

“I got a riddle for you,” T.J. Lawton said, to no one but a tumbleweed bouncing by on its bristly course. “How can a guy have driven a hundred thousand miles by the time he turns twenty-one, and never leave the same town?”

The tumbleweed didn’t answer, so T.J. did it himself.

“I dunno, but it helps if he’s me.”

The day was searing, the interior of the pickup’s cab like a broiler even with the dry breeze coming in the windows. That breeze spit granules of sand against the no-color paintjob and flapped the sheet of plastic where the rear window had been.

A better question, he supposed, would be along the lines of why the shoemaker’s kids went barefoot. That had been one Lorraine had often tossed out at Bert, meaning how come, what with Bert being a landscaper and all, their trailer sat in the middle of a yard as barren and lifeless as Mars. But it applied to mechanics equally well. Here he was, twenty-one today no less, and his truck was only slightly less sorry than the relics in the automotive graveyard out behind the Speedway.

He could see that graveyard from here. In a few minutes, it’d be time to get to work. For the moment, though, he could sit here on cracked vinyl, listening to the wheezing sigh of the engine cooling. He took a pull from the tepid, flat can of Dr. Pepper and crumpled the empty, tossing it onto the floor in the passenger footwell where it joined dozens of its fellows.

The Joshua Flats Speedway rose like the disinterred remains of some enormous prehistoric beast. The parking lot around it, asphalt under a heat-shimmer, resembled a puddle of tar. Easy to imagine the skeletal bleachers as all that remained of a dinosaur, sicked back up by the tar pits that had sucked it down.

The Speedway was at the outskirts of town, where Joshua Flats surrendered once more to the mighty Mojave Desert. With the exception of the strip of gas stations and fast-food places that made up the town’s main drag, it was the only business that made any money now that the borax operations in the surrounding hills had shut down.

And passing through town . . . not leading *to* it but leading *away* from it in both directions, the road. Two-lane blacktop until it reached the bustling metropolis of Joshua Flats. There, it widened dramatically to include a central turn lane.

T.J. could see the road from here too. As always, the sight of it triggered a cavernous gnawing sensation in him that was both hunger and despair. That road had been a symbol of his dreams for as long as he could remember.

The dreams came back to him now with aching nostalgia. When he’d been a little kid, he’d longed for the day when the road would bring his real parents to him. He sometimes waited in the shade of the trailer for hours, on dozy hundred-plus degree summer days when the sky was the color of burnished pewter and the distant mountains were hazy mirages. Waited, waited for the moment when a car would arrive. A nice car, a sleek sedan humming contentedly to itself. It would have soft seats, and cool air blowing from the vents. His real mother and father, she sharing T.J.’s red-blond hair and he having T.J.’s angular features, would whisk him into that car and away, into the life that should have been his.

It had never happened. He remembered, ruefully, the embarrassment that came one day when a sleek sedan *had* turned into their scabby driveway and a woman in a trim suit got out. He’d thrown himself at her, sobbing in amazed joy, only to have her turn out to be an Avon lady. That had pretty much spelled the end of his reunion fantasy.

As a teen, obsessed with MTV, he’d developed another that involved a dynamic red roadster with silver and gold zigzags down the sides. It would come roaring into view and slew to a stop, full of pent-up energy like a crouching jungle cat. Its idling engine would be the beast’s restless snarl. The doors would open and a trio of rock and roll goddesses in sunglasses and miniskirts would emerge. They’d single him out of the staring crowd at the A&W, draw him into the plush shadows behind the tinted glass, and away he’d go. Never to look back.

Needless to say, that hadn’t happened either. And was even less likely than his real parents showing up.

Escape down the road? No chance, my friend. No chance at all.

T.J. got out of the truck, exchanging the baking oven of the cab for the direct blaze of the sun. His lunchbox beat against his leg. He'd had to park out at the edge of the lot, because there was a race tonight and Mr. Jervis wanted to keep the prime spaces for paying customers.

Endless miles, endless circuits of the Speedway track. Racing stock cars. Jouncing over the hummocks on a dirtbike when Jervis turned the arena over to motocross. Demolition derbies. Test-driving the array of used cars that came in by the dozen. He would do better to measure his life by miles rather than years.

Could have crossed the country every which-way by now. Could have driven across the ocean, or halfway to the moon, if there were bridges. Could be far, far away from here.

The road. The road was the key. A passage to everywhere. To *anyplace* but here. The road was opportunity, possibility. Go west, young man, as the saying went . . . except would he? West was the dirty urban sprawl of Los Angeles, west was the sea, west was the edge and the end. But *east* . . . if he went east, he'd see the country. He'd see landscapes he knew only from books. The ever-changing views, from the wide rolling plains stretching forever to the horizon, the high crags of mountains with their eternal mantles of snow, rivers, cities, forests.

A yearning ache speared him. The worst part of it was the way it was so hopeless, the tolling of a bell echoing through dead places where only dead ears could hear.

No one was going to take him away from Joshua Flats. He'd been here since he was too young to remember anything else, he'd be here for the rest of his life. It was like a planet unto itself, with dense gravity ten times as strong as Earth's. He'd never manage escape velocity. Hardly anyone did.

He could think of a few who'd tried, and knew what had become of them. Shelley Merlink, Miss Joshua Flats, changed her name to Michelle Merline,

and off she went to Hollywood. Rumor had it she'd been busted in a vice sting three years ago. Or Carl Billings, one of the regulars at the A&W. Carl had gotten out. Had to join the Army to do it, though, and all it had gotten him was a quick death in a tank-training mishap. Or Trisha Cody. She'd run away last summer after a colossal tiff with her folks, and been picked up hitching somewhere between here and Barstow. Picked up by someone who'd left her in a dry creek bed. Most of her, anyway.

No escape. T.J. knew his future as surely as if it was written out for him in letters of fire.

He could feel the slightly sticky give of the substance beneath his boots, smell the horrible pungency of the tar. The sunlight poured over him like scalding water, and struck bright sparkles from chips of stone embedded in the asphalt.

It was late afternoon, and soon the sun would descend toward the mountains and turn into a fiery burnt-orange ball that cast the Joshua trees as coarse black shadows against a riotous sky. The acrid tang of smoke from brushfires was faint but discernable on the air.

T.J. trudged on, toward the gate. He could see others who worked the late shift making their own treks from their own beat-up vehicles.

Heads down, nearly all of them in jeans and T-shirts. Baseball caps and cowboy hats. Most of them were built like Bert. Thick and brawny. The sort of men for whom a night of beer and bowling at Rocky's Lanes was an evening on the town. The sort of men whose wives had big hair and bigger bottoms.

The sort of man he was destined to become?

"No," T.J. said, not intending to speak aloud and startling himself with the hoarse, frightened tone of his voice. "No, dammit, no, I don't want that."

His eyes sought and found the road again. Wonderful road, endless miles stretching away, leading anywhere and everywhere.

Do it, he thought with sudden harshness. Get in your truck and go, just go, do it!

Inner objections rose clamoring up, all the stupid senseless reasons for staying. He had a job, a place to stay. He knew people here. Never mind that a decent mechanic could find work anywhere. Never mind that the place he stayed hadn't been home since Lorraine died. Never mind that most of the people he knew liked things just the way they were, and scorned anybody who presumed to 'think big' of himself.

Do it! Go!

But the tug of gravity, the insidious comfort of habit, proved too strong. T.J., his lunchbox swinging, crossed to the gate.

He put in his shift, adding more endless miles to his life roaring around that ½ mile oval stretch in the red-and-white Art's Auto Supply car. After, he did a few hours in the back lot, stripping down the dead hulks to make like an automotive version of Dr. Frankenstein.

The sky had undergone many changes by the time he left. The initial sunset blaze had given way to dusky purple, and then the stars had come out in their brilliant clarity. The heat rose straight up and away. As he returned to his truck, the work-sweat sheathing his body made his clothes stick to him with clammy coolness.

He slung his lunchbox into the passenger seat and cranked the engine. It took ages before the pickup responded. It burped and gnashed, and settled into an arrhythmic clonking that made him think of a pair of sneakers going around inside a dryer. One headlight came on evenly. The other stuttered and shed a wan yellow beam.

"Next week," he promised. He did some mental math, comparing his paycheck to the parts he'd need, and frowned sourly. If only Bert didn't make him pay rent . . .

Refusing to think about Bert, T.J. drove toward town. The strip, with its royal flush of Ace Quick Mart, Burger King, Dairy Queen, Jack in the Box, and Top Ten Motel, gleamed and twinkled like beacons luring him on. The orange and brown sign of the A&W was well removed from the chaotic line-up, out

by the defunct movie theater.

The thought, not entirely unexpected, came back to him in temptation. He could forget going home for a shower and a sandwich and a few hours' sleep. He could keep on driving. Not west, not toward the edge and the end, but east and north. Over the Tehachapis and just keep on going.

He wavered. Go now? With nothing but the clothes on his back and the fourteen bucks in his wallet?

The truck was poised at an intersection. A left turn would take him through the neon-lit, plastic, franchise heart of Joshua Flats. But if he turned right, he'd only see it in his rearview, receding into the distance, into the past.

Impulse seized him. He slapped on his right blinker, which didn't work anyway, and turned. A wonderful, yet bewildering exhilaration made him want to laugh and cry at the same time. He was doing it, he was actually doing it, taking that first step.

The miles sped past as he coaxed the protesting pickup to just above sixty. The plastic in the back window flapped and snapped. His tools and assorted pieces of machinery clanked around in the bed. The crushed Dr. Pepper cans made clattering noises as they jostled together.

Joshua Flats was falling farther and farther behind. Soon it was a varicolored twinkling streak in the dark desert expanse.

He had the road to himself, but for twin specks of headlights coming the other way. Coming very slowly, he realized, or not even moving at all. As he got closer, he saw a car parked on the shoulder. One of the doors was standing open and people were moving around.

T.J. slowed. Part of him, that exhilarated part, cried out in dismay. That part saw this as a trap, fate's way of getting him back to town. Because sure as anything, the people in the car would need assistance. A mechanic, maybe a tow. He'd be obliged to help them, and by the time that was done, this spontaneous impulse would have passed. Come tomorrow, he'd have all but forgotten it.

Still, he couldn't leave anyone stranded by the side

of the road. He was almost on them now, able to identify the car as a Porsche, and a new one at that. He couldn't make out the color except that it was some dark hue. Two figures were beside it, a man and a woman, and by the way they were waving their arms around and gesticulating, not signaling for help but jabbing accusatory fingers at each other, he began to suspect that the car wasn't the problem.

He took his foot off the break and put it back on the gas. It was one thing to be a Good Samaritan and help out with a breakdown, but he knew better than to stick his nose in a couple's argument. Hadn't he learned that lesson nice and quick when he was a kid?

The woman glanced at his approaching truck, briefly, but long enough to show T.J. a pretty face framed by honey-colored hair, a good figure in slacks and a silky blouse. Her eyes were very large, and . . . scared? Yes, scared. Seeking help.

The man threw a quick look over his shoulder. His features were contorted with anger, narrowing his eyes to slits. Even in that short glimpse, though, T.J. was struck by a sense of familiarity. He knew this guy. But who could he possibly know that drove a Porsche?

One arm, in what to T.J.'s astounded eyes looked like a suit jacket, thrust out and waved. This was no plea for help, but an irate move-along, a "what the hell are *you* looking at?" wave. The woman shook her head and stepped away from the man, and her lips moved in words he couldn't make out.

She was the center of his attention again, T.J. forgotten. Over the clunk of his engine and the flap of the plastic, T.J. could hear the tones – anger, mostly – but not what they were saying. He sped up, wanting no part of this. He was almost even with them now.

He had the truck back up to thirty, when it happened.

Grabbing the woman by the upper arms, the familiar-looking stranger whirled her around and shoved. She flew backward, feet flailing, directly into the path of the pickup truck.

T.J. stomped on the brakes, stomped on them hard, and they made a queasy groaning sound. The wheels

locked, skidded. The rear end began to slide sideways. His chest hit the steering wheel and knocked the breath from his lungs.

Time stretched out like taffy, letting him experience every awful moment as the front bumper hit the woman.

She was lifted up and out, momentarily airborne in the fan of his headlights. Then she landed and rolled, not on the blacktop but on the gritty dirt of the shoulder.

The truck stopped. T.J. was out the door in a flash. He ran to the downed woman, begging incoherently to any benevolent force that she was all right. He hadn't been going *that* fast when he hit her, please God, he hadn't been going that fast, and she was only stunned. Not hurt. Not hurt, and please God, not killed.

The woman lay sprawled on the shoulder, like a rag doll that some kid had dropped. She was face down but he could hear her breathing, see her trying to move.

Behind him, a car door opened. The man who'd pushed her was getting into his Porsche, keys a bunch of jingling silver in his hand.

T.J. was across the road before he knew he was going to move. Had another car been coming, he would have been flattened, because he didn't so much as look. He reached the open door just as the man reached for the handle to close it.

"Hey!" T.J. barked.

The man spared him a look of sneering hate that abruptly turned to shock. T.J. was doused with it himself, an icy blast of shock.

Had he thought the man looked familiar? No wonder . . . the face looking up at him was a mirror of his own. His double's hair was short and styled, while T.J.'s was long and shaggy and tied back with a strip of rawhide, but the red-gold color was the same. The eyes were the same shade of turquoise. The lines and angles of the face were almost identical.

They stared at each other for what seemed like forever, neither one speaking or moving. Crazy ideas

raced through T.J.'s head, searching for an explanation. Long-lost twins, clones, duplicate selves from some *Twilight Zone* alternate dimension, all this and more went through his mind.

The double moved first. He pushed at T.J. and thrust his key at the ignition. In his panicky haste, he missed and it scraped along the steering column. It was plain, he still meant to take off and leave the woman where she'd fallen.

T.J. leaned in, smelling new Porsche and flavored, fancy coffee. He snatched the keys and backed up. "You're not going anywhere, pal. I saw what you did."

"I saw what you did too," his double spat, and they even sounded alike, the voice beneath the different accents and inflections. This guy sounded as upscale as his car and his clothes and his fancy coffee, while T.J., well, T.J. knew what he sounded like. "Ran Audrey down and then pulled a gun on me, all you good old boys have guns in your pickups, it's like a law."

Astounded, T.J. gaped at him. Then he thought of the state patrol and which of them they'd be likely to believe. His future in Joshua Flats might not look like much, but it was paradise compared to prison.

"What do you think of that, you redneck bastard? Now give me the keys!" He'd gotten out of the car and extended a hand, an unpleasant smirk turning that mirror image into a grinning troll's mask.

T.J.'s reply was unconsidered but heartfelt – he socked his double in the mouth and drove him back against the side of his Porsche. The skin on T.J.'s knuckles split and bled. In the vindictive thrill of the moment, he didn't care.

His double shook his head, looking more insulted than hurt despite the blood oozing from his mashed lip, and lunged. They were the same height, almost the same build. T.J. saw right away that while his double had health-club fitness, *he* had the wiry strength that came from years of hard work. And his double didn't know how to fight.

It was over in a matter of seconds. The double slumped beside his car, moaning and holding his head. T.J. gave him a final kick for good measure, slammed the door, and locked it with the keys that he then

stuffed into his own pocket. He crossed the road again to check on the woman.

Audrey. The other one had called her Audrey.

He knelt beside her and helped her as she tried to sit up. Nothing looked broken, all of her limbs seemed to be functioning. Her slacks and blouse were torn in places, the skin beneath scraped, but she was okay. Thank God, she was okay.

She shook her hair out of her face and looked at him. Her eyes, dark brown and wide as those of a doe, went even wider.

"Todd?"

T.J. jerked. "What?"

She cringed from him fearfully. "Don't hurt me, Todd, don't hurt me anymore."

"Wait. Audrey. I'm not him. I'm the guy from the truck." He pointed at it, saw that rather than do much damage, the little collision had shaken something in his headlight so that it was shining steadily. "He's over there."

Audrey regarded Todd, and then looked again at T.J. with increasing confusion. "You look . . ."

"I know. Never mind. Are you okay?"

"I think so. He . . . he pushed me. Didn't he?"

"Yeah," T.J. said. "Is his name really Todd?"

"Todd Jeffrey Brigham," she said. "Who are you?"

He felt cold, colder than the brisk, crystalline desert night could account for. "T.J. Lawton."

"T.J.," she repeated wonderingly. "It doesn't stand for . . . ?"

He brought out his wallet and showed her his license. "Nobody's called me anything but T.J. for as long as I can remember. Who *is* this guy? What's going on?"

"That's what I was going to ask you!" Audrey said.

"And why did he push you in front of my truck? Was he trying to kill you or something?"

"I don't know." Reaction set in, and she wrapped her arms around herself in an unsuccessful effort to

quell her shivering. “We’d been going to Vegas for his birthday. We were going to stay for the whole weekend. But we had a fight, and decided to drive home instead. We just kept on arguing. Finally, he pulled over and was threatening to leave me here. I think he would have, too, but then your truck came along and he just . . . just lost it.”

“His birthday?” echoed T.J. through numb lips.

“His twenty-first,” said Audrey.

She was about to say more, but her gaze shifted past him and she paled. T.J. saw Todd, who had staggered to his feet. His fists were knotted, and the one eye that wasn’t puffing shut glared at him with hot white fury. But rather than rush him, Todd veered to his right and headed for T.J.’s truck. It was idling, the keys still in it, the door standing wide open from when he’d bailed hurriedly out.

T.J. sprang up. Audrey did too, with a little scream.

“He’s going to run us over!” she wailed as the truck blatted into renewed life.

“Come on!” T.J. caught her hand and yanked her out of the way as his own truck plunged at them like something out of a nightmare. He could see his own face behind the wheel, his and yet not his, twisted in rage and wounded madness.

The truck missed them by a foot. The ghastly breath of its exhaust and baleful red glow of its taillights bathed them. T.J. looked for an escape. The shoulder descended in a gentle slope, but at the bottom was a ramshackle fence made of rusted metal bars and barbwire.

He and Audrey fled across the road, the truck just missing them again as Todd backed over where they’d been. He pushed her behind the Porsche, wishing he *did* have a gun, a baseball bat, something. But the only things he could have used for weapons were his tools, and they were in the truck with Todd.

“He’s gone nuts,” gasped Audrey, crouching and peering over the side-view mirror. Todd was about twenty yards down, laboriously backing and filling to turn the truck around.

Muttering curses, T.J. dug in his pocket and found the keys to the Porsche. “We’ve got to get out of here. Quick. In the car.”

He opened her door and she scrambled in without having to be told twice. He dashed around the hood as she leaned over to unlock the driver’s side. T.J. slipped into the car, wishing he had a few minutes to enjoy the way the seat molded itself to him, the way the high-performance engine turned over almost at his touch, that lovely new-car smell.

But Todd was coming. T.J. wanted to think Todd wouldn’t be crazy enough to damage the Porsche even though he’d been crazy enough to try and kill his girlfriend.

No such luck. The shuddering, clunking pickup came dead at them, picking up speed.

“Hang on!” T.J. threw the Porsche in gear and it leapt forward like a striking snake. It was a hair-trigger responsive piece of machinery, so much so that he almost oversteered them right off the road and down into the barbwire after all. Tires screeched and smoked.

The front of the pickup struck a glancing blow to the Porsche’s back deck and then they were clear. Rocketing down the ribbon of black road with the headlights behind them as yellow and lambent as the eyes of a monster.

“Now what?” T.J. asked, more to himself than to Audrey. “This baby can outrun my truck easy, but where’m I going?”

“Police,” she said.

“No way. They’ll think I stole it, kidnapped you, who knows what.”

The varicolored twinkle of Joshua Flats was growing. He was headed back toward town, his escape attempt aborted in the most bizarre of all possible ways. Left in a pickup, returned in a sports car with a beautiful woman at his side, but who was going to believe his story? Especially once they got a look at him and Todd together. He didn’t believe it himself.

“He’s coming!” She had twisted around in the seat to peer back, straining against her seatbelt.

Incredibly, Todd had gotten the battered old Ford

to such a speed that it should have shimmied itself to pieces. T.J. checked his speedometer, the long red needle hovering just past seventy, and Todd was gaining. He pressed down on the gas and the Porsche surged effortlessly into the realms above eighty miles per hour.

Escape velocity, he thought crazily. *If we had wings, we'd be lifting off.*

His eyes darted quickly to the rearview. The yellow headlights were falling behind, still struggling to catch up. Over the strains of what he guessed was jazz music issuing from the Porsche's speakers, T.J. heard a flat bang followed by a flapping noise.

Audrey yipped a small scream and slid down in her seat. "Is he shooting at us?"

In the mirror, the truck slalomed wildly to the left.

"He blew a tire!" T.J. said.

The truck overcompensated, swinging in a loose, looping arc. It teetered on the edge of going over, almost landed back on all fours, and then tipped. The side hit with a hollow crumpling crash. Sparks erupted as the metal scraped along the roadway. The truck rolled and went down the slope.

T.J. braked, brought the Porsche around in a neat turn as tight as a miser's fist. Audrey's frantic hand clutched his arm.

"You're not going back, are you?"

"What else am I supposed to do, leave him?"

She bit at her full lower lip. Tears turned her eyes to dark, rippling pools. "I don't know!"

His truck, that tough old veteran, had become something that looked like the modern-art sculpture the town had paid too much to have some artist install in front of the two-room library on Saddleback Street. Steam hissed, fluids gurgled, glass was strewn in a jeweler's display. Tools, cans, and assorted equipment made an irregular halo around the wreck.

"Where is he?" Audrey was still low, barely peeking her head over the dashboard. "I don't see him. Where is he?"

T.J. started to speak and gagged instead as he saw. The truck *had* seatbelts, wedged down behind the cushions somewhere, but Todd hadn't taken the time to go groping around for them, not when his quarry was getting away. He'd been thrown almost clear. Almost. Half of him had still been in the cab when the truck rolled.

Audrey saw too, and screamed through hands clamped firmly over her mouth. She moved the hands to cover her eyes.

Gulping, still trying hard not to throw up – his lunch had been hours ago so he doubted there was anything of substance in his stomach, but the heavens threatened vigorously – T.J. stopped at the edge of the blacktop and got out. Night wind riffled his hair and brought him the smell of gas. It chugged from the ruptured tank like beer from a tap.

"Is he dead?" asked Audrey, still with her hands over her eyes.

She'd seen him, or what was left of him. Why was she asking? The guy was nearly torn in two, his upper half crushed and barely recognizable as human.

"Oh, yeah," T.J. said shakily. "He's dead, all right."

The strength ran from him like water. He leaned against the Porsche so he didn't slither to the road. Fear swelled in him, a great blister of fear. When it popped, it would flood him with panic. He was going to get blamed for this, he just knew it. The truth was too insane, the truth made no sense. None of it made sense.

"Good," Audrey said, and that short, sharp, cold word went into T.J.'s ears like an icepick.

He turned slowly to look in at her. She'd taken her hands from her face and was sitting up straight, gazing impassively at the wreck and the body hanging partway out of the shattered windshield.

"Huh?" The interrogative croak was the best T.J. could do.

"He tried to *kill* me!" Audrey said. "He tried to kill us both. I'm glad he's dead. Glad!"

"We've got to call someone," T.J. said. "The police. An ambulance."

She got out of the car and came around to stand in front of him. “But if we do, they’ll find out. I couldn’t stand that. His parents, my parents, all our friends . . . they’d want to know why we were fighting. They’d blame me. Say I drove him to it, made him so mad that he went right out of his mind.”

“He did,” said T.J.

“Nobody has to find out,” she said, looking into his eyes with a budding, wild sort of hope. “No one ever has to know.”

“What, just leave him here? I know this seems like the middle of nowhere, but people will notice that truck in the ditch. *My* truck. How am I supposed to explain it being gone? Or turning up here with some other guy dead in it?”

She held up something small and dark. It took him a few seconds to recognize it as his wallet, which he’d given her to show his license. That seemed like such a long time ago.

“Todd’s wallet is in the car,” she said evenly. “He keeps it in the glove compartment.”

He began to see the shape of what she was saying, and it cast a monstrous shadow in his mind. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“We throw this in with him, and torch the truck. I can smell the gas. All it would take is a single spark to ignite the fumes, right? The fire will take care of his clothes, singe off his hair, and nobody will be able to tell it wasn’t you.”

Chills marched double-time, no pun intended, up T.J.’s spine. “They’ll think *I’m* dead. Then what? What do *I* do? You can’t be suggesting . . . no. You can’t.”

But she was. He could see it in her steady dark gaze. And he was startled to find that part of him wanted to. Get rid of his old life in the most final way possible. Not have to start from scratch making a new one, but step ready-made into the life of Todd Jeffrey Brigham. A guy who had everything. Money, a fast car, a girlfriend . . . a family . . .

A family. Real parents. Todd’s real parents . . . but what if they were his, too? What if Todd *had* been his

brother, his twin? He’d still never know why they’d given him up, but at least he’d have what should have been his.

The impulse that had led him to turn away from Joshua Flats was back, bigger, clamoring. To hop into the sleek Porsche, find some rock and roll on the radio, and head for Las Vegas to finish the vacation that had been so rudely interrupted. To see the sun rising over a new state. To look over every now and then at Audrey, see her smiling back at him in the shared spirit of their secret and their adventure.

To put all of this behind him and never look back.

Endless miles stretched out ahead of him, all promise and possibility, and as he spied the pinpoints of headlights approaching, T.J. knew he’d better make his choice, and make it quick.

“Let’s go,” he said.

* * *

The End

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