

Green and California Bound
by Curtis Ippolito

They were both drowsy, and it only worsened mile after mile with nothing in sight but well-worn blacktop and moonlit mountains to keep them company.

Couldn't blame them. Their adrenaline had been pumping hard twenty miles back while they navigated the winding mountain pass. Randall gripping the wheel ten and two, trying his damndest to keep the rickety box truck from overturning under severe gusts of wind, while Sheila squeezed his arm every time he drifted into the neighboring lane of the two-lane divided highway and shouted when their tires rumbled over the strip signaling a nonexistent shoulder and a desert of boulders waiting just beyond to obliterate them. Their nerves were fried. Exhaustion had settled in.

"There has to be another truck stop coming up soon." Randall slapped his leg. "Finding anything?"

"Keep your eyes on the road, I'm searching," said Sheila. The cab glowed from her phone. She barely had a signal, and the map app kept spinning without loading. Defeated, she locked the phone and dropped it in her lap with a huff.

"Shitty signal." She rolled down her window a few inches and the night's cool air flowed into the cab, accompanied by a blustering roar that muffled the truck's creaks and moans. Her thoughts turned to the dilemma they were in thanks to her, and she hoped their calculated gamble would pay off.

After a few minutes, Sheila scootched over on the bench seat. She started massaging Randall's shoulders, hoping to bring relief to his tired joints, but stopped when his eyes rolled back in his head.

"Wake up!" She smacked his arm.

"I'm awake. I'm awake."

Randall glanced down at the black hole where a radio should've been. Started singing "Ring of Fire" at the top of his lungs. He couldn't remember the second verse, so he repeated the chorus for a third time in a row. This amused Sheila.

Randall shouted suddenly, pointed left. "Look. Lights!"

"Oh, thank God. Take the next exit."

As they closed the distance, the lights grew brighter and Sheila's stomach unclenched. Randall rolled through a stop sign and proceeded on the overpass over the highway. Straight ahead, salvation.

The Golden Acorn Casino and Travel Center.

Randall brought the truck to a stop when they reached the gas pumps and craned his neck to see the awning. The travel center's full name was spelled out in white lettering against a dark background, with a warm white string of lights lining the top of the structure. The Golden Acorn Casino sparkled and flashed back to their left a short distance away.

"Got a signal," Sheila said.

"How far away are we?"

"Says another hour and twenty minutes."

Randall eased the gas pedal, guided the truck through the stalls and out the other side. "Close enough we can wait to fill up this thing, but far enough away we should crash here for the night."

“There was never any doubt about the last thing. Unless you want me to be a raging bitch tomorrow.”

“No, no,” Randall chuckled. His eyes were heavy. “Wouldn’t want that. Here, let’s park with the big boys.”

He pulled into a large asphalt parking lot. Around the perimeter, wind turbines rotated slowly. Thirty-foot LED lampposts anchored the interior of the area, but all of the dozen semis in the lot were positioned away from the stark white pools of light. Sheila pointed for Randall to head to the back of the lot. He did, giving an all-black rig to their right about fifty yards of distance.

“Look there.” Randall leaned over Sheila. “What a beauty. Bet she has a nice sleeper too.” Even this late at night, the truck gleamed. Sheila heard the low grumble of its engine and gazed over at the orange lights outlining the cab and running down the trailer.

“Yeah.” She rolled up her window. Felt around at her feet for her water canister and jammed her thumb against the metal container. “Ow!”

“You okay?”

“Uh-huh. Startled myself more than anything.”

“Ha. You’re tired as shit. You need sleep.”

“No duh. But I have to pee worse.”

“Amen, babe.”

The door chimed when they entered the convenience store and the fluorescent lights inside blinded them. Sheila shielded her eyes with a hand, located the restrooms beyond the cold-drink coolers. Some new country-sounding song she didn’t recognize that featured way too much banjo was playing. A deputy wearing a white Stetson was holding down the front counter, talking to the cashier. Three truckers perused the snack aisles. Sheila and Randall parted ways at their respective restroom doors and Randall told her, “Good luck.”

“Smart ass.”

A wave of bleach hit her when she entered. The smell was intense enough that she scrunched her nose and stifled a sneeze. At least all the surfaces appeared surprisingly pristine. After placing her water canister on a metal shelf above one of the dozen individual sinks, she toed the door of a stall open and used a piece of toilet paper to latch it once inside.

The toilet seat was frigid against her skin, even through the layer of toilet paper she’d laid down. Wasn’t such a bad thing. The shock helped her keep her eyes open. Soon, her overstressed bladder released, and she stared blankly ahead at a sale ad for the travel center taped to the stall door. Sheila pondered how she’d ended up here. Exhausted, broke, with no assurance this career-change plan of theirs would work. Not like they had any other options given the state of the economy, their ages, and limited skill sets.

After finishing, she washed her hands. The paper-towel dispensers were well stocked, which she noted for the quick sink bath she’d likely need in the morning. She filled her water canister and left the restroom.

Outside, Sheila found Randall leaning against an island where different coffees and other hot drinks were situated. He was nodding, blinking his heavy eyes, listening to a man dressed in black talking to him.

Randall perked up when he saw her, said, “Babe. This is . . . sorry, I already forgot your

name.”

The man turned around. In addition to the starched black jeans, black boots, and black jean jacket over a black shirt he wore, he'd donned an American-flag-print ballcap and black sunglasses with mirrored lenses.

“Stone George. This must be your little lady.”

“My *name* is Sheila.”

“Whoa, whoa, now. I didn't mean nothin' by it, sweetheart.”

“Mmhmm.” She watched herself cross her arms in the reflection of his glasses.

“It's okay to be fussy, darlin'. It's way past midnight and we're all beat.”

Randall stammered, said, “Stone was telling me he drives the black beauty outside. He's been a trucker for thirty-five years.” He motioned for Sheila to join him. She went, and side-eyed Stone as she walked around him.

“Great,” she said. “Can we—”

“Where y'all comin' from?” Stone asked.

Randall hugged Sheila to his side. “Arizona.”

“And you're moving to California?” Stone let out a low whistle. “Good luck. If the libtards don't turn your stomach, the taxes will.”

Sheila uh-huhed him, but Randall spoke over her. “Actually, we're not moving. We're truckers too. Well, that's the plan anyway. We're headed south, to the new warehouses to pick up work. The box truck was the easiest way to get started. Less maintenance than a big rig and less expensive to operate too.”

Stone sucked his teeth. “Oh, yeah?” He stood in thought for a few long seconds. “Well, you're right. Partly. On the downside, you can only haul a fourth of what I can. But you two seem like go-getters. I'm sure you'll make it work.”

“Thanks,” Randall said.

“So, why trucking?”

Sheila elbowed Randall. She was beyond ready to pass out, but his body language told her to hold on. Determined to end this weird job interview/meet-and-greet, she spoke up.

“I'll tell you why. We heard there was good money to be made with all the supply-chain issues. Rich people buying up everything in sight, and there's fewer truckers than ever to deliver things since so many of you quit, died, or retired. So, we bought the moving truck and here we are.”

She could have added how they'd both lost their jobs to the pandemic. How unemployment covered food, gas, and not much else. How they were one notice from eviction. How bills had gone to collections and the series of payday loans she took out had buried them further in the hole. And how trucking was their last-ditch effort to scale those slick, muddy walls. Instead, she said, “*Stone*, was it? We're exhausted and need to get up early to get after it.”

Randall didn't say a word. Stone was expressionless. Not one twitch or facial movement.

Sheila tugged Randall by his jacket sleeve.

Stone cleared his throat. “Sounds like you read a good article on the current state of things. Still, you're right. I've been picking up jobs at the border myself lately. Best money I've ever made too. It's like a modern-day gold rush out on these highways.”

Randall nudged Sheila.

Stone waved, said, “C'mon,” and started toward the exit. They followed.

Halfway across the parking lot, Stone said, “You two may be green, but your instincts are good. You parked at the back of the lot and nosed into your spot. Most rookies don’t realize how important it is to protect the front of your truck. Better someone back into your trailer. You can always duct tape or strap up damage to a trailer, but if your grill and rad gets crushed in, you lose precious hours on the road, which means you lose money.”

Randall smiled a goofy, tired grin. “Thanks, Stone.”

Stone told them he liked them, and then out of the blue offered them his sleeper for the night. “Plenty of room back there. Besides, I sleep in the captain’s chair half the time anyway.”

Randall squeezed Sheila’s wrist.

“No, thank you,” she said before Randall could spit out a word. “You’re kind to offer, but we’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, thank you,” Randall said, dejected.

“Suit yourselves.”

“Oh,” Randall said. “What are you hauling?”

Stone tucked his thumbs into his belt. “Construction materials. Mostly. Lumber, stuff like that . . .”

“Nice.”

Sheila tapped on their box truck’s passenger window for Randall to unlock it.

“Well, maybe we’ll see you in the morning,” Randall said to Stone.

“Bet on it. Breakfast is on me. This place makes a great breakfast burrito.”

“Night, Stone,” Sheila said.

“Good night to you both.”

In the morning, Sheila woke to find herself alone. The thick fleece she’d brought from home to share with Randall overnight was doubled up on her now. She checked her phone. Five-thirty A.M.

She straightened herself, then exited the truck. Her husband and Stone were walking across the parking lot toward her, each swinging a plastic grocery bag in hand.

“Stone bought us breakfast burritos. I ordered you one with sausage and potato.”

“Thanks. Or I should say, thank you, Stone.” She accepted a burrito the size of an infant, swaddled in yellow butcher’s paper, from Randall.

“Grabbed us coffee too.” Randall handed her a paper cup with a black plastic lid.

“My pleasure,” Stone said. “Figured you both could use a good meal before hitting the road.”

“Thanks again,” Randall said.

“Open up your trailer and we’ll sit, eat, and watch the sunrise.”

Randall darted to the box truck, his coffee in hand. Flipped the latch with his free hand and shoved the door up on its rollers.

“Hope you two have a padlock,” Stone said.

“It’s in the cab,” Sheila said.

“Good.” Stone planted a boot on the metal bumper, hoisted himself up, and plopped down. “Join me.”

They did, and soon all three were devouring their burritos with a panoramic view of a pink, fall sky.

“Was I right?”

“Damn straight,” Randall said. “Hits the spot.”

Sheila chewed and savored each bite. Every ingredient in the burrito thrilled her taste buds. She tried not to smile. This was by far the best meal she’d had in recent memory, having survived off fast-food dollar menus on the drive, and cheap box meals at home for more months than she cared to recall.

The two men were balling up their wrappers and Sheila had half her burrito remaining when she noticed two well-dressed men hustle from one big rig to another.

Stone’s semi was parked perpendicular to the back of their moving truck, giving them a clear view. Both men wore khakis, shiny brown dress shoes, and black coats. One knocked on the driver’s window. Sheila couldn’t hear the words being exchanged, but she could tell they didn’t get the answer they desired when they quickly scuttled off.

“Yuppies,” Stone said.

“Sorry?” Sheila wrapped up her remaining burrito and dropped it in one of the plastic bags.

“Those two.” Stone flicked his chin. “Don’t get me wrong, though. Yuppies got monies.”

Randal snorted. “What do they want?”

“You’re about to find out.”

The two men were headed their way. Stone scooted to the edge of the trailer, kicked off, and his boots stomped asphalt. Randall followed suit. Sheila climbed down carefully, and when she turned around, the two men stood there, appearing smart in their unblemished North Face coats.

“Hi, I’m Jon and this is my partner, Craig.”

“Hello,” Craig said.

“Mornin’. What can we do for you boys?” Stone sucked his teeth, adjusted his sunglasses.

“We’re hoping one of you is hauling lumber. We’ve been trying to build a lanai on the back of our house for the last year and haven’t been able to source any materials.”

“Sorry,” Sheila said, and gestured at the empty truck behind them.

Stone stepped forward, threw out his hand. “Stone George. I might be able to help you out. This way.”

Jon and Craig followed Stone to his truck with big grins on their faces.

Sheila said, “So he’s going to sell them part of his load?”

“Beats me, but sure sounds like it.”

“Isn’t that . . . illegal?”

Randall shrugged. “C’mon. Let’s close this thing up, go to the bathroom, and hit the road.”

“Best idea you’ve had so far.”

“The day is early, darlin’.”

“Don’t you start in with the darlin’ bullshit too.”

Randall ducked his head. “Yes, ma’am.”

Sheila used paper towels and pink soap to wash her face and armpits in the bathroom sink. She topped off her water container—feeling a bit foolish, like water was some treasure they might not be able to find when they reached where they were going—and tried to untangle her hair before surrendering and putting it up in a ponytail. Randall was

waiting outside the restrooms and they walked out side by side.

“Is Stone waving at us?” Randall asked. The sun had risen over the mountains and warmed the side of Sheila’s face.

“Looks like it.” She wanted to tell him how uneasy the trucker in black made her feel, but hesitated and a gasp came out instead of words. Randall didn’t notice.

“Greenhorns! Come here. I’ve hooked you rooks up with a righteous deal.”

“What is it?” Randall bounded over to Stone like he’d been picked first in a game of recess kickball. His youthful exuberance was what had attracted Sheila to him in the first place, years ago.

Stone jutted his head at his semi. “Those queers bought lumber off me, and now they need a way to get it to their house. Figured you two could haul it for them.”

Sheila groaned. “I don’t know—”

“They’re paying five-hundred bucks, and they live in South Bay. It’s a hop, skip, and a jump from there to the border, and the warehouses. You drop the load off, and BOOM. Easiest money you’ll ever make while notching your first job in the process.”

Randall’s eyes widened. Sheila frowned. “Is this legal, Stone?”

Stone snorted. “Legal? Honey, let me tell you a little something. I’m an independent owner/operator. I’ve been driving our country’s highways for thirty-five years, and nothin’ stopped me. Not wars, not terrorist attacks, and sure as hell not some goddamn fake virus. I kept working. While you were stocking groceries or mixin’ up expensive coffees, or whatever, I was out here. Driving. You think if I was doing anything illegal, I’d keep getting work?”

Randall looked like Stone had slapped him. Sheila still frowned, but was unsure of what to say.

Randall timidly said, “If it’s okay, let us talk for a minute, Stone.”

“Sure. Fine by me. I’m the one doing you two the favor. I mean, any one of these other mother-truckers set you up with a gig?”

“Okay. We get it,” Sheila said.

Randall guided her by the shoulder back to their truck.

“What’s wrong?”

“This doesn’t seem sketchy to you? And . . . him . . . he’s so . . . GRRR.”

“Okay, he’s not the most politically correct.”

“He’s a creep, Randall.”

“I don’t think so.”

Sheila scoffed. Folded her arms and pouted.

“Listen. We’d make enough to pay off one of the payday loans,” Randall said.

Sheila cringed. His words stung, even though that was not his intention. Randall hadn’t blamed her once and had been nothing but supportive. He constantly soothed her worries, assured her they’d make it work; this was temporary. And yet, the words sucker-punched her anyway, right where she held the ball of guilt.

“Yeah, one . . .” she said.

Randall rested a hand on her shoulder. “Yes. One at a time. Like we planned.”

Sheila sighed, raised her head. “Well, if you want to do the job, let’s do it. . . . I suppose if it’s not completely legal, the blame would fall to him, not us.”

“That’s what I’m thinking.” Randall smiled, rubbed her arm.

“We should ask the couple to gas up our truck too.”

After Stone and Randall—mostly Randall—transferred the lumber from Stone’s trailer to the moving truck, and the couple gassed them up, they were on their way. Randall merged onto the 8, headed west, and followed the couple’s red BMW crossover at a safe distance.

“Did they give you an address in case we lose them?”

“Stone texted it to me,” Randall said.

Sheila folded up the five one-hundred-dollar bills the couple had paid them and stuffed the cash into her purse. She settled into her seat and watched the scrub brush and mountains roll by her window.

After a while, open space ceded to population. Houses topped every mesa, and shopping centers, car dealerships, apartment complexes, and smaller houses dominated below. Palm trees punctuated the spaces between. The highway widened to five lanes on each side. Soon, they took the 805 south, riding above a crisscross of freeways.

Twenty minutes later, they exited the highway and took a series of turns as they followed the BMW into a secluded neighborhood. They stopped at a gated entrance and an arm emerged out of the red crossover, tapped on the staked keypad, and then waved for them to follow.

The couple’s home was on the second street on the right, inside the gated community, a sliver of the Pacific Ocean visible on the horizon. Randall parked behind the BMW in their driveway. Jon and Craig waited at the front of the truck while Randall and Sheila climbed out.

“Thank you so much for doing this,” Craig said.

“Yes, thank you,” Jon added. “You don’t know the trouble we’ve gone through simply trying to locate the materials our contractor needs.”

“Happy to help,” Randall said. “Thanks for the money and gas.”

Right then, a loud siren blared.

They all spun around. A sheriff’s vehicle raced up the street and squealed to a stop behind the moving truck. The faint smell of burnt rubber filled the air.

A deputy in a white Stetson hopped out and shouted, “Whose truck is this?”

Randall raised his hand.

“Open it up.”

“Wait. Why?” Jon said. “Who sent you?”

The deputy said, “We received a tip there may be stolen property in this truck. What do you know about that?”

“What? Nothing,” Jon said.

Randall walked to the back of the truck, unlocked the padlock, and threw up the door. The deputy swung around when he heard the door racing up its track, and jogged over.

“Yep. Stolen lumber.”

“Stolen?” Jon said. He and Craig ran to the back of the truck and Sheila followed.

“I think there’s been a misunderstanding,” said Craig.

Randall backed off and pulled Sheila with him.

“What the hell is going on?” she whispered. “This isn’t good.”

“You’re telling me.”

The deputy instructed the two men to sit down on the curb and they complied. He then told Randall and Sheila to go wait at the front of the moving truck.

After they walked up the driveway, Sheila peered over her shoulder at the house. She leaned into Randall's ear, said, "They didn't give us any money."

"What? But they did—"

"Listen to me. Something weird is going on. I recognize this cop from the travel center, and Stone's the only one who could have reported the lumber stolen, so if our truck gets impounded, we'll need the cash more than ever."

"Shit. It didn't dawn on me he could confiscate the truck . . . but I'd feel bad ripping off these guys."

"Look around. There's a marble fountain in the front yard and the gutters are made of copper. They'll survive losing five hundred bucks."

Randall stretched, turned his head when the deputy's attention was on the couple.

"Yeah, you're right."

They held hands. Two minutes passed and their palms went slick with sweat.

The deputy thrust his finger at the couple, then headed up the driveway.

"You two own this truck, yes?"

"Yes, sir," Randall said.

"Here's the situation. These dudes say they bought the lumber off a trucker at a truck stop out east. Problem is, said trucker says they stole it from him."

Randall and Sheila said nothing.

"They've agreed to relinquish the lumber, and in return, I'm letting them off with a warning."

"What about us?" Randall said.

The deputy rubbed his chin. "Today's your lucky day. All you have to do is drive the lumber back to Stone and you'll be good to go."

"So it was Stone," Sheila said.

The deputy smirked.

"Officer. Officer." Craig stalked up the drive, pointing. "We paid them five hundred dollars, and we would like it back."

"You really want to press your luck for five hundred bucks?" the deputy asked.

"There's the money we paid the trucker too," Jon said.

"We need to go through this again? Jail time, fines. Those sound like better options?"

Jon and Craig shook their heads, walked slowly past the deputy and Randall and Sheila to their house.

"Well . . ." the deputy said to Randall and Sheila. "Hit the road. Stone's expecting you two."

"Let's just go home." Sheila said.

They had driven through Alpine, putting the travel center thirty miles away. Randall gave it more gas to climb the increasing elevation and keep a semi-steady speed. The truck moaned and shook in response.

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, we dodged a bullet not getting our truck confiscated and the money taken back. If we give this load back to Stone, how do we know there's nothing else he'll make us do?"

"I'm not following."

"Randall, he's running a scam out here with that cop. I don't want any part of it. Does it

feel like he's going to allow us to get our own jobs, or is he roping us into his scheme?"

He shrugged.

"What's your gut tell you?" Sheila said.

Randall dropped his head against the head rest. His chest rose and fell.

After a few minutes of contemplation, he said, "Stone doesn't know our last name . . . and I bet we could sell this lumber off back home pretty easily."

Sheila lunged at him and hugged his neck.

"Yep, his truck is there," Sheila said as they flew past the Golden Acorn Casino and Travel Center.

Randall wisted sweat off his forehead. "Hopefully he's not watching the highway."

"We'll be fine."

They drove another twenty miles before Randall finally relaxed and loosened his death grip on the steering wheel.

Sheila said, "As soon as we leave San Diego County, the cop won't have jurisdiction."

"He could still find our address if he took down our plate number, tell Stone."

"But he won't; he wouldn't want to be implicated if Stone took things too far."

Randall gave her a sly smile. A second later, his pocket started ringing and buzzing.

"Shit. It's Stone."

"Hit cancel."

Randall did, and tossed the phone on the dashboard. "Shitshitshit."

"It's fine. He can't do anything to us through a phone—"

The phone chimed and Sheila scooped it away from Randall's grasp. She read a text from Stone.

ANSWER THE PHONE.

"Randall." Sheila glared at the reflection in her side mirror. A black semi was bearing down on them. "He's behind us."

"What? Oh, shit. We're screwed. Give me the phone."

Sheila reluctantly handed it to him. He tapped a button and then another. It dialed, on speakerphone. Stone answered after one ring.

"Where in the hell do you Zonies think you're going with my load?"

"Uh . . . nowhere, Stone," Randall said. "We'll give it back. I'll take the next exit."

"There ain't no next exit until after the pass."

"Shit." Sheila pointed out the windshield. The mountain pass was dead ahead.

The highway divided. Their side reduced to two narrow lanes. In another hundred yards, they whizzed past a green sign reading IMPERIAL COUNTY LINE. Rolling hillsides of boulders now dominated the landscape.

"Pull over," Stone said, growling.

Randall glanced at Sheila. The truck drifted right and the tires ran over the rumble strip. Sheila shook her head violently, yelled, "No!" She snatched the phone from Randall and ended the call. Randall straightened the truck out.

"What do we do?" Sweat ran down Randall's temples.

"I don't know, but don't you dare pull over."

"Maybe we can outrun him? Stop for help once we get to Yuma?"

Sheila nodded.

They approached the first curve, with a sign warning to slow to sixty miles per hour.

Randall maintained their speed at eighty for as long as he could, then eased off the gas to take the curve. Sheila checked her mirror.

“He fell back two or three car lengths.”

“Good.”

Stone blared his horn. It startled them both. “Keep driving,” Sheila said.

They passed a sign warning of strong winds and another one that read SLOW TRUCKS. No other cars passed them or were up ahead. Minimal traffic traveled on the west-bound side.

The phone rang again and Sheila declined it.

The next curve ahead cut through a tunnel of sorts with stacks of boulders for walls. A sign before the entrance read TRUCK SPEED LIMIT 35. Randall slowed to fifty. Driving through, the ticks and moans of the box truck grew louder as the stone walls amplified every sound. They emerged out the other side and Stone blared his horn again. They’d added another few car lengths on him.

They hit a straightaway. The posted speed limit returned to sixty-five.

“Punch it, Randall.”

Randall mashed the gas to the floor, lips pursed. Sheila gripped the “oh-shit handle” with both hands and studied the side mirror. Stone hadn’t appeared out of the tunnel yet and they were flying now. She exhaled a big breath and flopped back in her seat.

“We got this, babe.” Randall patted her thigh.

The lanes of the two-lane highway narrowed and the shoulder all but disappeared as the elevation increased and the road became more winding. The now early-afternoon sun beamed off rocks and white sand, and the wind whipped brown vegetation around.

They continued, navigating their way through the pass. Each subsequent curve became hairier than the last, requiring them to slow their speed as they went.

“Should we call the police?”

“And say what, Randall? We took off with a trucker’s load? A load he reported stolen.” A text chimed.

“I thought you turned it off,” Randall said.

“Shit.”

“What?”

“He’s back.” They both looked at their mirrors. The big black rig was gaining on them. Fast.

“How the hell?” Randall said.

“Just keep driving.”

BAM!

Stone rammed them from behind. Sheila slammed her hands against the dash with the impact and Randall struck his forehead on the wheel.

“The hell?” Randall rubbed his bruise. “Call him.”

She didn’t have to; Stone was already calling them. She placed it on speaker.

“The hell you doing, Stone?” Randall said.

“Comin’ to get what’s mine, boy!”

“What about damaging your front end? You bust your *rad* and you’ll lose precious time and money. *Stone.*”

“Randall!” Sheila shouted, and pointed to a sign reading TRUCKS 25. She ended the call and turned the phone off.

Randall slowed to fifty. Gripped the wheel tight and smirked. "I have an idea."

The curve approached fast.

The wind whipped.

They flew past a series of three yellow signs with arrows pointing left. Sheila stiffened, clasped the seat on either side of her legs in a death grip.

The box truck moaned and creaked.

"Hang on!" Randall said. Before she knew why, Sheila's stomach jumped into her throat. The truck's back driver's-side wheel lifted off the road. The truck tipped right.

She tightened her eyes shut, knowing this was it. They were about to roll and die. This is where she would take her last breath. In a junky moving truck on a desert highway four hundred miles from home. All because of some damn payday loans.

Then, the rear tire smacked against the road, righting the truck and bouncing them in their seats.

"WOOOOO-HOOOOO!" Randall hollered like he'd lasted eight seconds on a rodeo bull.

Sheila held her face in her shaking hands, not able to say a word.

She snapped herself out of it, stared at the mirror. Stone's black semi. Following. Taking the sharp curve at the same speed they had, at least she hoped.

"What's he doing?" Randall said.

"I think he's going for it. I see . . . the trailer. The back is swinging out. . . . Oh my God!"

"What?"

"The wind's got the trailer. . . . The whole thing is twisting . . ." Sheila smacked Randall's arm. "He flipped! He flipped! He flew off the road!"

Randall pulled to the side and stopped. Stuck it in reverse and backed up along the shoulder to within a hundred yards of the accident. They jumped out and ran to the edge of the shoulder and gazed down.

Stone's rig lay in a heap at the bottom of a shallow ravine on its right side. Dust spread out from the wreckage like smoke. The trailer was split open along one of its seams. The cab had smashed head first into a granite wall and was crushed in from grille to sleeper.

"Holy shit. Think he's alive?" Randall asked.

Sheila made a funny face at him.

"Let's get out of here, Randall." She pulled him by the hand, but he didn't budge.

"What are you doing?"

"Did I tell you when we unloaded the lumber from Stone's trailer, the rest of his haul was nothing but brand-new flat screen televisions?"

Sheila stopped pulling.

"No . . . but there's no way more than half of them survived."

"There's only one way to find out."

Sheila smiled. "Let's get to it then, before help arrives." 1

© 2023 by Curtis Ippolito