

## Chapter 1

He stopped mid-sentence, turned away to face the air gushing past the open window. He took a deep breath, long and slow, as if trying to draw in the scent of the land beyond the highway; a connoisseur assessing a new variety. He stayed silent, ignored the twitching cell phone in his pocket, and the click as Abe Wade dropped the blinker lever. The car slowed, hit something. The curb. Bump, clunk, thump. Otis gripped the seat, grabbed the door, braced his knees, shielded his face. The rough ground shook the little sedan, jerked the headlights around. Their beams showed only wild grass, buried bricks, broken concrete, and scattered trash. Wade sat with one hand rested on the steering wheel, the other fondling the gearshift. His bulk sank and rose with every roll.

“Mr. Wade?” Otis tried to keep the panic from his voice. “You don’t need to take a shortcut on my account, sir.”

“Shh,” he whispered, “we’re almost there.”

Through all the shuddering, Otis tried to pick out solid shadows in the darkness, get some clue about where they might be going, but the horizon blended perfectly with the night sky. They could be headed for a cliff.

Wade slowed, spun the wheel a few times, sending the headlights left then right, like he was shining a flashlight round a backyard. He spotted something, tapped the gas, braked, and got out. Otis sat back for a second, un-clicked the safety belt, and let the band drag across his chest. He waited, looked around for signs of Wade. Saw nothing, then got out to follow.

The car was pitched with the grill tipped into the long grass. The beams, still on, woke a long, legged insect, forcing it to crawl to comfort elsewhere. The only other lights came from the streetlamps lining the road behind, and the city, still far in the distance. Wade’s lumbering figure shadowed the skyline as he kicked through the weeds of the disused lot.

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