

## —THE STATION

by Bentley Little

Derek looked impatiently at his watch, making a show of it, wanting Gina to know how annoyed he was getting. But she was focused on getting her shot and either did not see him or did not care. She crouched down in the sand, viewfinder to her eye, moving incrementally to her right as she tried to capture the sun shining through the thin crack between two boulders.

Why did her new hobby have to be photography? Why couldn't she have gotten into Sudoku or needlepoint, something that she could do in the car while they drove?

The bitch of it was, he knew she'd probably burn out on this before the end of the year, maybe before the end of the summer. It would go the way of all her other transitory passions: scrapbooking, flower arranging, sushi making, and of course that damned book club. But right now it was making his already too-short vacation a living hell, and he looked again at his watch and said loudly, "Hurry up! We have a long way to go, and if we don't check in by six, they won't hold the room for us!"

"Relax!" Gina called back. "That place has about a thousand rooms. And it's the off-season. We'll be fine."

She was right. Furnace Creek Inn was huge. And, other than themselves, who else was moronic enough to vacation in Death Valley in the middle of July? They could probably walk in without *any* reservation and get the finest room in the hotel. "Hurry up anyway!" he shouted.

"I'm trying!" she called.

Derek opened the car door, sat down in the passenger seat and consoled himself by looking at a map. Before Gina had gotten them off track chasing artistic landscapes down this side road, they'd been making pretty good time, and if they could get back to the highway within the next half hour or so, they should still be able to reach the national park by mid-afternoon. Although he'd done so a thousand times, he once again went over their itinerary, then flipped through the AAA book at random, looking for future vacation destinations. When he glanced up again several moments later, assuming she'd had plenty of time to take her photo and was walking back to the car, he saw that she hadn't moved. She was in exactly the same position she'd been in ten minutes ago.

This was ridiculous.

Derek slammed the glove compartment shut and strode across the sand, ready to give her hell. Gina stood at his approach. "I was just going to come and get you," she enthused. "There's an old building out there. Look." She pointed past the boulders

## BENTLEY LITTLE

and down the sloping plain.

*Oh no*, he thought.

"It would make a great photo." She handed him her camera.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered, but dutifully looked through the telephoto lens. It appeared from this vantage point to be an abandoned gas station (*Esso*, judging by the shape of the sign's iron skeleton). He saw no indication of any cars or people. Derek handed back the camera. "Hurry up then and take a picture."

"Not from *here!*" She hit his shoulder. "I want to go down *there!*"

"It's already been—"

"I'll make it quick," she promised.

"You know," he told her, "if Death Valley was good enough for Ansel Adams, it should be good enough for you."

"That's the point," she said. "It's overdone. *Everyone* who goes there takes pictures. This is something new. I might be the only one to *ever* take photos of this."

"I doubt that," he said, but agreed to give her ten minutes at the building if they left *right this second*.

She beat him back to the car.

Derek drove quickly, stirring up a cloud of dust behind them. The road was not paved, and it was doubtful that it ever had been. Moreover, the barely extant trail ended at the gas station. *Odd*, he thought. Ordinarily, service stations were built alongside highways. They were generally not destinations in and of themselves. Something about that seemed wrong, but he told himself that since it had probably been the only gas station for hundreds of miles, travelers probably wouldn't have minded driving a couple of extra miles down a side road.

He pulled to a stop between an empty island and a closed garage door that had been seriously battered by the elements but surprisingly boasted no graffiti. There were no pumps left, only metal foundations embedded in concrete from which protruded sections of pipe and tubing. The two of them stepped out of the car. "Oh, this is wonderful," Gina said. "So many good angles and such high contrast with the light and shadow."

"Ten minutes," he reminded her. "Or I'm driving off without you."

He didn't like this place. That end-of-the-road thing bothered him, and there was something about the building itself that made him uneasy as well. He walked around the back of the car and looked at the closed garage door with its chipped paint and dents and inexplicable lack of graffiti. A small alluvial fan of sand had accumulated at the bottom of the garage door but the line of sand was too even, too perfect, and he didn't like that either.

He moved on to the office. The broken window had long since been boarded up but the door was gone, and Derek peeked inside. It looked pretty much as he'd expected. Chair. Metal desk covered with dust, yellowed papers and an ashtray. Table with an empty cardboard fuse display and a single broken fan belt. Bulletin board with tire ads and tame cheesecake calendar from 1955.

There was nothing that should not have been there. Yet it seemed wrong, all of it, and he was about to back away and tell Gina that they should go, when she pushed past him and into the office. "Whoop," she said, fanning the air in front of her face. "Stale." There was a closed door in the wall next to the desk, and before he could say a