

The gas station is usually the only place we stop for miles.

As gas is filling our small car, I press my face into the passenger window to see inside. My brother, Jamie, sees me and boops my nose through the window. I giggle, then hear the creak that tells me the gas is done filling. I put the nozzle back and close the gas cap.

When I turn the car on again, my brother immediately puts on the music. "I'm hungry," he says. In his lap, our cat Tinkle meows.

"Then let's get food. Where do you want to go?"

He thinks for a moment. "I don't know," he says helpfully.

I sigh. "Somewhere nice or fast food?"

"McDonald's."

I raise an eyebrow at him. "I thought you didn't know where you wanted to go."

He shrugs as I pull onto the street.

Food was easy; our parents had left all their money to us, and there had been enough of it to get by. When it first started, and we were living in our aunt's house, I dropped out of school and got a job. My aunt insisted she could provide for us, and we already had enough money from our parents anyway. But I was anxious, and heartbroken from losing our parents. I took my job at the grocery store way too seriously, but eventually got promoted to manager.

When my brother and I first decided to be independent and travel around, the few friends I told said I couldn't take care of my little brother at only 17, that we couldn't just live in the car, that it was all a bad idea. My

grandparents and aunt said it was crazy. Jamie needed to go to school, I couldn't dig up the roots we had begun to plant again so soon.

So I let Jamie decide. I told him I was tired of living in this city, the one we'd lost our parents in. I didn't like the reminders of what we had lost, how every time we broke the news to someone they'd get that look in their eye and repeat the same useless words every time: "I'm so sorry."

I told him we would go out on our own and explore the world, go to all the places we'd wanted to go. We could live in the car, which was small and old, but comfortable enough. We could even take our cat, Tinkle, with us. As for school, we'd enroll him in an online program.

Of course he'd said yes, because I knew my brother, and I knew he lived to do things he probably shouldn't do. Even so, he would never do it without permission. He was a good kid. That's how I knew I could take care of him.

So with our car, Tinkle, and a credit card linked to our parents' small fortune, we set off. Our aunt had cried that day, but we went back to visit occasionally. I know she still doesn't approve of the whole thing. That's fine. I had my own independence, and we wouldn't be tied down.

Realistically, I knew it wouldn't last forever. I was 18, my brother now 14, and I knew one day he would want to leave. Make friends, fall in love, have kids, get a job. For now, though, I held onto what I had.

Even though my brother usually chose to eat at the most unhealthy grease chains the world had ever produced, I made sure he had something good for him every once in a while. Fruit or vegetable every day, that went

for both of us. He has to have some real fuel to keep up with his online school. It is that online school which he is currently puzzling over. He had always been smarter than me, in everything except English. Grammar, spelling, the whole language just didn't make sense to him.

"It doesn't follow the rules!" he says. "Math always follows the rules."

He was right about that, I guess.

I look over his shoulder as I eat. "Jamie, you spelled the wrong 'week.'"

"Harper!"

I shrug. "Just spell it right, not my fault you did it wrong."

He rolls his eyes, swatting Tinkle away as she tries to steal a bite of his food. "No! You have your own food in the back Tinks!"

I laugh, then check my GPS. We were in northern Arizona at the moment, and making our way to northern California. This trip was simply because we wanted to see if northern California was really as beautiful as people said, but usually we had a specific destination in mind.

It was time to drive again, and so I set aside my trash in our paper bag. Tugging my sweater from underneath me, I get comfortable for another few hours of driving. Tinkle meows at me as I put the car in drive. I pet her ears, and press on the gas.

Driving down the street, there is little traffic, but a red car is tailgating me.

I switch to the right lane, and the car speeds past us as if we were a personal offense to it.

“These people need to get it together,” I say under my breath as I turn my attention back in front of me. Right at the same time that a minivan pulls out of a parking lot on the right, just a few feet in front of us.

I slam on the breaks, and honk my horn. The other car’s brakes screech, but I can tell it wouldn’t be enough. My brother screams, Tinkle yelps as she’s thrown to the floor of the car. I try to swerve the car as the minivan gets closer in only a second.

Then it is silent.

The recovery went smoothly, I had a concussion, my brother was fine. Tinkle was just traumatized. The family in the minivan was also fine, other than the father who had been driving. He was angry he had to pay for damages.

They told him he should make sure nobody was coming before he pulled out of the parking lot. That made him angrier.

Unfortunately our car was totaled, so the man had to buy us a new one. It was used, and not exactly new, but it was better than our old car.

The main issue now was that this whole thing presented the perfect opportunity for people to argue that I could not care for my brother.

Nevermind that it was the minivan's fault that there was a crash, or that we’d been perfectly fine for over a year. People simply disliked the idea that someone could live differently from them.

And so the fight for Jamie began.