

Dark

From *The Sky Is Falling*

By Rebecca Washburn

He hated the dark. He hated it more than he hated pointless trips to the mall or other gas and effort wasting occasions. He hated and feared the darkness of night with such a passion, he sometimes could not imagine that he could. That's why he never told anyone, not even Payton. They would not believe it. He would keep his fear, his hatred, a secret, held deep within himself so no one else had to know.

"Whoa!" cried Payton as she let her hands fall heavily onto the steering wheel. It had been a long day and they had driven to nearly every location Leo knew of. "What a day."

"It has been exhausting," Leo replied dryly as he pulled out of the mall parking lot. It was slowly becoming dusk. He did not trust Payton to drive them when light faded; she was too absentminded. She denied it, but she gave up arguing about it after the first few times.

"Oh, come on," chided Payton, taking out a nail file from her purse; Leo never let her leave anything in his perfectly pruned compartments. "I haven't been out with my friends in ages."

"You see them everyday in school."

"Yeah, but this is different. Besides, we only went to the mall."

"And the pizza shop. And the park. And the video store."

Payton made a face as she stopped in mid-stroke, nail file in hand. "What are you complaining about? I thought you liked exercise."

"Yes, but it has seriously depleted my fuel supply," Leo replied coolly. "Although I was manufactured as a hybrid, my electric motors cannot keep up without gasoline."

"Right," Payton said with a sigh. She picked up her purse and quickly rummaged through it. "I have enough for at least half a tank. I swear, you can be so expensive, Leo."

"In comparison to the costs you must pile onto your parents, I think my needs are much less exuberant," Leo replied. The smugness in his voice did not go unheard by his owner, who pinched the seat in revenge. Leo did not fall for the bait and continued to concentrate on the traffic.

The trip to the gas station did not take long, thankfully. Leo was always amused at Payton's attempts to be gentle as she worked with the gas nozzle. She had never really considered Leo to be a car; she had always referred to him as a person. Leo would never admit it, but he was eternally gratefully for that fact. Payton treated him as an equal and he cherished that. However, her habit of treating the SUV as a real person sometimes made her react in an embarrassed way to very simple things.

"This is, like, rape, only with a car" she muttered, gingerly sticking the nozzle into Leo's side opening.

"Shall I scream 'fire'?" Leo asked, sarcastic. He was secretly laughing at her expense.

"Do it. I dare you."

Leo only laughed and concentrated on the gas entering his system. He wouldn't call it food as a human would. It was more like a nourishing substance. It was warm and the buzzing sensation Leo got from it made him relax. Perhaps going out on all day drives was worth it, if he received this sort of treatment before going home.

Payton quickly paid for the gas and hopped back into the front seat. She sighed, tired from her own day of chatting and shopping with friends.

"Home?" ventured Leo.

"Yep. Curfew is coming up, anyway."

Leo obeyed and they were on the road for the short ride home. Leo couldn't deny it; he loved going out with his owner. He liked seeing the world, even if it was from a car's point of view. He could not speak directly to Payton when she had friends with her in the car, but Payton would often rub the steering wheel or pat the dashboard, as if trying to include the SUV in some distant way. They argued a lot, but Leo knew they were also very close.

"Target sighted," Payton said abruptly, as they approached Larkspur Lane. Their house was at the other end of the circle. Leo drove slowly around the residential cul-de-sac. The cookie cutter houses loomed ahead, darkened by the approach of night. Leo shivered involuntarily. The sun was now gone from the sky completely; they were now in darkness, save from the street lamps.

"...drive way?" Payton asked. Leo flinched, aware he had been ignoring her.

"Sorry, what did you say?" he asked, slowing down a bit.

Payton stared at the dashboard, surprised. She smirked teasingly. "I wasn't aware cars went deaf," she said. "Of course, it's apparent some can become dumb."

Leo snorted, trying to redeem his pride. "I am not deaf. I was simply ignoring the senseless rambling you seem to think is conversation," he replied.

"Touchy. All I asked was if I could pull into the drive way," Payton said, frowning. "I mean, you trust me to do that at least, right?"

"You get lost in your own house. I really don't feel like being treated like a bumper car by running into the trashcans again."

"That was only once! Please, Leo," Payton pleaded. She pouted at the dashboard.

Leo grumbled something unintelligent. "Fine, but if you scratch up my paint again, you had better get it fixed."

"Deal," Payton replied, grinning. She grabbed the steering wheel and pushed down on the gas as they pulled up to her driveway. She respected Leo's ability to maintain himself while moving, but she still liked driving on her own.

Much to Leo's relief, Payton pulled into the Trivison's driveway behind her mother's Jaguar without a major hassle. When Payton turned off the ignition and reached for her purse, Leo felt the panic sink in again. Payton's bedroom looked out onto the driveway, thankfully, and she had repositioned her bed

under the window so they could sneak a quick conversation in when needed. Even with a way to reach the child, Leo could not help but feel utterly alone in the driveway.

“Sleep tight, big guy,” Payton said, flashing a grin at the dashboard.

“Goodnight, Payton,” Leo replied absently.

Payton reached over and pulled on the handle. The door did not budge. She pulled again and nothing happened.

“What is it?” Leo asked, finally noticing her trouble.

“Um, your door is locked.”

Leo would have stared at her blankly if he had eyes. He checked and found out Payton was telling the truth; his locking mechanisms had activated.

“Weird,” Leo commented, slightly embarrassed. He released the locks. “I must have done it instinctively. I’m sorry, Payton.”

“No prob,” Payton replied. She patted the dashboard teasingly. “‘Cause I know you love me so much that you don’t want me to leave.”

“Like a thorn in my side. Good night.”

“G’night,” Payton replied, hopping down to the ground. The moment her body left the car, Leo felt coldness sweep over him. The door shut and Leo froze up unconsciously. Nothing stirred inside him amongst his seats and he felt his engine cooling down. Deep inside, he felt the bubble of fear return. He hated the dark...

Payton stopped as she approached the path leading up to the front door. Behind her, she heard a distinctive sound. It was like a sniff, or maybe even a whimper. She turned around and only saw Leo sitting there. While she knew he was still awake, she couldn’t help but feel like he was unnaturally still.

“Leo?” she called.

She nearly gasped when she saw the car jump. It wasn’t like a person, considering Leo’s heavy form was just too massive to get off the ground. It was more like a shudder, a flinch. His tires turned inward slightly and his glossy black body seemed to rattle.

“What?” he called back, his voice sharp.

“What the hell was that?” Payton asked, smiling warily, trying to play it off as a joke.

“What was what?”

“You just jumped.”

“I am physically impossible of jumping, Payton.”

“No, but you, like, shuddered,” Payton insisted. She took a step back towards her car. “Did I surprise you?”

There was a moment of silence. “No,” Leo replied. He stopped again. “I mean, yes, you surprised me.”

“Sorry,” Payton said, still uneasy. Leo sounded uptight and on edge.

“It’s nothing to apologize for,” Leo said, curtly. He did not seem like he wanted to talk. “It’s five minutes until eleven. You’re going to be late. Go ahead in.”

Payton frowned. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“I’m fine!”

Be it the cracking of his voice or the surprising defensiveness in his tone, Payton knew that something was not right with Leo. Her frown deepened as she walked back towards him. He sputtered when she came closer.

“What are you doing?” Leo asked, again defensive. “You’re going to be late.”

“Yeah, well, that can wait,” Payton replied. She put her hands on her hips as she stood in front of the SUV’s front grill. “Stop trying to be cool and just spit it out, Leo. I know something’s wrong.”

“There is nothing wrong,” Leo said quickly. His voice was betraying him.

“You’re acting like you’re mad at me,” Payton said. She shifted uneasily on her feet. “Are you?”

Leo sputtered again. “No!” he nearly shouted. “I am not angry at anyone. Just go to bed already!” He sounded almost desperate.

“Not until you tell me why you’re being such a spazz!” Payton shouted back. She leaned forward onto the still warm hood, staring directly at the dashboard. “I swear, if you don’t tell me, I will stand here all night and *you’re* the one whose going to have to put up with a sleep-deprived teenager in the morning.”

A low rumbled came from within Leo’s engine, a warning. However, Payton did not get the sarcastic or angry remark she had been expecting. She waited, the silence enveloping them both. Leo did not say anything.

“Leo?” Payton said, worried again. She touched the hood gently. “Hey, come on. Stop acting like this. I gave you life, remember? If you can’t talk to your mommy, who can you talk to?”

She meant it as a joke they often shared, but Leo did not laugh or snap back in his usual manner. Instead, she felt a tremor come from deep within the SUV. It was like the car was shivering. Payton knew that seemed impossible, but since Leo could talk and feel, she would not be surprised about anything else he could do.

“Stay,” came his quiet voice after a few moments.

Payton hesitated. She stared past the front window, and at the dashboard beneath it, uncertain if she had heard him right.

“Please stay,” Leo said again. In his tiny whisper, Payton heard fear—and desperation.

“Stay?” echoed Payton.

“Yes. Please.”

Payton stared at him, surprised and moved. Leo was always tough, even around her. He almost never lost his cool. Yet, this Leo was different. He sounded painfully weak.

“Sure,” she said quietly. She moved around the hood and over to the driver’s side door. The door automatically swung open before she reached it, as if begging her to enter. She climbed up and closed the door behind her. Silence fell over the inside of the car.

It was unnerving, but Payton forced herself to stay. She gently patted the steering wheel. No matter if he was sarcastic or a harsh critic, and no matter if he was just a talking car—Leo was her friend and now, she understood he needed her there.

“Are you afraid of being alone?” she asked, after a few minutes passed. She had never asked what the car felt about being left in the driveway all night. Once she thought about it, she realized how awful it must have been.

“Not so much alone,” Leo replied carefully. He sounded much more in control now. “Just…”

“Just what?”

“The dark.”

Payton stopped petting the leather. “The dark?” she echoed.

“Night, dark, whichever,” Leo replied. Payton could almost hear the shrug in his voice. He was trying to play it off again.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Payton asked. She felt almost saddened by his decision not to tell her his fear.

Leo snorted and Payton smiled at the familiar gesture. “And have you rub it in my face? Swamp me with overreacting sympathy? Worry for no reason? I know you, Payton. One of those reactions is inevitable.”

“I would never rub something like that in your face,” Payton said, hurt by the accusation. She frowned at the dash. “And friends are supposed to worry and sympathize for their friends. We are friends, aren’t we, Leo?”

Leo was silent for a moment. “Yes,” he replied quietly.

Payton smiled brightly. “Glad to hear it, partner.”

“I’m sorry for worrying you,” Leo continued. He seemed embarrassed. “Some nights, I feel more uncomfortable than usual. I don’t know why I acted like this tonight.”

“Fear is like that,” Payton replied.

“I hate being afraid. I feel weak by doing so,” Leo said softly.

Payton was deeply moved by her usually secretive friend’s sudden openness. “You can’t be brave if you aren’t afraid first,” she chided philosophically.

“You think?”

“I know. It’s perfectly okay to be afraid of something, Leo,” she said. “I’m afraid of the Drokes, but I don’t let that fear stop me from trying to work around them.”

Leo appeared pacified by her words. They made sense to him, it seemed. Payton stopped receiving the strange vibes from him. She smiled warmly, knowing her friend would be okay.

“Do you still want me to stay?” she asked.

“No,” Leo replied. He sighed. “You are right; fear leads to courage. I must first conquer the fear in order to be brave.”

“That’s the spirit,” added Payton. She smiled and hugged the steering wheel. “But if you need some help, I’m only a window away, buddy.”

Leo’s surfaces seemed to warm in thanks. “I may call you aggravating, Payton,” he began softly, “but I am very thankful that you brought me to life and have stayed with me. I don’t think I would have made it far without you.”

Payton smiled at the blank dash. “I owe you just as much, Leo,” she said. “We make a pretty good team.”

“A good team,” mused Leo. He rumbled softly. “I think so, too.”

With one last pat on his steering wheel and after gently shutting his door with care, Payton said goodnight for the second time that evening. Before entering the front door, she looked back at the still car. It looked like a car and probably always would, but inside Payton knew there was a very human soul. Her smile softened and she finally went inside.

Leo settled back down, aware of the pressing darkness and for the first time since he experienced the cloaking sensation of night, he fell asleep without a single thought of despair.

END