

RETURN TO

# ARGENTHOME



JONATHAN WAITE

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Braeden Carthew rounded a corner and skidded to a halt, breath sawing in his lungs. It was a dead end.

He reckoned they'd lost the pursuit a while back. It had been a nightmare, every turn blocked by one of those pointing, screaming monsters. The whole damned town had to be in the grip of the aliens. There was no other explanation. He had to find someplace for them to hide.

The woman beside him was sobbing again. He'd had to hit her three times already. It just didn't seem to be getting the message home. He didn't need her crying and whimpering, he needed her thinking and planning, finding them a way out of this. And if she couldn't...well, then he didn't need her at all.

He pulled her back with him into the shadows of the cul-de-sac. There were no lights down here. They could pass unnoticed till morning. Maybe the things would think they'd got out of town. Maybe they'd try and follow.

Damn truck. Why hadn't the damn truck worked? Damn woman must have messed it up somehow. Should never have let her drive. Damn women, always messing things up. Well, let him just get her home safe, and then she'd find out what happened to women who messed things up for Braeden Carthew.

He wondered, now that he had a moment to think, if Koost had been in on the set-up. All that password business...it had been fishy. He should have seen it. No. *She* should have seen it. That was her job. She was probably in league with Koost. Well, the little squirt could take his chances with the aliens, see how well they treated him. And maybe she could too. But not before he'd had a little taste of revenge.

A movement caught his eye, and he looked up in panic, but the entrance to the blind alley was empty.

He swallowed down a rising tide of nausea and spoke to the woman at his side.

"We'll hole up here till daybreak and then grab a car. Go find us somethin' to eat."

"How?" she whimpered. "Where?"

His hand went back reflexively, and she cringed, but he lowered it.

“I don’t care,” he breathed. “Just don’t come back without food.”

She stumbled away from him, down to the end of the alley, and was gone.

Braeden relaxed a little. It was always the same. A man could never think properly, never truly be at ease, with women around. They confused you, messed with your mind, expected you to think of things you wouldn’t ordinarily think of. He had wondered more than once if women were the real aliens.

Well, that made no never-mind now. There *were* real aliens. Somehow, he had been right all down the line. And they were everywhere, and they were after him.

He wondered if the woman would come back. He wondered if she would come back changed. He wondered if he would have to kill her before he could take his revenge on her. He thought possibly that he might.

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Orville, waiting in the shadows to deliver the *coup de grace*, suddenly found himself with an armful of Shallen.

She had stumbled round the corner straight into him. Her face, bruised and tear-streaked and blotched, registered one instant of absolute mortal panic as she recognised him, and then went completely blank. She stood, in his arms, unresisting, to all appearances conscious yet unaware of his existence. It looked as though she had withdrawn into some kind of trance.

Orville guided her away from the dead end where Braeden crouched, thinking fast. He had no experience with this kind of thing, and only a very hazy notion of what might be done. Right now, Shallen Westerman had given up. She had come face to face with the second most terrifying thing in her universe, after Braeden himself, and it had been too much after all the stress of the day. What would follow this surrender, there was no guessing. But she could be helped, he knew that. He just had to keep her stable till she could be taken to someone who could undo Braeden’s hideous work.

*Follow the drummer and try not to play any bum notes.*

“Shallen.” They were in a well-lit street now. It was quiet; Orville’s amateur opera troupe had knocked off some time ago, well pleased with their day’s work. He turned her so that the light fell on her face, and touched her on the brow with his finger.

“Shallen, can you hear me?”

A pause. Then she nodded, ever so slightly.

“Shallen, you are now under the control of the aliens.”

She nodded again.

“You feel no pain, and no fear. They are vanishing like mist.”

She stood a little straighter, and her face regained some of its natural colour.

“You remember what happened today, but without any emotion.”

Shallen nodded, more firmly now.

“You feel quite calm and confident. You no longer fear the aliens.” Gods, this was tricky. “You no longer believe in the aliens. There are no aliens. You know this because the aliens tell you so.”

Shallen nodded. She was standing at ease now, the tracks of tears and the marks of Braeden’s violence on her face the only sign that anything had been wrong.

“What are my orders, Controller?” she said in a toneless, spacy voice.

Orville gave her the keys to his car, and told her where it was parked. “You will drive to Broadfields meinie. You will be fully alert and capable of driving at all times during the journey, and allow nothing to distract you from reaching your destination safely. In Broadfields, you will go to the Seigneurie and ask to see Derwent Cathcart Windyridge. Tell him Orville Torres sent you. When you see him, you will tell him everything you know about Cold December, about its Leader and what he has done. Then you will ask to be taken to a good hospital where you can be looked after, because you have been subjected to mental and physical torture. You will be aware at all times that you are under the control of the aliens who do not exist, but you will tell no-one about that at this time. It will simply keep you focussed on your task.”

Orville paused for breath. He had no idea if he’d covered everything, but he hoped to gods he had. “Do you understand your orders, Shallen?”

"I understand." She sounded almost her normal self again. She repeated the orders back to him, word for word.

"Then carry out your mission," Orville said, stepping back.

"All right," Shallen said. She smiled at him, held up the hand with the keys in it, wiggled her fingers and set off. Orville sagged against the wall.

What he had just done was criminally stupid, irresponsible and morally reprehensible. He had no idea what the consequences would be. If that girl ended up permanently damaged because of his messing about, he would never, ever forgive himself. And what Kaichang would have to say on the subject didn't bear thinking about.

Still, it was done now, and at least she was clear of Braeden. Which left him a free hand. And he had no concerns at all about messing about with that one's mind.

*Don't do anything to hurt them*, Verneen had said. Well, he hadn't, and he wouldn't. All he had in mind was a little chat.

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For a second, Suncat almost started forward. She wanted to, oh, so much. He was there. And there was Kaichang, and Korynn. She wanted, needed to be with them.

What stopped her, what gave her good sense the time it needed to take over, was a voice from the past, a voice she had not heard in years.

*A lady does not desert her escort before the first dance is concluded.*

Miss Ganticold. Headmistress of the finishing school that bore her name, graduate of the famous St. Sybil Academy that had flourished for over a thousand years. A St. Sybil girl, she had used to say, from her St. Sybil shoes to her St. Sybil hat, and smiled at the outworn pun every time. Suncat had hated her, had set her face against everything the woman had tried to teach her, and yet some of it had obviously stuck. She turned to Darben with a brilliant smile.

"If you're sure you don't mind not dancing," she said, "I wonder if you would get me a drink?"

“Sure,” Darben said at once. “What’d you like?”

“Cider if they have it.”

“Sure they do.” Darben set off, weaving skilfully between the dancers.

“If you’ll ’scuse me, Miss Anger,” said Yorgen diffidently, “I see someone I’d sure like to say hey to.” Eynon and Droyc had already joined the dance, and Suncat had to admit they made a very nice couple. She nodded, and Yorgen plunged off.

“Shall we find somewhere to sit?” she said, and Feargal, eager to please, located an unoccupied table and pulled her chair out for her.

A young woman with pale hair, green eyes and a napkin over her arm came towards them.

“Hey,” she said. “Welcome to Magellen’s. Can I get you folks anything?”

“I’m all right, thanks,” Suncat said.

“Beer for me, please,” Feargal said.

“Oh, we got more kinds beer here than you can shake a stick at, darlin’,” the girl laughed. “You better go right on up to the bar and make a selection.”

“You’ll be okay, Miss Anger?” Feargal said, hesitating.

“I’ll stay right here,” Suncat promised.

Feargal headed towards the bar, and Suncat took Verneen’s hand and held it to her heart as their eyes met.

“How did you manage to—?” Suncat said.

“We’re a band,” Verneen said simply. “It’s what we do. You know that. Are you okay?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Suncat said. “What happens when Braeden comes back?”

“Orville’s in Downsholm right now,” Verneen said, “and the last we heard he’d thought of a plan that would keep them there all night. I don’t know any more than that.”

Suncat opened her mouth, and then stopped. “Is that a new piano?” she said.

“Korynn’s been working on it.”

Suncat listened for a moment. "I can't believe it," she said. "I know that piano. Shallen and I used to sneak in here and—" Again she stopped. "Shallen," she said. "What that man has done to her—"

"We know," Verneen said. "We heard. Kaichang and Tollain wanted to kill him."

"So do I. And I know I shouldn't, but I still do."

Verneen took her hand. "We'll defeat him instead. It'll be better." Abruptly she stood up as Darben and Feargal came back through the throng bearing three tall glasses.

"Well, I better be gettin' back 'fore old Jarlo docks my pay," she said, slipping effortlessly back into the accent. "Nice talkin' to you, darlin'."

"Cider," Darben said, placing a glass before Suncat and taking the seat next to her. Feargal edged round to sit opposite.

"You know her?" Feargal said, jerking his head at Verneen.

"Cousin of an old friend," Suncat lied easily. "The music's really good."

Fear touched her spine for a second as Darben and Feargal looked at the band and she remembered that Korynn had been with her in the cellar; but the sight of his back, bent over the keyboard, apparently brought no remembrance to them.

"Not as good as the regular band," Feargal said loyally. "Ain't nobody like Denzil on the drums."

"I dunno," Darben said. "This guy's got somethin'."

"Girl on the guitar's okay," Feargal conceded.

Yorgen, towing a stocky, moody-looking young woman, emerged breathlessly from the melee.

"Miss Anger," he said, "I'd like you to meet Jayda Gurdane. Jayda, this is Miss Anger."

"It's nice to meet you, Jayda," Suncat said, rising and holding out her hand.

Jayda shook it perfunctorily and muttered something. She reminded Suncat of Dillybine Longmoor, years ago back in Northshores.

"Jayda's my girl," Yorgen said proudly, and the phrase scraped along Suncat's nerves like a rusty razor blade. *Gonna take it out real good an' hard on my girl here.*

“No,” she said, gently but firmly. “Listen to me, Yorgen. She’s not yours. She’s hers. And you’re yours. How much of yourself you decide to give to each other is up to you, and Jayda. If you love each other, you may want to give it all, but remember, it’s two-way. What she gives to you stays hers, because you give yourself to her. You’re her man as much as she’s your girl, or as little.”

Yorgen stared at her.

“Well, sure, we know that,” he said. “I’m hers an’ she’s mine.”

“Wedding bells are going to chime?” Suncat said, smiling.

“When we’re *both* good an’ ready,” Jayda said, and her smile transformed her moody face into a thing of beauty. “Nice to meet you, Miss Anger.”

She towed Yorgen back toward the bar.

“I know why you said that, Miss Anger,” Feargal said. “But you gotta know, we ain’t all like the Leader. We know what’s what.”

“Then why do you follow him?” Suncat managed somehow to keep the question casual and not shout the band, who were now romping merrily into the home stretch of Mrs Jelliman’s Caracol.

Feargal and Darben both looked ashamed.

“Guess he just picked us up and ran with us,” Darben said. “You know there’s some people can do that, Anger. They just blow you over with the force of their personalities and you can’t help but follow.”

Suncat nodded, trying not to look over at Tollain. “Yes, I’ve met some people like that,” she said.

“But we’ve decided,” Feargal said. “All of us. Come tomorrow we’re packin’ up and clearin’ out. Ain’t no fun no more anyhow, and if the aliens ain’t real, ain’t no use neither.”

“Suppose he comes after you?” Suncat said.

“He’ll have to get through my daddy first,” Feargal laughed. “My daddy was real mad when I went an’ joined up with him. I go back there an’ tell him what’s been goin’ on,

well, sir, next time he sees old Braeden he'll—"

"We'll be okay," Darben said. "An' as for you, Anger, you'll be free. He can't hold you none without us."

"Darben, I—I don't know what to say," Suncat said.

"Just accept our humble apologies," Darben said, "and think kindly of us when you get talkin' to the po-lice."

"Your names will not come up in any conversation of mine," Suncat said. "I promise you that right now."

"All right," said the man with the tin whistle, over the applause. "Now we're going to be taking it down a bit for a while, to give you folks as well as us over here a chance to cool off a little, but our last dance for now is especially for the lovely lady in green over there and her young man."

"Darben, you didn't," Suncat whispered, horrified.

"I didn't," Darben whispered back, equally alarmed. "I don't know nothin' about it."

"It's a nice slow one," the whistler continued, "so try and stay off each other's feet. The Waves On The Water."

Darben swallowed. "Guess we gotta," he said, standing up and holding out his hand.

Suncat, suppressing an impulse to break and run, got up and took it.

He was nice to hold on to, Suncat thought, if only they didn't have to go through all this rigmarole with the legs at the same time. Somehow, by dint of constant vigilance, she managed to avoid doing him actual damage, but she was glad when the other couples, who had been watching, presumably in the hope that she would split a gusset, drifted on to the floor and hid at least her lower half from view.

It had been Tollain, of course, who had done it, and when she happened to be facing his way she made a horrible face at him. He smiled back at her, and as always she found her irritation melting.

"Thank you," the man with the whistle said, when the dance ended. "And a big hand please for Tollain, Kaichang and Fred."

*Fred??* Suncat thought, as the crowd applauded politely.

“And another, please,” Tollain called out, “for your own, your very own—and you really don’t know how lucky you are—Corwyn Chiatso!”

The applause was louder this time.

“I’m going to wet my whistle,” Corwyn said, holding it up, “and the others are going to play a couple of songs for you. And then it’s back to the dancing, for the night is yet young, and we can’t stop till it’s old enough to drink. Thank you!”

Suncat and Darben returned to their seats, as Kaichang stepped forward.

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“Braeden Carthew.”

The voice, deep as a tomb and harsh as winter itself, came from everywhere and nowhere, and Braeden’s head jerked up.

“This is the voice of the Patriarchy of Glaarght,” it went on. “We know you can hear us.”

“Where are you?” Braeden shouted, dragging his gun from his pocket.

“The human unit Shallen is with us now,” the dreadful voice grated. “She has told us everything. By dawn tomorrow your headquarters will be a burnt-out ruin, your army scattered to the winds. We will destroy your operation completely.”

“You never will!” Braeden yelled. “I’ll fight you as long as I live!”

“Incorrect,” the voice intoned. “Our Controllers are searching your brain frequency. Once they have isolated it, you will become our most eager servant. You will remember nothing except that you have always longed to give your life in the service of the Patriarchy. You will reveal to us all your contacts, and any that we do not already control will join us.”

“I’ll kill myself!” Braeden sobbed. “I’ll kill myself first!” He held the gun to his own head in a hand that shook uncontrollably.

“Incorrect,” the voice said. “And irrelevant. From this moment on you are alone. You are nothing, Braeden Carthew. A speck of dust to be blown away at a breath. You will

not take your own life, for you lack the courage, but you will pray for death many times over before we finally claim you. You will wander through a world that neither wants nor needs you, an outcast. You will seek human companionship and find none. You will seek a place and a standing, and find none.”

“You’re wrong,” Braeden wept. “You’re wrong.”

“You have taken lives,” the voice continued, “you have inflicted pain, you have done unspeakable things, not for any noble purpose, not to free a world, but simply so that you might think that you stand a little taller than those around you. You have turned your back on humanity to worship yourself, and humanity has turned its back on you.”

“It was you!” Braeden’s voice was a ragged thing, stripped of all power. “The aliens!”

“Incorrect.” The syllables tolled like bells. “There are no aliens.”

“I seen ‘em!”

“You saw only your fellow human beings.” The voice rang with sorrow. “You created aliens in the mind, to gain for yourself a little temporary power. You made your fellow humans into aliens for your own trivial purposes, and now you find yourself the one remaining human being on a world teeming with aliens. Or is it...that you are in fact the one alien in a world full of humanity?”

Braeden, beaten down and crushed by the terrible voice, nonetheless found in himself a spark of courage. He rose from his knees and stared around him, trying to pierce the shadows with his eyes.

“If there’s no aliens,” he said, “then who are you?”

Silence.

Braeden screamed and fired his gun into the darkness. He swung round in a circle, eyes closed, screaming and firing charge after charge of Gauss-focussed plasma into the emptiness of the night. The noise woke the echoes, and the flashes of light scattered the shadows and revealed empty space. There was no-one in the alley except Braeden himself.

At last he stopped, and fell back to his knees, weeping and mouthing nonsense

syllables. The gun fell from his hand to the pavement. He was a pitiable sight, and Orville reflected that had he known nothing of the man's history, he might himself have been moved to pity.

He checked himself over. A couple of those wild shots had come pretty close. As it was, the megaphone he had borrowed from the opera group would never walk again. He eyed the lacerated metal cone ruefully, before setting it down quietly point uppermost.

He waited, there on the roof overlooking the cul-de-sac, till Braeden had gathered himself together, picked up his gun and set off at a stumbling run. Then he climbed down the iron ladder set into the wall and followed at a leisurely pace. In his pocket, the engine parts needed to restore Braeden's truck to full function clinked together in his pocket.

On the whole, and given the givens, he felt he had done fairly well.