

Action Excerpt from Novel by Andrea Rains Waggener

I had the windshield wipers on high and, when no cars were coming, the high beams on too; but the rain wasn't so much rain as it was a perpetual blockade of water that the SUV had to keep battering its way through. In other words, I couldn't see much of anything except a black shroud. It was only the blur of the double yellow line and the occasional stretch of guardrail that helped me keep the SUV where it needed to be.

It sounded like we were caught in a wind tunnel that was still under construction. The water hitting the SUV's roof was a gang of out-of-control contractors firing nail guns through the metal.

The freaky fantasy-land in my head kept up. Just get to Ananda's, I told myself. Focus. Focus. Focus.

After what seemed like a decade (I was almost tempted to turn the rearview mirror my way so I could see what I looked like in my twenties), I was pretty sure we were getting close to the end of the lake. At least I hoped so. I really thought the rest of the drive would be nothing by comparison. A couple more hours and we'd be safe.

It seemed like the glaring beams came out of nowhere. Of course, the vehicle attached to those beams had to have been following us for awhile, but I'd been so intent on the road in front of the Expedition I hadn't looked at the road behind it ... until light brighter than I thought was possible hurtled through the back window of the SUV, reflected off the rearview mirror, and hit me in the eyes. I touched the switch on the mirror that dimmed the lights of following vehicles at night, but it didn't help much. I couldn't tell what was back there. It just looked like a giant sizzling supernova was trying to shove its way up the SUV's tail pipe.

Then something crashed into the back of the Expedition.

The SUV reeled forward and to the right. It scraped along the guardrail with a screech that sounded like a dozen angry cougars. The tires slid through standing water. I swore. I probably screamed. Agni's body hit the door. It sounded like Jag growled.

The light behind us darted to the left and loomed up beside us. I spared a millisecond to glance that way.

A behemoth, unfortunately not an apparition like so many of the things I'd been seeing in the last few months, dark and heavy, smashed against the left side of the Expedition. More wailing metal. It was like being in one of those things that crushed cars and a car wash at the same time. I somehow managed to keep my foot on the gas even though my instinct was to hit the brake.

The road in front of us bent hard left. I didn't see any light coming from that direction, which didn't tell me much about whether a car was coming because the road turned back on itself so many times and the rain was so hard an RV could have been fifty feet away and I probably wouldn't have seen its headlights. But what choice did I have?

I pressed the accelerator and the SUV seemed to writhe, protesting the metal vise created by the guardrail and whatever was attempting to compact us. Then the Expedition shook off the onslaught and lunged forward. The engine next to us revved. I looked left again and saw through the blur of water and light outside my window that I was in a drag race with a logging truck. It was empty, its trailers piggy-backed.

I pushed harder on the accelerator. The logging truck stayed with us for a couple seconds. Then it dropped back.

I was going too fast for the coming bend in the road; it was practically 45 degrees, but I couldn't slow down. If it was going to end here, I wanted to go with death by curve rather than death by logging truck.

I tried to remember everything my driver's ed teacher, Mr. Fremont, had said about skids. I'd never gotten to put his instruction to practical use, which was true of most of what I'd learned in school, but careening along a narrow road covered with several inches of rain water and being pursued by a malevolent logging truck wasn't the time to critique the school system.

I muscled the SUV into the curve, and its back end started a boycott. "Dumb idea," it seemed to announce. "I think I'll sit this one out."

Despite four-wheel drive, the back wheels spun, and the rear of the Expedition veered away from the direction of the curve. Agni's ribs hit my shoulder. Jag grunted in the back seat. The front end decided the back end had the right idea, and the whole SUV started shimmying sideways. I pointed the nose of the Expedition in the direction of the left sashay.

It looked like we were going to plow into the rocky mountainside on the south side of the road. I held my breath. Suddenly, the SUV got its act together and decided continuing on wasn't so bad. All four tires gripped the pavement. I had control again.

I glanced in the rearview mirror. The logging truck was right behind us.

As soon as I got us out of the curve, I stomped on the gas pedal. I knew that even if the truck's trailers were empty, the SUV had to be able to outrun a logging truck. I couldn't see Lake Crescent, but judging from how long we'd been on 101, I figured we had to be close to the end of the lake. Straighter road was coming. I just had to stay in front of our pursuer.

We skated around another curve, sliding so far to the right that we ratcheted along the guardrail again. Gravel bickered with the wheel wells.

The logging truck laid on its horn. I laughed. Really. Even though I was in by far the most terrifying situation of my life, which was saying a lot given all the classmates-with-Uzis-cougar-attack-crazed-family-men-with-knives-and-guns stuff, I could appreciate how dumb it was for the truck driver to honk at me. Did the driver really think that after being nearly crushed and almost drilling through a rocky mountainside, a horn, no matter how loud, was going to scare me?

Two more curves, two more close encounters with mountainsides, two more caroms off the guardrail—the SUV was clearly wishing someone else was driving, someone with a little less adrenaline running the show. Agni bounced back and forth in the front seat; Jag flopped around in the back. I kept muttering, “Sorry.”

Finally, between rabid arcs of the windshield wipers, a glimpse of a straight-away appeared in the headlights’ miasmic glow. I pushed the accelerator to the floor, clutched the wheel tight with one hand, and flipped off the logging truck’s driver with my other hand. The SUV sputtered forward and seemed to transform into a hovercraft.

The logging truck’s invasive lights started to fall away.

I kept my foot down, hard. But I loosened my grip on the steering wheel. Agni woofed. I was pretty sure he was saying, “Way to go.”

For the first time since the metal monster from hell started trying to squish us, I looked in the back seat. Jag was in panther form. If I hadn’t known he loved me, I would have been terrified. His teeth were bared, his eyes narrowed. He looked like an overgrown house cat about to swat his owner.

“You okay?” I asked him. I had to shout to be heard over the rain.

“Car chases are more fun to watch in movies than be in for real,” he shouted back.

I laughed.

The rain continued its attempt to downsize the SUV from vehicle to two-dimensional metal sculpture, but after 101 turned south, the road opened up—more straight stretches, wider shoulders. Even with the water engulfing us, I had a little more visibility. I started relaxing.