

Bristlecone

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PART THREE

Bristlecone, Late November

HORACE KEARNS, DIRECTOR OF THE SURPRISE VALLEY Senior Center, called the emergency meeting to order at precisely twelve o'clock noon. This was an unusual time for them all, since most of those in attendance worked day jobs, and the seniors met in the evening. But not today. With the new travel restrictions severing Cedarville from the rest of Modoc County, everyone seemed to be in town, available, and in a surly mood.

"I see a lot of familiar faces here today," Director Kearns croaked. He was recovering from the surgical removal of a polyp on his larynx. He was a tall, flinty, stoop-shouldered farmer in his late fifties with a freckled face and a ruddy complexion, except for the white band across his forehead where he usually wore his hat. "Plenty of ya from Cedarville. An' I see Teddy Tollitson and his crew up from Eagleville. An' Tom Ramirez down from Ft. Bidwell way. An' some a'ya I don't know yer names, but I seen ya before. Well . . . yer all welcome here today."

Heads nodded among the restless citizens who filled the folding chairs or watched standing from the back of the senior center conference room. Kearns waved to the clusters of townsfolk who stood beyond hearing on the sidewalk outside, gazing in through the latticed panes like children at a Christmas department store window. They were the perpetually uncommitted, whose curiosity was alloyed by the fear of getting involved with something that might someday come back to bite them on the ass.

"As y'all know," Kearns continued to those who could hear him inside, "Cedarville ain't got no City Council to take care of this mess for us, since the town ain't incorporated. The only incorporated city in the entire county is Alturas, and that's now behind the Khaki Curtain, as my wife calls it."

Smiles and a murmur of appreciation ran through the room.

"Anyhow, the State of California seems to of dried up an' blown away on us. She's gone. Done disappeared." He paused for effect. "Which leaves us with a bona fide dire emergency that this here community's gotta take care of. By ourselves, looks like. There's decisions we gotta make. An' work to be done. So let's us git right down to business."

Heads nodded again. A few grunted assent.

"Now . . . I had me a talk on the telephone this mornin' with the county attorney over in Alturas. Pearworth is 'is name. Deputy County Counsel. Anyhow, even *he* don't have much of a notion about just what's a'goin' on here or what our legal status is just yet. A'course, he can't get through the blockade himself t'talk with ya here directly, man ta man."

"What's he say?" Honus Cribs called impatiently from the back. "What's this Pear . . . Blossom say?"

"Yeah," crowed a heavy lump of a woman in the second row. "Are we still in California, er ain't we?"

A number of others shuffled to be heard, but Kearns raised his hands for silence. "*Listen up!*"

he croaked. “Now y’all jus’ listen up. Y’all gonna get your chance to talk. Ever’body. But we got to do it in an orderly manner, or nobdy’ll get heard. I’ll make a quick presentation to get the discussion goin’. Then I’ll open her up to y’all’s comments an’ questions as soon as we get our feet here on solid groun’. Is ’at okay with ever’body?”

“What about us in Eagleville?” called one of Tollitson’s hands. “We in this here too?”

“An’ Fort Bidwell?” asked Tom Ramirez.

“Ever’body’s gonna get heard,” Kearns replied hoarsely. “We’re all in this together, fer better er worst.”

There was some cross-talk and grumbling before the folks settled down to hear what Director Kearns had to say. He started by explaining that nobody but commercial truckers could get through Cedar Pass without a Pacific Coast Nation visa. The semblance of order broke down into angry comments and shouted questions. Kearns quieted them with raised arms and pressed on. The problem was, he slowly made it clear, that the State of California had ceased to exist. The new border for the Pacific Coast Nation stopped at the militarily defensible position of Cedar Pass, leaving them all on a sliver of no-man’s land caught between the high peaks of the Warner Mountains on the west and the western boundary of the State of Nevada some twenty miles to the east, where the paved, striped two-lane highway degenerated, as if randomly, into a badly-graded gravel Nevada road. That sliver ran from below Eagleville all the way up the Surprise Valley, through Ft. Bidwell, to Oregon in the north. None of it was any longer a part of the State of California. Nor any other state of the union.

“Ya mean we done seceded?” someone shouted from the back. “Why’d we do *that*?”

“No,” Kearns grunted, the pain in his throat worsening, “it’s more like *they* done seceded from *us’n*. An’ for the time being, we’re on our own. An independent sovereign realm with a whole lotta work to do.”

The sobering reality quieted down the crowd. No one could figure out who to blame, which was what many of them had come here for in the first place. Not to do any *work*.

“Now . . . one of the first things we’re gonna need is a Minister of Finance to figure out whether we got any money,” Kearns rumbled. He was staring straight at Elan Groves, who sat in the front row beside his daughter Katie. “How ’bout you, Elan?”

“Now hold on—” Elan began.

“No, you listen up, Elan. You’re about the only one of us can read a spreadsheet proper. And you know all them folks over in the tax collector’s office, don’t ya? We’re gonna need money to run this place. This realm. This sovereign nation. Whatever it is. Now how much of our money do ya think California’s holdin’?” He was betting Elan couldn’t resist showing off his expertise in government fund accounting.

Elan took the bait. “Well . . . there’s . . . the real property taxes . . . then there’s sales tax . . . both of those are general funds . . . and the gas tax, for roads . . . and the transient occupancy tax they collect for us . . . that’s general funds too . . . and they collect the Fire District’s bond tax money . . . and the Health Care District tax . . . and the School District’s money, some of which is local taxes and some state money . . . and—”

“So you’ll take the job, Mr. Finance Minister?” Kearns lifted his hands like a preacher to draw acclimation from the assembly.

“Wait a minute!” Elan rose. “Finance Minister of *what*?” He gazed around at the mostly

familiar faces. “Who do you think we’re supposed to *be* here, anyway?”

“We do need a name for ourselves,” Kearns conceded. He turned to the assembly. “Any ideas?”

“Sure,” piped up Moray Willits, owner of the Cedarville general store. “Why’n’t we jus’ call the country ‘Cedarville’.”

“Now jus’ hold on,” Ted Tollitson rejoined. “How’s about callin’ it ‘Eagleville’?”

“No way,” interjected Tom Ramirez. “That leaves Ft. Bidwell out in the cold. And all the ranches up north.”

“Naw,” called somebody from the back, “you tractor guys’re all thinkin’ too parochial . . . how about jus’ callin’ ourselves the ‘Surprise Valley Nation’?”

“Or ‘East Modoc’—”

“Or how about ‘East California’—”

The volume rose as everyone advocated for his own regional preference, while a single slim arm waved to be recognized.

Kearns pounded a fist on the table. He couldn’t remember ever having to do *that* before. “*Order!*,” he bleated. “Let’s do this orderly. One at a time. Katie, you got your hand up.”

The group fell silent as slender Katie Groves rose to face them. “Well . . . I’ve got an idea. How about . . . ‘Bristlecone’,” she said.

Everyone seemed to blink, as if they hadn’t heard right.

“What was that?” Scooter Thompson asked from the back.

“Bristlecone,” she repeated with more force.

“Wha’s’at suppose’ t’mean?”

“Bristlecone pines are the oldest living trees on earth. They’re strong . . . and they’re proud . . . and they endure with majesty right where they are, while the whole world changes all around them. The bristlecone stands as a symbol for the kind of nation we need to build right here. Together. Right now.”

“How do you know so much about ’em, young lady?” asked Peachy Watkins, who cooked for one of the three café owners in town.

“Well . . . I’m doing my term paper on bristlecone pines. They’re magnificent. Stately. Enduring. Like we can be, if we all stop arguing with each other and start pulling together.”

A bemused silence settled over them until Leonard Kline, owner of the new Gas Mart, broke it with, “We’re gonna need ourselves a bank, too. T’put all that money Elan’s gonna bring in.”

“You volunteerin’ t’run the bank, Leonard?” Ted Tollitson gibed.

“Ya could do worse, Teddy.”

“Bristlecone Bank,” someone else called out. “Now I like the sound a’ *that*.”

“Ain’t we gonna hafta hold some kinda election t’let the people vote on this?” asked Moray Willits.

Everyone turned to Director Kearns, who threw up his hands. “I sure don’t have a clue what we gotta do. This ain’t never happened before. At least as far as I know. Maybe Sherry at the library can look it up fer us. Or Michael over at the bookstore. They could serve as our historians to figure out what we gotta do. But in the meantime, we gotta get started . . . today . . . right here an’ now. We got no funds, an’ time’s a’wastin’.”

The meeting plowed on as Kearns loosened the reins and allowed people to talk about

whatever they felt was important. Most issues found little resolution. Kearns simply jotted them down on a yellow pad and for the most part kept quiet. This was just as he had intended. This was the prelude. The warm up. The symphony would come tomorrow. Or the next day. Or next month. But he wanted those assembled to feel free to discuss anything that troubled them. To let the cream of the ideas rise to the top. He wanted everyone to feel a buy-in. Feel a part of a team effort.

Hour after hour, like the roll of great waves, the discussion surged and ebbed between heated oratory and tepid ignorance. The congregation agreed they needed a police force, but haggled over who the chief should be. Or the minister of defense. Or the public works director. They were all in agreement to retain the current fire chief and the department hierarchy. And the school board, too. Without objection they appointed Willy Baxter, the only lawyer in town, as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Someone wanted a new dog catcher and an enforceable leash law. Others wanted their dogs to run free. They argued over that for half an hour. Issues of parking and downtown development and water quality and sewer leach field permits fluttered in the breeze and were forgotten or steamrolled by a louder voice. As the afternoon wore on folks began to drift away. Few reinforcements came through the doors to replace them. The metal folding chairs were now half empty. A few stood or paced slowly in the back of the room. November shadows lengthened outside, and the clock hands approached four.

Katie couldn't sit still any longer. Her butt was sore from the brutal metal chair. The stuffy room cloyed with a locker-room odor of stale sweat and tobacco breath. She stood and stretched her legs at the refreshment table and discovered the delicate little home-baked pfeffernusse cookies Mrs. Banke had baked and brought in to share. Katie closed her eyes and slowly savored one of the sugar-dusted confections, then stepped away from the table. But she returned to taste another, and then another, swearing that each one would be her last. By her fourth cookie, her stomach began to feel heavy and unsettled. She decided to step outside and maybe take a walk around the block to wake up.

"Okay," Director Kearns was croaking as Katie closed the door, "that's probably just about enough for our first day. But there is one last thing I'd like you all to be thinking about. We'll be needin' a head of state for this new . . . empire. Anyone interested in running for president?"

"Ain't you gonna do it?" Moray Willits asked.

Kearns shook his head. "Not with this here throat a' mine. An' I don't want the responsibility. I'm too old. Now . . . who wants to volunteer?"

Dead silence.

"As prime minister then. Any nominations."

"Wha'za diff'rence 'tween a prime min'ster an' a pres'dent?" Willits wanted to know.

Kearns' laugh became a barking cough. "Darn if I know, Moray. You wanna try it out an' let us all know?"

"Wha'chur really lookin' for is a figurehead, t'stand up an' take it on the chin for our country. Am I right?" Willits pressed.

"Yeah," Ted Tollitson grinned. "An' t'take all the blame when the Homeland Security agents show up an' haul him off to prison."

"Or worse," Hiram Atwater piped in. "I heard stories'd turn yer hair white--"

"Yours's already white, Hiram--"

“Yeah, but who’d be fool enough to take on a job like *that*?”

A swell of mumbling and quipping rose and fell and ended again in dead silence.

“No volunteers? No nominations? Elan, you been mighty quiet.” Kearns voice was no more than a raspy whisper. “You a’hankerin’ for the job, maybe?”

“No way,” Katie’s father shook his head vehemently. “Finance is the limit of my skills. And, you know what, the more I think about it, I’m not so comfortable with this ‘Minister’ business. I believe ‘Financial Consultant’ would suit me just fine.”

“But ya got that look on your face,” Kearns persisted. “Y’ must have yourself an idea of who might serve as our head of state. Am I right?”

“I . . . I just might have.” He turned and his eyes flicked across the room looking for his daughter. He had last seen her on the sidewalk outside the windows. Elan turned back to Kearns. “Yes, sir. I just might have a candidate in mind. He’s a long-time resident. A fine, upstanding citizen. Most of you know him. Anyway, he’s a landowner here in the valley. Owns a farm on the way down to Eagleville. But . . . he happens to be *gone* right now. And . . . he’s not planning on coming back in the near future. Which may be his greatest recommendation.”

Kearns raised his hands. “But if he’s *gone* . . . how can he accept the nomination?”

“Well . . . that’s just it,” Elan grinned. “I happen to hold a general power of attorney over his affairs. As his agent in fact, I guess *I* could accept on his behalf.”

“Well,” Kearns rasped, playing to the crowd. “‘Jus’ who you got in mind, Elan?”

Elan rose and faced the audience just as Katie was reentering the front door. “I hereby nominate . . . *Shadrack Smithers* . . . to be Emperor of the Bristlecone Empire.”

“Smithers?”

“Who’s Shadrack Smithers?”

“Tha’s Tildie’s husban’, ain’t it?”

“Yeah. Ain’t seen ’im about much lately. Since she passed—”

“Don’t really know the fella—”

“This’ll save us all a lotta grief—”

“Dad, no!” Katie was trying to find her way back to the front, but curious onlookers blocked her path. No one paid her any attention.

Elan still held the floor. “And . . . because he’s not here . . . and probably won’t be coming back . . . as his agent in fact . . . I hereby *accept* the nomination on behalf of Shadrack Smithers.”

“Dad, *no!*”

An irrational enthusiasm fired the noisy crowd.

“I call for a vote,” someone shouted.

Kearns raised his hands. “Any other nominations?”

“No, let’s vote on ’this’un!”

“Yeah, this Smithers sounds like the man—”

“I think he’s coming back!” Katie shouted fecklessly.

“All right,” croaked Kearns, “I move that we appoint Shadrack Smithers by acclamation to be . . . what was it?”

“Emperor of Bristlecone,” Elan said.

“Emperor of Bristlecone!”

The crowd, on its feet now, confirmed the appointment with its boisterous assent and

considerable relief.

BY THE TIME BESS SET THE SERVING BOWL of chicken stew on the dining table, Katie had still not come home. “Where is she?” she asked her husband.

Elan explained that Katie had been with him for most of the meeting at the senior center, but after he finished helping put away the folding chairs, she was nowhere to be found. He assumed she had decided to walk home by herself. “Or,” he smiled, “more likely, jog.”

“Without telling you? Well then, where is she? Have you tried to call her?”

“Cell phones are still not working.”

Bess shook her head. “This is not like her.”

“I know,” Elan agreed. “She’s been acting kind of peculiar lately.”

Bess thought about it. “Did something happen at the meeting to upset here?”

Elan finished spooning stew into the first of three bowls beside him, then reached it over to his wife. “Hard to tell anymore. She seems to be getting more headstrong every day. Haven’t you noticed?” Into the second bowl he dipped out his own portion and tasted it. The third bowl sat as empty as a memorial urn.

“That’s it?” Bess prompted.

Elan carefully spread butter on his roll. “Well, she did seem a little upset when the convention appointed someone to . . . to lead this . . . this new empire we’re trying to get organized—”

“Who was appointed?”

He raised the spoon to his lips. “Shadrack Smithers.”

“Shadrack? Tildie’s husband? He’s back in town?”

Elan held up a hand until he finished chewing. “Not that I know of.”

“But . . . how could they appoint him if he’s not here?”

“Well . . . it’s kind of a . . . it’s a technical deal. No one else wanted the job, actually.”

“I can understand why not,” Bess clucked. “But why on earth did they pick old Mr. Smithers? Why—”

They heard the back door whisk open and click shut.

“Katie?” Bess was on her feet. “Is that you? Come and have supper.”

“I’m not hungry,” came a muffled reply.

“Come into the dining room, honey. We’d like to talk to you.”

The sullen-faced teenager appeared in the doorway. Her gray hoodie was damp and disheveled from a passing evening shower. The liner beneath her dark eyes was smudged. “What?”

“You walked home in the rain? In the dark? Why didn’t you wait for your father to give you a ride?”

Katie glowered at him, then turned back to her mother. “I wanted to be alone.”

“What’s wrong?” Bess moved over to help her take off the damp sweatshirt, but Katie stepped back. “What is it, honey?”

“*He* knows.” She glared at her father. “Why don’t you ask *him*.”

“Now hold on there—” Elan rose.

“He’s coming back!” Katie snapped. “Didn’t you know that?”

“Who’s coming back?” Bess asked.

“What makes you think he’s coming back?” Elan wore a false smile.

“Because I talked to that farmer he was staying with. Diesler. That’s how I know.”

“Who’s coming back?” Bess repeated.

“In Kieferville? You called Kieferville again? What’d this Diesler say?”

“Shadrack Smithers, Mom.”

Anger appeared in Elan’s eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because we weren’t, like, *talking* that much, were we, Dad?”

“What in earth is going on here?” Bess demanded, glancing from one to the other. “What does Mr. Smithers have to do—”

“Shadrack, Mother. He likes to be called ‘Shadrack’.” Katie faced her father. “And you were making *fun* of him. I saw you!”

“No I wasn’t. You weren’t even there to hear my whole presentation—”

“No, but I heard enough of it. You were making a big joke out of Shadrack. And putting him in harms way. Just for a laugh.”

“No, I—”

“*Emperor of Bristlecone!* Oh my god! What kind of a joke is *that* supposed to be? Like, give me a break!”

He reached to take his daughter by the shoulders. “Now you listen to me, young lady—”

Katie jerked free and pushed her hands against his chest. “Leave me alone.” She took a step toward her room, then pivoted, snatched a key off the peg by the back door, and fled out into the dewy darkness.

“What’s going on between the two of you?”

Elan started to turn away, “I’ll go talk to her—”

“*No!*” Bess caught his wrist. “What the *hell* is going on here? Talk to *me*, Elan. This has been going on ever since I got back from Portland. But now it’s getting worse. Don’t you see? We’re losing our daughter? You’ve got to *talk to me*. What happened while I was away? Tell me! And this time I want the truth!”

They both heard the car start.

“That’s my car,” Bess yelled. “She’s not supposed to be driving by herself.” Bess hurried through the laundry room and pulled open the back door in time to see the taillights disappearing up the driveway. “Especially not at night. Her provisional permit doesn’t allow—”

Elan snorted. “Her instruction permit was issued by the State of California. Guess she doesn’t figure she needs a permit to drive here in Bristlecone.”

CRISSY WOLSKI STARTLED AWAKE and sat up in bed. Had she heard the sound of a car door slam? She thought maybe she had. She glanced at the red numerals of the bedside clock. It was 2:32 in the morning and all was quiet except for Michal’s husky breathing. Maybe she had dreamed the sound. But she had to pee anyway, so it wouldn’t hurt to go downstairs and check it out. As she swung her feet onto the cold wooden floor, Michal stirred and rolled onto his back, but continued snoring lightly beneath the down comforter. Crissy wiggled her feet into wooly moccasins, wrapped herself in her heavy robe, and padded over to the window. In the moonlit yard outside everything appeared still and peaceful. And perfectly in order.

She slid her hand down the thick banister as she descended the stairs toward the hallway.

Halfway down, a shadow moved across the pebbled glass window of the front door. She froze between steps. A key tick-ticked against the front door lock, then rattled inside. She held her breath, her heart suddenly hammering. The lock clicked and the door swung open to silhouette the shape of a man against the pale glow of moonlight. The form was bent and featureless and moved in slow jerks like the elderly. He lurched into the house.

Crissy screamed.

The man in the doorway jerked upright and squealed something incoherent.

Crissy turned and pounded her way back up the stairs, but she tripped on the last riser and ended up crawling into the bedroom. “Turn on the light,” she panted as she slammed the door shut with her feet. “There’s a man in our house!”

Michal fumbled on the lamp and stood befuddled beside the bed, blinking between dream and wakefulness. His mussed dirty-blond hair stood out on his scalp as if in confusion. “A man . . . wha . . .?”

“A man. Yes. And I don’t know who the hell he is.” She dumped his clothes from the straight-back chair and tried to wrestle it beneath the doorknob.

“Was that *you* . . . that *scream*?”

“*Yes, it was me.* Call 911!”

“911?” Michal fumbled up the phone and held it to his ear. “Still dead,” he pronounced. “Ever since the roadblock. Remember?”

“Where’s your cell phone?”

“There.” He pointed to his pants which she had dumped onto the floor.

She dug the phone out of a pocket and flipped it open and punched in the three numbers. There was a long silence before a pattern of beeps dissolved into a mechanical voice that said, “I’m sorry, but the number you have dialed is no longer in service. If you feel you have reached this message in—”

Crissy snapped it shut and moaned, “What’re we gonna do?”

Downstairs in the foyer the Emperor of Bristlecone, uncoronated and unadvised, fumbled for the light switch, but his fingers didn’t recognize the rotary knob which had replaced the old-fashion toggle switch they were feeling for. Finally he managed to punch on the hall light, but everything looked different in the multiple glows of a candelabra fixture where a bare 40-watt bulb used to hang. The walls had been papered over with of a dull cream-and-yellow pattern of repeating haystacks. And the floor . . . new speckled linoleum now covered the bare boards beneath his feet. His nose wrinkled at the sweet, flowery aroma of clothes-drier sheets which perfumed the air. Fatigued and irritated from the long drive, he was sorely perplexed and annoyed. *Who’re these folks in m’ house?* Shadrack wanted to know. *An’ whut’ve they done?*

The bedroom door upstairs creaked open and a man’s faux-bold voice demanded, “Who are you?”

“Who am I? Who’m *I*? That ain’t the real question now, is it? Who’re *you*?”

“This is our house. Go away before I call the police.”

Shadrack snorted. “Go’wan an’ call ’em. This here’s *my* house, an’ you’s a ’trespassin’ on my prop’ty.”

The voice upstairs was silent for a moment, then asked, “Smithers?”

“Shadrack, if’n y’please.”

“Well . . . ah . . . we rented your farm,” Michal Wolski announced sheepishly. He stepped out onto the landing in his red flannel pajamas. “Didn’t you know?”

“*Rented!* From *who?*”

“Well . . . it was . . . we leased it from that accountant fella in town. Graves, I think, is his name.”

“Groves,” came an angry female voice behind Michal. “Elan Groves.” Crissy squeezed her husband aside. Her dark brown tresses flowed down the shoulders of her robe, and her striking green eyes blazed angrily. “Don’t you even know when your own farm’s been rented out? And we been payin’ our good money for rent. You near scared me to death jus’ now. Now you get outta here and leave us be before we call the police.”

Shadrack stood stunned in the foyer. He seemed to deflate, to collapse in upon himself, mumbling, “He rented it out? Elan done rented out m’farm? Now what’m I ’sposed t’do?”

Michal eased himself halfway down the steps. “Have you come far?” he asked gently.

“Been a’drivin’ . . . two days . . . me’be more like three . . . an’ I ain’t slept much a’tall.” He began to tremble. “He *rented* it to ya, y’say?”

“Yes, sir. Where do you plan to stay tonight?”

Shadrack just shook his head.

“Have you eaten?”

“*Michal!*” Crissy snapped. “What are you doing? This man *frightened* me.”

“Come on, Chrissy. Lighten up. He didn’t know we were here.” He descended the rest of the stairway.

“How long y’got it rented fur?” Shadrack asked.

“The lease is for one year,” Michal replied.

“Uh.”

“August first to August first.”

“Uh.”

“But Mr. Groves led us to believe that we’d be able to renew it from year to year. He said you weren’t planning on coming back.”

“I wuddn’t.”

“But you did.”

“Uh.”

“Would you care for something to eat, Mr. Smithers?”

“Shadrack.”

“How about a bowl of oatmeal, Shadrack . . . or maybe some toast or yogurt?”

“Michal! He nearly scared me to death!”

Michal turned and asked softly, “Do you remember what we were reading about last week? In that little Zen book of yours? Do you?”

Chrissy sniffed. “Compassion?”

He nodded and seemed to relax. “Now come along, Shadrack. I’ll show you how we’ve fixed up the kitchen and find you something to eat.” He took the old man gently by the arm. “We can set you up for tonight in the guest room. It’s still being remodeled, but it’s clean, and Crissy can put sheets on the bed.” He nodded to his wife, then turned back to the old man. “I know we’ve got us a bit of a problem here . . . but I think we’ll work it out. Don’t you?”

As Michal was putting water on to boil, the doorbell chimed.

“Whu’zat?” Shadrack wanted to know.

“The doorbell,” Michal told him.

“I ain’t got no doorbell.”

“You do now. Crissy and I put one in.”

Crissy hurried into the kitchen. “Who’d be ringing our doorbell at this time of night?”

Michal shook his head. “Let’s go and find out.”

On the front stoop Katie Groves stood abashed, bedraggled, and shivering. “I’m sorry to bother you . . . but I saw that pickup truck pull in and park outside . . . and I saw your lights come on . . . and . . . and I was wondering—”

“Katie?”

Katie looked past the somber couple confronting her. “Shadrack!”

“Well, as I live and breathe,” the old man marveled. “What’er you a’doin’ here?”

Katie pushed her way past the doorkeepers and threw her arms around the old man. “I came to see you. You made it back! Thank God for that!”

“Katie Groves, if I’m not mistaken,” said Michal, extending his hand. “We met once at your father’s place.”

“Yes. Yes. I remember. How are you and your wife making out, Mr. Wolski?”

“Why are you here?” Crissy demanded.

“Why? I . . . ah . . . need to talk to Shadrack. I was waiting for him out by your mailbox. It’s important.”

“Now?”

Michal intervened. “Shadrack was about to have a bowl of oatmeal. And he’s tired from his long drive. It might be better if you came back in the morning.”

Katie hung her head. “I’ve . . . got nowhere to go tonight.”

“Why don’t you just go back home?” Crissy snorted. “Come back in the morning?”

Katie shook her bent head. “I have a sleeping bag in the car. I guess I can finish the night out there—”

Crissy threw up her hands in exasperation. “Michal? Are there no limits to this compassion thing?”

Michael grinned. “You read it yourself. True compassion is limitless.” He turned to Katie. “The sofa downstairs is available. You look like you could use a bite to eat too, young lady. Guess I could mix up a batch of pancakes. Whadda ya think, Crissy?”

NOT NEARLY AS MANY TOWNSFOLK showed up for the second noon meeting the following day. So they decided to set up folding tables in a rectangular configuration for those who wanted to participate eye to eye, with chairs behind for the spectators and kibitzers. A group of farm workers from the valley, many of them undocumented, asked for and received a seat at the table. They selected Raul Gutierrez to represent them.

Director Horace Kearns called the adjourned meeting to order. “Now,” he croaked, coughed, cleared his throat, and spat into a wad of tissue. “Now . . . let’s see here. We got ourselves a number a’things on the agenda. Let’s see. Ted Tollitson wants t’talk about settin’ up a farmer’s co-op t’grow what we can for the folks in this valley. Mr. Gutierrez will prob’ly want t’be a part

a' that discussion." He shuffled his notes. "An' we're gonna need some kinda board t'regulate prices on near-about everythin' folks need, with authority t'enforce price regulations." He glanced up and found Moray Willits' face in the audience. "But I think the first item of business has got to be all the complaints we've been getting about the prices at the grocery store. Seems like they been going way up the last few days. Elan, I'm gonna let you take over this inquiry as Finance Minister. Before my voice gives out for good."

"Thank you, Mr. Director," Elan replied. "Moray, you might want to join us up here at the table to explain exactly what's going on?"

Scooter Thompson called from the chairs in back, "He's been jackin' up his prices 'cause we got no place else t'shop, is what's a'goin' on."

"They're getting pretty steep," Mrs. Banke agreed.

Several others chimed in with grunts and nods.

Looking uncomfortable, Moray Willits found an empty chair across from Director Kearns. He was a plump man in his late forties with shiny skin and a bald head. He was still wearing his dark blue grocer's apron over Levi's and a gray sweater. "It's a supply problem," he mumbled. "Not really your business, I guess."

Kearns interrupted, "We'll be the one's t'decide if it's any a our business, Moray—" but he froze in mid-sentence, staring the length of the room.

Everyone turned to follow his gaze. Through the front door stepped Bess Groves, who most everyone knew from teaching their children, followed by her daughter Katie. Katie was holding the door for a skinny old ghost of a man in an oversize pair of clean overalls, bewhiskered and limping behind her.

"Well I'll be . . ." Kearns croaked. He turned a questioning eye toward Elan, who was staring at his hands in his lap. Kearns managed a twisted smile as he stood. "Shadrack! Welcome back. Good t'see ya made it home."

"Howdy, Horace." Shadrack minced his way up the aisle toward the front table, with Katie in his wake. Bess hung back and found a chair.

"I guess you heard about yer being appointed yeste'day, have ya?" Kearns asked.

"Yes, sir. Katie tol' me all 'bout it jus' this mornin'. An' ya kin jus' fancy my surprise."

"Why, I guess so." Kearns forced a hoarse laugh as he steadied himself against the table.

"Now . . . I imagine . . . now that yer back . . . an' with all that farm work ya gotta catch up on . . . well . . . I imagine yer prob'ly gonna tell us . . . yer gonna have to . . . well . . . refuse the appointment . . . am I right? But we'll all un'erstan' . . . under the circumstances . . . a'course we will."

"No, sir." Shadrack announced proudly as he reached the table. "I's mighty proud a you all bestowin' this honor on me. An' I accept it. I got the time. An' I got the spirit. An' I got an advisor." He nodded at Katie. "So I's a'gonna take it on. Now, where do I sit?"

Bewildered, Kearns offered Shadrack his seat and took another one further down the side.

"Much obliged, Horace. An' kin one a'ya make a space fer Miss Katie Groves t'sit b'side me. Thank ya. Now y'all go on where y'was a'fore I come in. I'll jus' follow along 'til I catch the drift." Katie whispered something in Shadrack's ear. Sheepishly he grinned his gap-toothed smile when he asked, "Say, Horace, what's this here job a'payin' me?"

"Well . . . we ain't figgered that out yet." He looked to Elan for help.

But Elan just shrugged. "All the phones are still dead, and I haven't received my travel visa yet, so I haven't been able to talk to anyone at the county or at the bank to see how much money we've got. Or how much we've got coming. But I guess I'd like to know the answer to Shadrack's question myself."

"I reckon yer workin' fer free fer now," Kearns said to Shadrack. "Y'wanna quit, maybe?"

"No, sir," Shadrack shook his head.

"Well, I guess we'll work us up a budget later on. But ain't you gettin' social security, anyhow?"

The old man shrugged. "Don' rightly know. Haven't checked m'bank account o'er'n Alturas fer all the months I been gone."

The long silence that followed was broken by Elan Groves. "Anyway, it's nice to see you, Shadrack. I look forward to hearing about your trip." He glanced down at a sheet of paper. "In my capacity of Finance Minister, I was about to ask Mr. Willits some questions about the sharp rise in prices at his grocery store."

"Howdy, Shadrack," Willits grinned. "Good t'see ya back. I was jus' a'tellin' Horace here I got a supply problem, an' it's not really anybody's business but my own."

Elan spoke to Shadrack. "May I continue?"

Shadrack bowed his head, embarrassed by the formality. "Go on. Don' mine me."

Elan turned to Willits. "Maybe it *is* our business, Mr. Willits. Now, a number of folks saw you unloading crates of food from that General Services trailer truck this morning. The big semi, I understand. Didn't that come outta Alturas?"

"Might of. But there's still a lotta other stuff I still gotta buy and bring in . . ." Willits' voice trailed off.

"Are the wholesalers charging you higher prices now, compared to what they were charging before the blockade?" Elan asked.

Willits paused. "Some of 'em might be. I'd have ta check the invoices, I guess."

"You don't know right offhand?"

"Well, not exactly . . ."

"But you know enough to substantially increase your own retail prices. Is that right?"

"Y'don' unnerstan'. It's complicated—"

"Moray," Kearns broke in, "If I was you I'd stop talkin' right now before y'make a whole lotta other good folks in this room mad. We can have our Finance Minister look over your books—"

"Now you jus' hold on," Willits protested. "You got no right t'look at my books. I got rights."

Kearns smiled. "Under what law, Moray?"

"Well," Willits sputtered. "I got a fundamental right t'make me a livin'—"

"A *fair* living, Moray. Now just stop talkin' an' listen up a minute. We ain't disputin' yer right t'make a livin' for yourself. We all want that, don't we folks?"

There were a few ambiguous grunts from the assemblage.

"But ever'body's gotta eat in this strange situation we fin' ourselves in. An' we gotta be fair to everybody. Ya unnerstan'?" He coughed and spat into his tissue before nodding to Elan to take back the reins.

“Mr. Willits,” Elan said, “no one’s disputing your right to enjoy a fair return on your business investment and labor. It benefits the community as well as yourself. But we need to assure the community that your return *is* a fair one, and to do that we will need to examine your ledger of costs and expenses—”

“*Over my dead body!*”

Katie felt Shadrack shudder at the image.

Elan watched the grocer silently for a moment. “You understand that if you don’t cooperate, our first option would be to open a community store to compete with yours. Selling the same commodities, and probably more, with open books and fair prices. I understand the Cressler & Bonner building might be available.”

“You can’t do that! An’ steal my good customers? That’s communism!”

“The hell we can’t,” growled Director Kearns. “There ain’t no law around here no more, ’cept what this convention says there is. Bristlecone law.”

“Your customers will shop where the values are best for them,” Elan continued. “Now, we want to work *with* you, Mr. Willits, and we want you to have a *reasonable* profit to live on. We would prefer to continue using your suppliers and wholesalers, as long as their charges are fair. They’ve already got free passage through the checkpoints. But if we can’t work this out with you, with full and open disclosure to my department and the public, then we, as a community, will have to arrange to supply the public with what they need and demand. That’s what government does.”

A sputtering of applause rose from the audience.

“Shadrack!” Willits pleaded, sweating. “They can’t *do* this! You’re the man they put in charge here. An’ you’re a businessman. A farmer. Tell ’em they gotta stop interferein’ with m’private business right here an’ now!”

All eyes turned to the grizzled old man with the wild bushy salt-and-pepper beard and unkempt hair. The man whom they had bizarrely appointed emperor. Whatever that meant. Shadrack glanced at Katie beside him. She smiled and nodded encouragement. He wrestled over the situation in his mind for so long that a few people began to wonder if he had even heard. Finally he drew himself up, took a breath, pursed his lips, and turned toward Moray Willits. “I seen enough dead bodies in my time, Moray,” he said. “An’ you sure don’t want t’be one of ’em.” People exchanged puzzled looks. Shadrack continued, “I been a’doin’ business with ya fer a long time . . . an’ I can bear witness ta yer bein’ a good man at heart.” He paused to let the words sink in. “But I think you oughta go on an’ roll back yer prices t’what they was last week. Right now. All by y’self.” He nodded finality. “An’ if y’be needin’ t’*up* any of ’em . . . well . . . you just talk ta Elan Groves here, an’ show ’im *why* y’gotta do it.”

“An’ what if he don’t agree?” Willits demanded.

“Well . . .,” Shadrack considered the problem seriously, “well . . . the two of ya can bring it t’me, an’ I’ll take a look.” Again he nodded, then thought some more. “Things’s gonna be a’changin’ perty fast, I reckon.” He looked Willits in the eye. “Right now you’s one a’us. But ever’body gotta eat, like Horace says. An’ you sure don’t wanna be on the wrong side a’ this if’n she gets worse.” He sat back in his chair, finished.

A ripple of applause rose again, this time joined by those seated around the tables.

ELAN HAD GOTTEN THERE EARLY and was waiting on the front steps of Willy Baxter's office when the lawyer arrived the next morning. Elan wanted to go over some things before the others showed up. "Morning, Willy."

"Oh . . . Elan. You startled me."

"Didn't mean to. You know, don't you, that you've been appointed Chief Justice of the Bristlecone Court."

Baxter shook his head. He was a stocky fireplug of a man, energetic, shorter than Elan, gray at the temples, but not as pale as his nearing-retirement years deserved. He looked to have a lot of career left in him "That's what old Horace Kearns told me when he stopped by the other day."

"What did you say to it?"

"I told him I'd rather serve as Attorney General."

"Attorney General? Huh . . . well . . . who'd take the job of Chief Justice then?"

"I suggested Marty Hoover's name to him. He's been retired up on his ranch for years. Up near Fort Bidwell. Put in fifty years before the bar, he did, and he was a damn good lawyer in his day."

"I never met him, but . . . isn't he kind of old now?"

"In his eighties, I guess, but he's still sharp as a razor. I drove up and talked to him day before yesterday." Baxter nodded gravely. "Said he'd do it, of course. Didn't really want to, but he's been following the situation, and, I can say this for him, he's still got a strong sense of civic duty. Doesn't expect many cases to come before him anytime soon."

"So . . . you're going to be Attorney General?"

"Horace says he'll bring it up before the convention next time. And you're Finance Minister, I hear."

"Last I heard."

"Mornin' Margaret." Baxter stepped aside to let his secretary unlock the front door.

"Morning," Elan nodded.

"You boys can come on inside, you know. Looks like we might be getting some snow pretty soon."

Baxter lowered his voice to Elan after the door shut behind her. "Are any of us going to get paid?"

"I hope so. I just got my Pacific Coast visa in the mail, so I was planning to drive over to Alturas when we get finished with this meeting. Try and find out whether we've got any money." Baxter reached for the door handle, but Elan caught his arm. "About this meeting . . . I just wanted to give you a heads-up before everyone shows up—"

Molly's car swung around the corner and whisked up to the curb. Katie was in the driver's seat, and Shadrack rode shotgun. The Wolskis were in back. Molly was not aboard.

"They're early," Elan grumbled as they climbed out.

"Let's just play'er by ear when they get inside." Baxter slapped Elan on the shoulder and turned to greet the new arrivals. "Howdy Katie," he waved. He held open his office door and one by one welcomed his clients inside.

The conference room was small and windowless. It had room for only four at the narrow trestle table, so Shadrack, Michal and Crissy Wolski, and the lawyer sat, while Katie and her father remained standing on opposite sides of the doorway. After they had settled in and orders

for coffee were tallied by Margaret, Crissy Wolski seized the initiative. She explained that the existing lease, as written and executed, was not going to work out. She and Michal had put a lot of work and money into remodeling the farmhouse and installing a new irrigation system and planting fruit trees and grape vines on the agent's representation and their good-faith belief that they would be able to stay there for a lot longer than one lousy year. And then Shadrack had showed up out of the blue, needing a place to stay.

The lawyer put down the copy of the lease he had been perusing. "So, what do you have in mind?"

"We want to buy the farm," Crissy told him.

Michal lay his hand on her arm. "Actually, it's a little more complicated than that. You see, we want to live there . . . and to work the farm . . . and at the same time provide Shadrack with a place to stay."

"At the farm, you mean?"

"Yes, sir. For as long as he wants to. And we want to work the land together. All of us. And share the fruits of our labors."

Baxter glanced over at Elan. "You signed the original lease as Shadrack's attorney-in-fact. Do you approve of this? "

"This is the first I've heard of it." Elan took his time. "Sounds a lot to me like one of those old hippie commune pipe dreams."

"That's about what I thought you'd say," Katie scolded from across the empty doorway.

"So you've been helping them figure out this . . . this goofy . . . this scam?" Elan's voice was rising.

Baxter quickly intervened between the two. "Let's just see what the *clients* want to do, okay? If you two want to fight a personal battle, you can take it outside. We'll wait."

Father and daughter hung their heads. "Sorry," Elan said. "Go ahead."

Baxter eased himself back down in his chair. He picked up his pen and turned to Shadrack. "Now . . . how much do you plan on selling the place for?"

"How much?" Shadrack fidgeted. "Ain't really thought 'bout it."

"Okay. How would you value the lodging you will be receiving?"

"Unh. Don' guess I know. Reckon we'll figger somethin' out."

"And what about board? Will you all be eating together?"

"Hadn't much thought 'bout it."

"Well . . . how about working the farm? How do you plan to divide the profits?"

Shadrack glanced uncomfortably towards Elan, who offered no help. "Unh. Don' rightly know. They's got 'emselves these . . . on their computer . . . some kinda sheets --"

"Spreadsheets," Michal supplied.

"Arr . . . showed me a couple of 'em . . . tells 'em what to plant an' jus' when. Now, I's jus' a ordinary ol' time dirt farmer . . . but I knows the soil out thar . . . an' I reckon if'n they got somethin' they want planted . . . well . . . I kin make it grow."

"And the profits?"

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

Baxter dropped his pen and exhaled. With a wry smile he turned to Michal and Crissy. "How about just adopting this old fella as a surrogate grandfather? Might save us all a whole

lotta paperwork.”

“Can we do that?” Crissy asked.

“He’s joking,” Michal explained.

They talked the whole morning long. The lawyer asked questions, offered suggestions, and made notes on his yellow pad. Katie and her father, without making eye contact with the other, would occasionally make a comment or ask a question. But Shadrack and the Wolskis did their own bargaining. At Baxter’s prompting, they considered a lease-option, an enhanced power of attorney, a conditional sale contract, a grant deed with reservation of a life estate, limited liability partnerships, a mutual operating agreement, living trusts, and a simple irrevocable will. Elan grew restless from all the legalize. He wanted to be on his way to Alturas and resolve what he considered more important issues, but he stayed on until a preliminary understanding was reached and the next meeting was scheduled to review the documents the lawyer would draft.

“You’re probably going to want to draft a revocation of my power of attorney, too,” Elan told the lawyer as he pulled on his overcoat.

“No way,” Shadrack objected. “Who’s gonna look after my side a’things fer me if’n ya quit on me now?”

“Looks like you already got another advisor.” Elan tilted his head toward his daughter.

“Yeah I do,” Shadrack said. “But I’m a’gonna need *both* a’ya, So’s we kin work like a team t’gether.”

An uncomfortable silence passed before Katie said, “I’d like that.”

“Alright then,” Elan agreed. “But I’ve got to get over to Alturas right now. Got a lot to do there.”

THEY CAME TO TAKE HIM AWAY five days before Christmas. Two inches of snow had fallen on the long driveway leading down to Shadrack’s farmhouse, but recent muddy tire tracks marked the way. The two men climbed out of an SUV, which was unmarked except for the faint shadow of Border Patrol lettering bleeding through the new paint job. Both wore gray uniforms under heavy brown open parkas with Homeland Security patches on the shoulders and pistols in holsters on their service belts. A third man, in back behind the security screen, did not attempt to join them.

On the way to the front door Agent Vince Blaylock, the shorter, stouter, and older of the two, pulled from an inside coat pocket the booking photographs of their quarry and handed it to his lanky junior partner. “Butch,” he said, “keep your eyes open. He shouldn’t be too tough to spot. Now you step over there and give me cover.”

Vince waited until his partner was in place, then rang the doorbell and waited some more. After a while the door opened and he was confronted by an attractive, brown-haired, green-eyed young woman in navy blue warmups and a dirty apron. “Yes?” she asked, annoyed.

“Morning, ma’am. We’re looking for Shadrack Smithers,” Vince said.

“He’s not home.”

“Where’s he at?” Vince pressed.

Crissy studied the two men for a moment. Registered their shoulder patches and holstered firearms. Pursed her lips. Turned to call her husband, then remembered he was out with the cows. She grimaced. “He might be over at the Senior Center.”

“Where’s that, Ma’am? In Cedarville?”

She nodded.

“Where in Cedarville? Downtown?”

Again she nodded, brusquely.

“Mind if we have a look around inside?”

“Matter of fact, I *do*.” She slammed the door in his face.

“What’re we gonna do now, Vince? Y’think she’s telling us the truth?”

Vince shrugged and stepped down off the porch. “Probably. Don’t matter all that much. We already bagged our main target. This guy’s just a TWP.”

“Traveling Without Permit’?” Butch asked as they crossed the ripples of drifted snow.

“You got it. You’re picking up the lingo, kid. Just takes time. Don’t worry about it.”

“So . . . we’re going over to this Senior Center?”

“Might as well, long as we’re here. If we can find it. Then we’ll head on back, one way or the other. And even if we don’t nab this Smithers,” Vince added with a nasty smirk, “word’ll get out and put the fear of God into the sucker for the rest of his days.”

The Senior Center was not hard to find. The low, square building had a sign and stood on Main Street at the far corner of the first commercial block. But parking appeared to be a challenge. They wanted the SUV close at hand. So Vince double-parked until a pickup backed out of one of the diagonal spaces in front of the market a half-block farther down, then wheeled the SUV into the vacated space. Both men glanced at each other, nodded, grunted, and climbed out.

“Hey, man,” said the prisoner in back, “I gotta take a piss. How about—”

They slammed their doors without bothering to respond, then walked slowly back up the sidewalk, getting their bearings, trying not to draw attention, and stood outside the Senior Center searching the crowd inside through the latticed windows. “See anything?” Vince asked.

“No . . .,” Butch replied. “. . . no . . . wait . . . that’s *him*.”

“Where?”

“There. Sitting at the big table. Right in the middle. That’s Smithers, isn’t it? See him?”

It took Vince a moment to spot him. “That’s him alright. Good job.”

“How’re we gonna get him outta there, Vince?”

Vince thought for a while. “We go in together. I’ll wait inside the door and cover you. You walk on up to Smithers, flash your badge, and tell him we want to talk with him outside right now. Right now. Don’t let him balk. Make it quick. Before these rubes figure out what’s going on.”

Butch considered the plan. Nodded. “You gonna draw your firearm?”

“Only if I have to. Once we get him outside, we shouldn’t have a problem.”

They glanced around. Faced each other again. Each drew a deep breath and exhaled. “Let’s go get him,” Vince said.

Shadrack was not surprised. Not really. It was he who had started the ball rolling, back there in Kieferville, and deep down inside he figured they would come for him sooner or later. It was just the timing of it all that unsettled him. He was of course prepared to go with them. That was what he wanted all along. Or what he *had* wanted anyway. At least before he had received absolution from the good Reverend Martin Blythe. And before he had been vouchsafed his

commission and his charge from this Bristlecone convention to perform the good deeds necessary to help save a foundering community. So now he was suddenly conflicted. But he rose anyway and went willingly with this stranger holding the Homeland Security badge, in order to buy a little time to think things through. Things that were happening so fast.

They made it through the silent mob of stunned conventioners without objection. Vince led them out the front door. Onto the sidewalk. Vince's face shone with perspiration. "Turn around and put your hands behind your back," he ordered.

Shadrack thought about it for a moment as onlookers began to file out behind them. "Wha'chou plannin' on arrestin' me fur?" he asked.

Vince grabbed his upper arm with a pincer grip and twisted his shoulder back. "I told you to turn around."

"Hey!" somebody hollered, "stop that!"

"That's police brutality!" another growled.

"Stay back!" Vince warned, one hand on his holster and the other on Shadrack's arm. His eyes scanned the gawkers as if he were taking names.

"I don't like the drift of this," Horace Kearns croaked to Elan Groves as they crossed the lawn together. "Look. Over by the market. That must be their car."

"I didn't know he was coming back," Elan said. "I honestly *did not know*."

"It ain't your fault. We all did this together—" Suddenly Kearns spotted the snowplow coming up the highway. "Delbert!" he shouted to his cousin and waved for him to stop. For years his cousin had run the snowplow for the county, when there was a county to run it for. It was just a big hydraulic-powered steel plow blade bolted to the front of a county ten-ton dump truck filled with cinders and salt. He was just bringing it down from the county equipment barn in anticipation of the first big snow of the season. Kearns stepped up on the running board and pointed at the erstwhile Border Patrol SUV by the market. "They're tryin' t'take Shadrack away. We're prob'ly gonna need your plow."

Delbert didn't have to ask why. He shifted gears and the rig growled around the corner to circle the block and turn around.

In the meantime Willy Baxter had pushed through to the front of the growing throng. "Have you got a warrant to extradite this man?"

Vince ignored him, bending and strapping the plastic flex cuffs around Shadrack's crossed wrists. He angrily jerked them secure.

"Ow! Tha's too tight—"

"I'm Attorney General of this—"

"Shut the fuck up! You're interfering with an arrest." Vince turned his back and began frogmarching his prisoner toward the SUV, while keeping a wary eye on the surly, growing crowd.

"You've got no authority here," Baxter persisted, pressing close behind him. "Zero. This is an independent nation and you cannot . . . *cannot* . . . *rendition* our President like this. Or anybody else. It's a violation of international law." He raised his voice. "*Do you hear me? You're violating our law!*"

Vince ignored him. "Butch! Get the door open! An' keep an eye on Rodriguez."

"What's your name, officer?" Baxter demanded. "And what authority do you claim to have here?"

Butch opened the rear door and waited until Vince pushed Shadrack roughly inside with a mumbled “Watch you head.” Then Vince pulled his pistol and spun on Baxter. “Does *this* look like authority enough for you, buster?”

The crowd fell silent. A few people edged back in fright. Others pressed defiantly closer, filling the air with indignant epithets. But a few of the farmers started for their pickups to get their shotguns. And their rifles. And their handguns.

“Stay back!” Vince ordered, brandishing the pistol and squeezing around the front to the driver-side door. “You’re all interfering with a lawful arrest.” He pulled open the driver’s door, climbed inside, and with trembling fingers managed to start the engine.

“There’s folks behind you,” Butch cautioned. “Want me t’get out and shoo’em away?”

“Stay where you are. I’ve got this.” In the rearview mirror Vince saw people milling around behind the vehicle. He revved the engine a few times in warning, then eased the shift into reverse. The SUV began to inch backward at a slow crawl, nudging legs and bodies away behind the bumper. Vince’s face glistened with sweat. He sure as hell didn’t want to run anyone over. Way too much paperwork in that. And an investigation. Probably loss of pay. But he was making a slow progress. Suddenly the people behind began to open a path. “They’re givin’ up,” he smirked.

Emergency lights flashed and bright high beams glared in his mirror. Vince couldn’t see what it was. With a clunk the snowplow engaged the rear bumper, lifting and pushing the SUV back to its original place against the high concrete curb.

“Shit,” Vince barked and thumped the steering wheel. “They can’t *do* that. We can have all their asses tossed in jail.”

A long silence followed as their situation began to sink in.

“Should I radio in for backup?” Butch asked his partner.

Vince grimaced. “Nobody’s gonna send backup way out here unless we’re dead. And even then they might not.” He shook his head. “No, we’re gonna have to get outta this jam on our own. Any ideas?”

Silence again.

A jolt of relief shot through Shadrack, who had not been able to keep his mind from toying with the mechanics of escape. But escape from *what*? From this ridiculous car? From the absurd conflict between the things he felt obliged to do and the things he no longer wanted to do? Something odd was going on in his mind. His hands had gone numb and his wrists burned where the plastic ties bit the flesh. He felt the pain, yes, but it no longer seemed to be *his* pain. It haunted him from a distance. Far away, as if from tilted, intersecting plains. A convergence of valley floors, where separate rivers merged. A whole geography of vast intersecting plains of intention and meaning. Shadrack began to chuckle. Slowly at first, from deep in his belly, then higher in his chest, and finally in his throat. Because he saw Tildie laughing. She was always so quick to laugh and to bring sunlight and singing into his life. She was laughing at him now, without a hint of malice, for the ridiculous situation he had gotten himself into. They were laughing together. It was such a beautiful laughter. In that moment he no longer felt the grief nor the guilt nor the sadness of her loss, but something joyful and enduring. And suddenly, after all those years, he understood the *meaning* of her laughter.

The prisoner beside him had drawn back warily into the corner. “Yo . . . *Viejo* . . . chou

okay?" he asked.

Shadrack shifted his gaze to his companion for the first time. The man was in his late twenties or early thirties. Brown skin. Stubble of beard. Tattoo on his wiry neck. Mexican probably. Shadrack was flashing him one of his rare gap-toothed grins. When the laughter had subsided enough for him to catch his breath, he replied, "*Creo que si.*"

"*Ta bueno,*" the man grinned back. "You laughin' or cryin', *amigo?*"

Shadrack wagged his head. "Cain't say, I reckon. *Lo mismo.*"

The prisoner nodded knowingly.

"Wha's yer name?" Shadrack asked.

The Mexican frowned, examining Shadrack up and down before his expression relaxed.

"Rodriguez."

"Where'd they pick you up?"

Rodriguez nodded southward. "Gerlach."

"Wha' for?"

The man showed a span of white teeth. "Chou ask a lotta questions, *Viejo.*"

"Sorry," Shadrack said, still grinning.

"*Esta bien.* 'S'all right. They claim I sellin' guns."

"Keep it down back there," Vince snapped. "We're tryin' t'think." He turned to his partner. "I think we might be able to climb over that curb."

Butch looked out the window. "It's pretty high."

Vince shrugged. "What've we got to loose?" He switched the transmission into four-wheel drive and downshifted to low low. "Hold on, here we go." The engine roared, the carriage strained, and the right front wheel began to climb.

Blam! The SUV jumped and settled onto the rim of its shredded right rear tire.

"Jesus!" growled Vince. "Now we're really fucked." He swung around and yelled at Shadrack. "Tell your pals to stop damaging government property. Or they're all gonna be shot." He buzzed down Shadrack's window a few inches.

Shadrack met his eyes with the goofy grin still on his face. "Don' see as how y'gonna manage t'shoot 'em all. Folks out thar, they all got shotguns a'their own, y'know. An' huntin' rifles. Matter a'fac', Chamber puts on a big squirrel roundup ever' spring, so they got a lotta practice usin'em."

Muscles stood out on Vince's jaw as he ground his teeth. "Well, how about I just shoot *you* then."

Shadrack's grin widened. "G'won ahead. An' see whut happens."

Blam! The other rear tire was gone.

Shadrack pressed his face to the window opening. "*Hey!* Stop a'shootin' out them tires!" he yelled. "An' somebody call Gunter over at the tire shop. He's gonna have t'change 'em."

Horace Kearns lanky figure emerged from the cluster. "Y'mean ya want *us* to replace the tires? Why would we do that?"

"How else ya gonna send these fellas on their way, Horace?"

Kearns spat into a tissue and nodded. "Good point."

"Have 'im change the tires soon's they let me go."

"They gonna let ya go?"

“I reckon. If they wanna drive away from here, they is.”

“An’ whose gonna pay for them tires?” Kearns asked.

“Bristlecone,” Shadrack pronounced. “We’ll spend some’a that money Elan’s ’bout t’bring in. Gunter’ll take a IOU.”

“You gonna sign it?”

“I reckon I kin.”

Vince buzzed down Butch’s window and leaned over. “Go ahead and change the tires,” he called, “and back that plow off . . . and we’ll consider letting Mr. Smithers go.”

“Shadrack,” Shadrack muttered.

Kearns approached the front window. “Now you sure don’t seem to have much respect for our intelligence, do ya? You go on an’ let him go first, and *then* we’ll consider changing your tires.”

The bargaining didn’t last long. The Homeland Security boys had no chips left to play, and they knew it. The town folks could bide their time all day long. All Vince and Butch could hope to win was their vehicle back in operating condition. At least they would have Rodriguez to show for their troubles. And, of course, their own freedom.

Butch cautiously cracked the passenger door, eased himself out, and sidled along the side of the SUV to unlatch the back door. Folks stepped back to make room. He pulled the door open and reached inside to help the wrist-bound Shadrack climb out. When Shadrack’s feet were planted on solid ground, Butch bent to retrieve the bracelet cutters from a cargo pocket of his pants. Rodriguez seized his chance. With surprising agility and power he sprang forward, bolting out and into Shadrack’s scrawny chest, caroming the old man into the half-open door, which flew back into Butch’s face, toppling him backwards. Rodriguez dove out, crashed into the crowd and disappeared into the sea of onlookers.

“Stop that man!” Vince hollered, but without daring to open his own door. “He’s a prisoner of the United States government.”

No one made any effort to restrain Rodriguez or pursue him.

“What’d the poor guy do?” a ribald voice called from the crowd. “Look a’chew th’wrong way?”

Everyone seemed to enjoy the comment. Two bystanders helped Butch to his feet. His nose was bloodied and possibly broken, but he was still trying to fish the cutters out of his pocket. Ted Tollitson stepped up and pressed his bandanna against the man’s bleeding nose. “Somebody see if Emma’s still in back. She’s got some medical training for the senior program. And help me get this man over there on the bench where she can take a look at him. I’ll cut off Shadrack’s cuffs.” He pulled his lock-back knife from its scabbard on his belt and bent to saw through the restraints.

The restless crowd cleared the way and oversaw Gunter’s ballet of quick tire change artistry. The citizens were riled and working themselves up into a frenzy, feeding on their own outrage and indignity. To them this was personal. When California had tossed them out like so much garbage, they had pulled together and elected their own leader. And now a couple of brazen armed thugs from who knows where had been dispatched to interfere in their local affairs. With their sacred right of self-determination. With their *sovereignty*. In the streets outside the Senior Center they watched as an armada of pickup trucks converged to escort their uninvited guests out

of town and across the playa, and then, squinting into the distance, witnessed their banishment onto the rough gravel roads of western Nevada. Cheers arose and a couple of shotguns were discharged into the air.

Inside the Senior Center the mood was somber and edgy. Shadrack's wrists were being slathered with an antibiotic cream and yerba buena by Emma Hilt, the center's self-proclaimed medical technician, nurse, and sorceress.

"Ain't nothin'," he kept reassuring her as she fawned over him like a baby and he squirmed to keep an eye on the crowd outside.

"Jus' hol' still," she ordered. "Y'never did know what fer yer own good. They should'a took more care with ya. Imagine. And at your age—"

"Now there ain't nothin' wrong with my age—"

"Jus' hol' still. Think I better wrap some gauze around 'em—"

"Don't want no *gauze*," Shadrack barked, jerking back both wrists. "*Thank* ya, Emma, but I's done here." He began to roll down the sleeves of his worn chambray work shirt.

"Lemme wipe that off, y'ol' coot, a'fore ya stain up yer dang clothes."

Shadrack submitted to the towel. "I surely do 'preciate what y'done fer me here. But we gotta get this 'ere convention back inta session."

"No need t'rush, Shadrack," said Horace Kearns, who had been hovering nearby. "Better to make sure you're okay before—"

"I's fine, Horace. But we need t'talk this thing over . . . all a'us . . . an' perty quick, I reckon . . . a'fore some a' them young bucks ou'char figure they kin take things inta their own hands. I know personal well what mischief a young'n kin do with a shotgun . . . an' make things a whole lot worse." He shook his head. "Fer *ever*'body."

IT HAD BEEN A BAD DAY for the Homeland Security team. They had managed to limp away without mortal damage and figured they could make their way back to Winnemucca on two bald, unbalanced, previously-owned rear tires, but without a single prisoner aboard. Butch's nose was not broken, at least by the primitive standards of the Cedarville first aide volunteer, and the bleeding was finally stopped by a roll of gauze protruding from each nostril. Oh well. A bad day. It had happened before. Maybe not *this* bad, but still . . . and now they had to cover their sorry asses. Vince would spend most of the long drive concocting the heroic fiction they would tell when they got back. "When you got a lemon, ya better make lemonade," he told his reluctant partner. They had no intention of returning to Cedarville. Either of them. Ever.