

# Bristlecone

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## PART ONE

Cedarville, California, Early June

A SOLITARY FIGURE knelt before the raw headstone. Balancing on one knee, Shadrack Smithers tried as he might to avoid focusing on the letters freshly chiseled into the granite face, but his eyes betrayed him and read them anyhow: *MATHILDE SMITHERS, Wife and Mother*. As if that summed it all up, which it most certainly did not.

The position was painful for the old man, but he had something to get off his chest. He plucked a dandelion and twirled it between gnarled fingers, then cleared his throat. “Well . . . this here jus’ might be m’ las’ visit.” His eyes were moist, but he was in a sore perplexity to be understood. “Or one a’em anyhow.”

His speech faded into the otherwise empty cemetery. The afternoon sun had passed behind the spreading canopy of honey locust trees, whose yellow blossoms swirled down with each puff of breeze. Shadrack twirled the dandelion as he worked up the gumption to go on. He heard himself mumble a few words about local doings and how the bookstore might be closing, but quickly fell silent again. It was taking him a heap of time to get his mind just right for the meat of this conversation. But it had to be said.

“I made up m’ mind, I have,” he declared at last. “An’ I’m a’bound and determined t’ go on an’ take me one final trip. Try an’ make it back t’ the Ozarks where we growed up. Missouri was a’where we met an’ was a’married. An’ whar Donny was first born. You knowd all o’ that. But there’s where I’ll be bound.” He paused and hung his head. “I got the cain’t-he’p-its all the time now, seems. Got ’em bad and cain’t seem t’ get nothin’ a’tall done no more.” He waited for more words to come, but they were slow in coming.

He took a long breath and blotted an unwelcome tear from the corner of his eye before plunging on. “Anyhow . . . I know what you’ be a’thinkin’ ’bout me tryin’ t’ travel nowadays, particular with me a’sayin’ t’hell with standin’ in line tryin’ t’ get one o’ them damn’ travel permits. They warn’t never gonna gimme one o’ them anyways. I ain’t got no chance for no travel clearance, tha’s fer sure. I ain’t got no long haul trucker license. An’ I ain’t got no ‘critical skills,’ as ’ey call ’em. No ma’am. An’ there ain’t no qualifyin’ reason for ’em t’ justify the burnin’ up o’ nash’nal resources jus’ t’get me back there t’ Missouri. But I don’t give a damn an’ that’s the truth! An’ I don’t want you a’askin’ ‘Why for?’ like ya always used t’do. ’Cause I don’t have a notion why for. I simply do not. I jus’ knows it’s somethin’ I jus’ gotta do. An’ that’s the open an’ shut of it.”

Shadrack rose stiffly and bent backwards until his spine crackled. He gazed up at the open sky and recalled the days when the wild blue was criss-crossed with drifting white plumes of vapor trails from everybody and his uncle flying somewhere or other for no damned purpose at all. He’d done so himself, maybe a half-dozen times, long ago, way back when anybody could just lay down some cash on the barrel-head and jump aboard any old plane and fly. But those days were long gone. Now the national policy was for you to stay put, just where you was and as

you was. Nowadays you couldn't ever borrow a car and drive across county lines without holdin' a permit of some kind. And they sure as shooting weren't gonna issue him no permit. What for would they? He wasn't nothing to them.

Stiffly he knelt back down on the other knee to finish this business. "I'm gonna have t' think this 'ere through mighty careful, I grant y' that. There's that civil insurrection still a'ragin' over by Denver, so I plans t' scoot aways south o' all that. An' things is still a little warm with the cattle ranchers an' seper'tists over there in Nevada, though they mostly been kilt or else rounded up and stuck behind bob wire. An' a'course there's terrorists ever'where a'blowin' 'emselves up, but I figure I can work m'way 'round them techy spots perty easy. I been a'rock houndin' all o'er this here territory fer years. As you well know. Anyhow, all it'll take is jus' t' hook up with some local fella here what still got an operatin' pickup hid away somewheres. An' some gasoline. There mus' be plenty a' fellas 'round here, I reckon. I'll jus' buy the sucker offa 'im fer cash money, paint it up black, an' ride out by moonlight." He thought about it for a while, then added, "Four wheel drive'd be highly pr'ferred."

He thought some more while his back and knee throbbed, but couldn't think of anything else to say, except, "I al'as loved ya. But you knowed that anyways. An' I don' wanna have t' leave ya har all alone. But it ain't like I'm a'leavin' without ya, 'cause . . . I'll be a'carrin' ya with me ri'chere." He pounded a bony fist against his breast. "Al'a's have been . . . but you knowed that." Shadrack rose painfully and turned, paused in thought, then turned back. "But ya gotta remember one thing . . . you's *dead*. So ga'bye now." He shuffled away without looking back.

ELAN GROVES was rocking in his front porch swing, rereading an old Faulkner novel, when he glanced up to see a scarecrow approaching. A loose worn work shirt flapped emptily in the breeze above faded overalls cinched up tight about the specter's bean-pole waist. Elan blinked, and the vision resolved itself into a human figure with a full snaggle of beard, a head of sparse shaggy gray-white hair, worn work boots, and a limp in his right leg. The fellow was no stranger. Few who lived in and about Cedarville were. But it took Elan a couple of heartbeats to place him. He was the husband of Tildie Smithers, who had worked with Elan's wife Bess at the Nuevo Niños Reading Project a few years back. The Smithers owned a small farm a mile or so down the road toward Eagleville. Tilde had passed away recently, he had heard, and Elan had seen the fellow around town more since she passed. But he couldn't recall his first name. Something odd, but he couldn't recollect what. "Howdy," he called out, rising to his feet. "Something I can do for you this fine morning, Mr. Smithers?"

"Shadrack," he corrected, waving a bony hand. But he spoke no more until he got right up close. Then low and confidential he said, "P'raps there might be."

"And what's that?"

Shadrack squinted about uneasily. Up close his bones seemed strapped with wiry farm-labor muscles, and he exuded that tangy old-man aroma of stale sweat. He muttered, as if to himself, "Your wife make it back home?"

"No. Bess is still caught up in Portland with our oldest girl, Ginger. She's started college up there last fall, and Bess went up to help her settle in a month ago. She's still up there waiting for her travel permit to come back home."

"Them permits!" Shadrack spat.

“I’ve been aggrieved about them myself,” Elan agreed. “Ever since those clowns in Washington went crazy and declared a state of emergency and diced up the whole country into sectors. Isolated everybody. And for what? It might make some kind of sense in combating terrorists some places, but not out here in the Warners.”

“No, sir,” agreed Shadrack. “Ya got that right.”

“I was teaching Business Accounting at the Community College over in Alturas when the new regulations came down. Now I’m on suspended leave, because I can’t get through the roadblock at the old agriculture inspection station. It’s now a sector checkpoint.”

Shadrack grunted accord and sympathy. “So you’s outta a job?”

“For now anyway.”

“Got no paycheck a’comin’ in?”

“Unfortunately not.”

Shadrack grunted again and looked down at the old flop hat he gripped in his hands.

“You look like you might’ve lost a little weight since I last saw you, Mr. Smithers.”

“Shadrack. An’ ya’d be right ’bout that. Don’t eat reg’lar much since Tildie passed, no sir. Got me no appetite. Don’t do much a’tall anymore. Ain’t even got the late potatoes outta the ground yet.”

“I was sorry to learn of your wife’s passing,” Elan said. “She worked with my wife, Bess, you know. You have my deepest condolences.”

Shadrack fidgeted, figuring that enough chit-chat had flowed between them to grease the skids, so he came to the point. “I un’erstan’ ya might have somethin’ I’d like t’ offer t’buy offen ya. Cash money it’d be. New gov’ment issue. Good as gold.”

“Oh?” Elan closed his book. “And just what might that be, my friend?”

“They say y’got a ol’ four-by-four truck still runs good. ’Zat a fac’?”

Elan considered him carefully. “Now who might be telling you such a thing?”

“Oh, ’s’jus’ the word ’bout town. Nobody in particular, I guess.”

“And just what do you want a truck for, if I might ask. You can’t go much anywhere anymore. Not without a permit. But I’m sure you know that.”

Smithers nodded. “Ever’body know’d that, right ’nough, I guess.” He paused for a moment, then pressed on, “But ’chew got a four-by-four, I hear tell. Ain’t that so?”

“You haven’t told me what you might want to use a truck for.”

So Shadrack Smithers drew in a deep breath and hunkered down on his haunches. He let it out in a long sigh, then told Elan what he had just told his dead wife, using mostly the same words he had used with her.

“The Ozarks. My goodness. Missouri or Arkansas?”

“Missouri, but it might’s well be t’other.”

“That’s a long way to try and go in a pickup truck nowadays.”

“That might be’s it is, I guess. But i’s whar Tildie and me was married. An’ whar ‘r first born was begot. An’ tha’s where I’m hankerin’ t’ get back to.”

Elan nodded. “The permitting is going to be a nightmare. And I’m assuming you haven’t got a permit to travel that far yet?”

Shadrack shook his head. “Don’t wanna make that no business o’ yourn. I’ll take on the ’sponsibility of havin’ a permit ’r not. Don’t worry yerself none about it.”

Elan smiled. "I appreciate your consideration in keeping me out of trouble, should there be any unlawful travel contemplated. But . . ." He fell silent again.

"But whut?"

"But . . . well . . ." Two competing trains of thought were vying for his attention. He chose the simpler one. "Well . . . for one thing, why don't you just hitch a ride along with some trucker? One of the long-haul ones that come through town now and again. They all carry commercial permits."

"None o' 'em I talked to'll take me on. Scared t'death, they are. Might get their license 'spended. 'R get 'emselves locked up someplace behind the bob wire. 'R even worse."

"That bad, is it?"

"These's troubled times, son. They might jus' get shot down like dogs, from what I hear. And it's not a'knowin' jus' *what* might happen t'em's got 'em so spooked."

Elan was quiet for a long while. At last he nodded. "Come with me, Mr. Smithers—"

"Shadrack."

"Sorry . . . Shadrack . . . let's go take a look see at what's available out in the old barn." He stepped down onto the grass. "I've collected some vintage vehicles out there over the years. At least I used to collect them. Now I restore them up, when I can find the time. Kind of a hobby with me. But I never get to take any out on the road anymore."

"Whyn't?"

Elan grinned. "Haven't got a travel permit."

The barn's red paint was faded and flaking, and the foundation blocks were separating in places. Elan fished a key out of his pocket, unsnapped the padlock, and ground the big red door back on its squealing track. He flipped a wall switch and an overhead fluorescent flickered on. The large, low space inside was sifted with bits of hay and dust and pigeon droppings. An abandoned concrete feed trough ran down the far side with rusting car and tractor parts leaning against it. Farm implements hung from the walls. "Watch your head," Elan cautioned as he led them through a second low opening into a larger section. That space was brightly lit by work lights beneath a canopy of surplus parachutes strung overhead to kept the workspace clean. It had the feel and smell of an old auto repair garage. Surrounding them were auto relics, stripped down for painting or major overhaul.

"Great Lordy!" gasped Shadrack. "A feel like a chile in a can'y shop!" He was admiring the three vehicles in the center beneath the lights. They had been cleaned up and polished and looked ready for the road. One was a three-decade-old black Toyota pickup, the one Shadrack had inquired about. Its coat of dull primer black paint seemed to absorb the bright light. Beside it was a stubby GMC school bus with the passenger seats removed and the original yellow paint sanded down and partially primered gray in spots, giving it the character of an old piebald workhorse. And beyond that sat a Humvee in desert camouflage livery, a restored relic of the Persian Gulf War.

Elan grinned at him. "As you see, I suffer from a bit of wanderlust myself. Like you, I've been considering getting away on a road trip of my own."

"You?" Shadrack wondered.

"Yes, sir."

"How y'gonna get a permit t' travel?"

“Well,” explained Elan, “when I began restoring these vehicles, you didn’t need any such thing. And now that you do . . . well, it’s all become a kind of compelling fantasy. You might call it an obsession. I kept putting it off, what with work and a wife and two daughters and all that. And now that I’ve got the time, it grieves me that it may be too late. Anyway . . . what you were saying about *your* travel permit being *your* problem is correct . . . but I guess it would become *my* problem too, don’t you think, if I decide to come along with you for the ride.”

“Come along? You?”

“Yes, sir. That’s what I’m thinking. With Bess and Ginger away, I’ve got a whole lot of spare time on my hands. But I’d have to figure out how to make arrangements for Katie. She’s my youngest, and she’s just a junior at Cedarville High. She lives at home with me. Just the two of us, until Bess gets back. If she ever does. Anyway, I’d have to think this through very carefully and talk to my wife. And to Katie, of course. But it’s a possibility. That’s what I’m saying. A real possibility. A road trip. What do you think of my crazy idea?”

Shadrack turned away, grumbling mostly to himself. “This ain’t what I come o’er here fer a’tall. I jus’ come t’ see if’n ya might have yerself a pickup I could buy of’n ya. This here seems t’ be gettin’ a way more complicated than I’druther. An’ I’m not sure I like where she’s a’driftin’.” He turned to confront Elan. “I was a’plannin’ t’ go this’n by m’self, y’ un’erstand. No offense intended, mind ya.”

“No offense taken, Mr. . . . ah, Shadrack. But you think it over, will you? And I’ll do the same. We can talk again in a couple of days.”

“But ya might sell me one o’ these here?”

“I might.”

Shadrack scowled. “Coupla day’s too long. How ’bout tomorrow? Same time.”

Elan nodded. “Tomorrow afternoon it is.”

KATIE GROVES could sense that something was up. She felt it the moment she walked through the kitchen door. Something was not quite right. She stacked her books carefully on the corner of the sideboard and turned to sniff for a clue.

Her father was sitting at the table just staring at her. No *Hi ya Kiddo*. No *What did you pick up in school today, honey?* He sat there with a piercing gaze and a grimly down-turned mouth.

“What?” she demanded. Katie was a tall slip of a girl on the threshold of becoming a fetching young woman. Pony tail of chestnut hair. Athletic body. She ran cross-country in the spring. Played soccer in the fall. And she was just about to turn sixteen. “*What?*”

Elan glanced away.

“What’s wrong? Oh my god, did something happen to Mom?”

“No, nothing happened to your mother.”

“*What is it then?*” She demanded.

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking of something is all.”

“What?”

“Oh . . . of maybe . . . taking a little trip.”

“A trip? Like how can you take a trip? Where to?”

He raised a puckish hand to pacify her. “We can talk about it at supper,” he smiled. “How did things go at the bookstore today, Kiddo?”

She turned fierce bright eyes on him. “What are you up to now, Dad?”

“Nothing at all. I just . . . sort of ran into . . . well . . . you remember Tildie Smithers, don’t you? Your Mom’s friend”

“Sure. She came in and taught us some Spanish back in, you know, sixth grade. But she just died, didn’t she?”

“Yes, she did. But her husband, Shadrack, came by this afternoon—”

“Isn’t he that scary old farmer from down the road? With the wild beard?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say ‘scary’ exactly. But you know who I’m talking about. Anyway . . . Mr. Smithers . . . Shadrack . . . he’s thinking of leaving the area here and I was thinking of offering him a lift.”

“A *lift*?” The concept baffled her. “Why would you do *that*?”

“Well . . . it’s just that I never get to take my trucks out anymore . . . and I wouldn’t mind a bit of a road trip myself.”

“A *road* trip? How far were you planning on driving him.”

“I wasn’t *planning* on anything just yet. Just mulling it over. And I kind of wanted to talk to you about it first. Make sure you would be alright here by yourself for a few days. You know—”

“A few *days*? How far are you planning on going?”

“We haven’t really worked that out exactly . . . but—”

“Dad! Come on. Tell me. How far?”

“Well . . . maybe as far as Missouri, but—”

“*Missouri*?”

“Just the southwest corner. Barely out of Oklahoma. Anyway, that’s his plan. Not really a plan. This is all very tentative, as far as I’m concerned.”

Katie stared at him. “Why are *you* involved?”

“I wouldn’t say I was ‘involved.’ ‘Involved’ is too . . . well . . . it’s not the right word.”

“Dad, there’s something here you’re not telling me. And this is about *me* too, you know. I need to know, like, how *I* fit in. Just let me *think* a minute.”

The clock ticked on the wall until he couldn’t stand it anymore. “Katie, I know—”

“Shush! I’m thinking.”

Mutely they both listened to the clock ticking. He sitting. She standing. Finally her face broke into a radiant smile, a beam of sunshine bright in her eyes. “I want to go too,” she announced.

“Wait,” Elan coughed, “I’m sorry, but I don’t think that’s possible.”

“Why not?” she wanted to know. “You’re like always going on about the splendors of this wonderful country. You know, the purple mountains. The wide open deserts. The wildlands and the forests. The waves of grain from shore to shore and all that. And I’ve never been off to see any of that. *Any* of it. I’ve spent my whole life right here in Cedarville—”

“Katie, you know that’s not true. We’ve taken you to Reno and San Francisco—”

“That’s not the same thing, for sure, and you know it. And the way things are going, I’ll probably never get another chance.”

“I . . . ah . . . don’t think I could get a permit for you, honey.”

She stared him in the eye. “I bet you and Mr. Smithers haven’t got any permits for yourselves either.”

He glanced away. "I couldn't take you, honey. There might be some . . . well . . . some danger involved, you see. And I can't put you in any danger. Your mother would skin me alive."

"I'll talk to Mom," she enthused. "I can make her see my side. You don't mind if I do that, do you?"

"Well . . ."

*"I want to go along!"*

SHADRACK SHOWED UP the following afternoon, right on time, aboard his ancient gray Farmall as it rumbled noisily into the driveway. He shut the tractor off and climbed down, a dirty brown paper grocery bag pinched under his scrawny arm. Elan had the doors open to the back half of the barn and was gunning the Toyota pickup's engine while he adjusted something under the hood. When he saw Shadrack, he pulled out and straightened up and leaned into the cab to shut off the engine.

"Looks like ya got 'er a'runnin' perty nice 'ere," Shadrack told him. "Sounds real solid."

"I tuned her up just this Spring. I like to run them all at least once a week. Worst thing you can do to a motor vehicle is to let it just sit. What have you got there in the bag?"

"Well sir, I brung along some money. We ain't talked about price yet, 'an I's a'hopin' it's 'nough. But I brung the deed t' m' farm, too, jus' in case the cash money don't cover it. How much 're you a'askin', anyhow?"

"Now hold on, Shadrack. We still have something else to discuss, don't you remember?"

Shadrack pulled off his slouch hat and scratched his head. "Nothin' all that much 's I recall."

"Remember me telling you that I might want to go along on the trip?"

Shadrack shook his head. "I recall you a'spoutin' somethin' 'bout that, but I reckon I told y' 'no' on that there partic'lar notion."

"I didn't hear you if you did. As far as I'm concerned, it's still up for discussion. And it would certainly affect the purchase price of the truck, if I decide to sell at all." Elan paused to let that sink in. "And now I know someone else who might just want to tag along, too."

Shadrack blanched. "An' who might 'at be?"

"My daughter Katie."

"Your *daughter!* I'n't she a one still in high school?"

"That she is."

"Well . . . but . . . I declare . . ." Shadrack sputtered, drawing back, "ain't *that* a crazy notion. This jus' ain't a'gonna do." His eyes narrowed. "An' y' figure ya can come up with all 'em permits, do ya?"

"Now hold on," Elan laughed. "Why should *we* worry about a permit, if *you* don't?"

"Don' seem a'tall right fer either one a ya t' think a'coming along without no permits. No sir. 'S just not right. An' again' the law. It be a mighty dangerous thing. An' she bein' jus' a girl! I'd never take my girls 'long on somethin' 's chancy 's this here might be. An' besides . . . an' besides, they jus' ain't 'nough *room* fer three a' us in that little ol' truck a' yours."

That was the opening Elan had been waiting for, and he pounced. "Now *that's* where you'd be wrong. I figured we'd do better if we took *two* vehicles. You in the truck, maybe. Katie and me in the bus. Mostly you would be by yourself and wouldn't even have to talk to us. But we could switch drivers from time to time. Spell each other maybe. Make the long drive easier.

And we would find safety in numbers, just in case one of the vehicles breaks down. Besides, Katie and me might not want to go the whole way. Probably would not. A couple of days out and back ought to be enough for us. Then you'd be on your own."

Shadrack was shaking his head gloomily. "This ain't . . . this jus' ain't a'tall—"

"Well, give it some thought anyway. We can go over the logistics if you're on for it. In the meantime I'd like to know what route you were planning to take. Why don't you come on into the kitchen for a cup of coffee. I've got some maps spread out on the table in there. And I'd like you to meet Katie."

"Don't know 'bout that," Shadrack grumbled as he followed across the wide lawn. "Ain't much good with the young'ns. 'Specially the girls. Jus' don't cotton t' me a'tall. M'own all moved out years ago, soon's they finished high school. Never bother t' give me a call anymore."

"Didn't they come out for the funeral?" Elan asked as he led the way up to the house.

"They did. But t'warn't fer t'see *me*, I reckon."

KATIE WAS ADJUSTING the flame under the coffee pot when the kitchen door banged open. With a wan smile she turned to face Shadrack Smithers as he stepped grudgingly through the doorway. "Hello there, Mr. Smithers—"

"Shadrack," the old man growled, taking Katie aback.

"Katie," her father intervened, "I'd like you to meet Shadrack Smithers. Shadrack, this is my daughter Katie."

"Would you care for a cup of coffee?" Katie tried again.

"Don't drink no coffee," Shadrack grumped. "Not no more. Angrifies m'bowels, it does."

Katie stood clutching the pot. She turned to her father for help.

"Have a seat here, Shadrack," Elan said. "Is there something else I can get you to drink?"

"Water'll be fine." Sullenly he drew out a chair and eased himself down. "These the maps you'us a'talkin' 'bout?"

"Yes, sir. Some of them, anyway. See, here we are in Cedarville."

Shadrack followed the finger, then pushed it aside with his own yellowing nail, almost a claw. "Ri'cher?" He leaned closer and squinted. He tapped his nail on the spot.

"That's where we are alright." Elan caught a glance from his daughter.

"Dad, can I talk with you for a second?" She made eyes urgently toward the doorway.

"Oh . . . sure . . . okay. Would you excuse us for a moment, Shadrack?" He followed her into the hallway.

Katie whispered in exasperation. "This isn't, like, going to work out, is it?"

"That's what I was trying to tell you, Katie."

"How about you and me just, you know, going off on our own?"

"That sounds just wonderful, sweetheart."

His daughter stared at him. "But . . . what?"

"I didn't say 'but' anything."

"I heard it in your tone, Dad."

"Well, yours is a good idea. A great idea. Just you and me out camping. And I think your mother might even go along with it. But . . . here's the thing . . . maybe we could just follow him along in our own vehicle for the first day or so. He seems to know the country pretty well.

Better than either of us. Better than a tour guide, and we might learn something new.”

“But he smells so . . . so *bad*.”

“I’ll see if I can talk him into taking a bath.”

She thought about it. “Make it part of the deal. For sure.”

Elan sighed. “I guess I could do that. Maybe offer him a soak over at the hot springs.”

Katie considered, then shrugged. “Whatever.” She smiled and gave her father a big hug.

“This is going to be *fun*.”

By the time they stepped back into the kitchen, Shadrack had familiarized himself with the map. “Now this’s how I see ’er,” he announced. “They a’gonna stick up roadblocks on the big highways and the choke points. Th’ain’t got the manpower t’ patrol all them highways an’ dirt roads a’runnin’ through here.” He swiped his hand over a broad swath south and east of Cedarville. He scratched his head. “Now, do ya suspect we need a permit jus’ ta travel there anyhow?”

“I don’t know,” Elan replied. “The state line runs down the east side of the Surprise Valley. But the sector checkpoint is over west of the Warners. That leaves us in a kind of no man’s land between the two. It’s like they sliced off the northeast sliver of California.”

“Arrr. But did ’ey stick ’er onto Nevada, I wonder?”

“I don’t know. Maybe for sector and travel purposes they ceded us to Nevada.”

“Might be. But might not. An’ anyways, might not make no diff’rence, bein’s ya got California plates on all the veh’cles.”

“Good point, Shadrack. When they see those plates, they’re going to stop us and start asking a lot of questions either way.”

“*If’n* they see ’em. Now I knows all them Nevada dirt roads perty good m’self from years a’ rockhoundin’, an’ I think I can a’slip us on past all ’em checkpoints.”

Elan nodded. “So you’re alright with Katy and me coming along then?”

“I guess it ain’t none o’ my never-mind, ’s’long ’s yous be a’drivin’ that other rig a’ yourn.” Shadrack glanced up. “But why you’d be a’takin’ that ol’ school bus rather’n the big jeep, confound’s me, it surely does.”

“Well, for one thing, the bus gets better mileage. I put a 4-cylinder diesel into it, and it just sips the fuel now. And its got a built-in stove and a sink and storage cabinets and a lot more room inside for sleeping mattresses and our gear and supplies.”

“But no 4-wheel drive?”

“No, but it’s got duals on the back with aggressive treads for sand and gravel and a new transmission with plenty of torque.”

“She got a winch?”

“Not yet. There’s one on the pickup, of course. And I think I’ve got another one I can mount on the bus, if that would ease your mind.”

“We ain’t got no time fer a whole lotta shop work.”

“Won’t take long. And we’ll have to put the shell back on the pickup. Give us another place to sleep if it rains.”

Shadrack grunted. “Y’ prob’bly right ’bout the bus. Hummer’d be too wide fer some ’a the shortcuts I was a’plannin’ on.”

“Shortcuts?”

“Yeah. Like ri’chere.” Shadrack tapped the map with a fingernail. “Ain’t no sense in a’tryin’ t’ run through Gerlach an’ Reno, when we’d do better a’cuttin’ down through the High Rock Canyon, then a’swingin’ north’a the Black Rock Desert an’ a’stayin’ north a’t the highways, then droppin’ down t’cross under the Interstate at a cattle pass I know this side’a Winnemucca, an’ catchin’ Highway 50 eas’boun’ t’ Utah.”

“Utah?” Katie asked. “We’re going into Utah?”

“Might be,” said Shadrack. “R me’be we’ll cut straight on down t’ Arizona. Have t’see the lay a’t things.”

“But U. S. 50 is a major east-west route,” observed Elan. “There would probably be checkpoints on it, wouldn’t you think?”

“Nobody uses ’er much. Jus’ a few truckers, mostly screamin’ ’long in the night, high on meth. An’ tha’s why they calls it ‘the Loneliest Road In America.’ They ain’t gonna be so stupid ’s t’ deploy no troops out thar. They’d jus’ die a’ plumb boredom. Anyways, we’ be a’drivin’ ’er in th’ dark a’ night.”

“But . . . they’ll see our headlights.”

“Me’be. But how’ll they know we’s not jus’a ’nother truck? Them commercial trucks all got stickers t’tavel.”

IT TOOK THEM the better part of a week to get things ready. Together they bolted a winch onto the front bumper of the bus and wired it up, secured the canopy shell over the bed of the truck, welded on brackets for jerry cans of gasoline and diesel, bolted a propane tank to the rear bumper of the bus, changed the oil and filters, checked the brakes and belts and hoses, and drove both vehicles out for a test run on the alkali flats of the valley and dirt roads in the foothills across in Nevada. Elan found and installed mattresses in each vehicle. Water jugs were filled and groceries and a porta-potty stowed away inside. Elan gave Shadrack free use of the truck to ease the commute back and forth from his farm, and they pulled the Farmall under a shed roof at the end of the barn.

At Katie’s request, Shadrack brought over two heaping baskets of his dirty laundry, which she washed and hung out to dry. After she took them down and folded them, Elan handed Shadrack a stack of clean clothes, a bar of soap, and a towel and sent him over to the Surprise Valley Hot Springs with a coupon for a bath and a good soak.

When he returned, Katie whispered, “He looks like a new man.”

“Smells like one, too,” her father agreed.

While Shadrack continued to bemoan the time they were “a’wastin’,” his protests grew milder as he settled into a comfortable working relationship with Elan and Katie. Shadrack showed up each morning with the dawn and performed the tasks and chores assigned to him with competence and growing enthusiasm until the dark set in. When he ran out of things to do, he wired a cut-off switch into the brake lights in the pickup, then found a hoe in the shed and attacked the weeds in the flower bed, neglected in Mrs. Groves’ absence. Katie prepared three square meals a day, and they ate mostly together in the kitchen, planning their route, arguing the details, and marking things off their checklists.

Shadrack confronted Elan one morning as they were walking up the dewy lawn from the barn for breakfast. He was holding out his grocery bag in one hand. “Now y’s still ain’t tol’ me how

much y'want fer that ol' truck a'yourn," he said. "You ain't gonna be a'goin' all th' way t' the Ozarks, that's fer sure. So I'd like t'settle up with y'right now, y'hear?" He opened the bag and peered inside. "How much d'y'be a'wantin' fer the truck?"

"Well," said Elan, stopping in the grass and stretching his back, "that's something I've been giving a lot of thought to."

"Ya have, have ya?" Shadrack waited.

"How much money have you got in that poke of yours?"

Shadrack gave him a suspicious look. "Wha's'at got t'do with'r? You set a price, an' I'll consider it, fair an' square, I will. I got m'deed in here too."

"Just tell how much cash you've got. Okay?"

"Um," Shadrack grumbled. "'Bout . . . me'be . . . two thousand dollars."

"That's it? That's all you've got?"

"Me'be twenty-five hun'ert. Any more'n 'at I need fer food an' gas, I reckon."

"Total amount in the bag, Shadrack. Come on, how much?"

"Twenty-eight hun'ert. Little bit more, me'be."

Elan clasped a hand over his mouth in thought. "Alright. Here's the deal. I'll sell you that old truck for twenty-four hundred—"

"Twenty-four hun'ert!"

"That's a fair price. It's worth more than that. But I only want three hundred cash down right now. You can sign an IOU for the rest, and I'll sign the pink slip over to you. You can pay me the rest when you get back."

"But I ain't a'comin' back!"

"Well then, you can send me the rest in installments after you get your feet on the ground there in Missouri. Alright? We got a deal?"

Shadrack hung his head. "I'm a'llin' t'pay ya the whole dang price right'chere'n now 'n' be done with it."

"No," said Elan. "You're going to need every penny of your cash to live on for a while. And maybe more. My mind's made up."

"But, I got—"

"I said my mind's made up. Now, what're you going to do about that farm of yours? Someone's going to have to look after it while your gone?"

"I ain't plannin' t' come back."

The kitchen door opened and Katie waved. "Breakfast is ready!" she sang out. "Come and get it!"

Elan waved back. "We'll be right in!" He turned back to Shadrack. "But you *might* be coming back. You've got to keep an open mind about it. In the meantime, someone's got to look after the place. If later you do decide to sell it . . . and not come back here . . . well, then someone will have to be here to sell it for you and pay the bills and send you the net proceeds."

"You?"

"That's not what I had in mind. But . . . well . . . I might be willing to help you find someone to farm it and keep it up and pay the bills and taxes while you're away."

Shadrack thought about it. "Tollitson might do it."

"Teddy Tollitson?"

Shadrack nodded. "Yeah. 'S'got that big ranch next t'mine. An' lots a' other prop'ty. Runs cattle mostly. Y' know 'im?"

"Sure. He used to teach an Ag class at the college. We used to drive over to Alturas and back together when our classes lined up. Have you talked to him yet?"

Shadrack groaned. "I never figured t'take th'time fer all 'at. *We gotta get a'move on.*"

"Hold on. Now just hold on. This won't take all that long. But you're going to have to sign a power of attorney naming someone here as your agent and giving them the legal right to look after things while you're gone."

"I should'a jus' sold th'damn place," Shadrack grumbled.

"Now *that* would have taken a lot of time. Months, probably, to get a good price. Do you know Willy Baxter? He's the attorney in town."

"Heard a'im."

"Ever met him?"

Shadrack shook his head.

"Too bad. Nice fellow. He did our wills. Mostly retired now. But I bet he could draw up a power of attorney for you real quick. Advise you on it. Get it signed and notarized. Why don't you call Tollitson to see if he'll serve as your agent for you?"

Shadrack gazed down at his boots and shook his head slowly. "No, sir . . . Tollitson'n me've never seen eye to eye on much. Had us some . . . problems, I might say . . . o'er th'years." He looked up. "But how's 'bout chew? You could do it fer me?"

"Now wait a minute," Elan held up his hand. He glanced up and saw Katie was watching them from the porch. "Okay. I *might* do it. You've got that deed of yours in there?"

Shadrack held up the paper bag. "Yes, sir."

"I would have to . . . find a renter for the house." He ticked it off on a finger.

Shadrack nodded.

"Find someone to farm the land." Another finger.

Shadrack nodded. "Tollitson, me'be. Might run 'is cows."

"Open your mail and pay the bills. Keep an accounting." He ticked two more.

Shadrack nodded.

"And I would pay myself an administration fee . . . and expenses . . . out of the income, I guess." He held up his thumb.

Shadrack shrugged. "Ain't never been much a'that."

"You sure you want *me* doing all that?"

"Yes'r. If'n yer a'llin'."

"Alright . . . I'll think about it," Elan sighed. "And we can give Willy a call and see if he can see us right away." He glanced up to the house. "But let's not keep the cook waiting any longer."

The power of attorney paperwork cost them another two days. But the delay allowed the moon to wax gibbous for better night driving, which comforted Shadrack. In the meantime, on several occasions Elan and Katie spoke by phone with Bess, still awaiting her travel permit from Portland, in a tag-team effort to secure her approval for the unfolding adventure. Neither mentioned Shadrack Smithers or his quest to return home to the Missouri Ozarks. Nor anything about the likelihood of crossing security sector boundaries without a travel permit. Nor of the

detention camps in Nevada or the unknown perils lying beyond. Bess was thrilled to hear of a little father-daughter bonding on a short camping trip in the old school bus. Enthusiastically she bestowed her unenlightened blessing.

DEPARTURE DAY ARRIVED at last. Shadrack appeared with the pickup in the early gray gloaming. He had conceded that the first day's route through narrow canyons and rocky mining roads would best be undertaken by daylight. Nobody would be driving those back roads anyway. But after that, he insisted, by god, on driving at night.

Elan and Katie had already finished loading the school bus. Their slickers gleamed in the porch lights from a steady, light drizzle. Down on the playa a pack of coyotes howled. Elan walked over and handed Shadrack a two-way radio through the open window.

Shadrack held it by the antennae like a vermin. "Wha's'is fer?"

"So we can keep in touch while we're driving. You know how to use it?"

"Course I do. But they kin hear them things, y'know. Trace'em right back t'ya."

"So I've heard. But we'll have them just for emergencies. Keep yours turned on while we're driving, okay?"

Shadrack grunted and dropped it on the already crowded passenger seat beside a long burnished metal barrel.

Elan leaned in. "Is that a rifle?"

"Shotgun," Shadrack corrected. "Double barrel. Breach loader. Twelve gauge. Med'yum choke. Got'er loaded with double-aught buckshot."

"Do you think we're going to need it?"

"Jus' might. Ya never know. A'huntin' rabbits an' squir'ls mos'ly, I reckon."

"I . . . ah . . . I think I read in the paper that the emergency regulations prohibit carrying firearms in motor vehicles."

"Well sir, I had this'un fer most a' my life, an' I ain't a'gonna leave 'er behin'." Shadrack turned and lifted the gun and stuffed it down behind the seat. He covered it with a red plaid flannel jacket. "Now . . . y'ready t'get a'goin'?"

Elan sighed. "Katie? You ready?"

"Just have to use the bathroom and lock up the house," she enthused.

"Guess we're good as we'll ever be," Elan said. "We'll follow you."

Behind the wheel of the pickup Shadrack led them the short way east on Highway 299 into Nevada, where the paved two-lane degraded into a graveled road. The rain had stopped and the rising sun lit a few scattered thunderheads looming a dazzling white against cerulean sky on the horizon. At the abandoned town site of Via, he turned south on gravel route 34 behind the Hays Range. No one else was on the road. After an hour of dusty washboard road, Shadrack slowed, looking for something in the sagebrush to his left. In a half mile he came to an intersection with primitive Duck Flat Road and wheeled the truck around heading back northward. When the bus pulled alongside, he rolled down the window and told them, "Musta missed th' turnoff."

"For what?" Elan asked.

"Li'l High Rock Canyon."

Elan had to cut and back to turn the larger bus, and by the time he caught up with Shadrack, the pickup had turned off onto a rough, unmarked dirt track descending into the sagebrush

toward a cleft in the mountain rim. There was no road sign. They crawled down the narrow, bumpy path, gunning across a few muddy ruts, hoping they would not have to turn around. At a fork, Shadrack chose the one to the right, which curved toward the canyon. The track circled above a dammed reservoir a quarter full of water, then dropped to a muddy stream crossing in the middle of a broad wet meadow. For 30 feet the road was a bog where the stream flowed through deep, sloppy ruts.

Shadrack climbed out to look it over. Elan and Katie joined him. An amazing abundance of cow pies adorned the green sward, and cattle watched them from the surrounding tall sage. Bits of black obsidian peppered the rocky, alkali dirt.

“Can we get through?” Elan asked.

“Truck can. Don’ know ’bout th’bus. Prob’bly. She’s got good high clearance.”

“Well, we always have the winches.”

One after the other the vehicles waded in, wheels spinning to their hubs, but both crawled up out of the slop. On the far side the road climbed a hill, then forked. The right-hand fork wound down toward the cleft in the mountain. Lichen stained the interior walls yellow. Sage frosted the slopes like mint icing. As they approached, it began to look like a chocolate-lemon layer cake that had been sliced open and a single piece removed. The road dropped for a half-mile until they came to a gate at the canyon’s narrow entrance. A barbed-wire fence stretched high enough up into the rim rock on each side to keep the cows out. The wire gate lay wide open in neglect or defiance. In Nevada, you never knew which. They all climbed out.

The walls were stunningly high rock cliffs, the bottom beautifully green and inviting. A definite trail followed the creek along the canyon floor, but Elan could not see past the first bend, so could not tell how far. No signs were posted, but he surmised that they stood on the threshold of the wilderness.

“It’s beautiful,” Katie whispered, stepping backwards up the road to get a panoramic picture with her smart phone.

The two men passed through the gate and followed the trail. “You’ve been here before?” Elan asked. “Driven through?”

“Been ’ere. Walked ’er. Number a’times. But ain’t never druv through.”

“Can we make it?”

“I reckon so. Stream’s shallow. Bed’s rocky. But ’er’s only one way t’find out fer sure.”

“What if we get stuck?”

“We brung th’ winches.”

“What if we . . . break an axle?”

Shadrack stared at him, shook his head, and turned back. “You ain’t gotta follow me. But I’m a’goin’ ahead.”

Meanwhile Katie had climbed to a ten-foot high strata of white alkali deposits exposed in the cliff above the road. There, before a shallow cave, lay the skeleton of a complete dead cow, ribs sticking into the air and a bit of hide still clinging to the hoofs and snout. She wondered if it had died naturally in that unlikely place, or if someone (or some *thing*) had dragged it there to eat, or as a warning to wolves, or rustlers, or to keep the herd in line, or for some mysterious dark ceremonial purpose only the Nevadan mind could grasp. She shivered, snapped a quick photo of the canyon, and scrambled back down to the bus.

Elan followed Shadrack into the canyon, the wider bus squealing against one of the fenceposts, and immediately crossed the shallow creek on smooth wet rocks, following the cattle trail onto the narrow valley floor. The canyon curved sharply right, then slalomed back and forth beneath ever rising rimrock painted yellow with lichen. As they descended, the canyon opened. The trail cut through tall sagebrush, eight-feet high in places, and crossed and re-crossed the creek as it meandered from wall to wall. Wildflowers brightened the slopes and meadows. A bright sun played peek-a-boo with the lingering low clouds.

"It's *so* beautiful," Katie murmured again and again, oblivious to her father's bare-knuckle battle with the wheel, around rocks big enough to bend an axle, up and down cut banks and point bars, smashing down stream-side willow saplings and serviceberry which had sprung back up after the pickup passed, and plowing blindly through sagebrush and meadow grass and wild rose and chokeberry. A massive quantity of horse and cow manure marked the well-used corridor, which was probably a thoroughfare for working buckaroos, but was unmarked by tire tracks in this roadless area.

After a while the floor of the canyon broadened into a 300-foot wide pastureland. Sagebrush grew short and sparse, replaced by lush green rye and bunch grass. The creek curled in a wide arc to the left, still and deep and muddy with alkali runoff which turned the water milky. There in the grassland they stopped for a rest. Swallows and magpies darted among the cliffs. Chukar scolded from the rimrock. A red-tailed hawk soared high overhead.

"I *love* this place," Katie exclaimed.

Shadrack heard her and admitted, "Kinda partial t'it m'self."

"Why don't we, like, stay here tonight!" she enthused.

Shadrack shook his head. "Cain't. Gotta get through these canyons a'fore nightfall." But his eyes sympathized with her disappointment.

"Well," Elan chimed in, "then how about a little lunch? I'm hungry."

Katie took her time making tuna fish sandwiches while gazing around the cliffs and meadow. The men inspected the vehicles for damage. They found no oil drips. No soft tires. Nothing bent underneath. Except for an ugly scrape on the bus's right side, everything looked sound.

After lunch they resumed their pilgrimage. The canyon narrowed and seemed to drop more steeply. Rock slides intruded from one side after the other as they zig-zagged their way slowly down. Katie tried closing her eyes and leaning against the headrest for a nap, but it was like trying to snooze aboard a bucking broncho. In two places boulders stopped them. Elan was sure they would have to turn around. But each time Shadrack managed to set a choke around a big rock to winch it out of their pathway. In a third place the pickup managed barely to scrape over a rock slide, but the bus high-centered and had to be winched, scraping and squealing, onward to level ground. Their progress was glacial, but as Shadrack had expected, they encountered no other souls, Homeland Security or otherwise.

The afternoon was almost gone by the time they emerged from the canyon onto the Smokey Canyon Road, a rugged favorite with 4-wheelers and off-roaders. It was a rough and rocky track, but a relief after the roadless canyon. Shadrack headed north, where the road skirted around the west side of High Rock Lake, a waterless dry playa ringed by rough black lava walls. Soon the track merged with the graded Soldier Meadow Road, where Shadrack picked up speed and Elan fell back to avoid eating his dust.

Katie followed their progress on the map through the Summit Lake Indian Reservation, where they turned east. But as the sun prepared to set, she dozed and soon lost track of where they were. "Circling north of the Black Rock Desert," her father explained when she awoke, although in truth he too was lost. It had grown fully dark, but the gibbous moon offered some light. Just not enough to see the big water bars and potholes coming.

"Hand me the radio, honey," he said. Elan thumbed the button. "Shadrack, come in."

No reply.

"Shadrack, we've got to stop for the night. I can't see the potholes coming anymore."

No reply.

"Shadrack?"

No reply, but ahead the brake lights of the pickup flashed through the dark and the dust. After a half mile they pulled up alongside. "Didn't you hear me?" Elan asked.

"I heard ya."

"But you didn't reply. Don't you know how to—"

"I knows how. Jus' don' like them things."

"Well, we need to stop for the night. Before I break an axle."

Shadrack nodded. "There's a good spot up at the pass, as I recollect. Be a li'l cooler thar. An' high 'nough fer timber cover."

"How far?"

Shadrack considered. "'Nother . . . twen'y minutes. Me'be half'n hour."

Elan glanced over at his daughter. She nodded. "Okay. Lead the way."

ONCE SHADRACK CRESTED the ridge, he turned left up a narrow dirt track that led a short way to a hunter's camp at a clearing in the forest. Here there was flat ground, a fire ring filled with burned-out tin cans and fallen branches, two sturdy sitting logs, and even an old wood-sided pit toilet with half the roof blown off.

They shuffled the vehicles into level positions. Then Elan popped up a small dome tent and tossed in a futon and his sleeping bag. Katie would sleep by herself in the bus. Shadrack had cleared a space in the back of the truck and was spreading out a blanket on top of an old foam pad. Evan flashed a light inside. Shadrack's shotgun lay beside his bed, barrel pointed out across the open tailgate.

"Planning on doing some hunting tonight, are you?"

Shadrack glanced up at him. "Well . . . there's critters ya hunt . . . and' there's critters 'at hunt you. An' this here's a wild country."

"Okay. But just make sure you don't shoot me or Katie if we get up to pee in the dark."

"Hardly likely."

Katie had prepared freeze-dried dinners, which they devoured hungrily before a kindling fire. Even Shadrack seemed to have an appetite. Afterwards, her father went out with the headlamp to gather chunks of juniper and pinyon for firewood.

This was Katie's first time alone with Shadrack. She eased herself down into the blue bucket of the folding camp chair next to the log where Shadrack perched upwind of the campfire. "I was so sorry to hear about your wife's passing, Mr. Smithers," she said.

"Shadrack."

“Right . . . okay . . . I mean, I’m sorry . . . *Shadrack*.” She adjusted her hips in the uncomfortable fabric sling. “How have you been getting along?”

Shadrack stared into the crackling fire without looking at her. After a while he sighed. “Oh . . . she’s been kinda rough, I reckon. Days’re long. Cain’t seem t’do ma’ chores. Chores’s been ma life. It’s what I done. All these years. Now . . . they don’t give me no more sat’sfaction. Don’t wanna bother with ’em no more. What fer would I? ’S’all fer nothin’ no more. Ya see?” He searched for the right words. “Nights’re longer still, they are. All b’myself . . . in that ol’ empty house. Empty bed.” He scratched at his neck whiskers. “Got t’do ever’thing fer myself now. Aw, I don’ min’ th’work, no ma’am . . . but . . . somehow . . . it mos’ly jus’ don’t seem worth th’ trouble.”

“Well, I’m sorry. Tildie must have been a wonderful companion.”

“That she war.” They sat in silence, watching the flame lick the wood and the smoke curl away into the night. After a while Shadrack spoke quietly. “We *had* us somethin’, we did. Tildie ’n’ me. An’ now . . . now it’s all plumb slipped through m’fingers, it has. An’ the only place I know whar ta look fer it ag’in . . . well . . . is whar it all started out.”

“Is that why, you know, you’re going back to the Ozarks? If you don’t mind my asking.”

Shadrack pondered on it for a while, then said, “’S’a funny thing . . . an’ hard t’splain in words. Never was much good with ’em nohow. But them Ozarks . . . oh my! . . . the smell a’ the pines after a rain me’be. The way it all feels *right*. Inside ’n’ out. Feelin’ things’s be all jus’ a’gettin’ better an’ better . . . an’ a’goin’ someplace.” He paused in his recollections, then turned his face to her. “It don’t make a lick a’ sense. None a’ it. Ya think I don’t know that? Well, I do. But what else’ve I got t’do? Cain’t go on like this, I reckon. Might as well jus’ put m’self outta m’mis’ry an’ be done with it all.” He turned back to the fire.

“I . . . I feel that way too sometimes,” Katy said. She drew a deep breath and let it out. “Oh . . . I’ve never had that feeling you’re talking about, I guess . . . but I *want* to have it. Someday. For sure. I want to feel like . . . like I belong somewhere. With someone. But everything just seems to be . . . you know . . . so laid out in front of me. Like by my parents. By my teachers. By my friends. And it’s all in one long, straight, dreary line. Like a . . . railroad track. And I’m not sure I want to *go* that way.” She paused to find the right words.

Shadrack looked over at her and nodded.

“I have no clue, like, where it’s all going,” she continued, gazing at the firelight flickering in his eyes. “But I’m . . . searching for something that . . . you know . . . that gives my life . . . *something*. A purpose, maybe. Something that gives all this, like, *meaning*, I guess.” She fell silent.

“I un’erstan’,” he said.

“You do?”

“Arrr. But you’s jus’ a young’n still. Me, I’s nearly spent. Fer me, it’s all ’bout gone past a’ready. Seems like two shakes o’ a lamb’s tail.” Slowly he smiled. It was the first time she had seen his gap-toothed smile, and it brought a kind of gentle beatitude to that gnarly, bewhiskered face. “Oh, thar’s a mighty lot I could tell ya ’bout . . . but I ain’t never been much good with words. An’ besides, it warn’t do no good. *My* path ain’t *yourn*. Like the song says . . . ya gotta walk that ol’ lonesome valley . . . an’ ya gotta walk it by yerself.”

Something snapped in the woods and Katie jumped. “What was *that*?”

“Jus’ yer pa, I reckon. A’bustin’ up sticks t’fit the fire.”

She laid her small hand across his larger one. “Thank you, Shadrack.”

Awkwardly he pulled back his hand. “Fer whut?”

“For . . . like . . . listening to me . . . for understanding, I guess. Dad never has time to really listen.”

“Uh. Whole world’s got in such a rush nowadays. He’s a’bound t’ mellow as he gets older. An’ it ain’t no easy thing being no parent, neither. No, sir. I can tell ya that. You’s near growed up now, but yer pa, he cain’t see it yet. No, sir. He still sees y’ as that little girl he’s gotta pectect an’ keep safe from the big bad wolf outside ’cher door.” He dropped his eyes. “But ’ere’s one thing I ken guarantee y’ for certain. Some day sure he’ll come t’ regret not getting t’ know ’is own chil’en better when he had ’is chances.”

She waited for more, but when nothing came, she asked, “Are you . . . talking about my father, Shadrack . . . or . . . or about yourself?”

He barked out a laugh. “Same difference, I reckon.” Slowly he creaked to his feet and arched his back. “Sometimes it seems like the same ol’ sorr’ful thing . . . over’n over ag’in . . . don’t it?”

MORNING LIGHT CAME too soon for Katie. But long before the sun rose she was up and dressed and cooking oatmeal on the propane stove in the bus, while the men broke camp. When her father hauled in his tent to stow beneath the cabinet, she asked him, “Do you think it would be alright if I, like, rode along with Shadrack for a while?”

“Ow.” The question so startled Elan that he banged his head on the cabinet door. “Ride along with *Shadrack*?”

“I was just thinking . . .”

“I thought you didn’t like the way he smells.”

“Oh, that’s not so bad anymore. Or maybe I’m just getting used to it. Anyway, I guess it would be better than breathing his dust all day long. He seems kinda lonely . . . and I know how you cherish your morning time to yourself.”

Elan rubbed his head. “Have you asked him?”

“Not yet.”

He thought about it. “Go ahead. See what he says.”

When she brought up the subject with Shadrack, he grumbled, “I’d haf’ta move all this stuff outta the front seat.”

“I can help,” she offered.

“Now hol’ on. Hol’ on. I . . . uh . . . don’ rightly know. Lemme think on’t.” But when she returned, the passenger seat had already been emptied. “You ask yer pa ’bout this?”

“He’s okay with it if you are. He likes to spend some time by himself in the mornings. And we can switch back whenever anybody wants.”

The sun rose hot and dazzling through the pickup’s windshield as they descended into the next basin of pale dry desert. The thick alkali dust kept the bus at bay far behind. Shadrack appeared uncomfortable at first with a companion aboard, and they didn’t have much to say to each other. So they rode along in a bumpy, rattling silence. After a while Katie asked him, “So, how did you and Tildie meet?”

It took Shadrack a long time to put the words together in his head. So long that Katie thought he hadn't heard, or worse, that she should mind her own business. But finally he spoke. "First laid eyes on 'er 'n . . . St. Louie . . . 's'I recall. She was . . . jus' . . . a'walkin' down the sidewalk thar . . . an' . . . an' I jus' thought . . . why, ain't she the pertiest senorita I ever see'd?" He smiled as the memory absorbed him.

"But . . . how did you actually get to *meet* her?"

Shadrack glanced over. "Shucks, I jus' stepped right up an' tol'er howdy an' how perty she looked." He broke into his gap-toothed grin. "An' she cottoned t'me right off, she did. I believe I cut me a perty manly figure m'self, back in 'em days."

Katie laughed. "What were you doing in Saint Louis?"

"A'workin'. Got me a job as a survey'r's helper fer the Corps of Engineers. Diggin' ditches an' holdin' flags an' poundin' iron stakes an' such. Right'char on the bank a' that ol' man river. Y'ever seed 'er?"

"The Mississippi?"

"Thass right."

"No, I haven't."

"Well . . . y'outta."

"So you weren't . . . like . . . dressed up in your finest."

"Lordy, no! Jus' my dirt boots an' work clothes." He shook his head in wonder. "But she took a shine t'me anyhow. Right away, she did." He pondered a bit more, then added, "An' ta this day I still cain't reckon why. But I knew right'en. I'uz th' luckiest man on this earth. An' I still b'lieve it."

"Was she . . . if you don't mind my asking . . . a US citizen?"

"Was after I marry't her." He thought about it. "Her pa, y'see, he come over as a bracero. Down in Texas somewheres. But he 'uz smart 'nough t'figure, well, he could earn a better wage up north. So a'stead a'goin' on back when he'uz s'posed ta, he brung up 'is family from Sonora an' lit out north. Up inta Missouri. Worked's a farm hand in the Delta. Near Cape G'rardieu, I believe. Anyways, Tildie, she got'er schoolin'ar. Learnt 'er English jus' fine. Spoke it better'n me, she did."

Katie waited, knowing not to press him too much. But finally she nudged him with, "So you moved back to the Ozarks?"

Shadrack nodded, reminiscing. "That we done. M' uncle's farm is whar. Needed us'n t'help run it by then. M'aunt, she 'uz not well. M'cousin Orville got kilt in th' war. M'other cousins'd all ran off. But I'll tell ya, Tildie knew her farmin', she did. Oh my, yes. From back down Sonora way, I reckon, she learn't it good. An' she worked hard's any man."

And so they drove, Shadrack beginning to unspool his story in bits and pieces. Dribs and drabs. She prompted him at times, but knew not to press him. And he would tell her what he wanted to tell, but no more. And that was alright with her. She found his tale fascinating. And it eased the passing of the long dusty road.

They stopped more frequently now. For a bite to eat. To stretch their legs. But mostly because Shadrack could endure only so much social intercourse at one time. The stops allowed Katie to change rides. For her it was like shuttling between alien worlds.

KATIE WAS RIDING with her father when she checked her cell phone for service. “We’ve got bars!”

“Well . . . that’s something. Must be getting close to Winnemucca.”

“Do you think we should call Mom?”

“See if there’re any messages first.”

Katie checked the screen. “Two messages. Both from Mom. You think I should listen to them?”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

Katie frowned. “Shadrack doesn’t think we should, you know, be using these phones. He says they can triangulate your location by the towers.”

“Just who is this ‘they’ who’ve got Shadrack so spooked?”

“He didn’t say.”

“Well . . . nobody’s looking for *us*. And it’s only your mother calling, for heaven’s sake.”

Katie still looked dubious. “What if he . . . you know . . . finds out?”

“Shadrack? He’s not going to find out. Just check the messages, will you?”

Katie used her thumbs with a dexterity incomprehensible to Elan. She held the phone to her ear, then turned to her father with her brows knit in concern. “Mom’s coming home. She’s got her travel permit.”

“When?”

“She’s not sure. Probably the day after tomorrow. Or maybe the next day. She’s, like, having trouble booking a flight.”

“Well . . . that’s good news, isn’t it?”

“Yeah . . . I guess so, but . . . does it mean we have to turn around?”

“Did you listen to the second message?”

“No.” Her thumbs flew over the tiny keyboard. Her face brightened. “She can’t get out until Wednesday.”

“That gives us . . .”

“Three more days.”

“More like four, actually.” Elan smiled. “That ought to give us enough time to see the bristlecone pines and get back to pick her up.”

The bus rattled and fishtailed as the washboard surface began to climb a knoll. Elan slowed and sought out the least-corrugated path. At the crest the road smoothed out again.

“So . . . what’s so special about bristlecone pines?” Katie asked.

“They’re the oldest living things on earth. Oldest living trees, anyway. Bristlecone pines. Some are five thousand years old.”

“Wow. And they just grow out here in the desert?”

“No. No. They grow up high. Twelve or thirteen thousand feet. Up at timberline on Wheeler Peak. That’s in the Great Basin National Park, where we’re headed. They may be the oldest living trees anywhere on earth, right there.”

“How do they know how old they are?”

“They count the tree rings. Each ring equals one year.”

Katie thought about it. “You mean they have to, like, cut them down to find out how old they are?”

“No. They drill out a small core and count the rings in it. But there is a story about some Ph.D. student who broke his core drill and asked the forest service ranger for permission to cut down one old living tree. Just to see how old it was. Turned out to be one of the oldest. Maybe *the* oldest. Five thousand years old.”

“And they let him *do* that?”

“They sure did. Someone had named it ‘Methuselah,’ as I recall the story.”

Katie shook her head. “Maybe . . . maybe *that’s* who Shadrack’s so worried about. The ‘*they*’ you asked about.”

“The bureaucrats, huh? Well . . . might just be a nugget of truth in that.”

She pondered for a long time as the bus bumped along, throwing up a rooster tail of dust. Then she said, “Kind of reminds me of Shadrack.”

“What does?”

“The bristlecones.”

“Why?” Elan grinned. “Because he’s so bristly?”

“No.” Katie was serious. “Did you know, he doesn’t even know how old he is.”

“He doesn’t? Doesn’t he know when his birthday is?”

“Nope. He’s like those trees. No birth certificate. He never knew his father or his mother. Grew up in an orphanage somewhere in Missouri. Until he was taken in by his foster parents.”

“They adopted him?”

“No. I don’t think so. But he took their last name. Smithers. Shadrack refers to them as his ‘aunt’ and his ‘uncle.’ His ‘cousins,’ I think, are their children. But none of them are related to him.”

“So . . . you think we’re going to have to cut down old Shadrack to find out how old he is?”

Katie cringed. She was not amused.

Elan thought about it. “You’re growing fond of old Shadrack, aren’t you?”

“He’s . . . well . . . you know . . . he’s had a hard life. But he’s endured. Like the trees. I like listening to his stories. He’s really a sweet man under all that gruffness and whiskers. He has a good heart. He grew up in a whole different world. And now he’s, like, all alone.”

Far ahead brake lights flashed through the clouds of dust. “Look!” Katie said. “I think he’s stopping.”

“Well, you’d better quick call you’re mother and tell her we got her message. And that we’ll pick her up when she flies in. I’ll drive real slow.”

ELAN CLIMBED OUT, slowly straightening his stiff, aching legs and back, and crabbed forward to where Shadrack stood leaning against the front fender of the pickup and gazing into the valley below.

“What’s up?” Elan asked.

“Don’ like this drivin’ in daylight. ’Spesh’ly not through a city big’s ‘at one .”

There in the distance the City of Winnemucca was laid out like dull dominoes glued down in a series of bone-dry grids. Amid the surrounding ridge spines and streaks of alkali desert, incongruous green crop circles were randomly pasted like felt stickers on a dusty chalkboard. The sluggish flow of the Humboldt River wound in tight coils between railroad tracks on the near bank and Interstate 80 on the far one. Flashes of sunshine sparkled off the water and from

windshields and chrome in the steady streams of traffic moving both ways along the freeway. The faint hum of distant traffic assailed their ears.

“Well . . . isn’t there a . . . some sort of back way around it?”

“No, sir. Not that I knows ’bout. Gotta get across the river, an’ the only bridges’re right’char. Right downtown. On ’a other side a’ them railroad tracks.”

Elan glanced around. “Well, we sure as hell can’t camp out here. It’s too open. And hot.”

“I know a railroad crossin’ off’n a road near the sewer ponds. Jungo Road ’ey calls it. An’ if’n I got any luck a’tall, they’s a summer bridge crossin’ the Humboldt jus’ b’yon’. An ol’ flat car, if’n it’s still there. An’ then, b’yon ’at, a cattle pass ’neath the Interstate, a ways west. But I don’t reckon I know whether we can get t’any a’ it. ’Spesh’ly sportin’ these ’ere California plates. We’ be taking a mighty chance, jus’ a’goin’ down there a’tall.” He turned to look Elan in the eye. “Jus’ wanted ya t’know tha’s how she stands.”

Elan nodded. “What alternatives do we have?”

“Well . . . you an’ that young’n a’yourn can turn back ri’ now. Y’unnerstan’?”

Elan nodded again. “What about you?”

“Me? I ain’t got me no choice, I reckon. I’m a’goin’ on through.”

Elan gazed off silently for a while, evaluating the landscape. Considering the options. “Well . . . I’ll go back and talk it over with Katie.”

Katie, of course, would not consider abandoning their quest, especially now that her father had seeded her imagination with his tales of bristlecone pine. She just *had* to see them. And after two uneventful days on the road, Elan was beginning to suspect that Shadrack’s paranoia might lack sound foundation in reality. So he walked back and told him they would be coming along.

Shadrack squinted into his face. “You sure ’bout ’at?”

“Yup. Katie wants to see the bristlecones.”

Shadrack drew a deep breath. “A’right. Reckon it’s yer choice. Le’s stop an’ fill up the tanks long’s we’re down ’ere.”

“Won’t the gas stations want to see our travel permits?”

“’Ey don’t in Cedarville.”

So Elan and Katie followed Shadrack down the long slope into the valley, keeping a distance from his dust until the pickup entered a narrow, crumbling macadamized road. They caught up, but still lay back several blocks as the city traffic grew heavier. The bus and the pickup pulled up at separate pumps of a run-down Biz-Y-Fuel on the outskirts of town and topped off their tanks. Elan payed at the diesel pump with his credit card. Shadrack paid inside with cash for the gas. Everyone took their time using the dingy restrooms before they all climbed back aboard, Katie still riding with her father. No one asked them any questions.

Shadrack led them along a circuitous route to a well traveled highway, over an unsignaled crossing of the railroad tracks, and down a rocky road to a gravel pit where they found an old railroad flatcar on blocks spanning the narrow, meandering green flow of the Humboldt River. On the other side Shadrack followed a dusty gravel alley along the river back westward, which, after a seemingly endless traverse, curved abruptly south through a wire gate into a cow pasture and through a narrow cow tunnel beneath the Interstate. No one stopped them.

“Guess this was his lucky day,” Elan observed.

“Nobody seems to care about us,” Katie responded. “Shadrack may be, you know, overdoing this caution a bit.”

Katie tried following their route, but most of roads were not signed or on her map. Narrow Grass Valley Road ran smoothly south, but soon ran out of pavement and reverted to the same rough gravel they had been driving for days. Shadrack led them southward through the stirring dust, then turned east at an intersection marked “Golconda Road”, where they began a long winding climb up into the junipers and over the pass. Along the way two sandblasted pickups passed them coming the other way, the drivers in cowboy hats each raising a hand in silent greeting. The road wound down the other side of the mountain, where Shadrack turned south, and then east, and then south again, and east again along dusty unmarked valley roads, until Katie was utterly lost. Shadrack finally pulled off at the base of a low ridge. Before them in the basin of a wide north-south valley lay a paved highway.

“That looks like a pretty good road,” Elan said.

“S Highway 305,” Shadrack responded. “Runs down t’Austin.”

Katie perused her map. “Austin is on Highway 50,” she said. “That’s where we want to be, isn’t it?”

Shadrack grunted, “Me’be.”

“You planning on taking it?” Elan asked.

“Might,” Shadrack said. “Like t’watch’er first. See who’s a’drivin’ on it.”

So while Katie prepared peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, the two men set up folding chairs in the shade of an old cottonwood beside a dry wash and watched the road. A single white pickup lumbered north, then nothing for a long while, until suddenly a convoy of a half-dozen big commercial eighteen-wheelers roared past heading south. A few more pickups passed while they ate their sandwiches and drank cool water to unstick their pallets. Then nothing.

“I knows a campground,” Shadrack muttered at last. “M’be twenny miles east a’ Austin on 50. We could make by afte’noon. We could hole up there an’ get us some sleep ‘til after the sun goes down. Then start a’driven’gin after she comes on full dark.”

“Drive at night. That’s what you want to do now?”

“Be a moon a’risin’ early. Mos’ly full.”

Elan considered the proposal for a while, then sighed. “Sounds like a plan.” He turned to his daughter. “Katie?”

“Sounds good to me,” she agreed.

They encountered no roadblocks and little traffic as they sped down Highway 305, keeping a mile distance between the vehicles. Austin was little more than a historic mountain relic, inhabited by 200 souls where ten thousand once lived and worked and gambled and prospected before the silver mining all played out. There they turned left onto Highway 50 in broad daylight and no one gave them a second glance. Elan pulled closer behind the pickup so as not to lose it as they wound through the mountain passes and ravines to the east.

A half hour later Shadrack’s turn signal flashed and Elan followed the pickup up a single-lane gravel road to a sturdy wooden campground sign that read: “Hickison Petroglyph Campground.” It displayed a map of the campsite loop, trails, and petroglyphs. At an elevation of 6500 feet, the temperature was mild in the high-desert forest. They parked the vehicles in the shade of pinon pines and gnarly junipers at a secluded campsite well out of sight of the highway. Shadrack

advised them to catch some sleep and climbed into the camper shell with his shotgun.

“But I want to see the petroglyphs,” Katie told her father back at the bus. “And hike all the trails. It’s *so* beautiful here.”

“Well . . . we ought to get some rest,” Elan mused. “Shadrack wants to eat a late supper and be back on the road by ten.”

“But . . . I want to *see* them,” she whined. “For sure. I . . . you know . . . may never be here again. Or get another chance to explore. Isn’t this what we told Mom we were doing?”

Elan looked around at the clustered trees and slabs of soft beige rock. He had seen some squiggles and marks scratched into their faces behind fenced off areas near the sign. “Well, maybe later, but we have to—”

“I’ll cook dinner,” Katie cajoled. “I promise. And be ready to go when you are. I won’t have to do any driving, so . . . so I can sleep along the way if I get tired. And it’ll be dark outside anyway. Just let me look around here for awhile first. You go ahead and take your nap. *Please!*”

Reluctantly, Elan nodded. “Okay. I’ll be lying down in the bus. Wake me up if you need anything, okay?”

“Yes, sir.” She snapped off a smart salute. “Oh . . . and I wanted to ask you . . . can I ride with Shadrack when we get going again?”

“You’ll have to ask him, honey.”

ELAN WAS ENJOYING the dark solitude and quiet of the lonely paved highway. He felt rested and fed. The moon hovered high above the eastern horizon, almost-full and bright enough to light the road even with duct tape constricting the headlight beams. He missed the company of his daughter, but the faint glow of the taillights ahead comforted him. Shadrack felt the mile interval would be a good idea in case anything happened. Checkpoints was what the old fellow had been talking about, Elan surmised, though he hadn’t asked. Shadrack’s reasoning was sometimes a little hard to follow, but usually reasonable. And Elan had grown to like the old farmer. Had grown to trust him. He was holding to the speed limit, as he had promised to do as long as Katie was on board. Elan smiled and wondered what the two might be chatting about. If anything.

A convoy of big eighteen-wheelers appeared as a string of bright beads descending the mountain far ahead and grew and grew and finally blazed past with blinding headlights and shuddering wake streams, the running lights of the trailers shrinking like Christmas-trees in the rearview mirror. It took them a long time to disappear over the foothills far behind. The road became quiet and empty again and straight as an arrow in the silver-white moonlight. No one was traveling their direction. East. Elan cracked the window to breath in the sharp tang of the cooling desert.

Then two things happened in quick succession. A vehicle spun onto the road behind him with flashing roof-bar emergency lights and blinding high beams, and a moment later the taillights ahead winked out and the pickup seemed to disappear from the face of the earth. “Shit!” Elan cursed. He reached for the walkie-talkie on the empty passenger seat and thumbed the button. “Shadrack, come in. This is Elan. I think I have a cop on my tail.”

No response came. He checked the volume. It was all the way up.

“Shadrack. Do you read me?”

No answer.

“Shadrack, are you there, come back?”

No answer.

“Shit!” he repeated, and began to slowly ease his foot off the accelerator, wondering what in hell he was going to say the cops. He spotted a wide, flat gravel stretch of shoulder near a dirt crossroad and crunched to a slow stop, hoping the cruiser would blow by him on a more vital mission. But the flashing lights pulled in behind him, the headlights blazing through the rear windows. Elan tried the radio one more time, without success, then let it slip through his fingers onto the floor and waited.

It was a long wait.

Finally the silhouette of a man in a smokey-bear hat climbed out of the patrol car and ambled up his long shadow toward the door. Elan rolled the window down the rest of the way and leaned out. “What’s the matter officer? I don’t think I was speeding.”

The man wore a brown uniform and hat with a Highway Patrol patch in the shape of Nevada on the shoulder. He was tall and lanky, his face long and drawn beneath the brim. He appeared to be a bit older than Elan, slim, solid, and a little weary of making these late-night traffic stops. His right thumb was hooked in his belt just ahead of his holstered service weapon. He flashed the light he held in his left hand briefly across Elan’s face, then swept the floor and passenger seat with it. “Are you carrying any firearms, sir?” The voice was slow and confident, almost a drawl.

“No, sir. I don’t own any.”

“May I see your driver’s license and travel permit?”

Elan fumbled his license out of his wallet and handed it out the window. “Here’s my driver’s license.”

“Where you headed?”

“Great Basin National Park. My daughter wants to see—” He bit his tongue. “I want to see the bristlecone pines . . . I mean . . . I’m just out scouting the route for later.”

The trooper swung his flashlight beam into the back of the bus. “All by yourself?”

Elan drew a breath and considered the ramifications. The image of the old double-barreled shotgun Shadrack had stuck behind the front seat of the pickup haunted him. For “rabbits an’ squir’ls mos’ly.” But Elan hadn’t been convinced. Nor was he now. “Yes, sir. I’m . . . trying out this new camper bus I converted. See if it’s seaworthy.”

“You with the other vehicle?”

“What other vehicle?”

“The pickup ahead of you?”

“Oh . . . was that a pickup? I was just . . . following the taillights. Helps me follow the road at night. For safety.”

The trooper nodded. “Well, it won’t do you much good, going to Great Basin. The park’s been closed for a month. Homeland Security’s taken it over as an operations center and staging area and temporary detainment camp. National Guard soldiers are bivouacked there. I can’t even get in without an invitation.” He inspected Elan’s driver’s license. “Cedarville.”

“Yes sir.”

“You know a fellow name of Tollitson?”

“In Cedarville? Sure I do. Teddy Tollitson. Owns a big spread out near Eagleville. We used to teach together at the college in Alturas. But we can’t get back there now, either of us. He teaches agriculture. Or used to.”

The officer nodded and smiled for the first time. “My cousin married one of his sons. Warren. I’ve been over to his place for the wedding and a time or two since. Can I see your travel permit?”

“I . . . ah . . . didn’t know I needed one. I live in this sector.”

“You’ve got California plates,” the trooper said.

“Yes, but I thought Cedarville was *in* this sector.” He patiently explained the theory he and Shadrack had concocted at the kitchen table so long ago. About how they wouldn’t let you drive to Alturas, where he worked, because the checkpoint was west of the Warners. So he supposed he was in the Nevada sector by default, and he didn’t need a permit. Now it all sounded a little vacuous and flimsy

The officer listened, frowning. “That’s a nice notion, but I’m not sure its right.”

“Well . . . okay, then. You understand my predicament here. The question is, do I belong in this sector or the Alturas sector?”

“Did you bother to call Homeland Security for an answer before heading out?”

Elan fidgeted. “No, sir. I just figured . . .”

The trooper considered for a while, then shook his head. “Don’t know the answer to that one. But if you’re coming from the California sector without a travel permit, then I’ve got no choice but to notify Homeland Security and hold you until they get here to pick you up.”

The news shocked Elan like a live wire. “But . . . but . . . but what if I *do* live in the Nevada sector?”

“Then I can just turn you back. You’re not supposed to come out this far.”

“You’d send me back home?”

“If you live in this sector, yes, sir. But that’s the best I can do for you. And I still better radio in and find out which sector Cedarville is in.”

“Now hold on. Just wait a second. Your saying you’d have to lock me up . . . or just turn me around . . . depending on what they tell you on the radio? Now that’s a pretty big toss of the dice for me, wouldn’t you say? And how do we know *they* would know the right answer. Or what if you can’t get through?”

The officer’s smile turned sour. He did not look happy. “You see what I’m up against here?”

“And how come you didn’t stop those big rigs going the other way?”

“They all had travel permits.”

“How do you know that if you didn’t stop them?”

“Transponders. Inside the windshields. Broadcasts who they are, where they’re from, where they’re going, cargo, tare weight, and commercial travel permit number.”

“But . . . they were speeding.”

“Everybody speeds out here. Can’t stop them all.”

“But *I* wasn’t speeding. How come you stopped me?”

The trooper was silent for a moment, then grumbled, “Wish I hadn’t.”

Elan picked up on something in his voice. “You don’t like this job you’re doing for them, do

you?”

“I’m not pleased with any of this state of emergency business, to tell you the truth. But the Highway Patrol’s been nationalized, and I’ve got my job to do. And the way things are going, if I don’t guess things right here, they damn well might lock *me* up with you.” He fell silent and considered the stalemate. “You know Ted Tollitson, you say?”

“Yes, sir. I know him well. I taught with him. And I’ve done some accounting work for him in the past. Until he hired his own bookkeeper.”

“All right. What I’m going to do here . . . is turn you around and let you head back home. And then, once you’re on your way . . . after I see your taillights disappear over those hills back there . . . then I’m going to call into dispatch . . . and tell them how I disposed of this stop.” He shook his head. “Since I already radioed in your plates, I’ll have to think up something to radio in as a disposition.”

“Thank you, officer. I guess I’ll just head back home.”

The trooper appeared vexed. He turned back toward the cruiser, thought for a moment, then leaned back in through the window. His voice was soft, confidential. “Your daughter is in that pickup?”

Elan stared at him. Bringing in Katie now could complicate matters. And Shadrack even more. Particularly that damned shotgun. But this fellow was sharp, and telling him lies might get himself locked up in some concentration camp, and that wasn’t going to do anybody any good. The eyes that held his own also seemed to hold compassion. “Yes, she is,” he said at last. “Her name is Katie. She’s only fifteen. She’ll be sixteen next week. And all I wanted to do was show her the bristlecone pines.”

The trooper nodded. “Who’s driving?”

Elan drew a deep breath. “A neighbor.”

“What’s his name?”

“Smithers. Shadrack Smithers.” Elan was relieved the officer did not write anything down. “He’s an older fellow. A farmer. His wife died just a few months ago, and he’s having a hard time with it. We were bringing him along . . . to help get his mind off his loss.”

“He from Cedarville?”

“Yes, sir. Owns a little farm there. Out near Tollitson, as a matter of fact. He’s owned it for years.”

The trooper straightened up. “Okay.” He shined his flashlight onto the radio on the floor. “You better get on the horn there and tell them to turn around too. Homeland Security is not something any of you want to mess around with. Especially not here in Nevada. And especially not with your young daughter on board.”

“You aren’t going to talk to them?”

The trooper shook his head. “I never heard of ’em. You’re trouble enough. This sort of thing is not what I hired on to be doing as a peace officer.”

“Thank you, officer. By the way, what’s your name? I’ll be sure to tell Teddy I ran into you when I see him.”

“I’d just as soon you didn’t tell anybody you ever saw me.” He crunched slowly back to the cruiser and switched off the emergency lights.

Elan started the bus and pulled a slow u-turn across the abandoned highway as he reached for

the walkie-talkie on the floor.

SHADRACK'S ARMS and shoulders ached. He had been holding Katie's birding binoculars for too long, watching for something to happen. Now they hung from the strap around his neck. Katie sat in the ground beside him, hugging her knees and shivering, but she couldn't bring herself to drop back down to the pickup for her sweatshirt. She didn't want to miss anything. The truck was parked behind a grove of junipers on the back side of the low knoll they occupied. The flashing lights on the patrol car had dominated the vast empty desert for the better part of an hour. Chirping crickets serenaded them during the long wait.

Suddenly the lights went out.

Shadrack raised the glasses. "He's a'movin'. He's a'turnin' 'round the bus."

Katie jumped to her feet. "Oh my god, I wanna see."

"Looks like . . . they's a'lettin' 'im go."

"*Let me see!*" She reached up and fastened a fist onto the glasses. Shadrack reluctantly let the strap slip over his head. By the time she had focused, the radio in Shadrack's shirt pocket crackled.

"*Shadrack? Katie? Can you read me?*"

"Give me the radio!" Katie demanded.

"Cain't do it. Too dang'rous." When she reached toward his shirt pocket, he plucked it out. "I told ya before, they can back-trace these things—"

"*Shadrack? Katie? Are you there?*"

"We've got to let him know we're here! So we can meet up with him!" Katie felt her anger rising. A tantrum coming on. She wanted control of her own damned radio and her own damned life and was willing to fight for them. But Shadrack just held it high over his head while she jumped up and down in a rage, whacking him in the arm and ribs with her fists.

"*Well,*" the radio voice continued. "*In case you are listening . . .*"

"Shush," Shadrack whispered.

"*I'm turning around. I don't know if you can hear me. Or what you'll do if you can't. This is all a mess. Great Basin National Park has been taken over by the feds. They've got soldiers there. And a prison camp of some sort. Do not go there! Do you understand? Do not—*" The transmission began to break up as the distance between them increased. ". . . *Homeland Secur . . . meet you back . . . troglyph . . . stand? . . . camped . . . ternoon . . .*" And then it was all just static.

"Try calling him back! Let him know where we *are!*"

Shadrack just shook his head.

"*Bastard!*" she hissed. "Do you understand, like, what he's saying? I think he wants us to meet him back at that petroglyph campsite!" The fight seemed to have drained out of her, dampened by a new tingle of fear. But not the outrage nor the venom.

Shadrack nodded. "Seems like. Prob'ly a good idea . . . from 'is way a'lookin' at it. 'Cept fer one dang thing."

She glared up at him. "*What?*"

"It'd put us a'goin' back th' plumb wrong way."

"Wrong way?"

“Yes’m. I’m a’headed east, an’ he’s a’goin’ back west.”

“But . . . we’ve *got* to meet him. You’ve *got* to take me back to my father.”

Shadrack shook his head. “Ain’t *gotta* do nothin’. I knowed this here idea was a sour one. A’travelin’ along t’gether with a girl. Yer pa shoulda knowed better. Shoulda jus’ sold me that ol’ pickup truck way back in Cedarville an’ been done with it. Wouldn’t a’ ended up in this here pickle t’ begin with.”

“What are you going to *do* with me?”

“Don’t reckon I know jus’ yet.” Shadrack reached out for the binoculars, and she let him take them.

“*Asshole!*” she muttered under her breath.

Shadrack appeared not to hear. He was focused on the patrol car, which still had not moved.

“No wonder they don’t want anything to do with you,” Katie growled.

“Who’s’at?”

“*Your daughters.*”

With that, all conversation died. The moon seemed to have crystalized the landscape into a frozen pewter. There was no traffic on the highway below. No lights on the horizon. No sound, except for the crickets and the rumble of the cruiser’s engine, which ebbed and flowed on the breeze. After a while the patrol car shifted into gear, turned with a sweep of high beams, and headed back west. Shadrack watched for a long while, until the taillights disappeared over the ridge that had swallowed the bus. Then he turned and began shuffling painfully down the gravel slope.

Katie found herself alone and confused. And afraid. She didn’t want anything more to do with that selfish old sourpuss son-of-a bitch Shadrack. She felt like crying. Or running away. But she knew that was a crazy idea, since she couldn’t get much more *away* than she already was. And if she wasn’t careful, he might just leave her here. Shivering, she checked her cell phone again. Still no bars. She has no options. She could die out here alone in the cold. Or be eaten by . . . *something*. So she pouted for a while more, but not too long, before following his footsteps down the loose gravel slope. Neither spoke as she took her place in the blackness of the truck’s cab and slammed the door.

Shadrack had trouble following his tire marks back down through the desert brush. Several times he switched on the low beams of the taped headlights to find the way. Just short of the black strip of highway he cut the lights and engine and climbed out. Saying nothing, he lurched up onto the blacktop. At the centerline he faced first one way, and then the other, mumbling to himself. Katie couldn’t make out his words over the rush of blood in her ears from of her own thudding heart. But there was something terrifying about the set of his jaw. And suddenly she was too frightened to breathe.

ELAN WAS LOST. Lost in the moon-blached landscape and lost in his own thoughts. His mind was racing. Spinning in circles. Reliving the panicky confusion of the traffic stop. Replaying his conversation with the trooper. Had the man really offered him only two choices? Turn around without your daughter or be turned over to Homeland Security? Could that be right? Shouldn’t Elan have argued for Katie’s safety? Made the man realize the danger she would be in if he turned tail and ran? And why was he still running away in the dark of night.

What was Katie going to do? What *could* she do? How was she expected to get home by herself? Would Shadrack bring her back? Make sure she was safe? And what was Elan going to tell Bess? That he lost their daughter? That she ran off with old Shadrack Smithers? Could he fix things before she got back?

The dark-cloaked landscape rushed by without his notice. Elan hadn't paid all that much attention to the landmarks. Katie had been his navigator. That was her job. She had followed their route on the map, making notes. Now she was gone and nothing looked familiar. Especially in the dark. Heading in the opposite direction. And he was afraid to pull over and wait for them. If they were even coming this way. The trooper might not give him a second chance if he was caught stopped along the road.

By the time Elan thought to look for the turnoff to the petroglyph campground, he feared it was already behind him.

SHADRACK LIMPED down from the blacktop, climbed into the cab, and started the engine. He eased the front wheels up over the soft shoulder onto the pavement. Katie held her breath. With a grunt Shadrack spun the wheel left. Westward. Back the way they had come. Back the way her father had disappeared.

Katie breathed again. "Thank you," she said softly.

"Fer whut?"

"For taking me back to my father."

He nodded. "Ain't much of a choice, I guess. Yer pa's been mighty good t'me. Ya both have. 'S time t'do wha's right."

"What about the Ozarks?"

"'Ey kin wait a li'l longer, I reckon. 'S already been nigh onto fifty years."

She smiled and felt like hugging the bony old man. A ridiculous notion, she had to admit. That would just scare him silly. Or rile him up.

Neither spoke as they lumbered down the long straightaway, without headlights, guided only by the moonlit center and fog lines. It took a long time before they crested the distant ridge, which had taken both bus and police car. The valley beyond opened slowly before them. It held no sign of light nor life.

A SIGN MATERIALIZED along the right shoulder, white and glaring and accusatory in the muted beams of Elan's headlights. *30 MPH Zone Ahead*. Elan knew with a sinking dread what that meant. He had arrived back in the ghost mining town of Austin. It was after midnight and the place was closed and empty and locked up tight. He allowed the bus to drift to the curb and roll to a stop. The diminishing velocity seemed to sap his energy and resolve.

Suddenly he felt faint and shaky and a little sick. He cursed his miserable fate. He cursed himself. For he knew it was not his stars, but himself that had gotten him into this mess. He alone was to blame for putting Katie in mortal danger. And for his inept negotiations with that Highway Patrol officer. But most of all for his craven blind flight through the night to save his own sorry ass.

Elan let his eyelids close. He couldn't remember ever feeling as weary as he did now. He didn't want to be where he was. Or who he was. And he had no clue about what he was going to

do.

“THAR SHE BE,” Shadrack proclaimed as a ghostly blue “Campground Ahead” sign slid past in the moonlight. “Thass where yer pa’ll be.”

“Thank you, Shadrack. Thank you, thank you, thank you. And I’m so sorry, you know, for what I said.”

“Bout whut?”

“About what I said back there. You know. About your daughters.”

“You don’t know nothin’ ’bout them!” he snapped, staring straight ahead until he turned off onto the campground access road. After a while he drew a deep breath and sighed, then shrugged. “Ain’t nothin’ t’be sorry about, I reckon, when yer a’ speakin’ th’ truth.”

“No . . . I’m sorry . . . like I didn’t mean . . . I shouldn’t’ve said . . .”

“Hold on thar!” he barked suddenly, slowing the vehicle. A small red light on the dashboard pulsed on and off

“What’s the matter? I didn’t mean to—”

“Jus’ shush up.” He eased the pickup to a stop.

“What is it?”

“Don’ reckon I know ’s’yet. But ’er’s som’thin’ *wrong*.”

“What is it? Is it the truck?”

“Up yonder . . . we’s a’bein’ watched.”

“Watched? How do you know? I can’t see anything.”

“See that thar . . . thing . . . a’blinkin’ in front’a ya?”

“Yeah. What is it?”

“S’a warnin’ us. I put ’er in m’self. She only flashes when somebody’s a’ watchin’ with inf<sup>r</sup>ed ’lumination. Night time vision.”

“Oh my god . . . who’d be . . . ?” Katie stopped, a chill crawling up her spine. “You mean . . . ?”

“Shush!” He cranked down the window and stuck his head out into the crisp air while the engine idled.

Katie fixed her eyes on the blinking light. “Where on earth do you buy—”

“Shush!” Shadrack listened for a long moment, then drew back inside. “Army surplus . . . but neve’ mine ’at. We got us a problem . . . an’ what we gotta do is fig’er ’er out . . . what we’re a’gonna do . . . righ’chere, an’ now . . . an’ mighty fast.” For a long moment he stared blankly in thought, shaking his head. Then he nodded to himself. “Yup. No two ways ’bout it.” He turned to face her squarely. “Yer a’gonna have ta git out.”

“Out? Out of the *truck*?”

Shadrack jerked around and pulled his red plaid hunting jacket off the back seat and thrust it at her. “Here. Take ’is here coat. It’ll keep ya plenty warm.” He eased up on the clutch and the pickup began crawling forward.

“You mean . . . you want me out of the truck? *Out there*?”

“Yes’m. I’m a’gonna swing ’round ’at that thar clump a trees . . . an’ when I get ’er turned . . . you gotta jump out an’ go hide in the brush thar.”

“I don’t *want* to get out of the truck. Not if somebody’s watching—”

“Y’gotta. Only safe way.” The pickup wheeled slowly off the road and began a wide, bumpy circle through the sage and rabbitbrush. “Try’n git behind one’a them big rocks. See ’em? ’S far from the road ‘s ya kin. But behind them rocks. Keep low. An’ move slow. An’ *stay thar!*”

Katie whirled around, looking for the unseen threat out there in the darkness. Over her shoulder, in the back seat, the pulsing red light reflected dully off the naked barrels of the unsheathed shotgun. “What are *you* gonna do?”

“Ne’er min’ ’bout me. Your pa’ll be along in time . . . least I’m a’hopin’ so . . . if’n they ain’t already got ’im. An’ I’ll be back t’check on ya . . . if’n I kin . . . elstwise . . . well . . . I reckon yer on yer own.”

“But I don’t want to—”

“*Ya gotta!* Now git ready . . . behin’ ’em big rocks . . . ya see ’em? . . . ready? . . . open up ’at door!”

Katie pulled the handle and cracked the door a few inches as Shadrack slowed almost to a stop.

“*Now jump!*” He leaned over and gave her a rough shove.

Katie’s shoulder pushed open the door and she threw herself out reflexively to keep from falling. The door slammed shut behind her as the wheels spun out bits of gravel. She stumbled on a rock and turned her ankle and fell sideways into a thicket of stiff brush. Shadrack’s jacket helped cushion the fall, but her hands were scratched and poked by the brittle stems and branches. She lay where she had fallen, listening to the pickup rattle and bang back to the access road and accelerate down the gravel toward the highway. She lay still, listening, but hearing nothing but the receding hiss and growl of Shadrack’s truck.

She was afraid. But her thudding fear was being eclipsed by a surging anger at Shadrack’s impulsiveness. By the time she heard the squeal of his tires on the highway, Katie had convinced herself that the son-of-a-bitch was crazy. His was a madness born of a sick, incomprehensible, and incurable paranoia. And now she was left here in the desert on her own. And all for *nothing*.

She heard a cough in the distance. Katie froze and strained to listen as fear regained the upper hand. From up the hill above the campground she heard a voice. Then another. Soft at first, but rising. Agitated. Arguing. A sharp order was barked and a car door creaked open and was slammed. Bright headlights flared, winking as an engine started. Other doors slammed. A second big engine wound and caught and revved and a second set of blinding headlights blazed down on the rocks around her. She buried her face in the old man’s jacket as two vehicles began crunching and rumbling down the gravel beyond the rocks, picking up speed. Something crawled down her neck, but she kept her face deep in the fabric until they both had passed. She lifted her head to see what and who they were. The first vehicle, in the headlights of the second, was a big truck with a brown canvass canopy over the bed and “U S Army” stenciled in white on the olive drab door. She couldn’t read the markings on the second, but thought she saw a light bar across its rooftop. They accelerated toward the highway, kicking up dust and gravel. The first truck turned east at the highway and the second one headed west.

Katie knew where they were going. They were running down Shadrack. And he was luring them away from her.

She struggled to her feet and brushed off her clothes. This was her chance to explore the empty campground to see if their school bus was parked there. Exposed in the bright moonlight,

she stumbled back toward the access road. If the bus was *not* there . . . well . . . then it probably meant that her father had intended to rendezvous somewhere else, and they had misinterpreted his message. Or else that he had simply missed the turnoff. But if it *was* there . . . and the thought made her shudder . . . if the bus *was* parked there in the campground, empty, then he had most likely already been taken into custody. And was bound for some Nazi-style concentration camp.

As she approached the campground grove, a bright light suddenly blazed from the moon shadow of the trees. “*Who goes there?*” a quivering voice demanded. “*Identify yourself and . . . and . . . state your purpose!*”

Katie stared into the light for only a second before shielding her eyes with her hand. Confused and terrified, she tried to collect herself. “I . . . I . . . I’m . . . my name is . . . Katie Groves,” she stammered. “And I’m looking for my father . . . I got lost . . . I got . . . got separated from my father . . . hiking these trails . . . we were hiking . . . the petroglyph trail . . . looking at them . . .”

“Where’s your father now?”

“*I don’t know!* That’s what I’m trying to *tell* you. *We got separated.*”

Private First Class Jerome DeSoto, Nevada National Guard, searched the girl with his flashlight beam. “That coat’s too big for you.”

“I know *that*. It’s my dad’s.”

“Are you carrying any firearms?”

“No!” Katie opened Shadrack’s heavy wool jacket to give him a better look at her.

“Okay. How old are you?”

“Eighteen,” she lied. “Now, will you please get that light out of my eyes?”

Jerome lowered the beam to the gravel road between them and switched it off as he stepped out into the moonlight. “Y’don’t look that old.”

They stood evaluating at each other as their eyes re-acclimatized. Neither seemed to know what came next. He appeared to be a harmless enough young man. His military fatigues were a size too big for his slender build. His hair was long and black and tied back with a band, not the standard military buzz cut. But his features were even and strong and dark. But young. “And you don’t look old enough to be a soldier, either,” she rejoined. “Like . . . where’s your gun?”

Jerome blanched. He didn’t need another critic. He was already under assault from the ignorant red-neck Bubbas in his company. A Paiute Indian by birth, brought up on the reservation where he graduated from high school, he had joined the National Guard to get away and qualify for some college credits in electronics. To make something of himself. But now he’d been called up to serve in this Army unit as a radio specialist. He was *in* the Army, but not really *of* it. Or the National Guard, either, for that matter. The other soldiers made sure he knew he was not a *real* soldier like them. He wasn’t even allowed to carry a firearm except in supervised training.

Katie saw the hurt in his dark eyes her words had caused. Something unexpected seemed to pass between them. Something silent and tender. She had never in her life flirted with a complete stranger, but the instinct seemed to arise naturally as she let him look her over in the moonlight. “What are you doing out here, anyway?” she asked gently.

“Monitoring traffic. Checking permits. Unit’s been called up to help with the national

emergency. We've been assigned here."

"Why *here* for god's sake? Out . . ." she turned a slow circle, showing herself off ". . . out *nowhere*"

He shrugged. "I . . . don't know." The hint of a smile curled the corners of his mouth. "All that's above my pay grade."

She smiled back. "How come you didn't go out with the others just now?"

The hurt returned to his eyes. "Somebody had to stay and look after the bivouac. And the communications equipment. I'm a radio operator, so I stayed." He changed the subject. "Were you with the guy in the truck?"

"What truck?"

"That black pickup truck. You didn't see it?"

"No. It was, you know, too dark. I'm just trying to find my dad and go home. He has an old school bus. A short one. He did, like, a camper conversion on it. Have you seen it? It's kind of a . . . a spotty school-bus yellow color with patches of gray primer all over? Is it parked here at the campground?"

Jerome shook his head as a convoy of big rigs thundered past on the highway. When the noise subsided, he said, "No, haven't see any school buses, or anything much else. This campground's empty . . . except for us."

"And . . . have you guys . . . have you taken any prisoners?"

"Not recently."

She shivered, but left the jacket hanging open and took a step closer. "I . . . I'm *scared*. I don't want to be here . . . when your friends come back."

"No, you don't. That wouldn't be good. These fellows . . . they can be . . . not very nice. They can get a little wild. A little . . . frisky. You know, rough."

"But . . . where can I *go*?"

He thought for a moment, then shook his head. "I don't know."

Katie stepped even closer. "I need my dad to pick me up. But I can't call him. My phone's got no bars. You don't happen to have a cell phone I could use, do you? One that works out here? "

"Yes . . . well . . . no . . . sorry."

She studied him. "But . . . you *are* the radioman, right?"

"This's all government equipment. No cell phones. Satcom stuff. Strictly regulated. And restricted."

"But . . . you *could* call out . . . if you wanted to?"

"Yes . . . well . . . but I'm not authorized to make calls, except for military use."

She eased right up next to him. "How about for search and rescue? The military does search and rescue, doesn't it?"

"Yes, of course. Sometimes, anyhow. In some circumstances, but not--"

"Hey, I'm, like, *lost!* I'm a *missing person!*" She managed an actual tear. "And I'm going to *freeze to death* out here in this wilderness if nobody finds me soon. I need search and rescue." She placed a hand on his arm and gazed into his eyes. "You can use that phone of yours for search and rescue, can't you? To prevent a civilian casualty?"

"I'd . . . I'd need authorization." His voice trembled. "Lieutenant Diesenwald isn't here . . .

and—”

Katie stretched her face up toward the meek warrior’s lips and brushed them with hers. Then she kissed him gently on the mouth.

His flashlight clattered to the ground. “Whoa.” Jerome staggered back a step, surprised and a little dazed.

She smiled coquettishly. “Will that be authorization enough?”

ELAN HAD FALLEN into a crack in his childhood bathroom. Guilt-ridden, he was caught somehow between the cold porcelain toilet bowl and an unyielding metal wall. His neck was cricked and his left hand felt bloodlessly numb. Before him rose his mother, impossibly tall and odious in her black silk bathrobe, glaring fiercely down at him with terrible damning eyes. He flinched as an insect suddenly screamed beside him and those accusing eyes were no longer his mother’s. They belonged to his wife. He and Beth were awaiting a phone call. Elan knew it would be from the Commandant of the concentration camp and he was going to tell them that they were holding Katie as a prisoner and were about to begin hurting her in unimaginable ways. Beth reached to pick up the phone. Elan tried to bat her hand away, but he couldn’t move his arm. She was going to find out the terrible truth of what he had done with their daughter—.

The insect chirped again.

“Wha . . . ?” Elan came more fully awake. The cell phone was chirping. He found himself slumped in the driver’s seat of the school bus, which still sat idling at the curb in Austin, Nevada. He tried to straighten himself up and get his bearings. The phone chirped a third time, and foggily he rummaged through the utility box beside the seat. He managed to grasp the phone and flip it open. “Uh . . . ’lo?” He listened to a hollow, empty swishing and was about to hang up.

“Dad! It’s Katie!”

“Katie? Where are you?” Again the swishing. “Katie?”

“At the petroglyph campground. Isn’t that where . . . yes, it’s Katie . . . I heard you . . . we have a delay in our signal here because, like, it’s bouncing off a satellite . . . but isn’t the petroglyphs where you wanted us to meet? Where the heck are *you*?”

He straightening the crick in his neck and searched for the right words as he gazed shamefully out at the empty streets beneath their dead amber lights.

“Dad?”

“Yes, honey. I’m here . . . I’m in . . . Austin.”

He counted to four as he listened to the swishing nothingness. Then, “Can you come get me?”

“Can’t . . . uh . . . can’t Shadrack give you a ride?”

Four more seconds of emptiness. “Shadrack’s gone.”

“Gone? He’s *gone*? Where’s he gone to?”

Four seconds. “It’s a long story. I don’t have much time. The soldiers will be coming back—”

“*Soldiers?*”

Elan’s interruption had put them out of sync. When the signal returned, another voice was speaking to Katie, muffled in the background, but Elan couldn’t make out what it was saying. Then she spoke into the phone, “They’re coming. Can you pick me up?”

“Who’s with you?”

The next four seconds seemed to expand while Elan waited. “Pick me up on the highway!” Katie’s voice was sharp with alarm. “Can you do that? A mile or so before you get to the turnoff, you know, for the campground. I’ll be on the road. I gotta go.”

And the line was dead. And the swishing of emptiness abandoned the phone to enter his heart.

LIEUTENANT DIESENWALD stepped down from the cab of the troop carrier, scruffy, grim and disgruntled. He surveyed the surrounding foothills, still frosted in moonlight. “You’re still out there somewhere, aren’t you?” he murmured to himself. “I can *feel* you watching.”

“What’s that, sir?” asked his first sergeant.

“Set up a perimeter,” he snapped. “Live ammo. That fucker may be coming back.”

“Yes, sir,” Sergeant Dudly saluted. “I’ll get right at it.”

Diesenwald was not a happy man. His team had managed to lose the pickup truck which had penetrated so threateningly close to their position. He spat. So much for all the fancy electronics. He turned and almost stumbled over Jerome DeSoto. “What the hell do you want, soldier?”

Jerome saluted sharply. “We seem to have a problem, sir.”

“Well . . . *do* we have a problem, private, or do we just *seem* to have one?”

“I don’t know yet, sir.”

“What *do* you know?”

“We seem to be picking up cross-talk on our sat phone, sir. Probably from a cell phone tower.”

“I thought they shut ’em all down.”

“Yes, sir. The cell towers were supposed to have been rendered inoperable. But we’re still picking up cross-talk from civilian transmissions, sir.”

“So?”

“That could compromise our security, sir.”

“Well . . . shit . . . you’re the radio tech . . . fix it.”

“Yes, sir. But I’ll need to take the humvee out to the road to track down the interfering signals. Triangulate them, sir.”

“Okay . . . what are you bothering me for? Just do it.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll need your permission to take the humvee, sir.”

“Didn’t I just give it to you, goddammit?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I suppose you’ll need a driver?”

“No, sir. I can handle it myself.”

“Then what the hell’re you waiting for, private?”

“Sir, we’ll have to suspend some surveillance until I’m finished.”

“Everything?”

“No sir. Just the night vision.”

“Why?”

“Interference, sir.”

“How long?”

“Shouldn’t be more than half an hour, sir.”

“Then get to it, private. Chop, chop. Tell Sergeant Dudley what you’re doing. And report back to me as soon as everything’s back to nominal. You understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Jerome snapped another sharp salute and turned on his heel.

ELAN CLIMBED OUT, stepped around the bus into its shadow to pee in the short grass, stretched his legs and back, then buckled himself back into the driver’s seat. He ratched the shift into gear and was about to pull a U-turn, when a convoy of big-rigs approached from ahead, heading eastbound through the sleeping ghost town. They were all creeping along at precisely 30 MPH, the maximum speed allowed in Austin. He counted eleven of them, big and brightly lit, their diesel engines vibrating the bus windows as they rumbled past. He figured that it might be wise to travel in their wake, just one of the herd, but another vehicle was following a couple of blocks behind the trucks. So he waited for it too to pass. As the automobile drew closer he saw the outline of an emergency bar on the roof and, as it passed, a “Lander County Sheriff” emblem on the door. Elan slid down in the seat, but the driver of the cruiser was focusing his attention on the trucks.

Hunkered down, he waited another minute or two, rethinking his strategy, until the tail lights all disappeared around a curve in the highway behind him. Elan made his silent turn and sedately followed them out of town toward the petroglyph campground and his daughter. Rather than trying to merge with them, he kept his speed down to let them all get as far ahead as possible and out of his world of concern.

At the edge of town the sheriff’s cruiser had turned around and was parked by the left side of the road with its interior lights ablaze and the deputy recording his observations onto a clipboard. So damned much paperwork, Elan thought. Only a computer could digest it all. Elan figured he had reached safety, just before the lights of the cruiser winked on a mile behind him and swung a big semicircle heading his way. The headlights followed at a discrete, unvarying distance.

“Shit!” Evan muttered. “Shit! shit! shit! Now what have I gotten myself into?” He wondered just how far he would have to drive before he got out of Lander County. He doubted that this sheriff’s deputy would be as cooperative as the state police officer who had already stopped him and let him go. This was, after all, the dead heart of hard-scrabble rural Nevada. He pressed down on the accelerator. The speedometer rotated up by ten miles per hour. He considered dousing his lights, like Shadrack had done, but that might enhance his pursuer’s interest. “Shit, shit, shit.” The last thing he wanted to do was lead law enforcement to Katie. It was feeling like *deja vu* all over again. “Shit, shit, shit.”

THE HUMVEE SLOWED along the shoulder of the highway. “Get in!” Jerome called. “Hurry.”

Katie scrambled aboard and the vehicle sped up as she closed the door. “How did you manage to—?”

“Long story. I’m supposed to be out looking for problems with our communications link. I only have about a half an hour to find your father and get back.”

“Won’t they know?”

“Hope not.”

“Thank you for everything, you know, for what you’re doing.” Katie wanted to tell him everything about herself in the short time they would have together. She described her father. And Cedarville. And their fated camping trip. “After he brought the idea up, I was, like, Holy Cow, I wanna *do* that. Like, this is gonna be a whole new adventure and a lotta fun.”

Jerome listened as he concentrated on the road ahead. “Guess you got more than you bargained for . . . what with this state of emergency business.”

“Yeah. Like, what’s it all about, anyway? I can’t figure it out. The Internet is down, or so slow it might as well be. And the TV news only tells you, you know, what they want you to hear. Is there, like, some kind of a revolution going on out here?”

Oncoming headlight blazed from around a curve ahead, and Jerome dimmed his brights. They fell silent as a long convoy of trucks streaked past from the west, buffeting them in the wake stream.

“They don’t tell us anything either,” Jerome said. “Just enough to get our jobs done.” He glanced over at her in the pale dashboard light and smiled. “Truth is . . . I don’t think anybody around here has a clue. I . . . I just don’t know. But I’ll tell you this . . . something’s not right about the whole mess.”

They rounded a curve and abruptly entered an arena of flashing lights. On the left shoulder ahead was stopped a shadowy vehicle whose bright headlights nearly blinded them. Tucked behind it was the police cruiser which had pulled it over, its red and blue roof lights flashing like a misplaced pinball machine. As they closed the distance, the front vehicle revealed itself to be a stubby school bus spotted with yellow and gray paint.

“*That’s my dad!*” Katie cried as they passed.

Jerome hit the brakes, reached over and activated the humvee’s own emergency lights, squealed a U-turn, and pulled in behind the cruiser. He left his high beams blazing.

Katie squirmed. “What’re you gonna *do*?”

Jerome held up a hand, sat up straight, and drew several deep breaths as he gazed blankly out the windshield.

“What are you *doing*?”

He took one final breath, then turned to her. “Getting into character.” He reached back for a clipboard, then cranked open the door. “Stay in the car.” He stepped out and tugged down the brim of his cap. “And keep your head down.” He slammed the door and swaggered into the high beams like an actor entering the footlights, ignoring the deputy who stood beside the open window of the bus, watching him. Jerome bent down to study the cruiser’s license plate and scribbled some notes on his clipboard.

Katie scrambled into the driver’s seat for a better view and pulled down the visor to shield out the pulsing lights atop the cruiser. In that moment her eye caught a movement far up the road near the curve. A quarter mile ahead a dark vehicle without lights came to an abrupt stop in the distant psychedelic red and blue of the strobes.

Jerome straightened. “Hello,” he called to the deputy.

The deputy made no reply, but walked back to meet Jerome, his body language sending the message that this was an unwelcome intrusion into his bailiwick. His face was young and plump and scarred by acne. Short-cropped blond hair covered his head like a shower cap. His pendulous belly swung over his belt buckle.

Katie watched as the dark vehicle reversed away up the road and swung off backwards into a drainage swale between two hillocks. Neither the deputy nor Jerome seemed to have noticed it.

“Jerome DeSoto, Nevada Air National Guard,” Jerome reported. He pulled a laminated card from his pocket and held it out as the deputy approached. “I’m deployed with the Army Tactical Detail stationed up by Hickison.”

The deputy glanced at the card. “Deputy Jay Flegler. Lander County Sheriff’s Department.” He held out his hand.

“Got an ID?”

Flegler grimaced, then pulled out his wallet and flipped it open.

Jerome studied it, adding notes on his clipboard. “Good to meet you, Flegler.” The two shook hands. “What’ve we got here?”

“White male. California plates. Driver by the name of . . .” he glanced down at the drivers license he held in his pudgy fingers.

“Groves, Elan,” interrupted Jerome before the deputy could read it off.

The deputy looked surprised. “You know this guy?”

“Why do you think I’m here?” He held out his hand for the license.

Confused, Flegler handed it over.

“He alone?” Jerome asked.

“Seems to be.”

“Firearms?”

“Not that I could see.”

“You didn’t pat him down?”

“Not yet.”

“Good. He show you a travel permit?”

“Says he ain’t got none.”

“Ah,” Jerome nodded, smiling. “That’s good too. You radio it in yet?”

“Just about to . . . before you showed up.”

“No need to now. I’ll be taking over.”

Flegler frowned. “You sayin’ you got jurisdiction here?”

“Absolutely. The Army’s taken over tactical interdiction along this stretch of Highway 50.”

Deputy Flegler scratched his head. “I ain’t heard nothin’ about it.”

“Well, you will. Just happened. Based on intel I cannot share with you at this time.” Jerome grinned. “But it’s gonna save you a heap of paperwork.”

“I think I better call it in.”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” Jerome leaned closer and lowered his voice. “Just a word to the wise. Cop to cop.” He nodded toward the bus. “Shouldn’t be tellin’ you this, but he’s one of ours. Homeland Security. Undercover.”

Flegler looked concerned, but unconvinced.

Jerome lowered his voice further. “This is about to get ugly. *Real* ugly. Word’s coming down direct from Central Command. They’re looking for traitors infiltrating law enforcement here in Nevada. Moles. Anybody involved here, either side of the law, is gonna get sucked in. Might be under suspicion for the rest of his career. I’m giving you a chance to drive away. Pretend it was *me* made the stop. You had nothing to do with it. And I’ll back you up, if it

comes to that. You want to stay the hell out of this mess. Believe me. Okay?”

Fleegler stood in the bright high beams of the humvee and thought it over.

“Where you stationed?” Jerome asked, trying to close the deal.

“Substation in Austin.”

“Oh boy,” Jerome grunted and flipped to a page at the back of his clipboard.

“Why. What’s the matter?”

“Fleegler . . .” Jerome placed a hand on the deputy’s shoulder “. . . let me put it this way . . . I *know* things . . . I can’t disclose ’em to you . . . sorry . . . but if I were you, I’d get the hell away from this mess as fast as I can. Your name is not on my list . . . not yet. You understand?”

Fleegler’s jaw worked, but no words came out.

“You’re messin’ with national security here, Fleegler.” He pulled a pen from his shirt pocket. “This is your last chance.”

Fleegler looked into Jerome’s eyes, then nodded. He climbed back into the cruiser and killed the flashers. Then he made a slow U-turn and headed back toward Austin.

Katie was out of the humvee as soon as he was gone. “What did you say to him?” she asked Jerome as she ran past to the driver’s window of the bus. “*Dad!*”

“Katie?” Elan looked dazed. “What are you doing here?”

“Are you okay?” She leaned in and hugged him around the neck.

“I . . . I think so.” He unbuckled his belt, pushed open the door, and found an unsteady footing in the gravel. “What are you wearing? Is that . . . Shadrack’s.”

Katie was gazing up the road toward the curve. It seemed darker now, but she thought she could make out a figure holding something in his hands. Something long that reflected the lights. She blinked, but she couldn’t focus properly. Couldn’t be certain. It might have all been her imagination.

“Katie?”

Katie turned and smiled. “Yeah, dad?”

“Who’s that fellow there . . . standing there by the hummer? He looks like a soldier?”

“He is . . . like . . . sort of.”

“Do you *know* him?”

“He’s my new friend. His name is Jerome. Come on, I want you to meet him.” She led him by the arm. “Jerome, this is my father.”

“Please to meet you, Mr. Groves.” Jerome handed him back his driver’s license.

“How . . . how did you . . . ?”

“It’s a very long story, sir, and I’ve got to get back to Hickison before I get in more trouble than I’m already in. Katie can fill you in on most of it.” He opened the door, leaned in, and switched off the hummer’s emergency lights. “But maybe I can come visit you and Katie up in Cedarville sometime.”

“I’d *love* that,” Katie beamed. “Can he dad? *Please!*”

“But,” Elan sputtered, “you’re not . . . she’s not . . . old enough . . . for . . . to have . . .”

“Maybe we can at least swap stories,” Jerome said. He bent and kissed Katie on the cheek, then climbed into the driver’s seat and buckled up. “Have a safe trip back home.”

Katie stood on the centerline and watched the hummer’s tail lights disappear around the bend. Back toward his unit. The moon was behind her now, low in the western sky. The long night

would be coming to an end soon. A wave of melancholy swept over her.

“Come on, kiddo,” Elan said. “Let’s go home.”

Wearily they trudged back to the bus and climbed aboard, shuffling things around, settling into their places. Evan revved the engine, cranked the wheel hard to the left, and eased out the clutch.

“Dad, wait . . . there’s something I want you to see . . .”

“What honey?”

She pointed up the road toward the curve as the headlights swept across.

“What is it?”

She strained her eyes for a moment longer, then shook her head. “Nothing, I guess.” Shadrack, or whoever she might have imagined there, was gone.