



**4** I drove west, homeward, into a fiery late afternoon sun. I cranked down my window and gulped at the clean desert air that had already begun to cool in anticipation of a spring evening.

No other vehicles appeared in either direction for almost an hour. I searched the road ahead for the turnout to Desert Home, unable to decide if I was going to stop. It wasn't until I'd parked and set the brake and listened to the engine relax that I began to wonder why I had stopped where I was so clearly unwelcome—the famous “scene of the crime.” My wondering was short lived. I knew from experience that if you're about to do something you probably shouldn't do, the best advice you can give yourself is not to think about it too long. It ruins the surprise when the worst happens.

The wind picked up in ferocious gusts that roared in my ears and partially obscured my view of the model home. I hiked down the slope. Blowing sand burrowed inside my clothes and forced me to squint. Well away from the porch, I threw my “hello” toward the house. The chair was gone. I shouted several more times, gradually moving closer each time. With each step the wind scooped up my voice with the sand and sent them both to parts unknown. I knocked on the door. The wind took that, too.

The front windows were now covered with blankets from the inside. Newspaper had been taped across the picture window on the north side. Two of the sheets didn't completely overlap and allowed the sliver of a view. I pushed my cap back on my forehead and cupped my hands to shield my eyes from the blowing sand.

The woman sat on the green chair that had been on the porch. She was alone. The chair was the only piece of furniture in the empty room. Her bare left shoulder angled toward my window. A skylight directly overhead encircled her with a narrow stream of honeyed light. The rest of her body drifted in shadow. My eyes adjusted. Her raised left elbow revealed the soft curve of a breast. She appeared to be vaguely Asian, though her skin looked too white. She was clearly naked. Her fingers moved rhythmically along the slender neck of a musical instrument.

The wind died. Silence took its place. I held my breath. What was about to happen was rare, though I had experienced it a few times in my years on 117.

The setting sun burned into a layer of advancing high red clouds that swirled with sand. Propelled by the wind, the clouds picked up speed and rushed across the flatlands where they broke against the mesa cliffs and splintered like a giant wave. The backwash of wind roared toward me across the miles of desert shore driving sand ahead of it. My hands glowed from the intense, approaching light.

I was caught in a blinding red flash. The air around me crackled with electricity. I fought the impulse to close my eyes. The skylight above the woman filled the room with a pulsing pink glow like the inside of a beating heart. In the unnatural light, the fingertips of her left hand flew over the absent strings. Her right hand grasped nothing as it sawed the air. The soundless instrument rocked side to side with music only she could hear and I could only imagine.

The light in the room transformed into deepening shades of the spectrum. I tried to recall the name of the instrument the woman played. Its name was lost in the curve of her bare shoulder and half oval of breast, seamless yet distinct against the instrument. The woman and the instrument were a cameo in the empty room.

She stopped playing. I felt shame. I had no right to be there. It was wrong.

Too late, I realized the light had slipped behind me. A misshapen silhouette of my head was cast through the newspaper and across the floor in front of her. She turned toward the window where I stood. She returned her attention to her instrument. Her chin dropped to her chest. She was lost again in her private music. I felt shame but was helpless to turn away. I continued to listen.

The sun dropped below the mountains. It only took a few minutes. She played on until I could no longer separate her from the darkness. I walked from the house into the dusk and remembered the name of the instrument—a cello. I sat in the cab with the engine idling and thought about the woman, and the cello and the red room and the haunting music I didn't hear. I whispered to myself, "Go home, Ben."

The headlights wrangled the soft darkness in front of me. I stared but didn't see. She might have been standing there for some time. The sleeveless flowered print dress she now wore was loose fitting and fell exactly to her knees. A slight wind fluttered its hemline back and forth across her pale legs. Her coal eyes were intent upon me. She moved only to push wild strands of her long dark hair away from her face. There was little chance she could see me with the headlights shining in her eyes, though I felt as if she could. Maybe I wanted her to see me through glass the way I had seen her.

I opened the door and slid out from behind the wheel until I felt the chrome running board under my boots. The interior lights flashed on and off. She reached up again and brushed the hair from her face. I stepped out in front of the headlights. She took a step backward to the very edge of light.

She didn't shout. Her voice lifted itself without effort over the rise and fall of the gently fluctuating rpms of the Detroit diesel.

"Are you a music lover or just a pervert?" she asked.

There were only two ways to answer that question. I wasn't pleased that the question so precisely limited my response. "Are those my only choices?" I asked. When she didn't say anything, I said, "I guess I'm a music lover."

“Go ahead, then,” she said, her voice breaking this time. “Take it and go.”

“Take what and go?” I asked.

Instead of answering me she turned and disappeared into the darkness. The faint sound of her footsteps stopped. From out of sight, she asked, “Did the owner send you?”

I didn’t know what she was talking about. “No one sent me,” I answered, aiming my voice up and out into the night.

“Then why are you here?”

“I just wanted to apologize again for what happened this morning.”

Her own laughter caught her by surprise. It erupted from her throat in choking hiccups before it exploded into a brief howl. A coyote answered her call. She howled back in a long, high-pitched response that made me shiver. I tossed my head back and let loose a howl of my own. My effort fetched only silence.

There was no way for me to know if she was still nearby.

“I’m a truck driver,” I said. I turned back to the cab and stepped up on the running board. I stood there high and small beneath the first shy desert stars. “I’m sorry I bothered you, ma’am,” I said. “Thanks for the loan of the wall.”

I already had one leg inside the cab when her clear voice drifted down out of the darkness. “You’re welcome.”

I listened hard for more and wished for another hiccup of laughter or a tender howl. All I could hear was the rhythmic fall of her shoes on sand that told me she was moving further away up the slope. The coyote let loose again while I was closing the door.

As I backed up to turn around, my headlights rose slowly toward the entrance. She stood on top of the hill beneath the arch, her arms wrapped around herself against the chilly breeze. In the desert, the line between what is dead and what is alive often gets blurred. She appeared to me as a vaporous feminine spirit guarding the gate of a cemetery. I confess, as my headlights aimed toward Price, there was an odd sting of homesickness inside me, though for what exactly, I couldn’t have said.