



WHY  
COYOTES  
HOWL



Watts Martin



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*Dedicated to my high school writing teachers,  
even though I'm not sure what they'd make of all this.*

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## WHY COYOTES HOWL

THOMAS HARTLEY TRIED NOT TO PANIC as the car's engine went dead. They'd driven well past the New Mexico state line now, come to an intersection in some tiny town — the first buildings they'd seen in nearly an hour — and he'd slowed to a near-stop to check the directions. If they were where he thought they were, they'd just about hit the north side of Gila National Forest, with only an hour or so left to go.

His computer-picked route, courtesy of Yahoo, didn't mention a town at all here beyond "bear slightly right on Main Street to stay on U.S. 180." Just as he made the turn, the engine stopped. It didn't choke out, made no distressing noises; it was as if he'd simply turned the ignition off.

Lara came awake with a start. "Hm? What?"

Tom first met Lara Chase forty-eight hours ago. He was on his way to El Paso to visit his parents — he couldn't quite think of it as "back home," since they'd only moved there two years ago, after he'd left for college — but El Paso was in nearly the opposite direction. His friend Ted sent Lara to him after Tom made an offhand comment about sharing ride expenses. She seemed nice, and offered enough money to pay for gas for the entire trip, even with the long detour. Given the way the trip had gone so far, though, he deeply regretted choosing commerce over convenience.

"I don't know." Tom turned the key. Not even a click.

"God." She looked outside, and then at her watch. "It's noon already. This can't be happening."

"It's probably just the battery again." Tom rolled the car to a stop, and rested his head on the steering wheel.

This was the second time today. The first time had been when they stopped for gas at sunrise in God knows where, Arizona, and

found the one gas station there didn't open until seven. They left the car there and went for breakfast at the cafe next door, and came back to discover that Lara, who had taken most of the night shift for driving, had left the lights on. The jump from the station owner had kept them going until now.

"How can it just be —"

"It couldn't keep the charge. This car's new enough to have one of those wonderful control computers in it, and when the battery gave out completely the engine shut off."

"And?"

"And now we need a new battery."

"Christ." She got out, slamming the door behind her. He reached across the Tercel's passenger seat to lock the door, then got out, wincing at the desert heat, and locked his own.

Lara pulled out a cigarette. This was only the second time he'd seen her light up on the trip. The first time was right after the morning battery trouble. It seemed it was less an addiction than a nervous habit.

"Well, this might be the biggest town in a hundred miles," he said. "Let's find a garage."

Lara stood about five-four, average build bordering on stocky, nondescript straight black hair matched with black jeans and black T-shirt — he'd barely give her a second glance if he passed by on the sidewalk. Not that Tom gave many people more than a second glance, or attracted them himself; he deviated from the crowd only by being reed-thin, bespectacled and given to a "business casual" dress style rather than the walking mall clothing store advertisements his classmates favored.

At least, Tom wouldn't have given her a second glance a few days ago. Since yesterday evening she'd been spooking him. She was American Indian — something he hadn't realized when he first met her — and it turned out she wasn't really going to Wills' Ford, the little unmapped town he was driving her to. She was going to a mountaintop nearby for what she called an "annual clan gathering," but she hadn't been to one in fifteen years.

That was only odd. This morning, though, he'd woken up before sunrise and looked over at her from the passenger seat and jumped. Her eyes were silver.

She'd looked over at him at the jump, and then quickly looked away. "If it's my eyes," she'd said, "they just look silver under the

right light. It'll fade by sunrise." It had, and she hadn't offered any more explanation.

The town stood quiet save for the hissing of wind through the junipers and the dry crackle of the grit under their shoes. Like most of the land they'd driven through, nothing here resembled a lawn. Thin, wild weeds that reminded him of sawgrass, brittle bushes with tiny yellow flowers, and a half-dozen types of cacti filled yards. Tall pines carpeted the sides of the hills and mountains.

The rough landscape forced most of the homes to cluster along the highway, tiny ramshackle boxes of adobe or tin all carefully fenced in to protect plots of bristlebrush and religious statuary — perhaps a step up from the yards of dirt he'd seen by homes outside the forest. There was no distinction between business and residence. Houses became offices by planting hand painted signs out front advertising themselves as a hardware store, or a nail salon, or a TV repair shop. Tom wondered if there were any TV stations you could get out here without satellite.

"Did you grow up somewhere around here?"

"No." She pointed down a side street. "A couple blocks that way, that looks like a garage. I grew up in northeastern Arizona, on Hopi lands."

"I'm part Hopi."

Lara stopped, and looked at him, eyes narrowed in skepticism.

"A small part," he said, a little defensively. "An eighth."

"Which clan?"

"I don't know. It was my great-grandmother, but she died when my grandmother was still a baby."

Lara's intense gaze dropped back to mellow. "So she was raised white."

He shrugged. "I guess so. She sure didn't pass on much interest in Indian life to my mom."

"They wanted to 'acculturate' her so she could get on in civilized society." She grinned faintly, and leaned down to snuff her cigarette out in the dirt. She hung onto the butt, rather than tossing it away, until they reached a trash can by the garage entrance. "Guess I'm back to deculturate myself a little again."

Two men were working in the garage. One looked up when the two came in.