

RETURN TO

# ARGENTHOME



JONATHAN WAITE



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Braeden Carthew drove the stolen truck along the road towards Coldsands.

He had found it outside an isolated farm house just beyond Bearford. The damn aliens had missed a trick there, he thought. They didn't know he knew how to free-start trucks. Should have left someone on guard. He knew they'd be watching his every move from here on out. Surveying him by satellite from their damn mothership or whatever. Well, he knew tricks worth ten of that.

He had it all planned out. Coldsands was done. Of course he didn't believe what the damn voice had said about it being burned out. That was just bluff, terror tactics, like telling him he was nothing. He would collect the boys and bug out, head south, start again. A new army, with no damn women. When you came right down to it, damn women were no better than damn aliens. Only two things they were good for.

Braeden Carthew did not know the ancient saying about a woman, a dog, and a walnut tree, but if he had he would have endorsed it heartily.

Start again in the south, yeah. Someplace warm. Koost wasn't the only southern meinie holder who wasn't happy about Affiliation. He had other friends down there. Leander Faybig down in Rahsayno. Old Leander would give him a place, sure, and more guns. Then when the time was right, they'd start collecting troops together and rise up against the damn aliens. They couldn't control everybody, not all to once.

He wondered whether to take the Morningsky chit with him. She seemed to be cooperating at the moment, and the damn aliens thought she was safely controlled. It might be worth it. He decided, as the landscape around him took on the familiar contours of home, to see what she said when he got in and talked to her. If she pleased him, then good. If she riled him up, tried to bamboozle him, then he'd send her down to join old Anson. She didn't matter anyhow.

He rounded the corner, and immediately noticed that there was no guard on the gate. Good, he thought. He was at the stage where he needed all the rage he could work up. It would make this all the sweeter.

He parked the truck on the lawn, making a note to have one of the boys take it out and torch it later. He got out, threw open the front door and stalked in, bellowing.

“What in the hell is goin’ on here? Where’s the gate guard?”

Darben Crossmith appeared at the top of the stairs.

“Oh, hey, Braeden,” he said.

“That’s Leader to you, mister,” Braeden snapped. “Why ain’t no-one on guard?”

“Well, see, that’s the thing, Braeden,” Darben said. “You ain’t no Leader no more.”

Braeden stood stunned.

“See, we all got to talkin’ and we took a vote,” Darben said, “and we decided to change the direction of the group.”

“You took a vote?” Braeden echoed. “I’m sorry, did someone declare this here army a democracy when I wasn’t lookin’?”

“What army?” Darben said, and now Braeden could see the others all crowded up behind him. “We weren’t no army, Braeden. We were just a bunch of stupid kids playin’ with guns. Makin’ up stories about aliens—”

Braeden’s face closed up. “They got to you,” he said, and his gun was out and aiming between Darben’s eyes.

“Mr Braeden Carthew?”

The tone, from behind him, was unmistakable, and the gun disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. Braeden spun in place, quickly putting together a disarming smile.

“Hey, officer,” he said. “What can I do for you?”

The policeman was young, like all of them in the new government force, not much older than Braeden himself. He had blond hair and a heavy face, and his accent was pure Broadfields. There were two others behind him.

“I wonder if we might just ask you a few questions, Mr Carthew?”

“Certainly, officer,” Braeden said. He had a sense that the disarming smile was not working its usual magic. Possibly he looked a little tired, after walking half way from damn Downsholm. Didn’t matter. “I wonder if you would just give me a few minutes,

though, you see I have only just got back and there has evidently been some disruption in the house while I was away.”

“Er—certainly, Mr Carthew,” the officer said. “We’ll just wait out here, then, shall we?”

“Thank you kindly,” Braeden said, easing the door closed. “I will be with you in just a few minutes.”

The door snicked shut and he turned on the crowd at the top of the stairs.

“Now what in the hell is this damn nonsense about electin’ a new leader?” he growled. “Who’d be dumb enough to try to stand against me?”

“That would be me, I’m afraid,” said a woman’s voice, and the Morningsky girl emerged from the crowd and stood on the second step, looking down on him.

“Although since this is supposed to be Cold December, you could actually call it restoring the former leader to her rightful place, couldn’t you?”

Braeden pulled his gun again.

“Ah-ah-ah,” she chided him. “I’m sure you would just love to shoot all of us, or maybe have someone hold us down while you beat us, but do you really want to try it with three policemen at the door? You do remember the policemen, don’t you? I know you’re prone to lapses of memory, Braeden.”

Braeden struggled with himself for a moment, and finally jammed the gun back into its resting place.

“My memory works just fine,” he grunted.

“Oh good, then you’ll be able to tell the nice policemen about Anson, won’t you? When did you last see your father, Braeden?”

“Anson?” someone said behind her.

“Thought he’d gone back to Northshores.”

“That was what Miss Shallen said.”

“Ah yes, Shallen,” the Morningsky bitch went on. “They’ll probably want to ask you about her as well. She’s in hospital now, but I gather she was very informative. About

the torture, and the murders, and the plotting to overthrow the government...have you anything you'd like to add to what the police already have, Braeden?"

She was wearing a fancy green dress he'd never seen before, looking real good. And she was looking down on him, just like they always did. Like Shallen herself. Like Dillybine Longmoor. Like so many others. Damn women never knew their place 'less you taught it to 'em good and hard. Well, her turn would come. He just needed to get rid of these stupid policemen.

He took a deep breath, smoothed his hair, adjusted the fit of his clothes.

"I'll be back," he promised in a low, husky whisper, "an' I'll deal with all of you."

Then he went outside to talk to the officers of the law.

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"Can he bring it off, do you think?" Verneen asked, in the parlour at Meldrum's farm. She, Tollain, Orville and Carson were clustered round the machine; Kaichang had gone out early, and Korynn was still in his room.

"Never," Tollain said. "There's too much evidence."

"I dunno," Carson said. "From what you tell me, Miss Shallen been acting kind of weird. Way I see it, it all hangs on her word."

"Not quite all," Orville said. He was a little pale, but the news from Broadfields, relayed via Morningsky, had made him feel somewhat better.

*"...and I just didn't realise," Braeden's voice came mellifluously over the speaker, via the transceiver fastened to his shirt, "how much of a bad way the poor girl was in. Not sleepin' at night, self-harmin', I've even come upon her passed out from liquor a time or two, but I was just so busy developin' my business contacts in the south I paid no mind to the troubles that were just eatin' her up..."*

Verneen made vomiting motions. Orville signed for her to wait. His finger hovered above a button on the machine.

The button said BRAEDEN – LEVEL 2.

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“So I guess she must have made up this wild story about aliens,” Braeden went on, strolling back and forth across the lawn, “and just brooded on it an’ brooded on it till the poor darlin’ came to believe it was real.”

“Why did she say that you had told her the story?” the policeman said.

Braeden shrugged helplessly. “Who can fathom the workin’s of a confused and misguided girl’s mind?” he said. “Maybe she wanted to punish me for my neglect of her, a punishment, let me say, officer, I richly deserve.”

“That’s as may be, sir,” the policeman said, “but it’s a bit outside our jurisdiction. Maybe we should move on.”

“Move on?” Braeden repeated.

“To the question of your father, sir. Mr Anson Carthew. Would you happen to know where he is right now?”

And at exactly the same moment, seemingly directly in Braeden’s ear, a faint but horribly familiar voice spoke.

*“Braeden Carthew.”*

Braeden stiffened. He felt the blood drain from his face.

“Uh—” He shook his head. “I’m sorry, could you repeat the question?”

“Your father, Mr Carthew,” the policeman said mildly. “We were just wondering if you knew where he is.”

*“Braeden Carthew,”* said the voice in his ear. *“You have been located.”*

“No!” Braeden yelled. “That is, uh, no, I don’t know. Uh—I think he said he was goin’ back to Northshores.”

*“Incorrect,”* said the voice. *“He is not in Northshores.”*

“Yes he is!” Braeden shouted.

The policemen looked startled. “We were only asking a simple question, sir,” the spokesman said. “No need to get excited.”

“I’m sorry, officer,” Braeden said. “I guess I’ve been overdoin’ it a little lately. Now if you’ll excuse me—”

“I’m afraid we’re not quite finished yet, sir,” the policeman said. Braeden wanted to punch him right in the mouth. “That vehicle there on the lawn, sir. Is it yours?”

He was ready for that one. “No, officer, it isn’t. My own vehicle broke down in Downsholm yesterday and I borrowed that one from a very kind person out near Bearford.”

*“Incorrect,”* the voice grated in his ear. Damn, he hated it. *“You stole it.”*

“Would you know the person’s name, sir?”

“No, I’m afraid not, but I could take you back there.”

“Would it interest you to know--”

*“Braeden Carthew. Your assimilation has begun. Your brain frequency has been isolated.”*

Braeden blinked. “I’m sorry, officer, what did you just say?”

“I asked you if it would interest you to know that that vehicle was reported stolen last night?”

*“You will become one of our human slaves.”*

The world seemed to be growing dark around him. Was this what being controlled felt like? “I, uh, I don’t—”

“Take your time, sir. We’re not out to trip you up or make you say anything you don’t mean to.”

*“We will make you say anything we wish.”*

“No you won’t!” Braeden couldn’t seem to catch his breath. Between the damn policemen and the damn aliens...he couldn’t deal with both. “I’m sorry, officer...truth is I ain’t feelin’ too good right now...would it be possible for you to come back tomorrow?”

“I’m afraid not, sir,” the policeman said. “We really do have to speak to you right now.”

*“Relax and accept your new destiny as a slave of the Patriarchy.”*

Braeden turned to bolt back into the house, and found the doorway blocked by the

Morningsky witch and the men he had once thought of as his troops.

“What’s the matter, Braeden?” the chit said. “Losing your nerve?”

Braeden turned back to face the policemen, who were coming closer.

*“There is no escape,”* the grating voice in his ear intoned.

And then he saw it. The one chance.

He ran straight at the policemen, knocking them this way and that, reached the stolen truck and leapt inside. Before they had finished picking themselves up, he was out through the gate and racing along the Broadfields road.

He didn’t have far to go.

*“Stop and return to the house,”* the voice commanded in his ear, but he ignored it.

They didn’t have his brain yet. He was still free. He giggled as he drove, waiting for the precise spot.

There. He opened the door and leapt out, rolling over and over as the truck careered off the road, through the rickety fence and over the side of the cliff. He heard it fall, but he was already moving, on elbows and knees towards the cliff stairs. Broadfields police would never think of them. They didn’t know the territory. They’d assume he’d gone over with the truck.

He sought with his foot for the first step, found it, and eased himself down, hanging on by the safety rope. There he waited, nothing but air at his back and a hundred feet of it beneath him, while the policemen came running up and he heard their muttered conversation.

Oh, they’d send someone down, and they’d find no body in the wreckage, but he’d be well hidden by then, and gone soon after. There were more ways of going south than by road.

He began to descend the stairs, slowly and carefully and above all silently. He had a little grace, not much but it would be enough. Braeden Carthew wasn’t dead yet.

Though all the world come in arms against him, he would prove that he was a man.

The wind was bitter cold against the rock to which he clung, and carried the tang of the sea. The tide was on the way out, he knew that much; he could hide in one of the



caves in back of Bracer's Cove till the fuss had died down, and then make his way at leisure round to the beach and take his pick of the boats laid up there for the winter. His arms were starting to ache. It had been a long while since he'd done this. But his feet were sure, and he was in good shape, and he was fighting for his freedom. A man couldn't fight for nothing finer than that. After all, even if they caught him, they wouldn't kill him. There weren't no executions out on Fairbourn Island no more. Damn aliens had seen to that.

Or...were there aliens? He couldn't quite make it out. He'd thought, at one time, that he'd made up the aliens. A story to keep his troops in line. But now he couldn't be sure. There'd been a voice in his head, but maybe he'd imagined that. It was all so damn confusing.

Anyway, long and the short of it was, if they caught him, they'd just lock him up for the rest of his life. Damn psychologists talking at him, trying to find out why he'd killed his daddy. Like they wouldn't have wanted to kill him after spending years listening to his big talk. Bought himself his own damn meinie, let them deny him the seigneurship. That meinie should have been his. Braeden Carthew, Seigneur of Coldsands. Nobody would have dared touch him then. Old fool had thrown it away. Old fool deserved to die.

He was nearly at the bottom. Sea was a good long ways out. He'd be safe soon. Safe and free. And then out, on to the open sea where no damn laws could touch him.

His foot touched sand. He let himself the rest of the way down, stumbled, caught himself on one of the jagged rocks that surrounded the stair bottom. Every couple years another chunk of cliff came down, left shards of itself embedded in the sand to be worn down by the sea. Like his daddy had let himself be worn down. Not him, though, not Braeden Carthew. He felt a sudden urge to shout his name to the rocks and sea, but he quelled it. That would be stupid. They might still be up there.

"Hey."

The voice stopped him cold.

"Did you just come down those stairs?"

It was another damn woman, one he'd never seen before. Big and dark, with hair in a cloud round her head. She didn't sound suspicious, though. Just asking a question. Better brazen it out. He smiled.

"Sure did," he said.

"That's quite an impressive feat," she said, looking up at the sheer wall with the footholds carved into it and the rope snaking down from the top.

"Guess so," he said. "Now, if you'll excuse me—"

"What a shame," she said, still gazing up at the wall of rock, "you lost your footing halfway down."

"What?" he said, feeling a coldness run up his spine. "I didn't—"

He never even saw the blow coming. It stunned him and turned his limbs to water. Before he could even register the pain, the world wheeled sickeningly around him and he was dimly aware that she had picked him up bodily and was holding him high above her head.

Then she threw him down on to the jagged rocks.

She did it several more times, but he lost count after the second or third.

The last thing he saw, as the light faded in his eyes, was her face, a forefinger to her smiling lips. She said something—it might have been "Goodnight, Daddy"—but he could barely hear it over the sound of the sea in his ears.

Then the dark waters closed over him, and his last conscious thought was that the tide must have come in awfully quickly.