

BENDING LIGHT

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PROLOGUE

“Black bus, Mommy!”

The woman focused solely on the red light in front of her. It was dusk, and in this part of town, the traffic lights blended easily with the glaring desert sun, making a signal change almost imperceptible.

“Sorry, sweetie, what did you say?”

“The school bus. See him waving at me?”

The woman panned back to her son in his car seat, then followed his outstretched arm and finger to the huge transport pulled along the passenger side. Through her open sunroof, she read the stenciled white paint of *MARICOPA COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS*, and paused at the rusted mesh covering each window.

“Ah, no, sweetie. That’s not a school bus,” she whispered, snapping her eyes back to the red beacon, with hands gripping tight to *ten and two*. “That’s a bus police take bad people away in.”

Conflicting emotions arise when you’re forced to share a space with something potentially dangerous: there’s the push of curiosity observing an entity you’d rarely encounter in your daily routine, tempered by the pull of keeping your child and yourself out of harm’s way. Obviously, the likelihood of one of the prisoners breaking free of his bonds, kicking through a side window, and leaping from the bus to commandeer her sedan was, of course, remote. Yet, the feeling of even *that*

small possibility, against impossible odds, was as real as the desperate psychological trap that keeps the weekly lotteries thriving.

At the back of the bus, the hand kept waving to the little boy and the boy used both hands to reply. This silent exchange continued until the signal finally turned green, and the car crossed the intersection turning left, as the bus continued straight on through.

As the rolling shadow moved further out of Phoenix, the dusk surrendered to a dark moonless sky.

CHAPTER 1

“*Por favoray*, barman. Another round for me and *mi amigos!*”

The bar was thick with smoke. Humidity dripped from the ceiling and walls. *Hendrix* blared from worn jukebox speakers. Every table was packed with old and young, tattooed and tempted. Pool balls clicked in the distant purple haze.

Garcia wiped his hands with a damp rag and put both wrists on the bar, “Billy, you boys got enough tonight. Go play pool.”

Billy leaned his broad shoulders across the bar. “If I needed another wife, I’d get your ass a ring, Garcia. Get us three more damn beers!” Lance and Joe flanked Billy, sitting with arms crossed.

Garcia sighed. “Billy, you guys are done. Go on home and sleep it off.”

Billy stared at Garcia, as he slowly pushed two empty bottles off the bar, onto the metal shelf below, shattering a shot glass.

“That’s it. Tank, get your ass over here and kick these guys to the door!”

The leathered skinhead charged over from his post at the entrance and flared in front of Billy.

“Tank, I got nothing with you, just three beers and we’ll split.”

“Come on, Billy, let’s make it easy. Grab your jacket and let’s go. Joe and Lance, you guys too”

“We ain’t leaving.”

“Didn’t you just get out yesterday?” Tank exhaled, noticing Joe and Lance rise. He shook his head. “You really wanna do this?”

“We ain’t leaving.”

Tank’s thick arms grabbed Billy’s elbow and pulled him up from the stool. Billy escaped the hold and shoved Tank backward, his shoulder colliding with the pool stick of a player leaning for a shot, sending the cue ball over the side. A gasp rippled through the crowd.

Tank regained his balance and came back at Billy, with both arms locked. Lance kicked out Tank’s legs, and Joe pushed him hard toward the bar. The bouncer stumbled forward and tripped, snapping his chin on a stool as he fell to the floor.

“Come on, get the hell up!”

The mass was motionless.

Garcia reached under the bar and came up with double-barrels swinging. “Get the hell out or meet Elvis!”

“Okay, chill, Paco.” Billy grabbed his jacket, and the three men moved slowly backward through the crowd, as two waitresses ran over and bent down to help Tank.

Lance and Joe pushed through the doorway into the parking lot, and Billy followed, slamming the metal slab shut behind them. The bar was the only building for miles, framed by a black oil sky.

The gravel crunched under their boots, as they made their way to Billy’s huge pickup at the far corner. The 4x4 mirrored the monster trucks that used to roar within stadiums, struggling through deep mud bogs and jumping rows of old junked cars for “*One Night Only! Only! Only!*”

They swung the doors and climbed up and in. The beast roared to life, belching exhaust from thick chrome pipes. Billy dropped into gear and rolled-coal across the lot, kicking dirt and rocks into every car and truck in its wake. When the mammoth tires reached the sandy asphalt, they smoked and shrieked, sending the truck hurtling down the road.

CHAPTER 2

For over four hours, the black bus traveled alone on the interstate, passing only a few vehicles, and even fewer buildings. The desert air had turned crisp as the earth cooled and it was mostly silent beyond the drone of the engine and the static whirring of the warm tires.

The bus began to slow and got off at the next exit, merging onto a two-lane road that ran alongside a rail line. The desolate scenery hadn't changed for the last few miles, except for some scattered saguaros and boulders.

Suddenly, red lights flashed ahead as the bus approached the track. Its headlights caught two red-and-white-striped gates slowly descending. The bus came to a stop as the crossing bells tolled.

In the distance, the giant 4x4 came around the corner and slowed as it approached the waiting prison bus ahead.

“What the hell?” Billy whined.

“Just go around and run the gates,” Lance offered as they pulled up behind.

“Nah, I can see the train light coming already. Damn it!” Billy took a long draw, draining the last of his Jack Daniel's bottle, and wiped his jaw with a sleeve.

The truck idled, shaking with impatience. Suddenly, the rollbar lights reflected off of a hand, waving from the back window of the bus. The three men looked up. The palm moved slowly, side-to-side, as if it were wiping dust from the glass.

“Hey, Billy, looks like you got a friend,” whispered Joe.

“Yeah, your Pen Pal from the *Pen*?” Lance piled on.

“Eat shit, the both of you.” Billy was drunk, late, and looking at a beatdown from his old lady when he got back to the trailer—he sure didn’t need any crap from the two village idiots.

Billy revved the engine, pumping the pedal in sync with the flashing red signal. His red glassy eyes stared forward at nothing, as he suckled the empty bottle and gauged if there was still time to run the gates.

The hand continued to wave...

Lance waved back. “Hey, Billy, was that your celly last time in?” Lance and Joe burst out laughing, wiping tears from their eyes.

The train rolled closer...

“Yeah, can’t get enough of that *Lockup Luuv’n*.” sang Joe.

The hand continued to wave...

“I said, eat shit!”

The train roared closer...

Billy punched the dash, sending cigarettes flying. His breathing was labored, as he pumped the pedal, his chest heaving.

The train barreled closer, its whistle in long bursts...

“Don’t get mad, Billy Ray. We’ll keep your secret.”

The hand continued to wave...

“Billy?”

The world fell silent...

The bottle hit the floor...

Billy howled and dropped into gear, pedal down, tires spinning, lunging the predator forward onto the prey.

Just above the deafening whistle, Joe shrieked, “Billy! What the hell you doing?!”

The truck roared as its tires smoked, clawing the bus forward, inching further and further—a linebacker pushing against the line.

The brake lights of the bus blinked in horror, as it fought to keep from losing ground. Its wheels were locked, but still sliding. And in one last attempt to fight back, the bus shifted into reverse and gave full throttle.

It was too late...

From under the frame came a metallic burst, and the bus heaved forward, smashing through the first gate, up onto the train track, lumbering toward the next gate.

It would never make it...

With the sustained scream of the whistle, the huge Union Pacific locomotive plowed into the bus, sending earth up to meet the sky in a bellowing explosion of storm clouds and lightning. The driver’s cabin buckled instantly, bending the frame to the side of the train.

Joe and Lance saw bodies thrown to the ceiling, blood spraying the side windows.

The freight train continued unhindered, pushing the screeching mangled mass, down the track, dragging the intact remains along its flank, in a smoking plume of sparks and fire. The glowing blaze streaked along the rails, into the distance, like an eager flame on an endless fuse.

The trapped metal began to slow the train, but it would still take half a mile for it to come to a complete stop.

The crossing gates slowly lifted, as the beast sat there, engine purring, pipes smoking. Joe and Lance were frozen. Billy’s chest was still heaving, his face flush and red, body drenched. He stared at the road with his mouth parted, releasing a muted growl.

“Billy, we gotta get the hell out of here!”

CHAPTER 3

Surveying the wreckage, one of the train engineers shouted into his shoulder radio, as the other two darted around the mounds of small fires, spraying and trying to get a look inside the bus. The windows had a metal webbing, that impeded a quick rescue.

Just then, a large bakery truck and parcel delivery van, raced up, stopping in a swirl of dust. Each driver got out clutching fire extinguishers.

“Over here!” yelled out an engineer. “There are survivors trapped inside, and the doors are locked. Do you have a crowbar or something?”

“No, nothing. We’ll get these fires out. What the hell happened?” said the driver of the bakery truck, focusing the hose at the base of a fire.

The engineer shook his head, “No idea. It’s midnight, it’s nowhere, then a bus in our lights and no way to stop.” He pointed to his radio. “I just reported to Dispatch, but got no ETA on cops or fire.”

“Did anyone else stop or drive by? Is it just you guys?” asked the driver of the parcel van, over the rushing sound of the extinguishers.

“No, no, just us. Nobody would be all the way out here, at this hour,” another engineer yelled. “It’s a miracle you both were passing by.”

The parcel driver turned back to the trucks and waved his arm high. Suddenly, fourteen men in black fatigues, helmets, and face paint, burst from the back doors, and rushed toward the

scene. They advanced in two lines, some strapped with weapons, the others carrying small black cases.

“What... what the hell is going on?!” yelled the middle engineer, as the three of them, stumbled slowly backward, arms raised.

The parcel driver, who seemed to be in charge, barked orders to four of the approaching men in Farsi.

The engineers turned and took off running but were quickly tackled. They hit the sand hard, each held in a chokehold, struggling against the damp cloths pushed against their faces. Slowly, their bodies went limp and were dragged back to the bakery truck and loaded inside.

The drivers then turned their attention to the teams reaching the bus. The men surrounded the back half and poked the points of their guns between the metal grates, smashing holes in the windows to push through thin canisters. Smoke began to fill the bus, choking and loud moans came from within.

Two of the men ran back to the delivery van, returning with huge gas-powered circular saws. When the inside of the bus fell silent, they went to work cutting the back and side doors. The sparks flew from the loud saws in every direction, like a secret *barrio* chop shop.

Once they gained access inside, the bodies—intact or not—were swiftly removed from the bus, transferred to the trucks, and loaded. The process moved smoothly, with every man in time with the tempo of the group.

The teams then piled back inside the trucks, and the drivers slammed the doors shut, sliding levers down to lock. The lead driver walked back to his open door, grabbed a screwdriver from a recess in the dash, and ran back to the remains of the crash.

He kneeled and began removing the screws of the license plate, letting each one drop to the sand. The plate was crushed and bent, making removal slow. Once free, he stood and tucked the plate under an arm, snapping his head toward the faint cry of sirens in the distance.

The driver scanned inside the bus to confirm it was empty and noticed the night sky framed by a large jagged hole in the side panel. After an extended pause, he sprinted for his truck, tossing the plate on the floor, as he jumped in.

Over the horizon, flashing blue and red dust began to rise.

Together, the trucks accelerated in a wide arc, lights off, and got back onto the road, heading in the opposite direction.

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