

Bristlecone

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PART TWO

Kieferville, Missouri, Mid-November

THE BEWHISKERED OLD MAN balanced on one bony knee between two weather-worn headstones. His fingers were bleeding. He had torn away the weeds and long grass and blackberry briars with his bare hands to expose the time-blackened names he sought. *EZEKIAL SMITHERS* was chiseled into one. *RACHEL SMITHERS* into the other. Dates of birth and death were scratched beneath the names. His adoptive parents, they were. His first real family. But the world had moved on. The graveyard had long gone untended. It had taken him months to find these grave markers.

Shadrack cleared his throat. “Well . . . I’s back,” he said. “I know it’s been a perty long spell . . . but not ‘cause I ain’t been a’thinkin’ ‘bout ya . . . all ‘ese years . . . simple gone by.” He lifted up his knee to clear a thorn branch under it. “Found me a space t’sleep, I did. In Diesler’s bunkhouse up the road. Remember old Diesler? He’s long dead now, a’course . . . an’ his son Luther don’t remember me, I guess . . . but he’s a’givin’ me a bunk an’ three square meals a day fer helpin’ out with the chickens an’ the cows an’ a little bit a’weedin’ in the veg’tible patch.” He bowed his head. “Feels good t’have somethin’ t’do with m’ hands ag’in.”

He breathed in the scent of pinewood smoke and fresh-turned soil from the fields being readied for winter crops. A tractor droned in the distance. Clouds were building in the west and rain seemed likely sooner than later. Maybe even a snow flurry. He loved the outdoors, Shadrack did. He was going to sorely miss it.

He sighed and tugged the rag sweater tighter around his neck. It was time to get down to business. “I made up m’ mind, I have,” he declared at last. “An’ I’m here t’tell ya what I’m a’plannin’ t’do.” He lined up the words in his head before he spoke them. “Well . . . I’m a’bound an’ determined t’ go on an’ turn m’self in. Yes’ir. Clear the slate ‘s best I kin. I gotta ‘tone fer the worst one a’ my sins. ‘S th’ only ways I’s a’gonna ever have a chance t’see Tildie ag’in, I reckon . . . o’er on th’ other side.”

He searched for the words that had to be said. Words that would embarrass him mightily. “I jus’ want you t’ know. A’forehand. Both a’ ya. ‘Cause ya likely ain’t a’gonna like it much. But I want ya t’ hear it from me first.” He drew a shaking breath. “An’ here’s th’ truth. I’s th’ one done shot an’ kilt that drifter name a’ Lupic Mufel. We was both drunk and a’arguin’ out in th’ woods behind that old honky-tonk. Shot ‘im with that ol’ shotgun ya give me fer squirrels. Way back then . . . jus’ a’fore I lit out fer St. Louie . . . when that drifter went a’missin’. Only, truth is, he weren’t never a’missin’ a’tall. He was plumb dead an’ buried. An’ I know where ‘is body’s a’buried. So . . . I’m a fixin’ t’ turn m’self in fer it. Take th’punishment I’s due. An’ me’be . . . jus’ me’be . . . I’ll be blessed t’see Tildie ag’in. In the hereafter. If’n they be such a place a’tall.”

Shadrack rose stiffly and bent backwards. His spine crackled. Stiffly he knelt back down on the other knee to finish this business. “This ‘ere ain’t got nothin’ t’ do with you . . . or the way y’ brung me up. Ya done jus’ fine. This was all m’ own doin’, curse a’ devil. An’ tha’s the sure

truth. Forgive me if'n ya kin. I's woeful sorry t've let y'down." He paused a final time, then rose to his feet. "Jus' a'wanted ya t'know."

THE POSTMAN DROPPED an envelope into the Groves' mailbox in Cedarville. Five months had passed since Bess's return flight from Portland had arrived on time. She had taken a cab to the checkpoint just north of Alturas, where they met her. As they drove back, her husband and daughter regaled her with an enthusiastic, though sanitized, version of their camping trip. No mention was made of Shadrack Smithers. Nor of the Nevada police. Nor of the Army National Guard. Bess accepted the account with good cheer and few questions.

Travel restrictions had been gradually eased for those who were gainfully employed and without criminal records. The Groves were on the list of upstanding citizens. So Bess had visited Ginger in Portland one more time in the intervening days, all without incident.

But the national state of emergency had not been lifted. Communications were more restricted than ever. Facebook and Twitter were things of the past. News outlets were all censored. Reliable information was scarce. No one knew what was happening out there. In Washington. In the heartland of America. In the hinterlands. It began to feel like they were living in some fascist third-world country. The real horror was the ease with which they were growing accustomed to it.

At least Elan had been allowed to return to his teaching, and for him life in Cedarville fell back into its time-worn rhythm of uneventfulness. He had even managed to lease Shadrack's farm to a young Polish couple from Stockton who had taken out a seed loan from Tollitson. Tollitson vouched for them, and somehow they were managing to make their monthly payments on time. Elan had no desire to probe more deeply into their circumstances.

Katie's sixteenth birthday had come and gone. It seemed to Elan that his daughter had blossomed into an attractive, self-confident, and independent young woman. Annoyingly independent. Like her mother. Whether it was a result of her turning sixteen, or of unspoken events which may have occurred during their strange camping trip, he could not say. He had no desire to inquire further. But it made him uncomfortable. Katie's new friend Jerome had telephoned her twice, but to Elan's relief, he had not come around for a visit. She said he had been reassigned to a unit in North Dakota. Elan hoped it would all just fade away.

Elan removed the unfamiliar envelope from the mailbox and held it up to the sunlight. It was addressed to him in childish block pencil letters, but bore no return address. The postmark was Kieferville, Missouri. He brought it inside and showed it to his daughter. Together they looked up Kieferville in the atlas. It was a tiny dot on a secondary road in the remote pine forests of the Ozark Mountains.

"Open it," she enthused.

Elan nodded and picked up the letter opener. The envelope contained no letter, but only a postal money order payable to Elan Groves in the sum of nineteen-hundred-sixty-two dollars.

Elan grunted and handed it to his daughter.

Katie was beaming. "At least there's one old bristlecone still standing," she told him.

IN THE DECADES SHADRACK WAS AWAY, a new Kieferville City Hall had been built across the abandoned railroad tracks from the roller rink and park. The sprawling one-story

structure was no longer new. Shadrack parked his pickup on the cracking asphalt, leaving the keys in the ignition, and minced his way to the front door. He was carrying his shotgun, broken open and without shells, in the crook of his left arm as he limped inside. A plump young woman looked up from her computer and smiled. "I'm sorry," she said, "but we don't sell hunting licenses here."

"Ain't what I's a'here for," Shadrack grunted. "I come t'see the chief a' police on important business."

The clerk shook her head. "We don't have a police department anymore," she explained, rising and approaching the counter. "We contract with the Sheriff's Department now. But Sergeant Wiederman is on duty today, and I think he's in. I'll see if he has time to see you. Can I tell him what this is about?"

"Yes, ma'am. Tell 'im I's here t'confess a murder I done."

The smile disappeared from her face. She glanced uneasily at the shotgun. "I'll . . . just . . . be right back." She hurried around the counter and disappeared down a hallway.

Shadrack bided his time, breathing deeply, hardly believing that he was really doing this. After all these years. He watched it all unfold as if from a distance. Like the rerun of an old TV show. Doubts still scurried like black rats in the shadows of his thoughts, but he tried his best to ignore them. He had made up his mind, he had. And that was that.

A short, muscular man in a blue uniform peered around the hallway corner to give Shadrack a cautious appraisal, then stepped warily into the hall. He looked to be in his forties, with a bushy black moustache cascading over his upper lip. In his fist he gripped an automatic pistol, pointed at the floor. "Sir, I'll have to ask you to place that shotgun on the counter and step away from it."

Shadrack grunted and complied.

Sergeant Wiederman approached, confirmed the shotgun was unloaded, and asked the clerk to take it to the storage room. He slid his service weapon back into its holster. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, sir."

"About a . . . a confession?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. Come on back to my office." He gestured for Shadrack to lead, and he followed. The city clerk kept her distance as they passed. "Turn right here. My office is the first door on the left there." He offered Shadrack a chair and sat behind a desk with stacks of papers surrounding a laptop computer. "What's your name, sir?"

"Shadrack Smithers."

Wiederman clicked on the keyboard. "Smithers. Smithers. Didn't a family name of Smithers . . . used to own a farm out by the Scale Road?"

"Yes, sir. M' Ma an' Pa. Zeke an' Rachel Smithers. They's long dead now."

"Sorry to hear that. Do you have a driver's license?"

Shadrack peeled his license out of his wallet and handed it to him.

"California."

Shadrack nodded.

"Cedarville?"

"Tha's in California. Up in th' corner near Nevada."

“Is this your current address?”

“I ain’t a’livin’ there no more.”

“Where are you living now?”

“Up at Diesler’s. In the bunkhouse.”

“Luther Diesler?”

“Tha’s right.”

“I know where his place is. Do you happen to know the address?”

“No, I do not.”

“Okay. How long have you been living up there?”

Shadrack considered. “Got here four . . . me’be five months ago.”

“Have you got your travel permit with you?”

Shadrack bristled. “No, I ain’t got no dang travel permit with me. An’ I ain’t come in here t’ talk about ’em. I’m sick t’ death with them travel permits. Fed up an’ done with ’em.”

Wiederman stared at him. “How’d you . . . um . . .” he glanced at his wrist watch “. . . never mind that now.” He leaned back and managed a wan smile. “What can I do for you this morning, Mr. Smithers?”

“Shadrack.”

“Okay. Shadrack.”

“I come to confess a crime I done.”

“What kind of a crime?”

“A cold blooded murder, it war.”

Wiederman blinked. “When did this happen, sir?”

“Shadrack. Oh . . . long ‘bout . . . me’be . . . say . . . fifty year ago, I reckon.”

“Fifty years?”

“More ’r less.”

“Here in Kieferville?”

“Yes, sir. Well . . . me’be. Might be jus’ outta town. In the Nash’nal Forest.”

Wiederman typed in the information. “Who did you kill?”

“Drifter name a’ Lupic Mufel.”

“How do you spell that?”

“Got no idea.”

Sergeant Wiederman drew a deep breath and puffed it up through his moustache as he pushed away from his desk. It had grown darker outside, and a light sleet rattled against the window. Winter was nearly here. Too soon. Too much to do. He leaned back in his chair. He did not have time for this. But he couldn’t ignore it. And if he *was* going to handle it, he needed to do it properly right from the get-go. There were procedures to follow. Evidence to be preserved. He sighed and picked up the phone. “Angel, I need you to call the sheriff’s office and get a detective out here. Right now.” He listened. “Murder investigation.” He listened again. “We’ll have to see. Somebody’s going to have to do a records search.” Pause. “Okay. Do what you can. I’ll get it started.”

“You’s busy,” Shadrack observed.

“You don’t know the half of it, Mr. Smithers—”

“Shadrack.”

“Shadrack. You and I are going to have to start all over again. This time in the interview room. I’ll have to record all this on video camera. Is that okay with you?”

“Seems like.” Shadrack flashed his gap-toothed smile. “I reckon I got time.”

The interview room was small and empty except for two straight-back chairs surrounding a small wooden table. Fluorescent ceiling lights blazed, leaving no shadows. Two cameras peered down from separate walls. It took Wiederman a while to get the equipment up and running. Once the cameras were rolling, he recited the time and place and the names of the parties present. He advised Shadrack of his Miranda rights, which Shadrack waived, consenting to being interrogated. Wiederman followed the notes he had made on his laptop and reproduced everything that had already been asked and answered. Up to Lupic Mufel. “Do you know how to spell his name,” he asked again for the cameras.

“No, sir, I do not,” Shadrack replied. “Never see’d it writ down.”

“Where did you hear the name?”

“In the parkin’ lot a’ the Rip-N-Roar. M’cousin Dolf pointed this fellow out t’me and tol’ me ’is name. Lupic Mufel, it war.”

“Okay.” Wiederman held up his hand like a traffic cop. “I think we’re going to have to continue a little differently now, Mr. . . . ah . . . Shadrack.. I want you to tell me *when* . . . and *where* . . . and *how* this . . . this alleged murder took place. In your own words. As succinctly as possible. Can you do that for me?”

“I reckon so,” said Shadrack. “It’s kinda a long story.”

Wiederman grimaced, glanced at his watch, puffed through his moustache, then nodded.

“Take your time. I’ll jump in if I have any questions. Okay?”

“A’right.”

“Go ahead.”

“Well . . . it all started down at th’ Rip-N-Roar. You remember the Rip-N-Roar? Honky-tonk out by the crossroads?”

“I’ve heard about it. But that was before my time.”

“Jus’s well. A wild an’ devilish place, it war. Deserved t’be bulldozed down. Now she’s just a field a’ weeds. Wished I’d a’ never set foot in ’er.” Shadrack shook his head. “Anyways . . . I was out thar at the Rip-N-Roar a’ drinking beer and a’ shootin’ pool with m’cousin Dolf. We was both a’ gettin’ pretty drunk. I jus’ finished up a tricky shot, ’s best’s I kin remember, when Dolf pulls on m’sleeve an’ says, ‘At’s yer coat, ain’t it?’ He was a’ pointin’ at m’coat hangin’ on a hook by the Wurlitzer jukebox. I nodded, an’ he say’s, ‘I jus’ saw that big fella take somethin’ outta yer pocket.’ ‘Tha’s m’money roll,’ I says, an’ heads over t’ m’coat. Sure ’nough, my money clip’s a’ missin’. . . the silver one my Pa give me . . . with my initials on it . . . an’ the fellow who took it sees what I’m a’ doin’ an’ scoots out the door. I go right after ’im inta th’ parkin’ lot. Dolf’s a’ followin’ and points to this big round-shouldered fellow walkin’ away. ‘Hey!’ I shouts and starts after ’im, but he picks up a couple a’ chunks a’ broken concrete and chucks one a’ ’em at us, jus’ missin’ Dolf’s head. He turns an’ keeps on a’ walkin’ faster away into the woods, still a’ holdin’ the other chunk in his hand.” Shadrack fell into a muse. “Guess I shouldn’t a’ never followed ’im.”

“You did follow him then?” Wiederman prompted.

“Why, a’course I followed ’im. He stole m’money. An’ he still had it. First I asks Dolf

whut's the fellow's name. 'Lupic Mufel,' he says. I'll never forget it. That's how I knowed 'is name. I tol' Dolf t'stay put whar 'e was. Didn't want 'im a'getting 'is head busted open on my account. An' I followed that slump-shouldered thief fellow's track into the woods."

"You had him in sight the whole time?"

"Naw. I tracked him. Like trackin' a squirrel. Had lots a' practice a'doin' that."

"It was still light out?"

"Evenin', 's I recollect. Summer. Twilight. Made it easy t' track a big, sloppy galoot like that."

"Go on."

"Well, sir, I tracks him t'is camp, I done. 'Bout a half a mile. Jus' off 'a the road. He was a'campin' dry . . . un'er th' trees . . . jus' a bedroll . . . an' a knapsack . . . 'e wuz jus' a'lightin' a fire' . . . that chunk a' concrete on the ground next t'im."

"Did you confront him?"

"No sir. Not right 'en, nohow. I may a'been young, but I warn't born stupid. I walked back t'im' truck and pulled out that ol' shotgun. Th' one y'had me lay on the counter out thar. Both barrels was a'loaded with buckshot. Put a couple extra shells in m' pocket an' headed on back. He had that campfire a'blazin' an' he was jus' a'sitting with 'is back plopped up agin' a tree keepin' warm. I could see that chunk a' concrete sittin' right next t'im. He was keepin' it close by. He seed me right away an' scratches t'is feet. 'Whadda you want?' he hollers at me, a'wavin' that concrete chunk around like 'e's jus' a'achin' t'fling 'er at me."

"Did you consider yourself to be in danger?"

"Naw. I's across the clearin'. But I holler's back, 'Ya done stole m'money. An' I want it back.'"

"Were you pointing the gun at him?"

"No, sir. Not yet. I yells, 'Gimme back m'money, an' I'll jus' let'er go.' An' 'e hollers back, 'I ain't got no money a'yourn.' So I takes a step closer, an' pulls back 'is arm t' throw. So I raise the gun an' shoots 'im dead center in the gut. Blam. Loud as the dickens."

"Both barrels?"

"Lordy, no. One 'uz loud 'nough. An' all it took. He doubles over a'screamin' an' I watches 'im fall an' writhe around all gut-shot an' a'bleedin' as 'e war. Made me kinda sick an' then I gets a'scart an' runs away."

"Where did you go?"

"Back to m'truck. That gunshot was powerful loud an' sobered me right up. I 'uz so a'scart an' shakin' 'bout what I done . . . I didn't rightly know what t'do."

"So you don't really know if you actually killed him?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I kilt 'im dead alright."

"How do you know?"

"Well . . . I drove t' m' Ma an' Pa's house an' found a diggin' spade we kept in the shed. An' I drove on back. The fella was doubled up by the dyin' fire an' a'dyin' hisself. I added some branches and built the fire back up sos I could see. Never knew a fella could hold so much blood. I found m'money clip in 'is coat pocket, but m'money was all a'soaked with 'is blood. I ended up a'tossin' it all in the hole I dug fer 'im. Kept the money clip, a'course. Had m' initials on it."

“You’re sure he was dead?”

“Yes, sir. By the time I got the grave dug.”

“How did you know?”

“Well, sir . . . ’e’d a’stopped a’breathin’ . . . an’ ’e was stiff . . . an’ cold . . . an’ I watched ’im fer a while. He war dead aw’right.”

“So you dug him a grave?”

“Yes, sir. Dug most a’ the night, I did, scared as th’ dickens. Worst night a’ m’life.”

“What did you do with his rucksack and blankets?”

“Tossed ever’tthin’ down in the hole a’fore I filled ’er up. Didn’t want nobody t’ find it.”

Wiederman thought for a moment. Puffed through his moustache. “Do you think you can locate that grave site now?”

“Don’ rightly know.” Shadrack shook his head. “I been a’lookin’, but them roads out thar ain’t whar they used t’be. Been moved around an’ paved over some. Somebody’s a’cut down th’ old trees an’ new ones’ve growed up. Nothin’ don’t look much the same no more.”

Wiederman puffed through his moustache. “Is that cousin of yours . . . Dolf . . . is he still around?”

“No, sir. Died in th’ war.”

“Have you told anyone else about this?”

“No, sir. Not ’til you.”

“Are you married?”

“She’s a’passed, rest ’er soul.”

“I’m sorry.” Wiederman sighed. “Why are you coming forth with this just now, Shadrack? Can you explain that to me?”

Shadrack considered where to draw the line. “S a personal matter. An’ that’s that.”

Wiederman nodded. “So . . . other than yourself . . . we’ve got no witness . . . and no *corpus delicti*—”

“Wha’s that?”

“No dead body.”

“Uh. Prob’ly not.”

“No missing person report.”

“Don’t know nothin’ ’bout that.”

“All we have is your own testimony.”

Shadrack frowned. “M’word’s good.”

“I’m not saying it’s not. But we have certain . . . legal . . . evidence standards to meet before we can commence a prosecution. I’ll have a detective at the sheriff’s department review this interview and search the missing person’s records. Then we’ll have to send a report over to the district attorney’s office. Oh, and I’m going to have to impound that shotgun of yours for now.”

“’Spected y’would.”

“In the meantime, I’m ordering you not to leave the county. Just stay up there at Diesler’s place until you hear from us.”

“What? You ain’t a gonna lock me up ri’chere an’ now? After all I jus’ done tol’ ya?”

“We’ll be looking into it, Shadrack.” Sergeant Wiederman rose and stuck out his hand.

“How come ya cain’t lock me up?”

“For one thing, all we have here is a daytime holding cell. And the cells over at county are already pretty full up, mostly with detainees for Homeland Security. We don’t have anyplace to put you.”

“But . . . Can’cha *make* room? I’s a *murderer!*”

“Well . . . that all remains to be seen. We’ll be looking into it, I can promise you that. You just stick around Diesler’s, and we’ll get back in touch as soon as we can.”

“This ain’t right!” Shadrack grumbled as he rose and turned, refusing to shake the peace officer’s outstretched hand.

KATIE PUSHED OPEN THE DOOR to her father’s study. He sat reading and scratching at the lesson plan he would be using for the next day’s accounting class, and really didn’t want to be disturbed. She could read that in his body language. But she needed to talk to him anyway.

“Dad . . . I’ve been wondering about something.”

“Not now, sweetheart,” he said without glancing up.

“But I think it’s important. Maybe urgent. We need to talk.”

Elan sighed and laid down his pen, placing it carefully on the page to mark where he had stopped. He looked up and even managed a thin smile. “What is it, Kiddo? You have my full attention. What’s going on at school? Are you having some sort of problem?”

“No. Nothing like that. It’s just that . . . well . . . I’m worried about Shadrack.”

“Shadrack?” He gestured for her to step in and close the door. No need for Bess to hear this. He lowered his voice. “Now why would you be worrying about Shadrack?”

“Because of that check he sent you yesterday. That was supposed to be a payment on the truck, wasn’t it?”

“That’s the way I figure it.”

“Was that the balance he owed?”

“Well, no. I sold it to him for . . . twenty-four hundred, as I recall. And he paid three-hundred cash down. So he still owed me . . . twenty-one hundred.”

“Was there any interest?”

“No. But I was glad to get what he sent. Actually, I was about ready to write the whole thing off as a bad debt. And bad judgment on my part.”

“And how much did he send you?”

Elan opened a drawer and took out the money order. “Nineteen-hundred-sixty-two dollars.”

Katie frowned. “Why do you think he sent you *that* strange amount?”

Elan shook his head. “I don’t know. Maybe it was the amount he won at some casino. At the blackjack table, maybe.”

“I don’t think he gambles.”

“Well . . . maybe he got a job. Maybe this was his first paycheck. I don’t know. Nobody knows what that old man is thinking.”

Katie shook her head. “And maybe he sent you all the money he had left in the world.”

Elan considered the notion. “Okay. Could be. But why would he do that?”

“That’s what I’ve been worrying about.”

THE REVEREND DOCTOR MARTIN BLYTHE was scratching at the leaves drifted against the

foundation of the church. Time and again he paused to pull a clot of them from the rusting tines of the parish's old metal rake. Rusty oak. Pale yellow box elder. But he was in no hurry. The doctor had emphasized *moderate* exercise. And he was feeling better today. Enjoying the outdoors again. The sleet had stopped and the sun had broken through a crease in the storm clouds to the west. Sunlight blazed down, rekindling that glowing ember deep inside him. That ember that had grown cool and forgotten during his bouts of depression. With the shortening days and the long dark nights of doubt. With the prospect of the church closing. But now the sunlight filled him. Rekindling that special ember inside which knew for certain that salvation was possible.

It was, after all, almost that season again. The season to string up the Christmas lights. And for the smell of fresh-brewed coffee in the rectory hall as those parishioners, many unseen for a year, flocked back for Christmas services. It was the season for renewal. And hope. He stopped his raking and drew a few deep breaths, his face upturned serenely to the sun.

And as he did so often now, he prayed for a *sign*.

When he returned to his task, he was smiling. He sang Hark the Herald brightly to himself as he raked.

“ . . . *Peace on earth and mercy mild . . .*”

The rake lifted and dipped and scraped back the leaves in time with the tune.

“ . . . *God and sinner reconciled . . .*”

A crunch of gravel in the parking area behind him brought him to a halt. The minister turned. A dull black Toyota pickup had arrived.

Shadrack Smithers rolled down his window and gazed up at the tall white steeple crowning the church he used to attend. So many years ago. Where he and his parents and his cousins and his friends and neighbors had all sung The Old Rugged Cross together on Sunday mornings. When everything was so much simpler. And surer. The old church was still standing. A kind of miracle in itself, in this world where everything else seemed to have changed. The pastor in a black frock had turned to face him. He was leaning on a rake and smiling at him, almost as if he was expecting him.

So Shadrack shouldered open the door and stepped out just as a dark cloud swallowed the sunlight. He had not intended to tarry here, but he didn't want to be unneighborly. “Howdy,” he called as he limped toward the man of the cloth. “Used t'tend church 'ere m'self when I was a boy. Back when ol' Pastor Mather was a'doin' the preachin' here. Name is Smithers. Shadrack Smithers.” He stuck out his hand.

“How do you do, Mr. Smithers—”

“Shadrack's good 'nough.”

“Shadrack.” The cleric took the proffered hand into both of his as if receiving an offering. “I'm Reverend Martin Blythe. I never met Reverend Mather personally, but I understand he was a fine man.”

“Yes, sir,” Shadrack said, wondering what was the polite way to retrieve his hand. “'At 'e war. 'E could spout out a mighty sermon that'd bring home th' spirit a' th' Lord an' get'cha all fired up.”

Up close Shadrack could see that the black vestment Reverend Blythe wore was not a robe at all, but an old black trench coat, frayed and threadbare at the cuffs. His cheeks were sallow and

sunken. His hair had grown patchy and thin. In spite of his bright smile, the man appeared unwell.

“Might I ask,” the preacher inquired, relinquished his grip on Shadrack’s hand, “are you still a practicing Methodist, Shadrack?”

“Well . . . no, sir . . . I’s a jack Methodist. Truth is, I ain’t a’been inside no church fer nigh on . . . a’most fifty year now.”

“So . . . might I be so bold as to ask you something else?”

“Go on an’ ask away.”

“Why not?”

“Why not whut?”

“Why haven’t you returned to the church?”

Shadrack’s first impulse was to turn and stomp back to the truck, the way he always would do when folks asked questions that were none of their business. But he restrained himself. He thought it over. A few flakes of snow began to spiral down. This preacher here, he seemed like a decent enough fellow. And he really deserved a fair answer, didn’t he, now that everything had changed? Now that the cat was out of the bag. Now that Shadrack himself had changed. Or wanted to, anyhow. Now that he had nothing left to hide. He shook his head. “’Cause . . . well, ’cause . . . ’cause I become a sinner, I did . . . m’self . . . yes, sir . . . years ago . . . an’ I’s damned fer all eternity . . . is why, I reckon.”

The snow was falling thicker. Beginning to stick. “Why don’t we go inside the parsonage, Shadrack? Will you share a cup of tea with me?”

“Well . . . I don’ know . . .”

“Please? You see, I’ve got a . . . a problem here . . . with attendance . . . and an *outsider’s* viewpoint might be exactly what I need. Won’t you help me out?”

THE TELEPHONE RANG on line one. All the other buttons were dark. The city clerk glanced over at the clock. The big hand had inched to within one minute to five, and she was already zipping up her down jacket. Light snow was spiraling down in the premature gloom outside. It was a good night to get home early. But she set down her mittens and picked up the handset. “Kieferville City Hall. Angel speaking.”

“Hello?” spoke a tentative, unfamiliar female voice. “Is this the Kieferville City Hall.”

“Yes, it is. How can I help you?”

“Well . . . I’m calling from California . . . and I’m trying to locate a . . . a friend . . . who just sent us a letter from the post office in your town. Would you happen to know if an elderly man with a bushy beard and a limp has showed up there recently. Say in the last few months?”

“What is the gentleman’s name?”

“Smithers. Shadrack Smithers.”

The clerk blinked. *Smithers*. Small world. “Well, a Mr. Smithers was in here earlier today. He brought his shotgun with him.”

“He did?” Pause. “Do you happen to know how I can reach him? Do you have his telephone number? Or his address?”

“No, I’m sorry. He talked to Sergeant Wiederman. But here’s gone now.”

“Shadrack, or the sergeant?”

“Mr. Smithers left several hours ago. I believe Sergeant Wiederman is still back in his office, but he has a detective with him now. I can leave a message for him to call you back.”

“Well . . . I don’t know . . . I don’t want to be a bother . . . but yes. My name is Katie Groves. Catherine, actually.” She spelled her name and recited her phone number.

The clerk wrote it down. “And this is about . . . Shadrack Smithers. Fine. I will leave the message for Sergeant Wiederman.”

“Thank you.”

SHADRACK EASED HIMSELF into the padded rocking chair by the fireplace while he waited for his cup of herbal tea. Rocking a bit seemed to ease the pain in his hips. A fresh log had begun to crackle behind the screen. Flakes of snow stuck and melted and ran down the western window panes. The sun had set. It was growing dark outside. He looked around the small parlor. It was comfortable. Cozy. The colors were subdued. The worn Persian rug was clean and the well-used furniture was neat and tidy. The way Tildie used to like to keep things. It reminded him of her. Even the smell was familiar. The fragrance of . . .

“Here’s the pot of camomile tea, Shadrack,” Reverend Blythe smiled, setting a tray on the coffee table by the sofa. He wore a white shirt and black trousers held up by black suspenders. Without his trench coat, he appeared skinny enough to justify the need for suspenders.

Shadrack leaned forward.

“Don’t get up. I can pour. Now, that’s no milk. No sugar.”

Shadrack nodded, a strange sense of disorientation growing over him.

The preacher handed him a large white cup with a saucer underneath. “Just the way you ordered it.”

Shadrack balanced them together on his knee, but words of thanks would not come. He had lost his voice.

“I’ll go slice some pound cake and be right back.”

Shadrack sniffed at the steaming cup. It smelled like the tea Tildie used to serve him. His throat tightened as he breathed in the aroma. It smelled like Tildie. Carefully he lifted the cup and took a sip. Tasted it. The cup began to rattle against the saucer in his hands. It was all familiar. Too familiar. And suddenly he was overwhelmed and the cup was rattling and the tea was sloshing and he was bawling like a baby. His eyes were blinded with tears. The cup and saucer shook with his sobs. Splashes of tea spilled to the floor.

And then there was a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll take that.” And the cup and saucer were gone.

Shadrack tried to say, “I’s sorry,” but it came out all wrong in snorts and coughs and groans.

The hand was on his shoulder again as he wept deeply and shook and sobbed and snorted for breath. Paroxysm of grief and loss and yearning and, yes, relief, went on and on for a long time, and did not so much end, as exhausted themselves with his strength. Then Shadrack felt shame rising to replace it. Through streaming eyes the room slowly melted back into view. He tugged an old bandana from his back pocket and wiped his eyes and blew his nose. “I’s so sorry . . . ’bout all the mess . . . an’ . . .”

“Nothing to be sorry about, Shadrack. I am honored to be of service. To serve as witness to a man who seems to have found himself. But tell me . . . how long have you been holding that

in?”

Shadrack blushed and sniffled and thought about it some. “Seems like . . . all m’life.”

The preacher said nothing, but continued gently kneading his shoulders.

“I . . . I miss m’Tildie, I do. Tha’s m’wife. She . . . died. In the spring. An’ I ain’t been right since.” He sneezed into the bandana. “An’ they’s more,” Shadrack added woefully. “Th’ part I confessed t’ th’ *police* ’is afternoon. It be th’ part ’bout me committin’ a . . . a terr’ble, terr’ble sin.”

“Would you like to talk about it?” The clergyman stepped across the fireplace and eased himself down into the recliner on the opposite side. “That’s what I do for a calling, you know. I listen.”

So Shadrack told him everything. His words effervesced like spume from a bottle of champagne kept corked for too long. He shambled through the confession he had given to Sergeant Wiederman. But unlike Wiederman, Reverend Blyth received it all with patience and compassion.

“So the police let you go?”

“Yes, sir. Said they ain’t got no cell available. Told me they’d look into it. Git back t’me.”

“And your wife . . . Tildie, is it? . . . your wife Tildie never knew?”

“No, sir. An’ it war . . . like a burr under m’saddle th’ whole time . . . an’ I reckon even she could feel it . . . not even a’knowin’ what it war. An’ now I see . . . I see me’be I shoulda tol’ her all along. Righ’ from th’ beginnin’.” He thought some more. “That woulda been tricky . . . Tildie bein’ brung up Catholic an’ all.” He nodded to himself. “But now I reckon all this confessin’ today war really . . . well . . . it war really a’confessin’ t’ *her* anyhow, rest ’er soul.”

“And to God, might I suggest.”

“Oh, I don’t know nothin’ ’bout that. We ain’t much on speakin’ terms. I’s jus’ a lowly sinner.”

“We’re *all* sinners, Shadrack. But that’s how it works. Confession. Forgiveness. Reconciliation. Grace. From God all blessings flow.”

Shadrack chewed on it. “So . . . are you a’sayin’ . . . I’m a’gwine’ t’ ha’f t’ confess this here criminal sin all *over* ag’in . . . t’ the Lord?”

Reverend Blythe laughed. “No, sir. No you do not, Shadrack. He has heard you. And he knew the whole thing all along anyway. He was just waiting for you to . . . to come to him . . . or at least to come to yourself . . . to open yourself up to the truth.” He spanked his hands on his thighs and stood up abruptly. “Now, it’s time to eat, don’t you think? This confessing’s hungry work, I warrant, and Mrs. McMoran just brought me over a tuna casserole yesterday afternoon that was way more than I could eat by myself. A fine lady, she is, trying her best to keep up my spirits. You see, I’ve been goin’ through a . . . a period of darkness of my own lately.”

“Well . . . I oughta git a’go’in’ . . .”

“Nonsense. You’ll have to stay for dinner. We haven’t even begun to talk about *my* problems.”

SERGEANT WIEDERMAN DIALED the number on the message. It rang for a long minute without anyone picking up, and he was about to hang up and call it a day. It would be nice to get home before the roads got slick.

“Hello?” a man’s voice answered.

“Hello . . . I’m calling for a . . . Catherine Groves.”

A long pause. “Who’s calling?”

“This is Sergeant Albert Wiederman, Sheriff’s Deputy, Kieferville substation.”

Another pause. “Missouri?”

“That’s correct. Is Catherine Groves available?”

“What do you want with her?”

“I’m returning her phone call from . . . five o’clock this afternoon. Is she available?”

Pause. “What was she calling *you* about?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t spoken with her yet.”

Pause. “I don’t think we want to get involved.” The line clicked dead.

The house in Cedarville was silent for a heartbeat. Then Katie stepped around the corner from the livingroom. “Was that for me?” she confronted her father.

“Wrong number,” he muttered without meeting her eyes.

“That was from Kieferville, wasn’t it?”

“Didn’t say.”

“Yes they did. I heard you ask about Missouri.”

Elan rounded on her. “Okay. It was some sheriff from Kieferville saying he was returning a call from you.”

“And you hung up!” Her eyes flashed. “I knew I should have called on my own phone.”

“You make calls like that on your cell phone?”

“I make lots of calls on my own phone that you don’t know about.”

“To who?”

“None of your business.”

“It *is* my business. I’m your father. And you’re still a minor and living in my house. I have a right to know everyone you’re calling as long as you’re living here.”

“No,” she told him. “You don’t. And if you don’t like it . . . I can move out.”

That stopped him cold. Elan stared at her, suddenly on shaky ground. She had never spoken back to him this way. Everything seemed upside down. “What’s . . . gotten into you, sweetheart?” A light dawned in his eyes. “You haven’t been . . . talking to that . . . to that Army fellow in the humvee—”

“His name is Jerome.”

“You’ve been talking to him?”

“That is, like, none of your business.”

“Are you . . . seeing him?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She turned on her heel and disappeared around the corner.

Bess stuck her head out of the kitchen doorway. “What was *that* all about?”

“Oh . . . I . . . don’t know. I . . . I have to go . . . grade some papers.”

“Who’s Jerome?”

Elan shambled down the hallway and into his study as if he hadn’t heard.

THEY FINISHED THE TUNA CASSEROLE. All of it, to the surprise of them both. It looked like more than two skinny old men would be able to eat in one sitting, but their appetites were

unusually hardy that evening. Reverend Blythe talked while they ate. About the dwindling attendance at the church. How the young folks were moving away. Old families were dying out. About how the District Superintendent had talked to him about beginning the process of discontinuing the church forever. And he talked about his own bouts of depression and doubt. Shadrack grunted some, but said little. Mostly he listened. Nothing was resolved, but Shadrack's quiet, nonjudgmental attendance seemed to balm the minister's troubled spirit.

Afterwards, Shadrack stood at the sink drying the dishes and turned the conversation back to his own mortal sin. "So . . . you's a'sayin' . . . I don't *need* t' go t' jail for my sinnin'?"

"The Bible says, 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's.'"

Shadrack grunted. "Never rightly figured out whut that meant."

"Well, you have already made your peace with God. Right? So whether or not you go on through the criminal court process of crime and punishment is no longer relevant to Him."

"He don't care?"

"That's the way I see it."

"An' you's the preacher."

"That's right."

Shadrack grunted and hung the dish towel on its peg. "Well . . . I ain't a'gonna be able t' pay ya nothin' . . . fer this fine supper an' all yer hospitality an' advice . . . 'cause I give all m'money away th' other day . . . but I thank 'ee fer ever'thin' . . ."

"You owe me nothing, Shadrack. If anything, it's the other way around. I am indebted to you."

"Fer whut?"

"For opening your heart up to me. And for listening to mine."

"Warn't nothin'. But I reckon it's gettin' on time fer me t' git along. Gotta git a fire lit in that bunkhouse stove a'fore the pipes freeze up." He tugged on his rag sweater and pulled his slouch hat down to his ears as he limped toward the front door.

The minister opened the door and stepped out onto the porch. The snow had stopped, but an icy breeze rattled the leaves. "Can I count on you at Sundays' worship service?"

Shadrack tested the top step for ice, found none, then turned. "Like as not . . . I's a'gonna be'n jail. But if'n y'got any more a'em holy words fer me, I'd favor t'hear 'em now a'fore I git a'going."

Reverend Blythe considered the challenge. Then he spread his arms above the congregation of a single old gap-toothed parishioner standing on the step below. "May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you. May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace."

"Amen," Shadrack nodded. "Mighty fine words. I done heard 'em a'fore. Never did know 'xactly whut 'ey meant. But she's a mighty fine way a' wrappin' things up, ain't she?"

THE NEXT MORNING Katie wrapped herself in Shadrack's oversized coat and slipped out into the cold back yard. Beneath the nearly leafless locust tree she punched the number for the Kieferville City Hall into her cell phone. The sun had just risen in Cedarville, so it had already been up more than two hours in Missouri.

“Kieferville City Hall. Angel speaking.”

“This is Katie Groves. I spoke to you yesterday. I was wondering if Sergeant Wiederman was in?”

“Looks like he’s on the other line. But he asked me to let him know if you called again. I’ll go hand him a message. Can you hold?”

“Yes, I can.” Time passed slowly. Katie’s phone was a pre-paid plan, so she was paying for the silence while she waited. It looked like it was going to be a warm, clear Indian summer day. *What was taking him so long?* She thought about hanging up and calling back later. But she ground her teeth and waited on hold.

“Wiederman here,” a solid male voice spoke at last.

“Sergeant Wiederman, this is Katie Groves. I left a message for you to call me yesterday.”

“Yes. The person I talked to didn’t want to call you to the phone.”

“That was my father.”

“Said he didn’t want to get involved.”

“Yes. I heard him.”

“Involved in what?”

Katie could think of no response.

Wiederman broke the silence. “You wanted to talk to me about Shadrack Smithers?”

“Well, yes, but I only wanted a telephone number where I could reach him. If it’s not too much trouble. You’ve talked to him?”

“I have. I interviewed him yesterday.”

Pause. “Is he in some sort of trouble?”

“That’s . . . yet to be determined. But maybe you can tell me how you know him.”

“Well . . . we went on a camping trip together this summer. Shadrack and me and my father.” She gave him a skeleton outline of their adventure, omitting the lack of travel permits and encounters with law enforcement. She made it brief, because her minutes were costly.

“When did this take place?”

“June. Beginning of June.”

“Did you know him before that trip?”

“No. Well . . . I knew who he was. His wife taught a Spanish class in grade school.”

“That’s . . . Tildie?”

“Yes. That’s right. Did he talk to you about her?”

“And she passed away this spring, is that right?”

“Yes. He told you?”

A long pause. “Did he ever mention to you a man named Lupic Mufel?”

“Who? Is that a person’s name?”

“According to Shadrack.”

“How do you spell it?”

A sigh passed as the sergeant blew through his moustache. “I’m not sure. Did he mention to you anyone with a name sounding anything like that?”

“I don’t think so. No. Is that what he was talking to you about.”

“I can’t really . . . it’s a pending investigation . . . Shadrack claims he and this Mufel character . . . or whatever his name is . . . had a . . . a conflict . . . about fifty years ago. We’re

looking into it.”

“Fifty years!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Is he . . . under arrest?”

“Not at this time. But I reviewed it with a detective from the department, and he’s going to look into it further.”

Katie was stunned.

“So let me give you this before I forget.” Wiederman read off the address and telephone number for Luther Diesler’s farmhouse. “I don’t know if there’s a telephone in the bunkhouse where Shadrack’s staying, though.”

“Thank you. I’ll give it a try, I guess.”

“Why did you say you wanted to get in touch with him?”

Katie thought for a moment. She knew what she wanted to say, but she didn’t want to sound like a silly little girl. “I’m worried about him.”

“Worried? How so?”

She told Wiederman about Shadrack’s debt to her father for the purchase of the truck and the check that came in the mail in such a strange amount. “I just thought . . . maybe he’d sent us the last of his money. All of it. And I wondered why. It made me worry.”

The line was silent. Then Wiederman said, “He wanted us to lock him up. He expected we would. So I guess he figured he wouldn’t be needing the money behind bars.”

“In jail?”

“Prison, actually.”

“For what?”

“I can’t tell you that. It might jeopardize a pending investigation. But . . . why don’t you ask him? I think it would do him good to hear from you. He needs a friend. And give me a call back if you learn anything that can help us . . . straighten this matter out. Will you do that?”

Katie wondered how much her father knew about this. He had said he didn’t want to *get involved*. In what? “We’ll see,” she said, and punched the end call button.

ELAN GROVES LEFT EARLY for the morning drive into Alturas and the accounting class he was teaching at the college there, figuring he would arrive in plenty of time to answer student questions before they got started. As he drove up the steep, winding road toward Cedar Pass, he glanced in the rearview mirror. The alkali lakes and playas and barren hills of the Great Basin stretched out behind him. He always enjoyed this view. It contrasted so starkly with its counterpart on the western downslope beyond the pass. There the agricultural fields and farms of the Pitt River valley lay like a lush green patchwork carpet and water flowed freely away toward the distant ocean.

But something was not right this morning. There was too much slow traffic for this lonely highway. He rounded a bend and saw a line of vehicles stopped at some sort of checkpoint up at the turnoff for the ski park. *Why?* There wasn’t any snow on the ground yet. Maybe up at the higher peaks of the Warners, but not down here at the rope tow and chair lifts. He came to a stop behind a big Fredoner Grocers truck. The traffic inched forward in jerks and spurts. An occasional semi or pickup passed by heading the other direction.

He was going to be late for his class!

Below him to the left was a drop off to Cedar Creek and the mixed conifers of the Modoc National Forest. Here rain and snow fell aplenty. Quaking aspens shivered with a few golden leaves which had not yet fallen. To his right rose a sheer stone cliff capped high above with slickrock peaks and perilously balanced boulders. There was no way through but straight ahead.

He swung his left wheels out into the oncoming lane and peered through the windshield. Maybe a quarter mile ahead a taut white canopy arched over the roadway, across both lanes. Every few hundred feet speed signs stepped down the limit to 50, 40, 30, 25, and 15 mph just before the checkpoint stop sign. They inched forward incrementally. The big rigs were not being delayed, and each one gained him fifty feet as it passed through. Occasionally a passenger car or a pickup was sent down the narrow road leading to the ski area. Impatiently Elan counted down the speed limit signs. Now he could make out a banner flapping from the canopy. It had a forest green background with the initials *PCN* printed in bright yellow letters.

What the hell is that?

The big rig driver ahead handed something down, took it back, and was waved through with both stacks belching black fumes. Elan crept up to the stop sign. A half dozen soldiers were observing under the margins of the canopy. Two of them were monitoring westbound traffic, which was light. All wore standard issue M-16 rifles strapped over their shoulders and had *PCN* patches on their shoulders. A young black soldier in forest camo fatigues and short hair stepped up to his window. "Where ya headed?" he asked with a warm, toothy grin.

"Alturas. I teach at the college. And this is making me late for the class."

"Travel visa?"

Elan had already removed his papers from the glove box and handed one over.

"This is a Homeland Security permit. Won't do you no good here."

"What? Why not? I live in Cedarville. Which is in California."

"Used t'be, maybe. But not anymore, it ain't. There ain't no more California. Nor Washington 'r Oregon, neither. Now it's all the Pacific Coast Nation."

Elan was dumbfounded. "That's what *PCN* stands for?"

"Yes, sir. Though some folks jus' like ta call it the Jefferson Nation."

"When . . . how . . . did *this* happen? I never heard anything about it."

"If ya got questions, ya kin aks 'em over at the administration office." He pointed down the narrow paved road that led to the ski lifts. "Now I can't have ya blockin' this here highway no more. I'll have t'aks ya ta either turn around or go on into the administration office an' apply for a Jefferson travel visa. Yer holdin' up the traffic where yer at."

"Has California seceded from the union? Is that what's—"

"Sir! You have to move along! Now!" He gestured to two idle soldiers for help.

"Okay. Okay. I'm going."

The ski area had been commandeered by Jefferson Nation troops. The administration office was a huge olive-drab circus tent that looked to be surplus from some forgotten war. It rose at the edge of the ski parking area, with a few passenger cars and pickup trucks parked in front. No big rigs. Behind the tent soldiers were spray painting olive-drab over the words "California National Guard" on trucks and humvees. Another was stenciling on "*PCN*" in yellow. Back by the ski tow two bulldozers scraped the ground for what looked like the foundation of a more

permanent building. It looked like they were planning to stay.

Inside the tent, the ancient fabric gave off that oily, mildewy, old-canvas, olive-drab smell. A dozen electric space heaters tried to warm the place, without much success. Four folding tables faced the door, with a soldier in military fatigues behind each one and a short line in front. Three were women, and one a young male officer. All wore camo fatigues with PCN patches on their shoulders. Elan would have preferred to speak to the man, but his line was the longest. That figured. He glanced at his watch. *Shit!* His class was about to start . . . without him. He settled for the shortest line. The lights flickered and someone shouted, "Turn off some of those damn heaters." In a few minutes Elan was face to face with a stocky, tar-black woman with short nappy hair and a no-nonsense attitude. She reached out and he handed her his travel permit.

"This here won't do you no good. You need a Jefferson Nation travel visa."

"I've already been told that. I'd like to apply for one of your visas right now. I'm already late for a class I'm teaching at the college."

She shook her head. "Ain't gonna get it today. I can assure ya that." She handed him a stapled packet. "You fill this here out and send it in. Or bring it back yourself if you're in a hurryin' mood. And if I was you I'd attach a copy of my drivers' license and that Homeland Security permit to make it slide along a little smoother."

"When will I get my permit?"

"If you get a visa, it'll show up in the mail in about a week."

"A week!"

"Yessir. At the earliest."

Elan paused in thought, calculating lost wages. He leaned closer. "Will they issue me one, do you think?"

She studied his travel permit and handed it back to him. "Prob'ly. But it's not for me to say."

"But I live in *California*. Just down the road. In Cedarville."

"Ain't no more California here. You got to get rid of that old thinkin' and get with the new program now."

Elan felt he had hit a wall. "Can I fill this out while I'm here?"

"Go ahead. You can use one of them tables over there." She pointed. "But now you got to get out the way for the next person in line."

"What the hell is happening here?"

"Not for me to say."

"I want to talk to your supervisor."

"Ain't none here," she chuckled. "The lieutenant and the captain are out supervisin' the construction." She turned in her chair. "Wait . . . ya see that tall skinny fella there. That's Colonel Wolfson. He's here this mornin' inspectin' the operation. Maybe he'll talk with you, if you aks him nice. But don' hold your breath. Now please step aside for the next customer."

The Colonel stood ramrod straight in his green dress uniform and cap, complete with white shirt and black tie, studying a thin sheaf of papers in his pale hands. Only his neck bent as he read. He looked to be in his fifties, with graying hair and worry lines etched around his eyes and at the corners of his mouth. Medals and ribbons spangled his chest like a living billboard, leaving scant room for his name tag, which read "Wolfson". He glanced up as Elan approached.

“What’s going on here?” Elan demanded. “I need to get to my job in Alturas.”

The Colonel studied him closely. “You a reporter?”

“No, I’m a teacher. At the junior college in Alturas. And they won’t let me through to my job.”

“What do you teach?”

“Accounting. Why?”

Wolfson barked a laugh and shook the papers. “I wish to hell someone would teach my quartermaster accounting. His damn columns don’t seem to add up.”

“Mind if I take a look?”

“Why not?” He handed the papers to Elan and turned to summon the only other man in garrison dress uniform across the tent. “Major! Can you come over here a sec?”

The Major stepped smartly and snapped a sharp salute. “Yes, sir.”

“Can you take these ledgers back to Staff Sergeant Wanamaker and find out why the hell they don’t add up.”

“I think I found your problem,” Elan interjected, showing him the first sheet. “These two columns differ in the same amounts. This one has too much. This one too little. Something got included here that should have been there . . . in the amount of . . . approximately . . . eleven-thousand dollars. Throws the whole tally off.”

“Is that right?” Wolfson studied the page, then nodded. Then he handed the pages to the Major. “You tell Wanamaker he screwed up these two columns and I want him to fix it right now. And tell him don’t ever let it happen again.”

“Yes, sir.” The Major saluted again, snapped his heels together, and headed off toward the back corner of the tent.

“What exactly is going on here, sir?” Elan asked again in a more respectful tone.

“This? It’s a fiasco. But what you see is what you get.”

“California seceding from the Union? Won’t this just bring on another Civil War?”

“I hope to Christ not. Actually, it’s an accommodation designed to *prevent* a civil war.”

Elan was stunned. “A breakup of the nation?”

“A reshuffling. Temporary I hope. At least that’s how it’s planned. Temporary. Just a restructuring of the hierarchy.”

“But . . . don’t the voters get to weigh in on it?”

“Not while the state of emergency is in place. We’ll see about all that later.”

“So . . . this is all something Congress has approved?”

“As far as I know, Congress hasn’t convened in half a year. This is coming down from the top.”

“The top? Meaning the President? And the military?”

“More of a coalition, as far as I know. Something much larger.”

“Corporations? They’re involved?”

“Contractors.”

“Then . . . there’s been a coup?”

The Colonel squared on Elan and squinted. “Nobody uses that word. I’d be careful with it, if I were you. You’re sure you’re not a reporter?”

“No sir. I teach accounting.”

The old soldier smiled with his mouth, but not his eyes. “Now, I’m in a good mood today, Mr. Groves. And I don’t want you to put me out of sorts, okay? If I were you, I wouldn’t spend any more of my time going around asking the kinds of questions you are asking. Okay? It is what it is. And we’re all trying to work this thing out without tearing the country apart any more than it already is.” He lowered his voice. “And I caution you . . . you didn’t hear anything from me. Understood?”

“Ah . . . yes . . . I guess so,” Elan grunted his submission. “But . . . can I get my travel visa today? Right now?”

“Not from me, you can’t. I don’t issue them. You’ll have to follow procedures like everyone else.” Colonel Wolfson turned brusquely. “Good day, sir.”

LATE IN THE AFTERNOON Detective Kringle stopped by the substation in Kieferville to see Sergeant Wiederman. “Where the hell did you pick up this Shadrack Smithers character, anyway?”

“He just walked in. Wanted to make his confession. Why, did you find anything on him?”

“Nothing at all. Not even a birth certificate.”

“He says he was adopted. Smithers is his adoptive family.”

“Birth name?”

“He didn’t say. I don’t think he knew.”

“Agency or private adoption?”

“He didn’t say.”

“Well,” Kringle grouched, “don’t matter anyhow. They didn’t keep records back then the way we do now. And even if they did, we’d probably need a court order to get them unsealed. All the damn’ Smithers around here seem to be long gone or dead by now. Except for your fellow Shadrack.”

Wiederman took a deep breath and puffed through his moustache. “I suppose you didn’t find anything about this Lupic Mufel.”

“Nothing. No record he even existed. I checked the national data base. But he seems like a pretty nasty fellow, anyway. Probably better off dead.”

“And nothing about a missing person’s report.”

“Records don’t go back that far. None that I could find, anyhow. And if there did, they’d be old papers moldering in a storage box in some rat infested warehouse.”

“No report of anything in the newspaper?”

“I looked at a few microfiche, but I really don’t have time for this shit. We don’t even know exactly when this was supposed to have happened.”

Wiederman puffed through his moustache again. “So . . . what do you want to do?”

Kringle leaned forward. “I talked to Clarence.”

“The new DA?”

“Yup. Caught him on his way back from the courthouse. Told him what we’ve got here. And he said we ain’t got nothin’.”

Wiederman chuckled. “Guess he’s smarter than I thought he was.”

“He says a good attorney would get Smithers off on self-defense. No way he intends to prosecute this mess unless we come up with something more.”

“Like what?”

“Shit. *Anything!*”

Wiederman thought about it. “He have any ideas?”

“Matter of fact, he did.” Kringle lowered his voice. “Clarence thinks we ought to turn this Shadrack fellow over to Homeland Security. For traveling without a permit, you know? Get it out of our hands.”

“But . . . wouldn’t they just house him back in our jail?”

“No. No. That’s the thing. They’ve got that new detention camp over by Springfield up and running now. They’re already taking some of our surplus out of the jail. We could forget about all this murder stuff while he’s in federal custody. Which might be forever, the way things are going.”

“So . . . we would just . . . keep the file open and hope he never comes back?”

“That what Clarence thinks we ought to do. Let him die in federal custody. Problem solved.”

Wiederman leaned back and gazed out the window. The sun would be setting soon. He didn’t like it.

“You still there?” Kringle asked.

“Yeah. I’m here.” He puffed through his moustache. “It’s just that . . . I know this’ll sound funny to you . . . but I kinda liked that old fellow.”

“Smithers?”

“Yeah. Reminded me some of my grandfather.”

“*Jesus!* And you’re going to let that influence how you enforce the law?”

“No. No. I suppose you and the DA are right about this.”

“Of course we are. Can’t let the newspapers get wind that we aren’t going to prosecute a confessed murderer.”

“Alright . . . but . . . do me a favor, will you?”

“What’s that?”

“Can you go pick him up? He’s staying out at Luther Diesler’s place. I told him not to leave town.”

A pause. “Alright. But I’m on my way back to an interview in town now. I won’t be able to get back out here ’til tomorrow afternoon.”

“That’s fine. He’s not going anywhere. He *wants* to be picked up.”

Kringle sighed as he stood. “Alright. But you owe me one.”

NEXT MORNING KATIE PHONED the Diesler farm in Kieferville from her cell phone. Luther himself answered. “Howdy,” he said.

“I’m . . . calling from California . . . for Shadrack Smithers . . . is he . . . available?”

“Nope. Sorry miss. Say . . . are you that girl name ’a Katie?”

“Yes. Katie Groves. That’s my name.”

“Well tha’s jus’ fine. Pleased t’meecha. Ol’ Shadrack, he talked plenty ’bout you. Had lots a nice things t’say. The way you been helpin’ him out. You an’ yer father.”

“Well . . . thank you . . . can I leave a message for him to call me back?”

“Nope. He ain’t a’comin’ back, I don’t reckon.”

“He’s not?”

“Nope. He done borrowed near forty gallons o’ gas and two hundred bucks offa me an’ says he wouldn’t be comin’ back.”

“Where is he going?”

“Back home, he says.”

“Home?” Katie was confused, and then it registered. “Can I . . . how much does he owe you?”

“Aw, don’t concern y’self none, miss. I trust ol’ Shadrack. He’ll make it good. The work he done fer me, he prob’ly earned it anyhow.”