

HEAT WAVE

by

Wayne Kyle Spitzer

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It happened *pow*, like that. One minute he'd been blasting through the Arizona desert and listening to Martha and the Vandellas sing "Heat Wave" on the Mustang's AM radio, and the next he was pulling over, rumbling to a stop on the shoulder of State Route 87 and idling in place as the good-looking hitchhiker jogged to catch up with him.

"Man, am I glad to see you," she panted, opening the door—then froze, suddenly, examining the cab, peering into the backseat. "No body parts in that cooler? No murder weapons?"

"Only these," He held up his hands. "Registered as deadly weapons in fifty states. *And* Puerto Rico."

"Is that so?" She laughed, appearing relieved, then climbed in and shut the door. "So where you headed, Deadly Hands?"

"New Mexico. Albuquerque."

"That'll do." She took one of his hands and examined it. "Nah, these are too pretty." She traced his fingers, studying them. "A dentist's, maybe. Or a lab technician." When he didn't say anything, she added: "No? Something creative, then. Nebulous. An artist, maybe. Or a photographer."

He shifted in his seat uncomfortably, unsure whether he was getting creeped out by her touch and directness—or a hard-on. He glanced her up and down quickly: the slender figure, the long, dark hair—the brown eyes like a doe in heat. Definitely a hard-on. "Look, I—"

"*A writer*, I think," she said, suddenly, and let go of his hand. "Ha! Am I warm?"

He opened his mouth to speak but closed it immediately, seeing only Heller and the office at 123 Wilshire Blvd—the cheap suit, the shit-eating grin—his hard-on withering like a prune in September.

"No," he said at last, gripping the gearshift, pushing in the clutch. "You're cold. Cold as fucking Pluto."

And then they were moving, crossing the rumble strip and picking up speed, the engine growling, leaping up, the sweltering sun beating down, as she looked at him, curiously, quizzically, and he tried to ignore

her. As the mercury in the little thermometer on the dash topped 90 degrees—and kept climbing.

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“SO WHAT’S YOUR STORY?” she asked, shouting over the wind and the radio, which was too loud, too tinny. He turned it down.

“My story?” He laughed. “I’m not the one who was hitchhiking through the Sonoran Desert.”

She smiled self-deprecatingly. “Yeah, there is that.” She hung her head back so that her dark hair billowed out the window. “I was at an artist’s colony—the Desert Muse.” She smiled again, bitterly, it seemed. “Or the Desert Ruse, as I call it. Ever heard of it?”

He shook his head.

“Yeah, well, it’s where a bunch of grad students hang out with their professors for a week and study the fine arts. You know, like how to out-snark the other pimply kids ... or fuck your professor.”

He glanced at her sidelong, raising an eyebrow.

“Okay, so maybe not fuck him. But definitely give him something to think about. You know, like when he’s handing out teaching internships.”

He nodded slowly, exaggeratedly. “Ah.”

“Ah. So I just bugged out. I didn’t want to play anymore. And now I’m heading home. Back to Miami.”

He drove, listening, the wind buffeting his hair, which was graying at the temples. She couldn’t have been more than, say, what? Twenty-five? Twenty-six? “Yeah? And?”

“And that’s all you get. At least until I know something about you. Your name, for instance.”

He accelerated, he wasn’t sure why, focusing on the road. “Cooper,” he said, finally. “Cooper Black. But, please, call me ‘Coup’—everyone does.”

“Cooper—Coup. *Black*? Cooper Black? Like the font?”

“Just like the font.”

“Well, that’s different.” She fell silent for a moment, watching the scenery pass. “I’m Tess, by the way. Tess Baker.” She added, “Please. Go on.”

Cooper only exhaled. “No, no, no, *that’s it*. I was just coming back from L.A. when I saw you with your thumb out.” He turned the radio back up but got only static. “That’s really all there is to it. Just a guy on a road trip.”

Neither said anything as the radials droned and the radio hissed.

“I think you went there for a reason ... and it didn’t go so well. That’s what I think.” She waited as he fiddled with the dial. “Can’t find your channel there, Coup?”

“No, Doctor Laura, I can’t, actually. Can’t seem to find much of anything. And I went there, if you must know, because I’d sold a book to Roman House and the editor I was working with had a heart attack—he just keeled, okay? So I had to meet this new asshole, who couldn’t stand me *or* the book, and who cancelled the entire project. And then ...”

He looked at her and found her arching an eyebrow quizzically.

“Then I hit him. All right? Right in the old kisser. And then I turned his desk over and threw his banker’s light, you know, the kind with the faux gold plating and green glass shade—”

She nodded impatiently.

“—right through the window. And then I ran like a rabbit, straight to my car and out of L.A., after which I passed this really good-looking hitchhiker who peppered me with questions until I started going bugfuck. Okay? All right? You happy?”

“I like a man who can open up,” she said.

“I’m not opening up. I’m trying to—”

And then they heard it, the whir of a siren, after which he looked through his rear-view mirror and she out the back window to see a brown and white State Patrol vehicle following them dangerously close, its windshield reflecting the sun like knives and its red and blue lights flashing, telling them to pull over.

"It's just not my fucking day," he marveled, still looking in the mirror, even as Tess placed a hand on his leg—close to his crotch, he noticed—and said: "But it could be, Coup. It still could be." —before her eyes expanded like saucers and she shrieked, shouting, "Look out!"

And he looked ahead in time to see a brown blur, a large mouse, he thought, or a kitten, which had been scurrying across the road, vanish beneath the filthy hood.

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IT ALL HAPPENED SO quickly that it wasn't even clear, at least at first, *what* had happened, other than he'd slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting the creature and caused the police car to ram them from behind—like a wrecking ball, it seemed, knocking them forward.

And then there they were, stalled at the side of the road in front of a partially accordioned police car (while parked over an almost certainly dead cat, possibly a rodent) and feeling their necks; even as Coup glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw the officer storming toward them—his service weapon drawn.

"Oh, not good," said Tess, shrinking down in her seat, as Cooper held up his hands and offered assurances. "It's okay—everything's going to be fine. There's nothing to—"

"Get out of the car and get on the ground! Now!"

"Jesus," said Coup.

"Yeah. Shouldn't he at least be asking us if we're all right?"

"Do it!"

They did it, easing open their doors and hurrying to get on the ground, putting their hands behind their backs, making of themselves nice little arrestable bundles.

"Look, Officer, I can explain every ..."

"Shut up! Shut up and stay on the ground! Don't move!"

They didn't move—but stayed precisely as they were, their hearts pounding, their blood racing, as the cop keyed his mic:

"530 to Dispatch, request back-up at State Route 87 and 19, collision with civilian vehicle, possible DUI. Over."

"Possible DUI?" Coup craned his neck to look at him. "Where in the hell did you get—"

"Shut up and stay on the ground! Keep your hands behind your back!" And into his mic: "530 to Dispatch, did you copy? Over."

But there was nothing, no reply whatsoever, just static—like the Mustang's AM radio. Coup craned his neck again, this time in the opposite direction: And no vehicles, either. Come to think of it, there'd been nothing since he'd picked up the girl, not even so much as a semi, always so ubiquitous.

He strained to peer skyward, the sun stabbing at his eyes. And no air traffic. No contrails to fuel the conspiracy theorists—nothing. Just a pale, blue dome, without even a cloud.

He froze as gravel crunched beneath the cop's shoes, half expecting a boot on his neck, but quickly realized the man was moving away from him, not toward him, back toward his car.

"I'm scared, Coup," said Tess, her voice sounding small, distant. "I'm really scared."

"I know," he said, the sweat pouring down his forehead, stinging his eyes. "I am too. But it'll be all right. Just, you know, chill, as they say. He's called for back-up. That's a good thing."

"Witnesses," she said. "Maybe a commanding officer."

"Exactly. Just hang tight. I know it's hot."

"I'll be okay." She added: "Thanks, Coup."

He grunted. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. Just—thanks. For being here. For looking out for me. Like a big brother, almost. Or a fa—"

"*Shht*, he's coming," he said—suddenly, urgently.

The world just sat, silently.

"But I don't hear any—"

"Sorry, false alarm. Must have been my own foot, or something."

And then they waited.

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HOW MUCH TIME PASSED would have been difficult to say: maybe it was only a few minutes—say, ten or fifteen—and maybe it was a half hour; regardless, when they at last climbed to their feet and walked to the officer's car, they found him nowhere in sight. He had, quite simply, just vanished without a trace.

"But ... that's impossible," said Tess, shielding her eyes, scanning the horizon. "He couldn't possibly have walked that far—could he?"

Coup appeared troubled as he stood next to her and did likewise. "It's possible ... but it sure as hell ain't likely." He looked at the patrol car, the door of which still hung open, and his eyes seized upon the shotgun—which glinted between the seats like black gold. "Maybe someone picked him up. But why would he leave in the first place? And why would he leave *that* just sitting there for anyone to take?"

He looked to where the keys hung from the ignition. "Not to mention the car itself?"

"There's no footprints," said Tess, examining the ground. She looked up at him as though she felt suddenly ill. "Nothing leading away. Just ours and his walking to and from ..." She paused, her lower lip trembling. "How is that possible, Coup? And not just him but—where is everybody else? Where are the other cars? How in ..."

And then she just *broke* suddenly and rushed into his arms, and they remained like that for several minutes, during which time he scanned the sky, and, to his deep relief, spied a passenger jet arching glimmeringly across the sky, its contrail just as white and reassuring as angel dust.

"Look, there, see," He released her abruptly and spun her around. "We're not in the Twilight Zone, after all. Hey, yo, Freedom Bird! We're down here!" He waved his arms back and forth. "Give us a lift! Albuquerque or bust!"

Yet there was something odd about the plane's trajectory he hadn't initially noticed—or had he? For it truly was *arching*, which is to say it wasn't crossing the sky so much as it was ... falling from it. Yes, yes, he could see now that was true, as he disengaged from Tess and paced through the scrub, tracking the jet as it curved gracefully in the sun— to finally plummet straight into the far hills, where it vanished like a specter in a plume of fiery smoke.

And then he was gripping the shotgun and trying to wrest it from its rack; but, finding it locked, had to search the car for a key: upon which, realizing there were none that would fit, he located a small button just beneath the seat and depressed it—freeing the weapon.

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Tess as she tailed him back to the Mustang, but he ignored her until they were again seated inside, after which he turned to her and said, briskly, "Maybe it is and maybe it isn't, but I'm doing it, okay?"

And it was on the tip of her lips to respond when they heard the sound: a kind of muffled whimper—something between a chirp and a meow—coming from outside. Coming from beneath the car.

"Oh my God, Coup. The cat ..."

"It was a *rat*, I think."

"Whatever it is; it's ... still alive. Listen."

And he did listen—and quickly determined that, whatever it was, it was either in great pain or scared out of its wits.

And then they were both scrambling, out of the car and into the heat and glare, and what they saw next was something neither of them would forget—for it was both portent and prelude to everything which lie ahead.

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IT WAS TWO THINGS ABOVE all else: adorable and almost dead. It was also attached to the top of the tire like a vise (where it had taken refuge after the near collision), its little claws dug into the rubber like a

cat's and its dark eyes regarding them fearfully—and yet somehow bravely. Still, it was not a cat (or a kitten) in spite of its claws, nor was it a mouse, however over-sized. What it was, quite simply, was something unknown; although what Coup thought it resembled most was a mongoose, albeit clearly still in its infant stage. Nor did it seem to be dangerous, as Tess found out when she touched it against Coup's advice and it merely licked her fingers—or tried to—its sandpapery tongue just as dry as the dead.

"It's this heat," she said, finally, stroking its neck and back. "It's seriously dehydrated." She looked at Coup. "Whatever it is, I don't think it has very long."

"It needs water," he said. "And it needs it fast."

He stood and looked into the backseat; at the cooler he'd picked up from Walmart before heading out to L.A. "And we gotta bring his temperature down. Can you move him, you think?"

"I think so, yes. If he'll let go of the tire."

Coup took a spare shirt from the back and shook it out, then opened the cooler and laid it inside. "Most the ice is still good; we'll lay him in here." He picked a Styrofoam cup off the floor. "And see if we can't get him to drink something."

And then, having managed a few sips and been laid in the chest—it had taken both of them to disengage it from the tire—the thing seemed to sleep; as they pulled away from the shoulder and back onto the road (although where they should go was another question entirely) and decided to name it "Rikki-Tik"—after Kipling's famous mongoose.

They hadn't traveled far, however, when they encountered more evidence that something wasn't right—with the road, with the traffic (or lack thereof), with *the world*.

"What's that?" asked Tess as something glinted about a mile ahead, something blue and crumpled, torn, smashed.

“What’s what?” he said, and then noticed it: a blue and chrome thing turned over on its side in the middle of the road, a ruined and battered thing. A car.

“Jesus,” he said, letting off the gas.

“Mary and Joseph,” added Tess. “Christ. Do you think anyone could have ...” She paused, squinting. “Coups, tell me that isn’t what I think it is.”

But he was seeing it too, and knew that what was splashed down the car’s door was *exactly* what she thought it was.

“It’s blood, all right.” He geared down and brought them slowly alongside the hulk, where he put it in park and inhaled, deeply. He did not, however, shut off the engine.

“Please, God, be empty,” said Tess. “I’m not ready for this shit.”

Coups sighed. “Why don’t you ... check on our friend or something. I’ll have a look.”

“Okay.”

But he’d barely begun to open his door when a wrinkled hand appeared suddenly, waveringly, amidst the wreckage—and gripped its glass-covered dash. After which Coups reiterated calmly, gently: “Tess, check on our friend.”—and climbed out.

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TO COUPS’S ASTONISHMENT, the man—who couldn’t have been less than ninety years old—had suffered only minor cuts and abrasions; although his wife, he said, had been killed (which was weird, to say the least, since he was the only one in the car). Beyond that, though, he hadn’t had much to say—nor did Coups blame him—as they rumbled from the scene and continued east; indeed, he seemed to still be in state of shock. One thing, however, was woefully clear, and that was that at his age (and level of dementia) he shouldn’t have been driving in the first place.

"Maybe she was thrown clear," said Tess as she buckled him in next to the ice chest, her tight Levi shorts merely inches from Coup's head. "It was obviously a horrific accident; although it is strange that there was no other car. Could they have had a blowout, you think?"

"The short answer is 'no,'" said Coup matter-of-factly. "That car's tires were good. As for being thrown clear—no way. I searched the entire area. There was nothing. Not unless the coyotes carried her away."

"Well, there you—"

"The coyotes didn't carry her away, Tess."

"Look, I don't know," she protested as she helped the man dig out his wallet—it was fat and had been causing him discomfort, was her guess.

All of which went out the window when he removed a picture from it and handed it to her: a picture of himself and his wife when they were much, much younger—or so she'd presumed, at least until she saw the timestamp in the lower right corner of the frame. A timestamp which read: October 15, 2017.

"*This is nuts*," said Coup, looking at it, before handing it back. "All of this is just stark-raving ..."

But he never finished the sentence, for they were approaching another vehicle, three other vehicles, to be precise, all of which were ditched at the side of the road as though their drivers had simply fallen asleep.

"They're empty, every single one," whispered Tess as they passed the vehicles at a virtual crawl. "Just like the cop car. Just like this guy's wife. It's almost as if—"

"Don't say it," said Coup.

"Well, it's true, isn't it?"

"We don't know that yet—"

"It's like they just disappeared! Just *poof*! Gone!"

"Tess—"

"Goddamn it, Coup! Lying to ourselves about it isn't going to—"

"Some of them did," said the old man suddenly, rendering them speechless, even as Tess turned around and Coup looked into the rear-

view mirror. “Vanished just like ghosts, like they’d never existed at all. I know because I saw it with my own eyes. But that’s not what happened to my wife.”

They just looked at him, nobody saying anything. It was, in a sense, as if he’d been reborn—still as old as Methuselah but suddenly alert and aware; enough so that he’d become acutely aware of his condition and surroundings and seemed to be entranced by the sight of his own liver-spotted hand, which he studied as though it wasn’t his at all but a total stranger’s.

At last he said, “No. No. Because you see, some disappeared. And some, well, I guess some have or will end up like me. But my wife ...” He paused, looking first at Coup and then at Tess, his eyes ancient, haunted, possessed almost. “My wife was *eaten*.”

After which they faced forward again and didn’t say anything for a long time, not until they passed the green and white sign indicating food and gas via the next exit, at which they looked at each other and nodded at almost the same instant, then touched hands as if to brace themselves for what they might find there.

To be continued in
HEAT WAVE 2

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Coming Soon

