

FADE IN:

EXT. NEVADA DESERT, 1967 - DAY

The sun pounds heat like a piledriver into parched sand, dirt, and the scrubby, dull cyan plants tenacious enough to survive here. Deep blue mountains meet cloudless blue sky at the horizon. Wind blows hot and dry. Miles from anywhere.

A two-lane blacktop paints a straight line across the desert, shimmering in the heat. A rattlesnake suns itself in the road. Reacts to a distant sound: the roar of an approaching engine. It slithers out of the way just as the car blows past.

INT. CADILLAC, DRIVING - DAY

Tight on bright coral-colored roses. They're part of a prize potted plant, neatly labeled "Fred Loads, *Floribunda*." It rides on the back seat of a dusty, maroon 1963 Cadillac.

The driver is SHIRLEY WALKER, 35. Brown hair falls down the sides of her face. She looks like she's in her Sunday best, but her dress is hitched up to let the air conditioning blow on her legs. She is crying.

She consults type-written pages of notes on the seat next to her, reciting as she drives.

SHIRLEY

It's an honor to be here

(sniffs)

at the Desert Shall Blossom Garden Show--

(sniffs)

She fumbles with the pages. The car drifts into the opposite lane. She notices, and corrects. The Fred Loads wobbles in the back seat.

SHIRLEY (CONT'D)

The Fred Loads is this year's gold  
winning medal winner,

(sniffs)

gold medal winner--

Big, nervous sigh.

SHIRLEY (CONT'D)

and I'm so honored

(sniffs)

to represent our club here at the--

Checks her running mascara in the mirror.

SHIRLEY (CONT'D)

Shirley, Shirley, Shirley. What were you thinking?

The car drifts right. Vibrates as tires crunch gravel on the shoulder. She glances ahead.

A MAN in the road!

She jerks the wheel and jams both feet on the brakes. The car brushes past him. Does a slow, howling pirouette and stops, wobbling, sideways across the road.

The hitchhiker, 30, approaches through the cloud of dust and tire smoke. He's dressed in perfectly starched jeans, cowboy boots and hat, small rucksack draped over one shoulder. Call him JEANS.

He taps a knuckle against the passenger side window. It whirs down. Shirley stares out the windshield. He leans in. Takes a long whiff. She is catatonic.

JEANS

Next time you don't wanna give someone a ride? A simple no will suffice.

He notices the potting soil, shards and rose petals all over the back seat.

JEANS (CONT'D)

Looks like your friend needs a proper burial.

She whips around in a panic.

SHIRLEY

Oh, my god! Oh, no! Oh, no--  
(to Jeans, bigger)

Oh, my god! Are you Okay? Oh, I'm so sorry! Oh. Oh. Oh--

She follows his gaze. Pulls the skirt back down over her legs.

JEANS

Going my way?

The passenger window whirs up, forcing him to stand back out of the way. She quickly wipes away the running makeup.

Thunk. The doors unlock.

INT. CADILLAC, DRIVING - DAY

Shirley has a death grip on the wheel. Jeans rides, relaxed. Long silence.

SHIRLEY

Hope you don't mind. The car's a little dirty.

JEANS

Everything gets a little bit dirty out here.

He opens the glove box. Rummages randomly through it.

JEANS (CONT'D)

I'm lucky you picked me up. And lucky you missed me. You're lucky, too.

A confused look from Shirley.

JEANS (CONT'D)

I coulda been someone dangerous.

Snaps the glove box closed. They drive on. Shirley sneaks glances. Tries to think of something to say. Switches on the radio. Jeans watches the antenna whir up from its hiding place in the fender.

Perry Como sings for a while.

Jeans hits the SEEK UP button on the radio. The radio tunes the dial automatically to a new station.

JEANS (CONT'D)

Whoa. Nice.

He holds his hand in front of the air conditioning.

JEANS (CONT'D)

This buggy's got everything.

SHIRLEY

You know, you can get one of these used for the price of a new Chevy.

JEANS

If you got the price of a new Chevy.

SHIRLEY

Well, I got a client over in Ely with a dealership.

JEANS  
(approving nod)  
Clients. Hm.

SHIRLEY  
Actually, it's not his dealership. He's  
just the sales manager. He helped me get  
a good deal.

Jeans lowers and raises his window, watching it work.

JEANS  
Nice. How is it on gas?

SHIRLEY  
Doesn't use as much as you'd think.

They drive on.

JEANS  
We're lost.

She double checks the road, the speedometer, confused.

JEANS (CONT'D)  
Going the wrong way.

SHIRLEY  
Elko's this way.

JEANS  
Who said anything about Elko?  
(beat)  
Where'd you say you're from?

She hesitates.

SHIRLEY  
McGill.

JEANS  
That's it. McGill. I'm going to McGill.

SHIRLEY  
They're expecting me in Elko. I have a  
speech.

He looks at the mess in the back seat.

JEANS  
They might be disappointed.

EXT. NEVADA DESERT - DAY

The highway stretches to the mountains on the horizon. The Caddy is the only thing on it. It slows, stops. Turns around.

INT. CADILLAC, DRIVING - DAY

Jeans is napping. Shirley glances between him, the radio, and the road. The song is driving her nuts. She switches it off. Checks herself in the mirror.

JEANS

I like that song.

She turns it back on. Just not as loud. Drives on for a while. Jeans adjusts his position, draping his arm along the seat back. His fingertips land casually on her shoulder. Shirley inhales. Says nothing. Eventually he notices that she's glancing at the hand. He withdraws it and sits up straight.

JEANS (CONT'D)

I shouldn't have done that.

She recovers a bit.

JEANS (CONT'D)

Look. Maybe you should just let me out.

She shoots him a confused look.

JEANS (CONT'D)

Serious. Maybe this isn't such a good idea.

She drives on a while, struggling to find something to say.

SHIRLEY

It's an awful long walk to McGill.

JEANS

You picked me up, didn't you? Anyway, you must be anxious to give your speech in Elko.

She changes tack.

SHIRLEY

Must be exciting. I mean--traveling alone.

JEANS

Never needed nobody but myself.

SHIRLEY

No friends?

JEANS

I got no trouble finding company if I want.

Shirley tries to read his eyes. Nothing. She unconsciously smooths her dress with one hand.

SHIRLEY

I'll take you as far as McGill. Then--

She gropes for something to say.

EXT. EDGE OF TOWN, MCGILL, NEVADA - DAY

The tall smokestacks of the smelter loom over the tiny town. The wind smooths a long streak of sandy tailings that stretches from the smelter, along the railroad tracks, and into the desert. It always blows in McGill.

The Caddy pulls to the side of the road. Jeans gets out. The car drives on.

INT. CADILLAC - DAY

Shirley watches Jeans shrink in the rear view mirror. He just stands there, watching her go.

EXT. MAIN STREET - DAY

The Caddy pulls to the curb in front of a small, store-front office. Shirley sits in the car, heart pounding. The sign on the office window: "Shirley Walker, Insurance." She opens the car door and steps part way out.

Then remembers to shut off the engine.

INT. SHIRLEY'S OFFICE - DAY

Modest, one-person office. One desk. File cabinet in the corner. A chair for the client in front of it. A small sofa next to the potted plant in the window.

Shirley sits at the desk. On it is a portrait of a man, DAVID, in an Army uniform. She doodles on a legal pad. Absentmindedly rubs her right shoulder.

LIZZIE, 24, a firecracker redhead, pops in and flops melodramatically on the couch.

LIZZIE  
Shirl, I've got Scarlett Fever.

SHIRLEY  
Hi, Lizzie.

LIZZIE  
(Clark Gable)  
I should be kissed, often, by someone who  
knows how.  
(herself)  
It's SA-TUR-DAY!

SHIRLEY  
Uh-huh. You know. Paperwork.

LIZZIE  
Did you know that if towns were people,  
this one wouldn't have a pulse?

She pantomimes defibrillator paddles on an invisible patient.

LIZZIE (CONT'D)  
Stand back! We're losing him! Beeeeeep!  
CLEAR!

The invisible paddles jump. She looks down sadly at the  
corpse.

SHIRLEY  
It's quiet here.

Lizzie is up and pacing.

LIZZIE  
I'll be quiet when I'm dead! I need to  
make some noise! Every quiet Saturday  
night is a nail in my coffin.

She doesn't notice when PASTOR BROWN, 30, soft hands,  
cherubic face framed in spectacles, enters quietly behind  
her.

LIZZIE (CONT'D)  
Where are the men, Shirl? Even these  
smelly Kennecott guys with their  
sandpaper hands are starting to look  
good! Jesus! If they just had two lips,  
two arms and one--

SHIRLEY  
Pastor.

LIZZIE  
 (whirling)  
 Pastor!

PASTOR  
 Lizzie. It's been a while.

She steps a tiny bit closer to him.

LIZZIE  
 Miss me?

PASTOR  
 I mean at church.

LIZZIE  
 You shouldn't be missing me at church!  
 Someone might notice.

He hesitates -- and produces some scraps of paper. Moves behind the desk, next to Shirley and lays them out in front of her, looking over her shoulder.

PASTOR  
 Sorry I'm late with these. Can we still get them in the bulletin for tomorrow?

SHIRLEY  
 I haven't typed up the mimeo yet. I was going to do it later tonight anyway.

PASTOR  
 Is this the week for the garden club?

SHIRLEY  
 Is there a problem?

PASTOR  
 The Cub Scouts sometimes leave a mess.

SHIRLEY  
 Boys. They're nothing but trouble. Don't worry. I'll take care of it.

He puts a friendly hand on her back.

PASTOR  
 We sure appreciate all you do. See you in church.

He heads for the door.

SHIRLEY  
 (off the paper notes)  
 I'll try to have them there early  
 tomorrow.

Lizzie watches the Pastor exit, and pass by the window.

LIZZIE  
 Aren't you supposed to be in Elko?

Shirley struggles for an answer. Gives up.

EXT. SHIRLEY'S HOUSE - DAY

The setting sun shines on a row of simple company cottages in Middle Town. Roses of many colors brighten one yard: Shirley's.

She parks the car out front. When she opens the screen door the bottom hinge pops off. Trying to catch the door with the other hand, her key rips a hole in the screen.

SHIRLEY  
 Great.

She struggles with the flopping door as she works the key in the lock. She goes inside and closes the door. The screen door flops back to as close to closed as it's going to get.

INT. SHIRLEY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Shirley finishes a plate of spaghetti, seated at the little kitchen table. Dressed in her comfy grubbies.

Dishes go in the sink.

She pours soda over crackling ice. Uses the glass to cool her forehead as she goes to the living room. Puts on some soothing music. Selects a dog-eared romance novel from the book case.

INSERT ON BOOK

On the cover, a giant castle broods in the background, on a hill behind the heroine.

BACK TO:

Shirley curls up on the couch with the paperback and the soda.

A knock at the door. She jumps. Opens it. Shocked to see:

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