

## The Cactus Motel

The shadows across the road were long, sagebrush and tumbleweed magnified into grotesque monsters stretching their long arms far into the depths of the darkening desert. Other than the moaning of the tires as they ceaselessly caressed the seemingly never ending ribbon of asphalt, and the gentle rush of the wind marking the smooth passage of the car, the only sound was the radio whispering the scratchy voice of a cowboy who'd probably never been west, much less seen a cow. Distant mountains blocked from his tired song all but an echo of loneliness and despair.

Pulling his eyes from the mesmerizing pattern of the median stripe, he glanced across at her slowly, so as to make sure that he wouldn't find her eyes glaring back at him as they had for what seemed so many interminable miles. Good, he thought, she was asleep, her tiny frame tucked against the doorpost, the back of her head wedged into the narrow gap between seat back and the frame of the car. If only she could stay that way until the dawn.

He couldn't remember what had started their fight, much less the argument that had preceded it. He'd said something during dinner, of that he was sure. An off-hand remark, some meaningless casual comment ... he couldn't recollect. All he knew was that by the end of the meal she was being quite sharp with him, and, after they'd said their goodbyes and were pulling through the ornate wrought iron gate onto the city street, she'd really let go.

How could you ... what were you thinking ... were you thinking ... I just don't understand you sometimes ... you're so filled with yourself it hurts. The latter had struck with such force that he was stunned and, by the time he'd recovered his senses, he found himself screaming at her, saying things he knew not to be true, but that were carefully calculated to hurt and wound.

She'd withdrawn, pulling away from him as far as she could to her side of the car. And, by the time he'd pulled onto the road home, a lightly traveled state highway, it was as if he was driving alone ... no, it was much worse. Her cold aloofness drew even his soul into limbo, so that it seemed that he was guiding a vehicle in which there were no occupants, the emptiness of the interior of the sedan a perfect match for the stark void of the darkening desert landscape.

He drove on, hour after hour, until it was close to midnight and the final stretch of road lay ahead, close to a hundred miles straight across the most desolate part of the desert. As was his habit, born of long years living in the region and the practical part of his nature, he scanned the instrument panel of the car, well aware that there would be no services nor support in the miles ahead. It was then that he noticed it, a rhythmic pulsing of the volt meter needle. A bad gauge? A normal fluctuation due to the heat of the engine being enveloped in the rapidly cooling night air? Nothing to worry about. Once more he glanced over at her, immediately noticing the silky smoothness of her skin glowing softly in the diffuse illumination from the dashboard lights. Perhaps, a failing voltage regulator or a loose connection somewhere in the wiring harness? Could the alternator itself be failing, sending a signal through the gauge that its mechanical life was near ending?

Ahead, just at the edge of the last foothill before the featureless flatness of the desert floor stretched into a formless void, he could see the green glow of a neon light. What was it ... he pulled at his memory, trying to recall this section of the highway. Even as he reached down and disengaged the car's cruise control, he remembered. Yes, there it was, a tiny motel, far enough from the edge of the road that it would have been lost except for the fluorescent glow of charged glass tubes outlining a ten foot high plywood sign. Shaped like its namesake, the most well known flora of the desert, it proudly, if somewhat tiredly proclaimed, "The Cactus Motel."

Making the decision quickly, a trait required of his profession, he carefully steered the car from the highway, passed under the plant he could now hear merrily buzzing its electric tune into the still night air, and pulled to a stop in front of the motel's office. Shutting off the motor, he glanced back at the sign and then down the length of the one story adobe structure. He remembered this place, now, but couldn't for the life of him recall why. Had he ever been here, or was it familiar simply because he'd passed it so many times while heading out of state on his frequent inspection tours? Why did it seem so ... he was interrupted from his thoughts as she stirred slightly, her arms crossing in an attempt to ward off the sudden chill as cool night air began infiltrating the passenger compartment.

He reached across, and, after first carefully brushing an errant wisp of light hair from her eyes, gently stroked her cheek with the back of his hand, as he had learned long ago was how she preferred to be awakened.

"What is it?"

"I stopped here. It's late, and I figured we could find out what's wrong in the morning. Right now, I just need to rest ... is that okay with you?"

He saw her begin to tense, but as she looked at him with sleepy eyes, her vision focused past his shoulder, through the window of the car and across the parking lot to the glowing cactus at the edge of the tarmac. Her face seemed to relax, the cold green of her eyes slowly warmed, and the barest hint of a smile played across the wrinkles at the corners of her mouth.

"Sure, why not ... it's a good idea."

As he'd done so many times in other journeys, he walked to the front door of the office and rang the night bell. While he was checking in, she tidied up the litter in the car, grabbed the bottle of wine she'd brought from her mother's, and scooped up the plastic bag of sliced fruit, cheese, and crackers that since he'd known her she always seemed to have at hand. By the time he emerged from the office holding the room key, she'd locked up the car and was handing him the small, worn overnight bag they always shared on short trips.

"What room are we in?"

"Sixteen, furthest away from us. The old clerk ... I think he's been here forever ... said he might get a few late night truckers checking in, but that it'll remain quiet at the end of the building. All right with you?"

She smiled again, and something from the past flew across the back of his consciousness. But, before he could examine the image, she was walking away from him, calling back, "Hurry up, you're starting to look like some lost old man!"

He scurried after her, by the time he'd caught up she was standing at the door to room sixteen. Knowing how she was, he unlocked the door and entered ahead of her. Switching on all the lights, then carefully scrutinizing the space under the bed, along the walls, and every corner of the room's minuscule bathroom, he called back to her, "It's safe, I don't see any cockroaches."

"Well ..." she entered the room and neatly bolted the door behind her, "I hope you're right! And I'm still not convinced you'd tell me if you had seen any of the damned things."

"Don't worry, I looked everywhere. By the way, I hope you don't mind, but all that was available was this room with one bed." He chuckled, "We'll just have to put up with being bundle buddies tonight."

She smiled at him, this time her eyes seemed to draw him towards her and, for a brief second, his knees became weak and a certain sweet faintness passed over him. "Sure, you wash up," she rummaged through the drawer of a worn desk set under the shuttered window, "and I'll pour us some wine. Would you like something to eat?"

"No, I'm not really hungry. I had far too much at your mother's. And just half a glass'll be fine, thank you," his voice echoed off the hard ceramic tiles of the bathroom walls.

When he came out she was sitting on the edge of the mattress, the covers turned down and, he noticed with pleasant surprise, his pillow was fluffed and creased at the head of the bed. Last he'd seen it had been in a bag in the corner of the car's trunk. She must have gone back and gotten it while he was washing, he thought.

"Do you want to watch television?"

"No," he responded, "It's been a long day."

"Okay, you settle in. I'll be to bed in a few minutes."

Slipping between the sheets, the goose bumps on his skin reminded him that when they'd entered the room the air conditioner had been running at full power. Probably been doing so all day ... what a waste of money, he criticized to himself.

He awoke with a start as the light from the bathroom flashed across his eyelids. As the room darkened, he could see that she had left on the light in the bathroom. His sudden slumber had been interrupted when she'd opened and then not quite fully closed the bathroom door, the rays from the bulb over the cracked porcelain sink had bounced off the mirror on the back of the door into his face.

He slid over as she got under the covers. "Oh, thanks for warming up my side!"

"No problem. You comfortable?"

"Yes, thank you. And you?"

"I'm fine." He reached across to rub her shoulder, not really thinking about the movement. As his hand touched her, he could feel her warmth, the gentle tension always within her, the soft, silky fabric of her negligee.

"Whoa! What's this?"

"Why, it's a nightgown, silly."

"But ... but, you only wear this when ..."

She rolled to face him. The quick, moist heat of her lips stilled his, and silenced his thoughts. As one hand reached down to stroke him, her leg hooked over his side to pull him closer with a familiar urgent strength that never ceased to amaze and delight him. His breathing became rapid and the walls of the room began to recede into the distance, as the world falls

away to nothing below a lofty mountain peak. He reached for her, stroked her, became entangled with her, and, ever so slowly, slowly he melted into her ...

He glanced back in the mirror as they pulled out of the parking lot, the mid-morning sun washing out all detail in his view except for the faint reflection of sunlight off the now silent neon lights outline the wooden cactus. Carefully checking for traffic, he accelerated the car onto the highway, noticing as he did so that the voltage gauge was showing no movement whatsoever. Good, must've been the cold air, he thought.

As he reached cruising speed, and fading into the haze behind him was the line of hills marking the edge of the desert he'd just crossed into, he glanced over towards her. She was already asleep, her head tucked into his pillow, which was stuffed in the space between the door and the seat. What was that, in her hand? Clutched to her chest was a folded paper bag, wrapping some small object. For a few moments more he wondered what it was within the bag, but soon his attention was drawn to the task of keeping an eye on the road for debris scattered by the night wind or the inevitable numbers of small animals whose mutilated carcasses testified to the almost hypnotic quality of the endless pavement. Yes, indeed, he thought, long, straight, roads like this were the most dangerous to drive.

It was almost noon when he pushed the button to open the garage. She awoke in the silence after he shut off the motor, startled to full awareness by the grinding noise of the overhead door descending. As was always the case, she rushed from the car to enter the house and deactivate the alarm system. By the time he'd closed up the car and brought in their belongings, she was in the living room standing in front of their glass doored display cabinet.

"Could you put this up on the second shelf for me, please?"

"Sure," he said, reaching for the object she'd just unwrapped from the paper bag.

He looked down at the tiny glass ashtray, the raised paint lettering "Cactus Motel" under his fingertips feeling so oddly familiar. "What's this? Don't you know this is stealing," he teased, "... after all these years, sometimes I think you're still mostly a kid!"

"Well, we paid enough for the room. Besides, it'll go great with the other one."

He almost said something, but the sudden images filling every corner of his being stilled his voice. Her cries of passion ... his own breath almost exploding ... the secret softness she'd showed him, a gentle feeling that in his wildest fantasies he'd never dreamed could exist ... that special moment so long ago he'd come to his first awareness that in the perfect rhythm of loving, two people could, indeed, become one ...

... and, as he looked into the corner of the cabinet, the repository of those precious few mementos from their life that she found to be so very important, he saw the mate to the ashtray. It was a perfect match to the one in his hand, except for a strange, shimmering glow which time had deposited across its surface.

He remembered. The minister. Family, friends. Cutting a cake and dancing. A thousand or more flashbulbs exploding in their faces. And then ...

... it was late evening, the sun was low and the shadows stretching across the road were beginning to make it difficult to determine where tarmac ended and desert began.

"Look, up ahead, do you see it?"

"Yes, isn't it cute."

"Why don't we stop now, before it gets much darker. You must be exhausted." He'd never been bothered driving at night before, but for some reason he didn't want her to know it made him nervous to think about heading out into the desert in the dark with her in the car.

"What about the room in Vegas?"

"I'll call ahead and change it to tomorrow night, I don't think it'll be a problem. Okay?"

"Sure ... it looks kind of cozy."

And so, at the Cactus Motel, it had been their first night ... he remembered now. He pulled her close as he closed the door to the cabinet. It had been last night, too, he thought. And suddenly ... she could feel him draw even closer, holding her with a surprisingly desperate tightness ... suddenly he became aware that there had been no time between the two nights, no time at all. He looked down her, and smiled, and thought of all the nights that had been. And she reached up to kiss him on the cheek, and, looking into his eyes and heart and love, thought to herself of all the nights that were yet to be.

That night, they made love once again, and then, so very soft and tender and seemingly forever, again again. And all the while they came together, in night's embrace lost from the world, far away close by the neon lights at the edge of the desert continued to sing their sweet song to all who stopped at the Cactus Motel.