

# Bristlecone

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## PART FOUR Cedarville, Winter

WRAPPED IN A DOWN JACKET AND WOOL LAP BLANKET, Crissy Wolski hunched in the rocker on the veranda and sipped hot black coffee. She watched two slim figures bend and straighten in the morning mist, bend and straighten, as they worked their hoes and spades in the vegetable garden. Weak year-end sunlight touched the peaks of the Warner Mountains three-thousand feet above their heads and glistened off the fresh snow there. Perhaps the rays would strengthen enough to burn off the wisps and tendrils of valley fog before long. By then Katie would have run off to her morning classes, if this weren't the year-end holiday week. But Shadrack would keep on weeding and furrowing and planting and coaxing the seeds and sprouts. All day long if he took a mind to it. He was the hardest worker she had ever seen. Scrawny and hobbled, he was determined to grow things on his own terms. And the plants responded to the magic in his fingers. Leeks. Garlic. Kohlrabi. Winter cabbage and kale and chard and beets and carrots.

Another figure caught her eye pushing a wheelbarrow into the garden through the gate in the deer fence. That would be Rodriguez, bless his heart. A former gun-runner, they say, but a gentle and sweet man who had found a home, at least for now, with Shadrack in the old bunkhouse they were restoring. He bent to collect another batch of weeds for silage that would feed the livestock as the long winter drew on.

Crissy sighed. Christmas had come and gone. Winter was settling in. And according to Michal, the extra hands might spell the difference between a meager yield and an abundant one come spring. Depending on the weather, of course. A good snow pack would be a mighty boon. But she had to admit that things were working out much better than she had ever imagined. She gulped the last tepid splash from her cup. It was time to put some eggs and flapjacks on the griddle for the hungry crew.

When the triangle finally clanged, they all assembled in the kitchen, where the breakfast nook wall had been removed and a new trestle table erected to accommodate them all in one shift. They left their shoes on the mud porch without having to be reminded. A wood fire crackled comfortably in the Wedgewood cookstove. Crissy started a pot of hot coffee around and set a special cup of honey camomile tea at Shadrack's elbow. The work crew. Dirt farmers all. And, like an adopted family, Crissy was growing fond of them all.

The chair at the head of the table stood empty. "Where's Michal," Katie asked brightly, shaking her chestnut hair as she waited for the plate of scrambled eggs to make its rounds.

"Out looking for parts for the tractor," Crissy replied.

Shadrack looked up. "Wha's he need?"

"A shaft bracket. For the three-point."

"Uh. It war a bit wore down."

"My dad might have something—"

“That’s where he headed first thing.” Crissy passed the tray of bacon. “If he can’t find something there, he’ll have to drive over to Alturas.”

“I can run the errand for him,” Katie volunteered. “I’ve got mom’s car. And my own travel visa.”

They all heard a diesel engine growl to a stop outside. Everyone turned to the kitchen windows. Elan Groves and Horace Kearns were climbing down from Kearns’ big one-ton pickup. They slammed the doors and crunched toward the house. Crissy made them remove their shoes before she let them inside. “Did Michal catch you?” she asked Elan.

“Couldn’t help him. Sorry. He’s headed on in to Alturas.”

“Would either of you like some breakfast?”

“Jus’ a cuppa coffee, if y’got any,” Kearns said.

“I’m good,” Elan replied.

Shadrack grinned his gap-tooth grin as they padded into the kitchen. “Howdy Elan, Horace.”

“Morning, Shadrack,” Kearns said.

“You were up early this morning,” Elan said to his daughter.

“No school this week,” she responded. “Mom said I could take her car.”

“What’s up?” Shadrack asked.

“Morning Shadrack,” Elan said, turning to him. “Horace here heard something this morning that we thought you should hear.”

Everyone stared at him in silence. Shadrack nodded encouragement.

“I’ll let Horace update you.”

Kearns cleared his throat, paused a moment for emphasis, then announced, “The State of California jus’ might be comin’ back.”

“Coming *back*?” Crissy asked.

“Yessum.”

“Where’d you hear *that*?”

“Gunter up at the tire shop. He heard it from one of them long-haul truckers. Rupert Holmsworthy, I think it was. You know him? No? Drives from outta Nevada somewheres near Winnemucca.” Kearns coughed and spat into a tissue. “Anyhow, Rupert told him *he* heard it up at the checkpoint while they was doin’ a inspection on his rig. They told him he needed new front tires or they weren’t a’gonna let him come back in.”

Everyone turned to Shadrack, who considered for a moment before asking, “He say when?”

“Perty soon now, I hear. Me’be the beginnin’a the year.”

“We thought you better know right away,” Elan added.

Shadrack thought some more, then pushed his plate away. “Kin ’ey *do* that?”

Elan shrugged. “Guess they can do whatever they damned well please. Probably you’re gonna want to convene the council.”

Rodriguez broke his silence for the first time. “*Bueno*. Prob’ly gonna need some more guns *tambien*.”

OUTSIDE THE SENIOR CENTER Riley Suggs, the newly-appointed public works director, and his crew of volunteers were busy epoxying a ceremonial bronze plaque to a flat slab of basalt. Horace Kearns’ cousin Delbert had brought the rock down in the dump truck, snow plow raised,

from an outcropping above Teddy Tollitson's ranch. Teddy had loaded it himself with the front-end bucket on his tractor. The volunteers had managed to dig a narrow trench and erect it without anybody getting seriously hurt. Now they all stood leaning on their shovels and lining bars admiring their work.

The plaque had been cast in a greensand mold by Elroy Jackson's daughter Belinda down at his blacksmith shop in Eagleville. She had lived for a while in an artist community over in Paisley, Oregon, before that state too had disappeared from the face of the earth. Belinda beamed with pride to see her new creation being placed on permanent historic display. No one mentioned to her that the tablet looked a little lopsided and insignificant against the massive black slab of gnarled stone. Or that she had misspelled the word "skirmish". The plaque commemorated the now-famous "Skermish at Cedarville" where local armed minutemen had fought off and defeated agents of an invading foreign army to save their appointed leader from capture. And everybody seemed to be feeling pretty damned good about it all.

The meeting convened inside with a robust attendance of ministers, advisors, citizens, and curious bystanders from the ceremony outside. Shadrack sat at the center of the extended main table like a wizened savior from a comic portrait of the last supper. Horace Kearns handed him a gavel he had borrowed from the high school debate department. Instead of banging it, Shadrack pushed it over in front of Katie Groves, who sat next to him, and waited until the familiar small-town palaver and joking settled down by itself. Finally, when he thought he could be heard, he announced, "We got some important news 'at gotta be took care of ri'chere an' now," and waited until the final few had quieted down.

"Tell'em what y'got, Shadrack," Kearns encouraged.

The room fell silent.

Shadrack cleared his throat. "Well . . . 'pears 'at the State a' California jus' might be a'plannin' t'start back up agin."

"Start back up?" asked Peachy Watkins from the restaurant across the street.

"At's right."

"When?" she demanded. A rumble of other voices echoed her question.

"Don't rightly know as yet," Shadrack admitted. "But *we* oughta be a'gettin' ready fer it . . . a'fore it comes."

"What ch'all planning' on doin'?" asked Moray Willits.

"Ain't up t'me," Shadrack said. "This here's a democracy . . . an' *you* all gotta make the decision."

"What choices we got?" Leonard Kline wanted to know. "I'm jus' tryin' t'run m'gas mart here in town. Jus' like Peachy at the restaurant. An' Moray over there with the store."

"Well . . . tha's why we gonna wanna hear from y'all. I reckon we kin jus' . . . let'er happen. Let the reborn California jus' grab us back on in. Go back t'the old ways. Or . . . or . . . we kin try doin' somethin' else."

"Like whut?"

"Well . . . for one . . . like try'n t'form us our own state."

A stunned silence, followed by a rising murmur of conversation.

"State of Bristlecone?" Leonard asked.

"Might be," Shadrack nodded. "If'n 'at's the way y'wan' it ta be called."

“How we gonna do *that*?”

“Well . . . I’s glad y’aksed. That’s why Horace aksed Lawyer Baxter t’come on in an’ talk t’ya about it. He’s our new Attorney General, case any a’ya forgot.”

Willy Baxter pushed back his chair on cue and stood up with controlled energy, his blue pin-striped three-piece trial suit, now a little worn, still looking sharp from ten feet. His gray hair was neatly trimmed and combed. He always felt more comfortable being free to pace the room when facing a jury. Baxter looked over the throng, taking his time to make eye contact with most of his audience. “First of all . . . I want you to know that they’re holding a lot of folks in detention camps over there in California . . . or whatever they want to call themselves now. Holding them against their will.” A number of heads nodded. “Just because those folks tried t’speak out against what’s going on over there.” The nodding spread like a slow contagion. “Their legislature passed something called a *sedition law*, making it a crime to speak out the truth.” He paused for the words to sink in. “There’s a lot of people over there have never been accounted for.” Baxter glanced from face to face. “A whole bunch of folks have just plumb *disappeared*.” A rumble of discontent rose, but Baxter raised his hand. “And now . . . and *now* . . . they’re planning to make *us* a part of California again. Bring us back into their fold. And force us to kowtow to them under their damned sedition law . . . or else face imprisonment ourselves for speaking the truth.”

“No way!”

“We don’t want no part a’that.”

“Amen.”

“Now, hold on,” Baxter continued, raising his hand again. “There’s maybe something we can do.” He paused to let them think about it. “Now . . . when California joined up with Oregon and Washington to form the Pacific Coast Nation . . . without affording us an opportunity to *vote* on what they were doing . . . they did more than just cut us free.” He shook his head. “They did more than *disrespect* us.” He paused for effect, then spoke with a rising oratory. “They *broke the law*. And because they purported to secede from the Union without the consent of the people . . . all their acts were void . . . and everybody who adhered to it vacated their offices . . . and it was an act of revolution against the United States of America . . . and an act of insurrection that left *our* homeland here . . . this beautiful Bristlecone territory we all live in . . . without a state.”

He had them riled up and their attention riveted on his lips.

“What kin we do about it?” shouted Elroy Jackson, standing in the back with feet splayed and blacksmith muscles bulging.

Baxter raised both arms to calm them. To keep them under control. “I’ll tell you what we can do. We can petition to rejoin the Union as an *independent state*.”

“How do we do that?” Jackson wanted to know.

“Well . . . let’s take a look at that. Now that the elected officers of California have disqualified themselves from office, the body to consent to the admission of Bristlecone to the Union is this here legislative body. You and me. The government of Bristlecone. *Us!* We’ll have to hold an election first, of course. But that won’t take long. Half the voters of the territory are already here in this room today. And then when *we* have the consent of the people . . . when *we* have complied with the law . . . then *we* can appeal directly to Congress for statehood. And if Congress isn’t in session, or if they won’t hear us, we can appeal directly to the President. Just

like they did back in 1861 . . . during the Civil War . . . when West Virginia broke off from the Confederate State of Virginia.”

“Who *is* the President now?” Scooter Thompson asked from the front row. “Is it still that . . . what’s’s name?” Several tentative guesses were called out, but no one knew for sure anymore.

“We can cross that bridge when we get to it,” Baxter told them and sat down.

“Let’s do it *now!*” Jackson called out. “Before them clowns over in California try to pull us back in with another land grab.”

“What about us jus’ a’joinin’ up with Nevada?” Moray Willits countered. “Seems like that’d be a whole lot better fer business.”

Peachy Watkins jumped up from the front row. “I for one don’t by god wanna be no part of no *Nevada*,” she cackled. “Not with all their gamblin’ an’ whorin’ an’ atom bomb testin’.”

And so the flood gates sprung open for a good old-fashioned American hometown debate. The speakers were passionate in their views. No one had a very good grasp of the underlying facts. And everybody seemed to want to be heard first. Shadrack just leaned back and let them go at it. A shoving scuffle started to break out between Moray Willits and Elroy Jackson, but Varner Woolsey, the newly appointed Police Chief and Minister of Defense, fired a single bullet into the floorboards of the meeting hall and the belligerents all settled down to a noisy, enthusiastic, nonviolent discussion.

Moray Willits was finishing a long rant about the need for a stable and visitor-friendly business climate when he sensed the latticed window panes vibrating from a powerful engine outside. He turned his head to glance out front. “Well I’ll be damned,” he said. “Ain’t seen one a those for a coon’s age.”

“What is it, Moray?”

“Damned if it ain’t the CHP.”

People flocked to the window where they saw a California Highway Patrol cruiser double-parked behind the diagonal vehicles at the curb, engine thrumming and vapor swirling out of its tailpipe. Two officers sat as immobile as mannequins inside. A moment later a dirty old Modoc County Sheriff’s unit swung around them and pulled into the red zone by the fire hydrant. A big, stoop-shouldered deputy with hangdog jowls climbed out and lumbered over to shake hands with Riley Suggs, who had been buffing up the new bronze plaque. Suggs pointed inside.

“Why that’s Drummond Buck,” announced Chief Woolsey. “Dang! Haven’t seen him since we worked together at the jail. Surprised he ain’t retired by now.”

“What’s he want?” someone asked.

“Guess we’re gonna find out,” Woolsey responded. “Here he comes.” The new Chief pressed his way to the front door. “Drum,” he said as he greeted the deputy, “it’s sure been a long time. Come on in. Doin’ civil process now? I thought you plumb retired.”

“I did. But they called me back. Lost a lot of good deputies during the shutdown, and now they’re scramblin’ t’hire some of us back. Got myself a nice signing bonus,” he grinned. “Say, it smells like gunpowder in here. You folks havin’ a celebration?”

“Naw, just a little housekeeping I took care of. What brings you out here to Bristlecone?”

“Bristlecone?”

“That’s what we call this valley territory now that you boys in California dumped us. And, for your information, I’ve been appointed Chief of Police and Minister of Defense. Got a new

uniform on order.”

“Well, I guess I better be congratulatin’ you right now, ’cause it ain’t gonna last. And ya might wanna think about canceling that uniform order.”

“Now why’s that, Drum?”

Buck pulled a sheet of paper out of his satchel. “The Sheriff’s Department’ll be takin’ over law enforcement again here in the valley. An’ you’ll be in California again. I’ve been sent out to serve and post this notice about it.”

The mood around them changed from somber to hostile as he spoke.

“What?” the deputy asked. “I say something wrong?”

Wiley Baxter inserted himself between the two lawmen. “When is this takeover supposed to happen?” he asked genially.

“Who’re you?”

“Name’s Baxter. Wiley Baxter. I serve as Attorney General of Bristlecone. You can deliver that notice to me. Thank you. Now, when is this supposed to happen?”

“Well,” Buck said uncomfortably, pointing to the sheet, “it says there, January first. Start a’ the new year.”

“That’s in just over two days.”

“Yup.”

“I see,” said Baxter, still cordial, still smiling. “There’s only one problem.”

“Oh?”

“And it’s a big one.”

“What’s that?”

“Nobody asked *us* about it. And two days won’t give us time to call an election.”

Buck’s eyes narrowed. “Now, we ain’t gonna have no trouble from you, are we?” he asked as if addressing an unruly child.

A titter of amusement spread through the room.

Baxter took a breath, then continued in an even tone. “We’re not a part of California. Am I right?”

“Not right now.”

“California doesn’t exist.”

Buck nodded.

“Then you have no authority here, my friend. Nor do those CHP officers outside. California law does not apply here. Modoc ordinances do not apply. You can’t even ticket a drunken jaywalker here.” He smiled pleasantly and offered the deputy his hand. “Nonetheless, on behalf of the independent jurisdiction of Bristlecone, I am happy to receive your notice.”

“*Jeeze!* An’ I thought you folks were gonna be happy as pigs in mud t’have us take ya back in.”

Chief Woolsey walked the Modoc County deputy back to his car trying to sooth his ruffled feathers. “Ya gotta see it from their point a’ view, Drum. California jus’ outright fucked ’em good an’ then dumped ’em without s’much as a g’bye kiss. They’re still mad’s swarmin’ hornets ’bout it all. But y’give ’em a little time’n you an’ me’re probably gonna be back a’workin’ right side by side again.” Both men ignored the haughty CHP escort and ended up shaking hands and pounding each other on the back in fraternal good will.

Inside Attorney General Baxter was trying to convince the commission that they needed to send a petition to Congress and the President *right now*, before California accomplished their land grab coup. "I can draft something up by tomorrow morning, if you pass a motion to authorize Shadrack here and the secretary to sign it."

"Who's the secretary?" Kearns stepped in. "We never appointed one,"

"I don't know. How about Katie Groves? She seems to be doing it anyhow."

"I don't know. Katie, you willin'?"

"What? You want me to take the minutes, just because I'm the only female up here?" She shrugged. "I guess somebody has to do it."

"Better make that 'Bristlecone Territory *Clerk*,'" Baxter corrected.

Katie shrugged. "Whatever."

"Well . . . is there a motion then?"

"About what?" Hiram Atwater asked from the back.

"*Hell's bells!* About Katie bein' elected secretary."

"Clerk," Shadrack corrected.

"Oh."

Silence, then Peachy Watkins spoke up, "I move t'appoint her. She'll do a fine job."

"Any more talkin'?" asked Shadrack.

Nobody had anything else to say.

"Alright. Everybody in favor, say 'Aye.'"

Most people mumbled, "Aye."

"Nays?"

No one said anything.

"The ayes've got'er," pronounced Shadrack. "Katie's our new clerk. Welcome aboard, young lady."

Kearns looked over at Baxter. "Now . . . we gotta have a motion about that other thing . . . how do ya wanna put it?"

"Well . . . two things, actually." He turned to address Shadrack. "I think we need a motion to petition for statehood right away . . . to both the Congress and the President . . . and we need to call for an election of the people to ratify it all."

Moray Willits was the first one to his feet.

"Moray?" Shadrack said.

"The voters don't know all the upshots a' this thing. An' I'm not so sure we ain't a'gettin' ahead a' ourselves here. What's t'hurt in waitin' an' seein' how things play out by 'emselves a'fore we all go jumpin' offa the cliff."

"Time is of the essence," Baxter reminded him. "If we don't act now, we may lose our standing to petition. We can always rescind it later."

"I know . . . I know . . . but still . . . how're we gonna run our businesses here without the backin' a' the State a' California?"

"Good question. But we can talk about that as a part of the voting process."

Baxter himself made the motions, which were seconded by Elan Groves. Both passed on strong voice votes, but not unanimously.

Elan Groves cleared his throat. "How are we going to send these petition off to Washington?"

There's no time for the mail to get through. Not in two days. And the Internet is still down for all practical purposes. Maybe we could fax them, but the phone lines and cells towers are not what you'd call reliable. And they're censored anyway. This is the sort of thing that would be noticed and blocked, is my guess. So . . . assuming you can get everything drafted and signed by tomorrow morning, how do you propose to get this petition out?"

Wiley Baxter sucked in his breath. He hadn't thought about that. Slowly he shook his head, thinking. "Anybody got a CB radio?"

"I got one," Honus Cribs offered, "but it won't do no good. They got the signals all scrambled perty much all 'a the time."

Katie Grove's hand shot up.

"Katie," Shadrack called on her, "you got a idea?"

"Satellite phone," she said. "We can fax the petitions in over a sat phone."

"Problem with that," her father pointed out patiently, "is we don't have access to a satellite phone."

Katie smiled. "I think I know somebody who can help us out."

PRIVATE FIRST CLASS JEROME DESOTO gazed out at the gray, barren mountain ranges surrounding Holloman Air Force Base like a prison wall. For what seemed like about the hundredth time he was contemplating the pros and cons of going AWOL. To him desertion was just one small step short of suicide, but things had been going from bad to worse since his transfer to this new unit in Alamogordo, New Mexico. His new company had no use for a full-blooded American Indian here, especially one who presumed to have expertise in radio electronics. The notion was laughable. And they already had more radiomen than they could keep busy, so Jerome was tasked with the jobs no one else would do.

Somewhere a telephone rang. A moment later a pit-faced soldier named Ringer slouched out of the com tent and called out to him, "Hey Chief, ya got a phone call." Ringer stared at him insolently, then laughed. "Thought you people used tom-toms. Ya better make it snappy. Y'got latrine duty again today."

Jerome pushed open the canvass flap of the tent and picked up an antique Bakelite handset as the duty officer slipped out to give him some privacy. "Hello?"

"Jerome, it's Katie." A long pause on the line. "Hello? Jerome? Are your there?"

"I'm here."

"I know we haven't talked much lately . . ."

"I wasn't sure I'd be hearing from you again. How are you?"

"I'm good, I guess. I know we have a lot to catch up on, but I need to ask you for another, like, favor. If you're not mad at me or anything, or, you know, if you're still my friend."

Another pause. Then Jerome sighed. "We're still friends. As far as I'm concerned. Things have just gotten . . . depressing here . . . what do you need?"

Katie told him.

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS LATER A DIRTY PLUM-COLORED SEDAN climbed the highway from Cedarville toward the Cedar Pass. Fresh snow clung to the white pines across Cedar Creek and clumps plopped down into the white powdered meadows. The blacktop was already free of

snow and dry in all but the shady stretches. But Katie took it slow with her mother's car. In the back seat an exhausted Jerome DeSoto slumped with his eyes closed and head nodding. He was a fugitive now, traveling on forged credentials. His flight in a stolen Army humvee to the sanctuary of Bristlecone had exhausted him. Katie had urged him to take the morning off and sleep a few hours at the farmhouse, but Jerome insisted on being shuttled to the Modoc Electronic parts store in Alturas to find some transistors and a variable capacitor and hardware to jury-rig the purloined sat phone and make it invisible to prying surveillance. Time was running out.

Beside her in the passenger seat rode Shadrack Smithers, the chaperone her father had insisted on, humming a little country ditty to himself. "Sure is perty up 'ere," he said. "An' the mountain air . . . oh my!"

"You're in a cheery mood," Katie smiled. "Seems like you've been cheerful ever since you got back from Kiefertville."

"Tha's a fac'," he grinned back at her. "I've found me some peace a'mind back thar, I reckon. Back in Kiefertville"

"I'd love to hear about it," she prompted. "That is, if you feel like, you know, sharing."

Shadrack thought about it as the car approached the old ski lift turnoff just below the summit. The canopy had been removed from over the highway, and the checkpoint shed stood abandoned beside the road. Back by the ski lift they caught a glimpse of the gigantic empty tent flapping vacantly in the morning breeze. There were no vehicles anywhere to be seen.

"This war it?" he asked. "The bound'ry 'tween Bristlecone an' . . . an' whatever they a'callin' 'emselves now?"

"The Pacific Coast Nation," Katie replied. "Looks like a ghost town now, doesn't it? Kind of like, you know, a no-man's land . . . no . . . not '*land*' . . . it's more like a no-man's . . . '*time*.' You know, an . . . *interlude*. Lost here between the old Pacific Coast Nation and the new . . . what? . . . the new California? . . . the Bristlecone Nation?"

Shadrack nodded absently, apparently lost in his own thoughts. After a while, as they crested the summit and started down the long, winding slope into the Pitt River Valley, he opened up. "Don' min' a'talkin' t'you 'bout it at all, young lady. Kiefertville, 'at is. I reckon I ain't got no secrets left in me no more. No ma'am." He sought out the right words. "Y'see . . . seems t'me like a . . . a *fear* . . . an' . . . an' a *cravin'* . . . yes'am, plain ol' fear an' cravin' . . . 'ey both had a stone cold grip on me . . ."

"That doesn't sound like you, Shadrack," Katie said, surprised. "I can't imagine *you* being afraid of anything."

"Well . . . I reckon I war . . . most a m'whole life long, seems."

"What would you be afraid of? If you don't mind my asking."

He drew a deep breath and sighed. "Mostly . . . jus' . . . a'losin' Tildie. Afeared a her up an leavin' me, I reckon."

"But why would she want to do that?"

"Guess I never fig'ered I was worthy of 'er. I al'ays fig'ered she deserved better'n me." He thought about it. "An' mos'ly on account a'a secret I was a'keepin' from 'er. Sumpthin' I done a long time gone by . . . afore I ever met 'er." He nodded to himself. "Anyhow, o'er in Kiefertville, I done shook off all 'at contrary thinkin'. Now I's at peace . . . mostly." He waited

for the next words to come. “Y’see, if’n ’ere be a afterlife . . . well . . . I reckon now . . . I’ll meet up with Tildie again thar, bless ’er soul . . . an’ she’ll know the truth . . . an’ it won’t trouble her none. An if’n thar *ain’t* . . . no afterlife, ’at is . . . well . . . then I fig’er thar ain’t nothing much t’trouble m’self ’bout no more. None of it don’t matter nohow. Either way, I feel . . . I feel like somethin’ bad’s been scoured away inside me . . . I feel . . . I reckon I feel free inside . . . fer th’first time in most’a m’life.”

Katie waited for more, but after a moment she prompted, “What happened in Kieferville?”

Shadrack told her. About the murder he committed as a young man, and his attempt to confess it to the mustached Sergeant Wiederman at the police station. And how the policeman turned him away. Just didn’t want to be bothered with what a hobbling old man might have done nearly half a century ago. And as the highway grade began to flatten and straighten out, he told her about his encounter with Reverend Martin Blythe, and how the good minister had pointed out the error in his thinking. About how the true Christian path runs not through the civil authorities, but directly from a man’s heart to God. All he had to do was confess his sin to the Lord, if he ever hoped to see Tildie again. Assuming there *was* an afterlife. And he had confessed and opened his heart. The police were not a part of it at all.

Katie turned left where the road t-boned into Highway 395 and followed the North Fork south past the old California agriculture inspection station, which stood unused and empty. “Looks like another ghost town,” she smiled. “Another no-man’s land.”

Shadrack grinned. “’Nother ‘no-man’s *time*,’ ya mean, don’cha, young lady?”

“So,” Katie smiled as they slowed at the outskirts of Alturas, “So . . . in Kieferville you finally found yourself.”

Shadrack thought about it. “Reckon ’s’more like I got *rid* ’a myself thar.”

ON THE FIRST DAY OF JANUARY two older gentlemen, neither of whom had bothered to stay up and ring in the New Year, were out walking their dogs as the sun rose. Nothing about the valley seemed to have changed. Meadowlarks warbled and trilled from the tall sagebrush as they always had. The alkali playa mirrored back the faded sunlight from its usual butterscotch-colored scrim of rainwater. White pine and juniper still scented the Cedar Creek canyon trail. Distant humps of black cattle grazed as always on the vetch and rye grass beneath the pewter cast of winter sky. And the crisp air itself, punctuated by plumes of steam from artesian hot water vents across the valley, still exuded that familiar Great Basin ambiance.

But the two men had been told that, while they slept, something would change in the invisible realm of human politics. Now they felt it in their bones. The State of California, they felt, had winked back into existence. As had the States of Washington and Oregon. All with the stroke of a pen in some far-off chamber of secrets. As if by magic, the pads of the dogs’ feet and the soles of the mens’ boots now trod the soil and grass and concrete sidewalks once again claimed by the State of California. The Pacific Coast Nation was over and done with. Dead. Gone. A bad dream. A trick of some banished conjurer. It had all been a complex political swindle of some devious sort, the men speculated as their dogs watered opposite sides of the same fire hydrant, to achieve something that was never explained to the peons who lacked proper security clearance, which included everybody in the Surprise Valley. And they were not particularly happy about it.

“They give us two days’ notice,” grumbled Honus Cribs, as he tried to decide for the

hundredth time which end of his companion's bull-pug was uglier. "What the heck? Elan Groves finally got some money put into our Bristlecone bank account, didn't he?"

"That's what I hear," rejoined Hiram Atwater. "We was jus' a'gettin' our feet on the groun'. An' now it's all been took back."

"Well . . . me'be. Me'be not. They mighta been able to push us *out*, I reckon . . . but I guess they ain't a'gonna be gettin' us *back* so easy without our *say so*."

Hiram uttered an "Amen" to that.

THERE HAD BEEN A GLITCH. The State of California had *not* winked back into existence as planned. And the Pacific Coast Nation still hovered like a patient on life support. The checksum algorithm on the mainframe in Langley, Virginia, had not matched the algorithms running simultaneously on computers in Berkeley and Portland and Seattle. It took technicians nearly four hours to track down the source of the problem. The glitch appeared to be partly technical and partly political, but the political part was cloaked in impenetrable security, making it nearly impossible to determine whether the error arose from the machine algorithms or from human thinking.

SHADRACK WAS JUST PULLING ON his mud boots early New Year's morning when the telephone rang at the farmhouse. Crissy answered it, and Shadrack figured it was none of his never-mind, so he unlatched the back door and began squishing out toward the garden plot.

But Crissy summoned him back. "Phone call for you, Shadrack!"

"Fer me?" he called.

"Yeah."

"Who is it?"

"Someone calling himself 'the Ambassador'."

"The who?"

"The Ambassador."

"Who's 'at?"

"I don't know. But he sounds important. I think you better take it."

So Shadrack grumbled and limped back to the house, tugged off his boots, and picked up the phone in the kitchen. "Lo?"

"Mr. Shadrack Smithers?"

"Jus' 'Shadrack'."

The voice was deep and mellifluous. Calm and commanding. Shadrack pictured a rotund Orson Wells mouthing the round vowels and biting off crisp syllables. The voice demanded a face-to-face meeting with Shadrack. As soon as possible. Shadrack suggested a public session at the Senior Center. He preferred to convene the entire convention. But the Ambassador said no. He insisted that their first meeting be private. Shadrack could bring members of his staff. But no more than four representatives from each side. It was more an ultimatum than a conversation.

Katie arrived just as Shadrack had returned to his hoeing. Crissy briefed her about the phone call. "What did he, like, do?" Katie asked.

"Just went on out, back to hoeing."

Katie tugged on her own mud boots, threaded her chestnut pony tail through the back of her

Surprise Valley Hornets cap, and slogged out to confront him in the vegetable patch. She asked Shadrack about the details of the phone call, which he gave her.

“Did you, like, call anyone yet?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“Didn’t much like the fella’s attitude.” He considered for a moment. “Ya think I shoudda?”

“Of course! This could be important.” She fumbled her cell phone out of her jacket pocket. “I’ll call Dad and ask him to get hold of two other people. Like, get them over here. This Ambassador fellow said you could have four?”

“At’s whut ’e said.”

“Well then . . . it’s you and dad . . . and how about Wiley Baxter?”

“Wiley’d be fine.”

“And . . . and . . . Horace Kearns?”

“Him too. I like Horace.”

“Okay. Good. And after that, I want to take you out and, you know, get you cleaned up. Is that okay with you?”

“Well . . . I reckon . . . but whut ’bout these weeds?”

“They can wait until tomorrow.”

The parties met shortly after noon at Shadrack’s farmhouse. A caravan of vehicles drove down the long muddy driveway and parked in formation on the rutted grass. Armed men in State Police uniforms entered the structure first and inspected every room, then waited outside on the veranda while the principals filed into the kitchen. First came the Homeland Security Liaison, then Senior Legal Counsel, and finally the Deputy of Public Information, who screwed a high definition camera onto a tripod and stationed it in the farthest corner. Shadrack shook each hand and promptly forgot their names and titles. When the forum had been inspected a second time by staff, the Ambassador himself finally entered. He was an average-sized young man, perhaps in his mid-thirties, with a round face and round wire rim glasses, dark trimmed hair, and a thin black moustache. Younger and slighter than his voice had promised on the telephone. He wore spit-shined black dress shoes and a black military trench coat, which he declined to remove, suggesting the brevity he anticipated for the meeting. The Ambassador did not smile, nor speak, nor offer his hand. They all settled in silently across the trestle table, the teams of four facing each other from opposite sides.

The Ambassador came right to the point. “We’ve got a problem,” he projected in his deep, honeyed tones.

“What kinda problem?” Shadrack asked. He was about as spiffed up as he could be, with a fresh haircut, a trimmed beard, and a clean pair of overalls. Katie had hustled him into the barbershop in town and then over to the Hot Springs for a free bath in the new Emperor Room.

“Homeland Security won’t approve the reestablishment of the State of California until your petitions have been resolved.”

“Our petitions?” Shadrack asked as if he didn’t know.

“Your petitions to Congress,” the Ambassador replied irritably, “and to the President. Your petitions asking to establish Bristlecone as an independent State of the Union.”

“Oh, them,” Shadrack smiled. “Has the boys in Congress took a look at thars?”

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that, sir."

"Well now, how 'bout the Pres'dent hisself?"

"I can't discuss that either."

"But'r they considerin' a'grantin' 'em then, or whut?"

The Ambassador shook his head. "I can't discuss any of that with you. National security."

"Oh . . . well . . . what're ya plannin' on talkin' t'us 'bout, then? You's the one a'wantin' this here palaver."

"We want you to withdraw the petitions, sir."

"Withdraw 'em? *Both* 'a 'em?"

"Both of them."

Shadrack pursed his lips, then surveyed carefully from face to face of the support staff on his side of the table. Attorney General Wiley Baxter nodded. Minister of Finance Elan Groves nodded. Horace Kearns coughed, spat into a tissue, and nodded. Finally Katie Groves, who sat at the end of the table recording the proceedings, looked up from her notes, returned his glance with a bright smile, and nodded for him to go on as they had planned.

"Well . . .," Shadrack responded, ". . . don't seem like we kin do that 'til the folks has voted. We got us an election called fer—"

"Next Wednesday," the Ambassador interrupted. "We know that. But this can't wait that long."

"She cain't, huh?" Shadrack leaned back in his chair and scratched where his newly-trimmed whiskers prickled his neck. "Well . . . I guess you was right t'begin with."

"Right? In what way was I right?"

"I reckon y'got yer'self a problem."

The Ambassador leaned back and regarded Shadrack with intense pale blue eyes. "Listen, Mr. Smithers—"

"Shadrack."

"— we are not playing games here. We have the resources, *and* the authority, to turn this entire valley into one big detention camp, and not one of your citizens . . . not one of those *voters* you are talking about . . . not one of them is going to like it a bit."

"But," Shadrack told him, "y'ain't a'gonna do that."

"Why not?"

"'Cause . . . y'a'ready wouldda done it 'afore now." Shadrack showed him his gap-tooth grin. "Y'come here t'palaver, is what y'done. So . . . let's us palaver."

The Ambassador's gaze wavered. He looked down at his hands. He seemed to be contemplating a hidden agenda.

"So," Shadrack pressed, "wha'cha got t'offer us?"

Without so much as a glance toward his retinue, the Ambassador made up his mind. He leaned forward and leveraged his elbows firmly on the table. "What do you want?"

"Whadda *we* want?"

"Yes. Short of statehood."

"Well, I's mighty pleased y'aksed. Yessir. Mighty pleased. 'Cause Elan here, our Financial Minister, an' Wiley Baxter, our Attorney General, they done worked up a little list a ideas 'at jus' might do the trick. Yessir. Elan, why'n'cha tell 'im wha'cha got in min'."

Elan, who did not share Shadrack's comfort in the presence of the Ambassador, cleared his throat nervously. "Well, first of all we would like to receive all the taxes collected by the state and the county before—"

"How much?"

"Well, there's the real estate tax . . ." Elan consulted the packet of papers on the table in front of him ". . . in the amount of—"

"Total," the Ambassador snapped.

"I've got it all here on these spreadsheets." Elan held them out. "The real estate—"

"Total," the Ambassador interrupted again. "*All* taxes."

Elan flipped to the back page. "Don't you want a breakdown—"

"Total. How much?"

"It's . . . I've calculated . . . looks like . . . two million, seven-hundred—"

"We'll give you three million. What else?"

"Well . . . we would like a guaranty of receiving taxes accruing in the—"

"How much?"

"I . . . haven't calculated the exact—"

"Let's make it four million a year for five years and five million a year for the five years following that. What else?"

And so it went. Each of Elan's monetary demands was met or exceeded without debate. It appeared that he could have demanded anything. "Well . . . of course . . . we'll want it all in writing before—"

"The agreement's already being prepared."

"And probably," Elan continued, "some sort of . . . of earnest money to seal—"

"It's already in the contract. Anything else? No?"

"Now just a blasted minute!" Wiley Baxter barged to his feet, his chair tumbling over behind him. "Who do you think you are, trying to buy us off? Push us around?"

The Ambassador turned a cold eye on him. "And you are?"

"Baxter. Wiley Baxter."

"Ah, yes. The so-called Attorney General of this rogue state."

"No more rogue than *you*, my friend. You never bothered to tell us what you were the ambassador *of*. What's your authority here? Just who do you represent, anyway?"

The Ambassador met his eyes calmly. "Sit down, Mr. Baxter. If you have issues you would like to address, please set them forth in a civilized manner."

"Damn right I do!" Baxter remained standing, his face flushed. "And I can think of three big ones right now. First off, I want to know who the hell you and your henchmen represent, and second—"

"We represent interests that cannot be disclosed at this—"

"Just hold on!" Baxter raised his voice. "I'm not finished yet. Second, we are not going to enter into any agreement with you, whoever you represent, without holding an election first . . . or at least airing it out at an open and public forum—"

"I'm afraid that's not—"

"*Hold on*, I said! I'm not done! You had your turn. Now I'll have mine." He was hyperventilating, and paused for a deep breath to compose himself. "My third demand . . . *our*

third demand . . . and this is the most important one . . . and non-negotiable . . . and probably a deal breaker . . . is that our citizens *will not* be subject to your goddamned sedition laws.”

The Ambassador flicked his eyes toward the Public Information Deputy and drew a quick slash across his throat. The deputy arose quietly, switched off the camera, and began disassembling it.

“We demand that our citizens be free from those laws,” Baxter continued. “No one here will be going to jail for speaking the truth. We demand total and permanent immunity. From sedition and any other imagined crimes or prosecutions originating outside our borders. Bristlecone is, and always will be, a sovereign state. A sanctuary. Do you understand?”

The Ambassador sat in silence for a long moment, then stood abruptly, scraping back his chair and making a show of studying his wristwatch in exaggerated surprise. He turned to the advisors on his side of the table. “Gentlemen—”

“Who the hell decides anyway,” Baxter persisted, “what speech is *permitted* and what speech amounts to *sedition*?”

“Gentlemen,” the Ambassador repeated, “I see we have overstayed our schedule here. I know your time is valuable and I promised you this would not take more than,” he glance again at his watch, “a half hour. I am declaring this meeting is now adjourned, and I excuse you and thank you for participating.” He leaned toward the stern-faced Senior Legal Counsel and said quietly, “Hugh, you’ll see that the agreement is prepared as discussed and brought back here for signature as soon as possible?”

“Of course,” Hugh nodded.

“Excellent! Excellent.” One by one he escorted the members of his party to the kitchen door like old lodge brothers, with a hand on each shoulder and a muttered quip of valediction. When they had all stepped through, the Ambassador turned back and spoke in his mellow, rolling syllables, “Mr. Smithers, if you and your staff will be patient enough to remain where you are just a little longer, I will return in a few minutes to continue our fascinating discussion.” He pulled the door shut behind him.

“Well don’t that just beat all!” Horace Kearns said. “What the heck was *that* all about?”

“What I think—” Elan began.

“Shh,” Baxter whispered, shaking his head and holding a finger to his lips. “Might be bugged.” He pointed to the Ambassador’s briefcase still resting on the corner of the table. “He’ll be back.”

Soon they saw movement outside the windows. State police were escorting the Ambassador’s support staff to their vehicles frozen into the rutted lawn. One by one the cars started, then threaded up the narrow driveway until all that remained was a single black Chevy sedan.

WITH A SINGLE BRISK KNOCK THE AMBASSADOR pushed open the kitchen door and hustled to his place at the table. He shook off his long black trench coat, folded it carefully over the back of the chair next to him, and dabbed perspiration from his forehead with a handkerchief. Without the coat, he appeared shrunken in his gray woolen sweater and rust-colored corduroy trousers, except for his belly, which mimicked the rounded contours of his face and eyeglasses. He looked more like a young college professor than a high-powered diplomat. But behind his silver-rimmed glasses his eyes had not lost their intensity. He turned to Wiley Baxter and

motioned for him to be seated. “The algorithms,” he said.

“The what?” Baxter barked.

“The algorithms,” he repeated.

“What are you talking about?” the lawyer demanded as he eased into his chair.

“You *asked* me: who determines what statements amount to sedition?”

“I know I did.”

“Well . . . that’s it. That’s the thing. It’s not really a *who*. It’s a *what*.” He paused to let the concept percolate. “Now, before we proceed any further, let me first ask everyone to turn off their cell phones. And any other recording devices in the room. Are there any others?”

“Jus’ Katie,” Shadrack quipped. “Only she ain’t no device, I reckon. An’ she’ll be a’stayin’ put.”

The Ambassador glanced at her, nodded, then returned to Baxter. “The algorithms are running on super-fast quantum-entangled computers. They are the only processors with the capacity to decide instantaneously what speech is permitted and what speech is forbidden. They alone can crunch all the necessary data in so little time. How else *could* it be done?”

“Who *are* you?” Baxter stammered.

“Joshu Hardcastle’s my name.” He reached across the table toward Baxter, held out his open palm, and smiled a smile that made him look like an entirely different person. A far gentler one.

“And I believe we may have an understanding after all, Mr. Baxter.”

Baxter tentatively gripped the proffered hand. “And who did you say you represent?”

“Ah . . . we’ll get to that a little later.”

Elan Groves stepped in. “So . . . what kind of data are you talking about here, Mr. Hardcastle?”

“*All* of it. Mountains of it. Oceans of it. Judicial decisions. *All* judicial decisions ever recorded. Legislative history. *All* legislative history. Of every kind. All digitized libraries. NSA data and intercepts of almost every phone call made in the last ten years. Internet records. *All* internet records. Facebook. YouTube. Microsoft. Google. Amazon. Preferences and profiles. Location and travel plans. All footprints of every kind of everyone on the entire internet.”

“*Jesus!*” Baxter breathed.

“Only then can a statistically reliable assessment be made as to the *intent* of the words a particular person has spoken.”

“That’s plum crazy!”

“Yes. It is.”

Elan spoke up, “That’s too much for a computer to take into account in a hundred years.”

“Maybe it once was, Mr. Groves. Not now. Not with quantum computers. All of it . . . *all* of it . . . can be indexed and crunched in a matter of seconds. Milliseconds. Computed to an accuracy of five decimal places.”

“That’s crazy!” Baxter repeated.

“Isn’t it?”

“Whatever happened to the judge and a jury?”

“Not nearly as reliable. They can get it wrong. Often do, in fact. But not the quantum algorithms.”

A long stunned silence echoed off the Victorian woodwork as this brave new world reverber-

ated around them. Finally Shadrack cleared his throat. “Jus’ tell me this here one thing, Josh . . . jus’ why’re you *here*?”

Joshu smiled. “Why are *you* here, Mr. Smithers?”

“Shadrack,” he corrected, then considered the question carefully, wagging his head slowly, before replying with a grin, “‘S complicated, I reckon.”

“I couldn’t have said it better, Shadrack.”

“Do you mean to tell us,” Horace Kearns coughed, spitting into a tissue, “that this whole mess we’re in is bein’ controlled by *robots*?”

“Not robots, Mr. Kearns. We’re talking about data processing machines with constantly upgrading algorithms. Artificial intelligence. The algorithms are what you’d call the programs. The software. The apps. They don’t walk around and zap you with ray guns.”

“But,” Elan asked, “aren’t there people . . . technicians . . . to control these machines.”

“Ah,” said Joshu, settling back in his chair, “now you’ve pierced to the heart of the matter. Control. Or who is controlling whom. Or what is controlling what. Or whom. I’m sorry to say that those distinctions are no longer clear.” He hesitated for a moment to watch their stunned reactions. “Let’s go back to your original question by way of example. The crime of sedition. The problem with sedition is *not* ascertaining a person’s intent when he has spoken. No. The real problem is determining what intent *should* constitute a criminal act. And I’m afraid the algorithms have gotten into that business now too.”

“Wait a minute,” Wiley Baxter interjected. “Are you telling me that the politicians have all bought into this craziness? And the courts, too?”

“That’s a long and complicated story, Mr. Baxter. The short answer is, nobody really knows at this time. But hopefully we can get a look inside some of those algorithms and sort it out as we work together here in Bristlecone.”

A long silence ensued, while the echoes of the words “we” and “Bristlecone” jittered irreconcilably. One by one his advisors turned to Shadrack for direction. The old man shifted his painful hip and finally spoke up, “First thing y’tol’ us, Josh, was y’wanted us t’drop our petitions. Am I right?”

“Yes, that’s what I said, but—”

“Hol’ on. If’n we drop them petitions, seems t’me there won’t never be no state a’ Bristlecone t’begin with. Just the same ol’ state a’ California.”

“That’s right. And *now* I’m asking you *not* to withdraw your petitions. On the contrary. I want to help you perfect them. I want to see them granted. I’m counting on the establishment of the free state of Bristlecone . . . as a sort of . . . a last resort.”

“Don’t make no sense,” muttered Kearns. “None of it.”

“Yes it does,” Baxter countered. “Sort of, anyway. That first part of this meeting, the part that was videoed, that was all a dog-and-pony show for those officials he brought along with him.”

Joshu did not contradict him.

“And that’s why he scrambled them outta here as soon as I started talking about sedition and holding an election and conditions they could never agree to.”

“They left to prepare the agreement—” Joshu began.

“Now hold on here,” Elan said. “What about our money? You promised us nearly fifty-

million dollars if we withdrew our petition. Guaranteed. Over ten years. Will we see any of that money if we don't drop the petitions?"

Joshu shifted uncomfortably. "Not likely you'd ever see much of it either way—"

"And now you're saying you *don't* want us to sign the damned agreement. Don't want us to withdraw our petitions."

"That's correct."

"While your friends have preserved their deniability," Baxter added.

Joshu lowered his voice, its oratorical splendor evaporating. "That's one way of characterizing it. These are dangerous times."

"But they're on board?" Baxter asked. "With you, I mean? Your friends? They don't want this thing signed?"

"I . . . I can't speak for them. But, yes, in my opinion most of them share my concerns."

"I don't know," Elan pondered out loud. "I just can't see giving up fifty-million dollars just on this fellow's say-so. The valley could sure use the money."

Katie's hand shot up.

"And I think the people around here would want us to take it," Elan continued. "And they're the voters, after all. They're the ones to decide. We've got to hear what they have to say." He threw up his hands. "This is crazy! We don't know what's going to happen. It's chaos. But a pot of money would make me a lot more comfortable."

"The devil you know, eh, Elan?" Baxter grinned.

"Katie?" Shadrack said. "You got somethin'?"

"Yes." She laid down her pen and gave a little cough. "This agreement they're drafting, it's not going to say anything about the sedition laws, am I right?"

Joshu nodded. "Just about withdrawing your petitions. And the financial terms I discussed with Mr. Groves."

"Don't forget the money, sweetheart" Elan added. "That's the important part."

"Okay," Katie continued, "so . . . like . . . if we sign the agreement and, you know, withdraw the petitions . . . then we'll end up back in California again . . . we'll end up subject to their sedition laws . . . and subject to the control of those data processing machines Mr. Hardcastle told us about. Am I right?"

A mumble of assent rose in confirmation.

"*Oh my god,*" she said, "we don't want *that*, do we? I mean, *totally!* However much money they offer, you know, to pay us off."

"But you're proposing we leave nearly fifty-million dollars on the table," her father admonished. "We *need* that money . . . for roads . . . and salaries . . . and public works—"

"Aw, we'll get it back," Baxter said. "Or some of it at least. Most of it's our money, anyhow. They're holding our tax dollars and trust funds from when they tossed us out."

"Not that much."

"Maybe not, but we can . . . we can sue for reparations. For the damages they caused us. And demand payments in lieu of taxes from the federal government. And . . . and . . . we got lots of tricks up our sleeves . . ."

"Not that much," Elan repeated.

They fell to pondering the dilemma.

Joshu broke the silence. “We may have funds available to offset some of your losses. But first I would need to—”

Baxter snapped around. “*We?*” he glared. “Just who the hell *are* you? And who are you working for?”

Joshu lowered his eyes and said nothing.

Shadrack spoke up. “D’y’think the President’s a’gonna grant us statehood, Josh? If’n that’s what the folks here vote for? Or me’by the Congress?”

Joshu considered how he should break the news. “Frankly,” he said gently, “I don’t believe there *is* a President anymore. Or a Congress. At least not as the independent institutions you’re familiar with. Certainly not with the power to grant your petitions. Most of them haven’t been heard from for nearly a year.”

“Well . . . who’s runnin’ the show, then? The robots?”

Joshu smiled. “There are no robots, Shadrack. And I’m not sure who is running the show anymore. My guess is that it’s a conglomerate of some sort . . . of mid-level government functionaries . . . both federal and state . . . together with a syndicate of CEOs from the largest corporations . . . and, of course, the data processors . . . both human and quantum. Technicians. Economists. Bankers. The military and Homeland Security play a big role too, but its mostly classified.”

“Nobody elected? Nobody voted for by the people?”

“Some may have been elected, once. But no one seems to be responsible to the voters any longer.”

“But . . . but that’s un*American!*” Baxter interjected. “Undemocratic.”

Joshu nodded. “Well . . . that’s the thing. You have to understand the new way of thinking. *Their* way of thinking. Whoever these people in control are . . . assuming there *are* any people in control any longer . . . they no longer believe that democracy is the best way to go. Certainly not in making important decisions. They don’t want to allow the votes of the most ignorant and the most uninformed to . . . to dilute . . . to undermine the mathematical precision of the data stream analyses.”

“That’s un*American,*” Baxter repeated.

“What’s the hold up, then?” Shadrack asked. “With us’n? Are we in er out? A’California I mean?”

Joshu shrugged. “I’m not sure. The algorithms have created their own language to talk to each other, and we can’t understand what they’re saying yet. But they just can’t seem to handle these political issues. It’s all too soft and mushy. Especially when they have no precedents. No prior data. And no power to extrapolate into the future with confidence. At least not yet.” He thought for a moment. “Or else someone’s gaming the system. There’s no way of knowing at this time.” He paused again. “This is just my opinion. I don’t know. I’m not a political analyst. I’m a technician. I’m a programmer. A data analyst. And this is unprecedented for me too.”

“Well, at least there’s food on the table,” Shadrack observed. “An’ the lights’re still a’workin’. An’ the toilets a’flushin’. Guess it could be a whole lot worse.”

Baxter frowned at him. “But there *are* people in detention camps. *Concentration* camps, I’d call them. Thousands. Maybe millions. Disappeared. Unaccounted for. And I doubt that their toilets are flushing so well.”

Shadrack's grin faded. "You's right, Wiley. Reckon I was jus' a'thinkin' mighty selfish." He shook his head, but then the grin crept back. "But a'speaken a' toilets, I reckon it's time fer this ol' man t'take a bathroom break. So I's a'callin' recess."

THE MESSENGERS ARRIVED while they were still milling around the coffee pot. The officer in command wore a crisp tan California Highway Patrol uniform with a seven-point badge, silver lieutenant bars on the collar, and a nameplate that read "L MOXON." He was accompanied by a beefier patrolman, similarly uniformed, but without the collar bars, and an elderly gentleman in a pale gray herringbone suit, who carried a briefcase and introduced himself as "the notary". Lieutenant Moxon withdrew four copies of a substantial document from a large manila envelope he carried. "They need all four originals signed and notarized and returned immediately" he said.

Wiley Baxter said, stepped forward. "I'll take those." He kept one and handed the others around to Shadrack, Elan, and Horace Kearns. "Now, if you fellas will excuse us, we're going into closed session to review and discuss these agreements before we sign anything."

"We're not supposed to let them out of our sight," the lieutenant objected.

"Tough," Baxter replied as he ushered the three visitors out of the kitchen. "You fellows can wait out here. Or on the veranda."

When the door was closed, Elan asked, "Shouldn't Joshu be in on this?"

"Good idea," Baxter replied, beginning to read. "Bring him in through the back door."

"And Katie?" Shadrack suggested.

"Her too. Bring her in the back way with Joshu. Now shush up and let me read this damned thing." Baxter perused the twenty-four page agreement by skimming the standard legalese and boilerplate and studying the unique operational language. It was pretty much as Joshu had said. There were covenants to withdraw their petitions for statehood and commitments from the State of California—which, he noted, was a purported party that did not yet exist—to repay the tax and other monies as previously discussed. There were signature lines for Shadrack Smithers, CEO, and Katie Groves, Clerk of the Bristlecone Territory. The attached exhibits contained repayment schedules, federal and state disclaimer forms, a list of penalties for breach of covenant, and a legal description of the Bristlecone Territory. After ten minutes he slapped the document down on the table.

Everyone turned to him and waited.

"Well," Shadrack ventured, "d'ya reckon we oughta sign 'er?"

"We can't sign this without running it by the folks at the convention," Kearns interjected, coughing into his handkerchief. "In an open and public meeting session."

Elan shook his head. "Sounds like we have to sign it today . . . right now . . . or the deal's off." He turned to Joshu. "Isn't that right?"

"That's the way I see it," Joshu agreed.

"Katie?" Shadrack asked, scratching the short bristles on his neck.

"You already know how I feel about it," she said somberly, shaking her ponytail. "Like, no sedition laws."

They all turned back to the lawyer.

"Wiley?" Shadrack prompted.

Baxter stood and made eye contact with each of them, one after another. "I think Horace has

got it right. Who do we think we are? We've never been delegated the power to execute a document of this nature and gravity. Certainly not without the prior approval of the voters."

"Or at least the approval of the convention," Elan suggested, then turned to Joshu. "Any chance we could buy ourselves another day? To convene the convention?"

Joshu shook his head. "Not likely."

"What's the big hurry?"

Joshu sighed. "They're running against a clock that's not their own. One that they can't control. Maybe no one can control it anymore. I expect it's now or never. They reestablish California or the chance passes by. They have no time to fool around."

"What'll they do?" Kearns asked. "If we don't sign it?"

Joshu shrugged. "It falls apart. Nobody knows for sure what will happen next. The algorithms have been predicting a period of chaos."

"What do *you* think will happen?"

Joshu thought about it. "I think they'll cut you off. They'll redraw California without you. Right away. This afternoon, I expect. They'll erase the Bristlecone territory from their map. Just like before. Like the Pacific Coast Nation. If you won't sign the agreement, they have no other choice. And they'll reestablish California without you."

"But we *can't* sign it!" Elan grumped. "Wiley says we have no authority."

Joshu shrugged, but said nothing.

"Either way," Shadrack sighed, dangling the draft agreement between two gnarled fingers, "this here 'greement 'pears t'be a dead duck."

"Whadda we do now?" Kearns asked.

"Well," Shadrack considered, "I reckon we better invite them boys a'waitin' out there back in t'join us . . . and let'em know what's what."

"I shouldn't be here," Joshu said, rising. With his hand on the back door knob, he turned and added, "I think you're doing the right thing." And then he was gone.

Katie led the two CHP officers and the notary into the kitchen from the foyer, where they had bided their time. "We're going to have to have Mr. Wilbert notarize your signatures," Lieutenant Moxon said impatiently. "Have you signed them yet?"

"No we ain't," Shadrack replied. "An' we ain't a'gonna . . . 'til the whole convention's had a good look at'em and tol' us whut they want us t'do. Thas th' bes' we kin do."

Moxon was not pleased. "How soon can you do that?"

"Tomorrow . . . at the soonest, I reckon."

"Too late. You have to sign them today."

"Sorry," Baxter intervened, moving beside Shadrack. "We have no authority to sign anything of this nature without the express prior consent and authorization of the conferees—"

"*Shit!*" Moxon spat. "I *knew* this was going to happen. You people . . ." He shook his head. "Well, give 'em back to me."

Kearns collected three originals and handed them to the lieutenant.

Moxon took the three and said, "I want all four. Where's the fourth one?"

"I'll hold on to mine," Baxter replied. "I'll be presenting copies to the convention tomorrow—"

"My instructions were to bring three signed agreements, or, if you don't sign them, all four unsigned."

Baxter shook his head. "We never agreed to that."

"It's my *orders*," Moxon said, dropping his hand to the side of his service weapon.

Baxter didn't blink. "What're they trying to hide?" he taunted.

The lieutenant unsnapped his holster.

"Katie," Shadrack called out, rising painfully with a long *oomph*, "will ya go on out an' phone Varner Woolsey. Tell 'im we got a s'curity issue." He half-turned to the police officer. "Varner's our Chief a' Police and Min'ster a' Defense." Then to Katie he continued, "Tell 'im we got some out-a-townners . . . fellas with no authority here—"

"Or anywhere else," Baxter added.

"—a'threatenin' us here in our own private home. Have 'im call out the minutemen, would ya . . . an' aks Rodriguez t'bring me m'shotgun while yer at it."

Moxon re-snapped his holster. "We'll see about this," he snarled. He spun and jerked open the door. "We'll fucking *see* about this. And we'll be back. You can fucking count on it." He stormed through the house and out the front door, followed in close step by his partner. The notary, forgotten and swinging his briefcase wildly, had a hard time keeping up and was almost left behind. The patrol car roared to life and spit gravel as it slalomed up the driveway.

Joshu let himself in the back door. "Looks like that went well," he quipped.

"Says 'es's a'comin' back," Shadrack told him.

"I doubt it. What's the point? They've got bigger things to worry about."

"Piss on 'em," Baxter spat with uncharacteristic crudeness. "California doesn't exist. They've got no authority." He slid the fourth agreement into his briefcase. "I guess I better get back to the office and make copies and start handing them around. Before those boys come back . . . just in case they do."

Elan folded up his papers and followed the lawyer out without a word. The room grew somber.

"Guess I better call a meeting of the convention," Kearns said, plucking his Stetson from a wall hook. "How about noon tomorrow?"

"That sounds fine," Shadrack agreed, arching his back to relieve the pain in his hip. "An' thank ya." When he was gone, Shadrack turned to Joshu. "Reckon you'll be a'goin' on back yerself."

"I can't. I've pretty much burned my bridges out there. Do you know of . . . is there an inexpensive motel in town?"

Shadrack scratched his neck. "Why'n't ya jus' stay here with us while we try'n sort this thing out. We still got room in the bunkhouse. An' I's perty sure Crissy won' min'."

WORD CAME LATER THAT EVENING. At 6:21 P.M. Pacific Standard Time the State of California reestablished itself within its historic boundaries, except that the land lying east of the Warner Mountain crest, including the Surprise Valley and Cow Head Slough, was not included within those boundaries. The official map labeled those severed lands simply as "Bristlecone Territory".

THE BUNKHOUSE FELT CROWDED THAT NIGHT. Shadrack and Rodriguez had already established their cots on opposite sides of the old pot-bellied wood stove in the center of the room. Jerome DeSoto, who had joined them two nights ago, had nailed together a wooden pallet and

installed a futon on top which he and Katie brought over from her father's familiar old school bus. That left the newcomer, Joshu Hardcastle, without a bunk. For him Crissy found a squeaky old folding bed with missing casters up in the attic, which they managed to muscle down and set up as close to the stove as the remaining space allowed.

The fire crackled, and the room was dark except for the slender flickers of firelight dancing in patterns on the knotty pine walls from the cracks in the stove's antique cast iron. They lay in their beds, all mismatched, with threadbare quilts and rag-tag blankets or sleeping bags. But the men felt a uniform bond among themselves. They were all fugitives now.

After a long period of quiet, Shadrack spoke softly. "What're yer plans here in Bristlecone, Josh? Ya never did answer me that, I reckon."

The dark silence returned for a long while before Jushu's baritone replied. "Well . . . we were looking for a place of sanctuary ourselves."

"We?" Shadrack murmured.

"My company. And my associates. We saw those vacant buildings in Cedarville. Looks like the town is balanced between . . . developing a future . . . and crumbling into total economic collapse. Am I correct?"

"S been a'lookin' like that m'whole life," Shadrack chuckled. "A little bit a'both, I reckon. We got us that new gas station up the highway . . . an' . . . an' . . . well, a lotta ol' historic buildings."

"If things go as I'd like, we . . . my associates and I . . . might just bring you some economic development. We're probably going to want to relocate the company here. So we'll need to build a small work campus. And housing."

"Why in tarnation *here*?"

Joshu considered his answer carefully. "For one thing, it's in the shadow of the mountains."

Jerome DeSoto joined in with his sotto voice. "The rain shadow?"

"More a matter of the electronic shadow. The information shadow. High mountains to the west and empty desert to the east." Joshu paused. "Then we heard about the Pacific Coast Nation fiasco. Cutting you off. Leaving you without a state. Well . . . that suited our own purposes." He paused again. "And then we heard about your petition to become an entirely new state. A sanctuary territory."

"An' that was it?" Shadrack prodded.

"No. No. That's when I came out here . . . and met you folks in person . . . and *that* was the clincher."

The room fell silent in the comfort of Joshu's praise. No one seemed in any hurry to fall asleep. At least no one was snoring yet. Not even Rodriguez.

After a while Jerome's languid voice drifted through the flickering darkness, "What kind of work does your company do?"

"Storage and transfer of data."

"What protocol do you use?"

"You familiar with computers, are you?"

"A little. Got my associate degree in electronics. Served as a radio specialist in the Guard. I like to . . . fiddle around with that stuff."

"Ever hear of photonic storage?"

“I think I read something about it. What is it?”

Joshu considered how best to describe it. “A new way to move and store enormous quantities of data.” Joshu’s voice was no longer sleepy. He couldn’t mask his enthusiasm. “Our company does nanoengineering. We’ve helped create the photonic chips necessary for handling the massive data required by quantum processors. The photons travel together with no resistance. On multiple wavelengths. That allows them to read and write multiple bits of data simultaneously. All at the speed of light. Photonic data storage and busing are the breakthrough quantum computing was waiting for.”

The darkness fell over them again. Rodriguez began to snore lightly.

Shadrack groaned to his feet and limped to the wood box. He lifted out a single split piece, cranked open the stove door, and pitched it inside. He spoke softly into the darkness, “So . . . so you’s the ones ’at made all them computers t’work. Them nasty ones y’was a’tellin’ us ’bout.”

“We played a part,” Joshu admitted.

“An’ now . . . an’ now y’wanna bring them computers out here. In ta our valley.”

Joshu sat up in bed. “It’s not what you think. We want to get *away* from the frantic flow of development. We want a safe place to try and evaluate what’s happening with this new technology. We want to get a handle on it. With all this unprecedented computing power. Exponentially higher power. We want to find a way to *control* these things we helped proliferate.” He paused. “If it’s not already too late.”