

Red Rock

by Terri Windling

"This is a hard land. Breeds hard women," Creek tells me. He likes pronouncements like this, eyes narrowed Clint Eastwood style, a cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth. His angelic face betrays his youth, so he hides it behind long red dreadlocks. He blows out smoke and floors the truck through the hairpin turns of a mountain road. He steers with one hand, casually, as though it's all under control.

The land around us is hard and dry. A forest has grown from this unlikely soil. Live oak. Sycamore. Cottonwood. Pine. He names them all as we fly past and I think: So it's true then. He comes from this place. It's not just another bullshit story.

"My mother," Creek says, "she's tough as old leather. I like my women soft, myself."

As if he's had so many of them. I'd bet good money that I am his first. And me, I'm fifteen, so I'm not quite sure if I count as a woman or a girl.

He glances over. "You tired, gal?" That gal. That's another thing come between us. Gal and Howdy and the drawl that crept into his voice as we travelled here.

I shake my head no, but I'm tired to the bone. The truck has no shocks, and no heater besides. We stole this scrapheap from a Stuckeys rest stop. Got fed up with hitchin' the highway, that's all. Creek and me, we're not criminals exactly; we're just impatient. Maybe it's the same thing.

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"Yo!" he says, and he downshifts, turning sharply onto a rutted dirt road. The track leads through sparse groves of pine, backed by a wall of red rock cliffs. The road bumps and grinds and stops abruptly at the edge of a shallow river.

A rusted house trailer sits under the trees, surrounded by old wooden sheds, a horse corral, many cars and trucks. Dogs are barking. All of them look part coyote, except for one small, yappy mutt. They follow along as Creek parks the truck, scatter as he opens the door. A naked brown toddler appears through the trees, and a thin dark girl in a torn gypsy skirt. The skirt and her bare feet are covered with mud. Her wrists are weighted with turquoise and silver. She scoops up the child, ignoring us, and stalks down the road to the house.

"My sister," Creek drawls. Clint Eastwood again. He means the toddler and not the girl. He stubs out the cigarette butt with his heel and sucks in the pine scented air.

We follow the girl and the dogs follow us. The house trailer squats at the end of the trail. Its wooden porch steps are half rotted through. Creek jumps them. I climb up warily. Inside, I smell meat roasting and coffee and smoke; and my stomach growls.

The big trailer is crowded with stuff. Old hippie stuff; it's that kind of place. Creek was born in a commune nearby, tucked further back in these red rock hills. His father was some Indian -- not the one that his mom lives with now, but some red-skinned cowboy who Creek never knew. When Creek grew up, he split for L.A. Now he's back, the prodigal son returned. His mother greets him with a wide, sweet smile. She doesn't look like a hard woman -- she's young, almost pretty, her long red hair in a braid, her hippie skirt covered with stars. Her baby sleeps on her shoulder, and suddenly I don't feel so good about this.

The room is filled with Indians. Some Mexicans. Many dark haired kids. A woman with a broad copper face puts a head of lettuce into my hands.

"I'm, umm, just here with Creek," I tell her.

