

*diedre Knight*

## WITHOUT NOTICE

He crushed his cigarette out in the overflowing ashtray and rolled up the window against an early fall chill. Other than the occasional eighteen-wheeler, the highway was deserted in the dead of night, and that's just the way he liked it. It gave him time to sort his thoughts.

Had it only been five years? Or eight since he'd last felt good inside; warm and appreciated. When had he last felt like more than a paycheck; dutifully sent home every two weeks? Well, since recently, truth be told. Reese had come into Jonas's solitary life like a spectacular Arizona sunrise; illuminating his world with laughter, his lonely heart with delight.

But he would not be blackmailed. This was why he'd jumped in his truck to drive six hundred miles to tell his wife the news himself. He owed her that. He didn't allow himself to worry about how Merilee would take the news because he knew it had to be a lot better than Reese's lover had; Vera had vowed to kill him.

His best and only friend, Pete, had been less than sympathetic "Aw, Jonas. Why you want ta' get involved with another woman anyway? You had the perfect set-up; life on your own and safe sex once in a while."

Jonas had to admit he'd been happy with Merilee. But the temporary separation caused by a job offer he couldn't refuse had stretched into years of excuses he'd grown tired of arguing about. Sure, Merilee had a great job back in Arizona, with good bennies. And he could understand their daughter's desire to stay in the same high school. But there were schools and

jobs in New Mexico, too. He had feelings and wishes of his own, but it seemed nobody cared or noticed.

He hadn't realized he'd slowed until a trucker's high beams flashed in the rear view. He quickly shot to the slow lane and decided he'd brooded enough. He figured a soda and maybe a sandwich under the glaring lights of a Truck Stop would snap him out of it.

Just across the Arizona line he saw a flashing neon sign that read "Geno's Eat and..." the word "Sleep" remained dark but he got the idea. The diner lights were bright and welcoming as he pulled into the parking lot. Once inside he realized why there were only two rigs parked out back. The place was a dump. *Okay, a soda and a piece of pie. They can't screw that up, right?*

The smell of old grease assaulted his nose even as the aroma of freshly brewed coffee caressed his senses and made him want to sit down anyway. He purposely chose a swivel seat at the counter in front of a glass display of several slices of pie.

"I'll have a soda." Jonas said to the waiter who looked like most of the Indians he'd seen, except this guy's features were sharper, more chiseled. And in sharp contrast to most, this guy was tall and muscular.

"Light or dark?" the waiter flipped his long blue-black ponytail over his shoulder and placed the usual napkin-wrapped silverware in front of Jonas.

"Dark."

"Don't have any."

“Then why’d you ask?” Jonas snapped; the guy was getting on his nerves.

“Coffee goes better with pie.” The Indian nodded at a pie server and plate near the display and turned to the grill where he slapped a burger patty down.

Jonas opened his mouth and closed it again. How had the Indian known he’d order pie? And as far as he could tell, he was the only customer. Who ordered the burger? *Damn, that smells good!*

“I’ll just have a piece of pie and some water.”

The Indian deftly flipped the burger and spun around “Just a sec.” before pushing through a swinging door near the sink.

*What the heck?* Jonas had his hand on his keys. He didn’t need a piece of pie from the Twilight Zone. *But who was gonna eat that burger?*

Jonas picked up his keys just as the Indian swished back through the door with condiments and a can of Coke in his arms. He set them all in front of Jonas before returning to the grill.

Tossing bun slices on the grill, the Indian turned to Jonas “You want pickles?”

“Not with pie, thanks.” Jonas earned a genuine grin from the Indian “And I thought you didn’t have dark soda.”

“Delivery is late—as usual. It’s from my private stash.” The Indian turned from the grill and presented Jonas with a mouth-watering burger. “Eat up.”

Jonas dug in to the best burger he’d ever tasted while the Indian busied himself with clean-up.

Around a mouthful, Jonas asked “What’s your name?”

“Geno.” The Indian answered “What’s yours?”

“Jonas.”

Geno nodded and Jonas finished his burger with a big swig of Coke. *Delicious!* Jonas would never look at a burger the same way again. Of course, he didn’t usually go twelve hours between meals, either. But, as promised, Jonas was rejuvenated.

Geno had wiped his way down the counter to where Jonas sat “Pie’s on the house.”

Jonas shook his head “I’m stuffed.”

“Sweeten the demeanor.”

“Hell, why not?”

“Take what you want, I hate waste. How far you got left to go?”

Jonas helped himself to a slice of Lemon pie as Geno held up the standard topping choices.

Nodding at the cream whip, Jonas said “Couple hours or less. Depending...”

“On whether you drag or burn rubber?”

“Yeah. I guess so.”

“Let me see your hand.” Geno beckoned with his own hand.

Jonas complied with his hand palm up. Tracing the lines on Jonas’ hand, Geno’s brows furrowed.

“What?” Jonas took a last bite of pie and dropped his napkin on the plate.

“People want to harm you.”

Jonas snatched his hand back, “Oh, right. Why’s that?” He wondered if Reese’s ex qualified as one. Shrugging, he went on “I’ll keep my eyes open.”

Geno nodded slowly “Things happen without notice.”

The Indian was creeping him out “Well, I’m outa here,” Jonas said “How much I owe ya?”

Geno gave a dismissive wave “Just don’t let it be your last supper.”

Jonas’ mouth went dry “Thanks a lot.” he croaked.

He literally leaped into his truck and hastily stabbed the key in the ignition. His stomach turned over when the engine did not. *Damn you, Pete!* Jonas was pretty sure Pete had said he’d changed the battery. Or had Pete said more like “*You’re good to go if you got to.*”?

Come to think of it, Pete had been acting like a real jerk ever since Reese and Jonas began dating. Jonas shook his head and tried the key again. When the engine roared to life, he quickly left the strange Diner and unsettling thoughts of Pete behind.

Jonas was more than relieved to see that Merilee hadn’t yet left for work as he pulled in behind her Honda. He didn’t want to drag this out another minute. The kitchen door off the carport swung open as he was fishing for his key.

“Oh.” Merilee’s tone was as flat and dry as the surrounding terrain.

*She knows*, he thought. “We have to talk.” he said.

“No!” her dark eyes flashed with a fury he’d never known her to possess. “No, *we* don’t. *You* need to decide –and move your truck, I’m late for work.” she pushed past Jonas and went to her car.

Merilee drove away without a second glance as the bright morning sun stung his tired eyes. Didn’t she know he could not, *would* not make that decision? Between Merilee and Reese? Well, he loved them both, truth be told.

Besides, he had a teenage daughter to think of. She’d be in class by now, so he’d just head back to Tucumcari and try to get some rest before his next shift. His cell phone beeped a message alert as he wearily climbed into his truck. The caller I.D was Merilee’s oldest daughter.

The voice was unmistakable, the words undeniably chilling “You will pay for this, Jonas. If I have to do it myself, you will pay!”

*Huh.* He thought they’d been friends.

Jonas dialed a number a number he knew by heart “Pete? Hey, you’re gonna feed Lexor this morning, right? C’mon, man. You know Reese is scared to death of him. Just be careful if he gets annoyed...Pete?”

The signal had faded but Jonas was reasonably sure Pete would take care of his prized possession. Though he had to admit, measuring five feet long, the Komodo Dragon Jonas had raised from an egg was a bit imposing.

Nearing mid-afternoon, Jonas was in danger of nodding off and pulled into a convenience store for coffee. *No more weird diners for this guy*, he thought. He coasted easily into a front parking space and pressed the brake pedal but the truck didn’t stop! With both feet on the brake pedal he

frantically grabbed the emergency brake and missed the plate glass window by inches. He sat for a few moments; heart pounding, hands shaking. Jonas recalled Pete, rolling from under the truck just a day before, having installed a new set of brakes. *Or had he?* Jonas' stomach lurched. *Was Pete trying to kill him, too? How had he ever made it safely through all those steep grades?*

He stumbled out of the truck, rubbing his eyes. He realized he'd left the radio on but walked ahead on wobbly legs to the entrance of the store where the smell of old grease assaulted his nose even as the aroma of freshly brewed coffee caressed his senses—*wait, this was too familiar - what the hell?*

Jonas knew in his heart before his eyes could prove it, that Geno would be standing behind the counter.

“Welcome back, Jonas.” the Indian said

“This can't be happening...” Jonas stammered. He must have fallen asleep and was having one helluva bad dream. “I have to go.” he managed above a whisper.

“You're already gone, Jonas. You just don't know it.”

Sirens wailed down the highway as a gravelly voice announced late breaking news on Jonas' radio:

“This just in from Tucumcari: A man was found late this morning, apparently killed by a pet Komodo dragon. In other news, crews are still searching for the driver of a truck that rolled down a ravine off Highway 54 late last night.”