

## AWAY FROM TREES

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It's past seven o'clock, but dust still hangs over the parking lot from the last of the tourists to leave. I have been driving since three, and am exhausted by the climb from the basin floor, by the relentless sunshine beating on the hood of the car. Already my skin itches and pulls with dryness. Just this morning, I left Connecticut: lush and dense, claustrophobically green, all lawn and hedges, soaring elms and maples against a sky matted into white glare by humidity, air that doesn't move, air that you feel against your skin like a damp, thin sponge. I will have to take it easy here. I will have to go to bed early, get plenty of rest, give my body time to adjust. I will have to wear sunblock constantly, and a hat.

A ranger walks up as I'm opening the trunk, raising his right hand before he is close enough to shake mine. His hat hides his eyes. "You must be the archeologist from back east."

"Yes," I say, and smile into his face, visible now as tanned and wrinkled, with cloudy green eyes and one gold front tooth. "I'm Holly." I shake his hand.

"Earl Cobody. You'll be staying with Dawn and me." He must have been watching me look around, at the bare brown hills, scraped above the old blue-gray mine into white rock exposed like scars, at the dusty sagebrush tangled along the edge of the parking lot, at the wooden buildings of town straight ahead, because now he says, "There, behind you, the old burial ground. And over to the right, the Chinese camp, where the laborers lived. Then that's it. That's Bodie. Quite a town in the 1870s and 80s. By 1915 most mines shut down, and everyone gone for good after the last big fire, forty-six. Except for us, of course. And we're seasonal, most of us, only here April through October. High today of eighty-three, though of course it feels much hotter at this altitude. Low was twenty-seven, just before sun-up."

"Twenty-seven?" The warmest thing I packed is a sweatshirt.

"Don't worry. The house is heated. Bodie may be a ghost town, but inside the rangers' houses, all the comforts of modern life. Dawn wouldn't have it any other way." He picks up my duffel, waving off my protest. I slam the car trunk and follow him, carrying my workcase.

"Lots of people say Bodie's haunted. At one point known as the most dangerous town in the West. Lots of killings. No law to speak of. Ghosts still here, seeking revenge. If you believe that sort of thing. Here"—he moves down a narrow dirt path—"this way."

We pass house after house now, all weathered brown clapboard, windows

broken or boarded over, crumbling chimneys, split and sagging front steps. Outhouses beyond, and, on a small island of dried grasses, an old well. Nothing grows taller than my knees. In front of each dilapidated structure, there is a small post carved with a number corresponding, Earl tells me, to a description in the printed tourism pamphlet. We turn another corner past a large brick building. "The courthouse," Earl says. "Only brick structure in Bodie."

"How'd they bring the bricks here?"

"Same way they brought the wood. Pain in the ass."

"Frontier justice needed every edge it could get, I guess."

He laughs, a short burst that surprises me with its friendliness, and then abruptly asks, "How long you here?"

"Probably a week or two, depending on what I find. If there's more obsidian, it might take a month."

Earl stops in the middle of the road and turns around, drops my duffel in the dirt, points his finger to the hills and, beyond, the snowy tops of mountains.

"Nevada?" I say.

He peers at me. "You don't say it like an easterner. *Ne-vah-dah*."

"I grew up in California. I've just lived in Connecticut since college."

He nods. "You're right. That's Nevada. We're seven miles from the border. But before that, see that rock?" His finger ticks back and forth along the scars. "That's Bodie bluff, where they found the obsidian. Federal land. That's where you'll dig."

"I won't dig very far. About an inch."

"There'll be some grumbling if you find anything. Some people want to mine again. Nothing personal."

"Of course."

He's still looking at the hills. "Gold's what built this place. And half of it's still up there. Nothing now but tourism." He picks up my bag, walks on. I turn around to follow, and notice two men I had not seen before, sitting on the courthouse steps, looking our way. One wears a baseball cap and has a droopy mustache. The other's face is hidden by the shadow of his friend's torso, and his legs, long and muscular, stretch out over the wooden steps.

"Glad to see you boys hard at work," Earl calls out, and they laugh.

"Day's over," the one with the mustache says. "But not if you're training for bellhop. Didn't know we had a visitor." He smiles and lifts his cap, shows teeth as small as corn niblets.

"If you didn't drink so much, you'd remember what I tell you. This is Holly, the archeologist that Parks sent. Holly, this joker's Dan, and this is Craig." We are standing at the edge of the boardwalk now, and I flush with surprise as Craig leans forward and I look into blue eyes, a long straight nose, lips that look puffed, soft. His eyes meet mine just longer than would be expected in an introduction, and when I shake his hand I notice how broad and smooth his fingernails are, how the blood runs under the skin of his arm in raised ropes of vein.

I was working on a site on the Housatonic, back in November, when my brother died. Three of us were camped out in two trailers five miles downriver from the covered bridge where, every October, idling cars line up for photo opportunities, just around the bend from the spot where a bulldozer turned over shards of Indian pottery while digging a tennis court.

I had brought skeins of blue mohair and my needles with me to Cornwall, and had just about made it halfway on a scarf for Court's Christmas gift when Jerry knocked on the trailer door. He peeked his head in, but his eyes did not meet mine as he said, "I was just checking e-mail. There's an urgent message for you. Your mother left a number. A hospital in L.A." At the nearest phone booth, which reeked of stale Pepsi, I stared at hardened lumps of chewing gum and kicked the empty plastic phone-book holder, watching it swing on its large metal ring, as I waited on hold. When my mother came to the phone, her voice was oddly calm as she told me Court had been in an accident. I remember nothing from the drive to the airport except that I kept the needle at 35, and a deer stared at me from the side of the road, which I took as a portent. I just didn't know of what. I was in my mother's kitchen by nine o'clock the next morning, California time, to learn my brother had died during the night of complications from a fall while rock climbing.

I have not knitted since.

My room has gone unused all summer, Earl told me when he settled my bags on the floor and opened the window, and even after I unpack, finding a drawer full of nails in the dresser, it's still stuffy and warm. Outside, the sun has sunk behind the hills, but I can see the outline of the buildings just ahead as I cross through a field of dust and the rusted, dented metal of old pots and pans, bed springs, what looks like a bear trap. I step up on the boardwalk of the old telegraph office, the coffin maker's, the general store. Inside the coffin shop, tall caskets line the walls. One rests on two sawhorses, as if left by someone who intended to return the next day but never did. The general store is locked. I sit on the edge of the boardwalk and pull my knees to my chest, look up. There will be no moon tonight, but the sky still holds enough blue to keep it distinct from the black hills, and when I feel the push of air against my face from beating wings, I turn to see the silhouette of a bat dipping into the broken window above the coffin shop.

The grief after Court died was enormous, exhausting. It hung over every moment and insinuated itself in places that used to be free of emotion—waiting in line at the A & P, detaching the nozzle from the tank at a self-serve station, standing at a counter of the local post office to stick stamps onto envelopes, and driving to work. I live 20 minutes from the office along a busy road, and as I reached the corner where a stand of pines grow, just where the road begins to climb a hill, as I eased up on the gas and downshifted, I'd be remembering how, one Saturday in the high school parking lot, Court had me turn up and down the rows of empty parking places while he repeated