

Because Harold and Barry were both light sleepers, they decided Clint should take the first “watch.” It was only prudent for someone to stay awake and keep an eye on the cars, as well as the personal belongings Barry and Shay had to unload in order to fold their rear seat down for their makeshift bed. Harold would relieve Clint in a couple hours, and then Barry would take the last shift. Barry assured them he would be awake in the wee hours anyway.

“There is one thing that concerns me,” Barry said. “I’d feel better if our perimeter was more ...secure.”

“I know what you mean.” Harold scanned their surroundings. “Well, we could move the cars to fence us in better.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Jenny said.

Harold and Barry adjusted the two wagons so they were back to back, overlapping just a little. They decided it was good enough and everyone but Clint retired to try and sleep.

Clint sat in the comfortable canvas chair he brought along and gazed at the night sky. The smell of campfires was still heavy and the stars were out. He thought about Jake. Jake always liked the stars. Clint checked his cell phone for the twentieth time, but there were still no bars.

Jenny came out of the tent. Clint expected her to come over and kiss him goodnight, but instead she scurried to Harold’s tent and called him. The two of them talked in low voices before Harold got up and walked to his car. He came back with a small vinyl bag and handed it to Jenny. She thanked him and they both went back inside their tents.

Clint could still hear bits and pieces of conversations from the other campers. Not enough to understand the exchanges, but he picked up certain words that gave him the gist of the topics being discussed. Everyone was trying to go somewhere. People were concerned about their own safety, in addition to the safety of the ones they were going to see. Complaints about phones not working were also popular. Clint realized he and Jenny were in the same predicament as everyone else. Barry and Shay, too. They were nice folks. Good thing Clint picked this spot, so they could partner up with them for the night.

Clint caught himself nodding off twice. He eventually decided to move to the picnic table to prevent any further occurrences. Harold got up and relieved him shortly thereafter. He had a book, and turned the lantern back on so he could read.

Inside the tent, Jenny was sleeping lightly. She rustled as Clint found a comfortable position next to her. That’s when he noticed the vinyl bag Harold gave her was partially unzipped. He couldn’t be certain in the dark, but it looked to contain one of Harold’s pistols. Clint wasn’t sure whether that should relax him or make him nervous.

It must have relaxed him, because the next thing he knew it was morning. The sounds of people talking—along with car doors shutting and engines starting—caused his eyes to open and find sunlight.

When he and Jenny crawled out of the tent, Harold was talking to Barry next to his brown Volvo. Barry and Shay were packed up already, and apparently about to leave. Shay waited in the passenger seat. Clint and Jenny approached them.

“Good morning!” Barry said “The roads have reopened. Here.” He held out a piece of paper. Clint took it. There was writing on it.

“That’s the name, address, and phone number of Shay’s sister in Pueblo. If you need anything, or have any trouble travelling, feel free to contact us there. Or, if you happen to find yourself in Pueblo, stop by and visit.”

Shay rolled her window down. “Bye, guys. So nice meeting you. Bye, Jenny. Good luck!”

Clint was still groggy as they said their final goodbyes. He wished he had a cup of coffee. They had a bag of grounds packed away, but no practical way to make it.

Barry got in his car and joined the crowd of vehicles that were all attempting to leave at the same time. He first tried to wedge his way into the line, but then seemed to have an inspired notion. He turned and drove right through the trees to get to the side road, his windshield acquiring a small pine branch in the process. Several other cars then followed his example.

“We might as well wait until this clears out more,” Harold said. “Go ahead and use the bathrooms if you need to. I’ll start packing up.”

Harold had everything loaded when Clint and Jenny returned from the restrooms. The field cleared out fast and was nearly vacant by now. Unsightly patches of burned grass marked the sites of last night’s campfires. One of them was still smoldering.

“Are we ready?” Harold said. He appeared to be in good spirits.

They took one final look around before climbing into the car for the road trip. Clint was hopeful of a reunion with his brother before this day was through. Harold started the engine and put the car in gear.

But then he put in back in park.

“No,” he said. “Dear God, no!”

“What’s wrong?” Clint didn’t like the sudden desperation in Harold’s voice.

Without answering, Harold turned the ignition off, opened his door, jumped out, and ran through the trees towards the road.

“What’s the matter now?” Jenny asked.

“I don’t know. Not car trouble, I hope. Looks like he tried to run after Barry and Shay. Did they leave something behind?”

“Or accidentally take something of ours, maybe?” Jenny asked.

Clint looked at her and tilted his head. She raised her eyebrows. They both got out of the car. Harold had disappeared. The traffic was now thinned out, so the remaining cars were moving freely.

Clint turned to Jenny and made an exaggerated shrug. As he did, he noticed a black Chevy Suburban driving on the field. It parked next to the still-smoldering fire. A well-dressed man got out and stomped on it.

“There he is,” Jenny said, pointing to the trees. Clint turned back around.

Harold was back in view, shaking his head and muttering as he slowly returned.

“I’m so stupid,” he said. “So stupid. We’re screwed. Damn those shysters!”

“What’s the problem?” Clint asked.

“They siphoned us. Took all our gas. We had over three-quarters of a tank. Now on empty!” He walked up to his car and pounded a fist on the hood. “Dammit!”

“Are you sure?” Jenny asked. “How can that be? You guys watched the cars all night, right?”

“Let me see,” Clint said. He came around to the driver’s side, slipped in sideways and turned the key one click to the accessory position. The gas gauge rose only to E and the *need gas* light came on. He cranked the ignition. The car started right up, but the gas reading didn’t change.

“Oh, no.” Clint turned the car off and rested his head on the steering wheel.

Jenny came up next to him. “I don’t understand. Who could have stolen our gas? How could this happen?”

“Our friends,” Harold said. “Barry and Shay. They must have been low.”

“No,” Jenny replied. “No, I don’t believe it. No way it was them. Maybe we punctured the gas tank or something?”

“It was Barry,” Harold said. “Only person it could have been. There’s no gas leak. I saw the gauge when we repositioned the cars last night. There would be a smell, and a puddle under the car.”

“Well then it had to be someone else—like that Zane character, maybe.”

“He’s right, honey.” Clint shook his head. “I remember thinking the position he put his wagon in was a little weird, overlapping the rears like that. It was so the gas caps were lined up.”

“Right,” Harold said. “Remember when he offered to siphon some gas to us? That struck me as odd. Obviously, he had a siphon. Now I see it was a sly way of finding out how much we had.”

Jenny looked shocked. “I ...I just can’t believe it. They were so nice. And they gave us their address and phone number.”

“Fake,” Harold said. “Guaranteed. That’s why he wanted the last watch. I shouldn’t have fallen for that. Stupid, stupid, stupid.”

“Not your fault,” Clint said. “They fooled all of us. Good actors. But what are we going to do now?”

“We need help!” Jenny shouted to the air. She began waving her arms frantically. “Somebody, help!”

She then lowered her voice and looked at Harold. “We need to find someone who will give us some gas.”

“Not bloody likely,” Harold said.

The sound of a big motor drew close as the black Suburban on the field suddenly pulled up next to them. The passenger window rolled down and the driver leaned over in his seat.

“You folks all right?” the driver said. “Having some kind of trouble?”

Jenny ran up to his window. “Oh yes, yes, thank you for stopping! Someone siphoned all our gas last night while we were sleeping. We made friends with this other couple, but we think

they ended up stealing our gas! Please, can you help us? We just need some gas. At least enough to get back to Denver.”

The driver turned his engine off and climbed out. Clint thought the man looked out of place as he came around the front of his big SUV. Probably in his early fifties, he was too well-groomed, and appeared too well-rested, to be one of the campers from last night. He wore a dress shirt and sports jacket, which smartly complimented his jeans, cowboy boots, and partially-gray hair. This man moved with a certain confidence. Somehow, his presence here relieved much of the stress of the current situation.

“Name’s Wade. Sorry to hear about your trouble. Gasoline has become a scarce commodity, so I’m not surprised by your story. Unfortunately, I can’t spare any, either. And I’m not going to Denver anytime soon—like for the rest of my life, if I’m lucky. About the best I can do is offer you a ride into Springs.”

“Did you spend the night here?” Clint asked. “I don’t remember seeing your car.”

“No.” Wade shook his head. “Not in the park. I got stuck in the Black Forest, too, though. Fortunately, I have some friends with a house here. Heard about the impromptu communities of stranded motorists and decided to take a quick survey of the scene before heading home.”

“You look familiar,” Jenny said.

“You folks live in the Springs area?”

“No, Denver. But we have a second home down near Springfield.”

“I see.” Wade looked disappointed. “Too bad. Well, my offer stands, anyway. You seem like nice people. I’m your fifth-district congressman, Wade Bennett.”

“Oh.” Jenny giggled. “That must be why I recognized you. I’m Jenny Stonebreaker. This is my husband, Clint, and our neighbor, Harold. We were trying to make it down to our second home.”

“Maybe we still are,” Harold said. “Would you mind making room in your truck for some of our equipment?”

“I suppose I could do that. Not the entire load, I hope.” Wade eyed the rear compartment of Harold’s wagon.

“No,” Harold said. “Only the bikes and backpacks.”

“Wait a minute,” Clint said. “We need to discuss this.”

Wade nodded. “Of course. Talk it over. I’ll wait a bit. Those look like good bikes, and you all seem to be in decent shape. You might be able to get back to Denver by early afternoon. Although...”

Everyone looked at him.

“It might be safer heading south. Guess it depends on your second home. Denver had some problems last night, from what I hear. More riots and looting. Just so you know. Up to you.”

Wade sat in his car while Clint, Harold, and Jenny talked. Clint wasn’t initially sure about trying to finish the trip by bike, but when he heard the congressman’s warnings about Denver he

was much more inclined towards it. The ride would be difficult either way. But at least going south figured to be more downhill than facing the steep inclines back to Denver.

Then there was Jake. Clint still had no way of knowing if he was okay. Stopping by his house in person might be the only way to do that now. And travelling by an internal-combustion powered vehicle no longer seemed to be an option.

Harold, predictably, was all for it. Jenny took some persuading. Ultimately, though, she was sympathetic to Clint's fear of riots and acquiesced.