and noticed it did not have a license plate on it. He thought it very odd that a van with no license plate had not been stopped for the hundreds of miles between here and home in Oklahoma City. The driver didn't have a license plate, because he didn't want to be stopped. Jim was about to approach the driver when he heard the van engine start and pull out of the gas station. Jim just stood there and threw his hands up in the air.

"So much for trying to talk to him."

Jim went inside and paid for his gas. It was still several hours to Scottsbluff. He knew Antonia was pissed. He couldn't blame her. Driving almost thirteen hundred miles through a desolate country was insane. They could have flown and paid half as much money as the gas was costing. They would also have been there by now. The road trip got a whole lot less attractive as you got older.

Jim was now more upset as he traveled along the dark, lonely highway in the middle of Nebraska. Maybe it was just a misunderstanding, maybe it wasn't. He knew he had to talk to the driver of the van, or he was going to lose his mind. He reasoned that it had to just be a coincidence. A very, very unusual coincidence. Perhaps they were just headed in the same direction? Maybe he was headed to Cheyenne or someplace close to there. There were plenty of perfectly logical reasons why he was constantly seeing the van. There was still one very unusual aspect to all this, that he just couldn't figure out.

How in the hell did that van get there before he did?

Antonia didn't seem bothered by the whole thing at all. She was still very innocent. She came from a wealthy family in Brazil. They had housekeepers and a full staff to cater to their every whim. She had no idea just how cruel this world can be until it happens to you.

He decided to stop at Broken Bow and get some gas. He was averaging sixteen miles per gallon. At this rate, he was going to go broke. He looked around for the white van and didn't see it. He felt a little better. He had kept his eyes open for any sign of the white van on the highway and hadn't seen any trace of it. He had only passed two other cars on the lonely stretch of road. Antonia said she was going to use the bathroom. He waited for her while she went inside. The night was getting chilly. He knew she was going to be in there for at least ten minutes. He was just leaning against the wall when the white van drove by him and slowed down. It stopped right in front of him. The driver rolled down the window. He and Jim locked eyes for a minute.

"Why are you following us?" asked Jim nervously.

"I got nothing better to do." said the man coldly, without any trace of emotion.

"You got nothing better to do than follow us across the country? I'm sure you can think of something better to do with your time."

"Your girl is something else. Where's she from?"

"Who are you?" asked Jim getting closer.

"Just a guy in a truck, Jimbo." said the driver as he cracked a smile.

"How do you know my name?"

"I know everybody's name. Her name is Antonia."

Jim froze. He could feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He was torn between running back to the truck and grabbing his pistol or just dragging him out of that van and beating him.

"You know I'm going to have to call the cops, right?"

"Sure, if that's what you need to do, go ahead. We both know they won't be able to find me."

"You're in a white van out in the middle of nowhere. I don't think it will be that hard," said Jim inching closer to the van.

"I'm going to take her, Jimbo. She's mine now. She's mine forever."

Jim lunged at the driver's side door, but the van just took off before he could open it. Antonia came out of the bathroom a moment later. She saw the look on her husband's face and got very worried.

"What's wrong?"

"I have to call the cops," he said as he grabbed her and ran inside the store. He did call the Broken Bow Police Dept and ten long minutes later, two patrol cars pulled into the gas station. Jim rushed out to meet them. They didn't even introduce themselves. One of the Officers was named *Reading*, the other was Officer Diaz.

Jim went over the story as best he could. The police were listening, but the more he told, he could sense, they were becoming skeptical. They didn't interrupt him and let him finish. They ran his Canadian Driver's License and returned it to him. They took Antonia's passport and ran her information as well.

"Look, the guy knew our names. He knew our names. How the hell did he know that? I've never seen this guy before in my life." said Jim hysterically.

"How did the van follow you and arrive before you did if you didn't see him on the road?" asked Diaz.

"I don't know. None of this makes any sense."

"If this van is on the road, we'll find him. I have a bulletin going out to all agencies in the state and even Wyoming and South Dakota. We'll find the van. It certainly would help if you could give us a description of the license plate." said Reading.

"He didn't have one. Front or back."

Diaz and Reading looked at one another. Jim knew exactly what they were thinking.

"There's plenty of motels in Broken Bow. You guys should really stop for the night. There's going to be a lot of cops looking for this white van. I'd like to interview your wife, separately, if you wouldn't mind. Why don't you go and grab a coffee with Officer Diaz."

Jim reluctantly went back inside the gas station. The coffee was just brewed. He quit smoking years ago, but now, he wanted a cigarette more than anything. They paid for their coffees and waited for Antonia to be interviewed. There was an awkward silence between him and Officer Diaz. He knew they weren't completely buying his story, at least Diaz wasn't.

"Anything you want to tell me, that your wife won't hear?"

"I'm telling you the truth. I know it doesn't really make a lot of sense, but that's exactly what happened."

"Do you have any enemies, Jim? People that might want her dead? Now's the time to tell us. I mean you're out here in the middle of nowhere. It would be a great place to bury a body.....or two bodies."

"No, I've pissed a few people off in my life, who hasn't? Certainly, no one who would want me dead."

Reading and Antonia came in a minute later. Diaz left him and Antonia walked over and put her arms around him.

"I'm sorry, honey. I had to tell them the truth," she said, tearing up.

"What do you mean? What did you tell them?"

"Jim.....I haven't seen this white van at all. Not once since we left the apartment. I'm looking for it, I just don't see it."

Jim didn't quite know what to say. He knew his whole case just went out the window. He was on his own from here on in."

"Sir, we have your report. If we find the van, I can assure you,. We will talk to the driver. Why don't you guys get some rest." said Officer Reading.

"Yeah, I think that's a good idea," said Jim.

He waited until the cars left the gas station.

"How did you not see the van, Antonia, it was right in front of us?"

"I don't know. I wasn't paying attention."

"This guy is dangerous. I don't want you leaving my sight. Your father is a very powerful man in Brazil. Is it possible this is because he made an enemy and that enemy followed you here?"

"Dad works for the government as a translator. He doesn't have any enemies."

"This guy seems to know a lot about us. Like he's been watching us, just waiting to make his move. I have my pistol in the truck. Remember what I showed you. If it comes right down to it, I hope you can pull the trigger."

"I hope it never comes to that. Maybe we should just turn back and wait for the 80 to open up. I think we would both feel better if we were around more people."

"We have to be there for the wedding by Saturday. We're losing daylight. We can't miss this wedding. No, we're better off to just keep going. If this guy is going to make his move, he's going to do it no matter where we are."

"Jim, we are in the middle of nowhere. We're kind of sitting ducks out here." We have cell phone coverage along the whole road. I've taken this road before. Those cops aren't going to do a damn thing since you told them you never saw the van. You think I'm making this whole thing up?"

"No, of course not. I can't lie and say I saw something when I didn't."

"He's after you, Antonia."

"Jim, I'm scared."

"Don't worry, we'll find him. I got to draw him out into the open. Trap him. The cops will have to do something then."

"Why is he doing this?" she asked

"I don't know. He's got this strange confidence about him like he can get anything he wants. I'm not going to let anything happen to you." he said.

She smiled and hugged him. They got back in the truck and took off across the Nebraska prairie. The lights from Broken Bow disappeared behind them as they continued on the rural Nebraska highway. The sun had set and it was now just darkness. A car would pass them every ten or fifteen minutes. Most of the time, it was just them on the highway. Jim took out his pistol and kept it nearby. He had ten rounds of 9mm in case things got ugly.....*or uglier.*

They were now outside the Nebraska National Forest in Halsey, they passed by the gigantic man-made forest and over the river below. Jim pulled into the rest area. Antonia was asleep. He could almost smell the van nearby. There were a few cars in the parking area. He didn't wake her. He just got out and looked around. A pair of headlights was following him down the road. He knew it was him. He grabbed his gun and tucked it in his pocket. The lights were getting brighter. They pulled up to him. Jim wasted no time as soon as he saw the outline of the white van. He ran over to the driver's side door and flung it open, pointing the gun at the driver.

Jim quickly realized his mistake. The driver and his wife both looked terrified. They were an elderly couple. Jim looked down at the license plate. The van was from Montana.

"I'm so sorry. I thought you were someone else," he said

"Okay, you can put the gun away now." said the old man

"Yes, I'm so sorry. A white van has been following us since we left Oklahoma. The guy said he was going to kill my wife."

"Did you call the police?"

"Of course I did. They weren't much help."

"I'm sorry for your trouble mister, but you just can't go pointing guns at people. That's how accidents happen."

"Yes, you're absolutely right. I'm so sorry. I would greatly appreciate it if you did not call the police." said David.

"Sounds like you've had a hell of a night." said the old man

"Longest night of my life."

"If you find him, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Whatever it takes."

The old man got out and lit up a cigarette. Jim didn't really know what to make of him.

"Son, as someone who has taken somebody's life, I have to strongly advise against it. As bad as this person sounds, if you kill him, you won't be any better than he is. Let the cops handle this. That's what they get paid to do."

"If someone threatened to kill your wife, what would you do?" he asked

"Wilfred, get your ass back in here, don't go having a full-blown conversation with him!" his wife screamed from inside their van. The old man just smiled and whispered.

"I'd let them have her," he said as he climbed back in the van.

Jim had to chuckle to himself. Americans just never ceased to amaze him. He wasn't sure he even wanted to go back to Canada. The more time he spent in America, the more he enjoyed it.

He walked back to the truck. Antonia was still asleep. That girl could fall asleep on a roller coaster.

He continued on the desolate highway. He was getting tired and knew he should just pull over for the night, but she was right, they were sitting ducks out here. He saw a pair of headlights behind him and they got into the other lane to pass him. As he looked over, he could see the white van in the other lane. The passenger side window was rolled down. He saw the driver just nod and smile at him. He passed Jim and got in front of him. Jim was done being the nice guy. He floored it and slammed into the back of the van, jarring Antonia out of her sleep. The van jumped forward but continued down the highway.

"Do you see the van now, Antonia?"

She immediately sat up in her seat. She looked absolutely terrified. Her look of terror soon turned into something else. She wasn't terrified anymore, *she was furious*.

"Do what you have to do, honey," she said as she looked at the gun.

"I got an idea. I didn't pay fifty grand for a slow truck. I'm going to pull right beside him. You shoot out his tires."

"What?"

"Just do it."

Jim sped up and got right beside him. He gave the gun to Antonia. He realized that she had never held a gun before.

"Shoot!" he shouted.

She rolled down her window and fired the gun twice. She missed both times. The third time was the charm. She blew out the front tire. Jim slammed on the brakes and watched the van speed off the road and slam into a large ditch. He stopped the truck. Antonia was now shaking. He reached over to her and grabbed her hand.

"Honey, you did the right thing. Now, let's get out of here."

"Aren't we going to call the police?"

"What are we going to tell them? They'll find the van in the morning or somebody will call it in. We could have killed the guy."

"The man I married would not just drive away after doing what we did. We have to go back and make sure he isn't dead. He might need medical help."

Jim knew she was right. There was no way he was going to just drive away. He was in this way too deep now. He backed up the van and stopped in front. There was no way the guy could have survived that. He took the gun with him and got out. He walked over to the van and looked inside. There was no one in the van. He opened the passenger door and climbed in. The back of the van was empty as well.

OK, where the hell did the driver go?

Jim took out his flashlight and looked around. There was no one in the van or around it. This didn't make any sense. How the hell did he just vanish? He had no time to think about it. He ran back to the truck.

"There's nobody in there."

"What? How is that possible?"

"He must have climbed out the back or something."

"So, where did he go?"

"I don't know, Antonia. There's nobody in the van."

That was all they said for the next hour. They drove in darkness, stopping at a gas station on the lonely highway. Jim filled up and they continued onward towards Scottsbluff. He figured Antonia would try and get some sleep. She never took her eyes off the road. She didn't seem scared, she seemed more angry than scared.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"What's wrong? We could have killed somebody back there. We should have called the police. How are we going to explain it to them when they find the van?"

"There's nothing linking us to the crash. As far as the cops are concerned, the van had a blowout and went off-road, simple as that. Besides, I'm sure this guy will have a lot of explaining to do."

"I can't believe we did that."

"Look, we called the cops. It didn't do any good. I would do anything to protect you."

"I don't need to be protected. You think I'm just this naive little girl from Brazil who has no idea how the world works, well, you are wrong. You should have listened to me. I think we are in big trouble."

"We're not in any trouble. That van was following us. He told me he was going to take you. I don't know what that means, but those were his words. Can't you see how dangerous this guy is?"

"All I ever see is someone who does not take me seriously. I have thoughts and opinions. I would like you to listen to them."

"What would you have done?"

"We should have stopped for the night in Broken Bow as the officer said. It was stupid to continue."

"Maybe. I think that's exactly what he wanted us to do. That guy might have been trying to kill you. Doesn't that bother you?"

"Yes, of course. But, it bothers me more when you don't listen to me."

"I do listen to you."

"No, you only hear me. You do not listen to me. There is a difference."

The two of them said nothing as they continued on the dark and very lonely highway. They pulled into a small motel in Alliance that was open 24 hours a day. Jim got the room keys and went inside the motel room. They were both exhausted and yet completely awake. They both sat down on the bed. Jim knew he needed to say something, he just didn't know what to say.

"You're right. I don't listen to you. I just don't want anything to happen to you. I was more worried about your safety than anything. I wasn't trying to ignore you."

"I think I was too hard on you. I'm not sorry for what we did. This was a very bad man and he had to be stopped. If that meant we had to kill him, then that's what we have to do."

"It was his cocky confidence. It was just unreal. It was like he was going to get you no matter who or what stood in his way. Delusional people are the scariest people of all. No connection to reality, they just make it up as they go along. I don't know if this guy was just crazy or dangerous, but I'm not going to stick around to find out."

"Let's get some sleep. We can call the police in the morning."

Jim and Antonia took off their clothes and went to sleep. Jim faded in and out of consciousness for a few hours, each time having a quick, vivid glimpse of the van and its strange driver inside. He knew the man was coming for her. He knew there would be no way to stop him.

Jim woke up the next morning. He left Antonia for a few minutes to go and get coffee. When he came back, she was in the shower. The phone rang as Jim looked out the window. He walked over and picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Jimbo. That was some stunt you guys pulled last night."

"You're still alive. Can't say I'm happy to hear," said Jim nervously.

"Do you really think you can stop me? Are you really that stupid?"

"I guess I am."

"I'm going to take her today. There isn't anything you can do about it. She belongs with me." the stranger said.

"I just need one chance. Just give me my one chance and it's over for you. You know where we are. Why not come and get her right now?"

"Now is not the time, but soon."

"Can't wait. I guess I'll be seeing you soon," he said and hung up.

Antonia came out of the shower and dried herself off. Jim could not get over how beautiful his wife was. He hugged his wife, who was still wet.

"I'll kill this guy before I let him hurt you. Those are the stakes."

"You are so macho. I like having someone to watch over me," she said and kissed him. In less than a minute, they were making love on the bed. When it was over, he looked into her eyes. She was the most amazing woman he had ever seen.....and she belonged to him. They were packed up and on the road in less than half an hour. She held his hand in the truck. She just didn't belong to him.....he belonged to her as well.

They took the turn-off to Scottsbluff near Northport. He saw the van off in the distance.

"There he is."

Antonia looked around and she suddenly got very concerned.

"There is no way for him to be using that van. It was wrecked. How did he fix it so fast?"

"I don't know, but this ends here and now. I'm going to pull over the first chance I get and end this. Are you ready? I have no idea how this is going to go down."

"Pull into that rest area. I have to pee. Use the gun if you have to. Do whatever it takes." she said.

"I will, don't worry."

Jim pulled into the small rest area and Antonia got out to use the lady's room. The white van pulled in right behind them. The windshield was cracked and the front bumper was barely on. The van sounded like it was on its last legs.

Jim took out his pistol and tucked it behind his pants. He turned off the truck. He got out slowly and walked over to the driver's side door of the white van. The driver rolled down the window. The two of them just locked eyes on one another.

"I'm amazed you got this thing running again," said Jim

"It's a Chevy. They're built to last."

"You know I have to kill you, right?"

"If that's what you think you have to do. I'm not sure Antonia is going to be too happy when she comes out of the lady's room and sees her husband's brains all over the windshield. I mean, if you love her, how could you do that to her?"

"You're a real piece of work. They broke the mold when they made you. She's mine, you asshole. This ends here and now."

"Jimbo.....she was never yours," he said.

Antonia came out of the women's room. She gave Jim a weird look and got in the van with the stranger. She kissed him. Jim couldn't believe what he was seeing. This was unreal.....*this was almost worse than him killing her!*

"This is the guy who was following us. I told you I wasn't making him up." said the stranger.

"Leave us alone. What is wrong with you?" she asked.

"Antonia.....what are you doing? I'm your husband for God's sake," he said with tears in his eyes.

The look on her face is one he will never forget. That look of absolute horror and repulsion. She wasn't looking at her husband.....*she was looking at a complete stranger.*

"Stay away from us," she said before the white van took off.

He tried to follow them but lost them at a train track in Scottsbluff. He drove around frantically for hours in the hopes of trying to find them, but it was no use. She and the white van were gone. Jim stopped at a gas station and called the police. He didn't know what else to do. He soon realized he did far more harm than good.

The police detectives were skeptical of his story from the start. They had the transcript of his report about the white van from Officer Reading. They were unable to locate the white van. He knew he had screwed up when the detectives started asking some very *intense* questions.....like: did he ever threaten to harm his wife? It went downhill from there.

"Jim, I don't know what to make of this story. If your wife got in the van willingly with this guy then there's really not much we can do. Maybe she will come to her senses and come back home. The best thing you can do now is go back home and wait for her." said one of the officers

Jim did just that. He went back home. Back to their small apartment at the University. He waited and waited, but she never came home. Not after a week, or a month, or a year. Her family did not believe his story. They even hired a private investigator to track her down. He talked to Jim several times and each came, he came up empty-handed. The surveillance video at the rest area showed her getting into a white van. That video pretty much saved Jim. Without it, he was certain he would have been charged with her murder. The video doesn't lie. As far as the police were concerned, she got into the van of her own free will. There was nothing to investigate. No one believed his story. Everyone felt he was hiding something. Jim waited for her for over a year. He never even graduated. All those years of late-night study sessions proved to be a waste of his time. He waited and waited, but she never returned. No one in her family had heard from her since the day she disappeared. Finally, Jim had enough. He sold his truck and all of his possessions and bought a small white van. He was going to find his wife. He would roam the lonely roads and highways of the midwest, looking for her. He knew she was out there. The evil man had taken her from him and he was going to get her back.....or he would die trying.