

Part Four

Departure

Bear was awake well before the six hours had elapsed. His sleep had been troubled and tenuous all the way through, and he'd finally given up trying when he heard Jake exit his bunk and get dressed. He sat up, and did the same. They didn't speak, just accompanied each other to the kitchen. They ate very little, but each downed some instant coffee. It tasted awful, but the caffeine did help. Jake set his mug on the metal counter next to one of the sinks, picked up his rifle, and looked at Bear.

"I'll bring the truck around."

Bear nodded, and watched him leave the kitchen. He wondered to himself what the day would bring. He was at once in new territory and the same place, and the dichotomy was hard to reconcile. He'd orchestrated his revenge in Evanston with no real expectation that it would ever succeed. He had not been able to keep his daughter alive long enough for her to see it, not that it would have necessarily been enough for her to choose to live, anyway. He knew that.

This now was another attempt to right a wrong, and a hope to save another young woman.

Maybe that was what it came down to. He *had* to try again. For Brin, but also for Elise.

It was enough. What else was there? He was fine if it was the last thing he tried, but he did hope that Jake and Brin got a life beyond this.

He got up himself, and threw his coffee cup into the sink. The handle shattered, bits of ceramic tinkling around in the stainless steel confines.

It didn't matter. He'd never be back here anyway. Somehow, he knew it. He grabbed his own rifle, and headed for the electrical room to retrieve the eight cube-multiple.

As he exited the admin building through the same door they'd originally entered, the sight of the Humvee idling in the pre-dawn dark at the curb ahead gave him a deep sense of reverse dislocation. There was a tacit normalcy to the red lights at the back, the amber side-markers, and the white glow piercing the dark at the front, all while the engine growled quietly. It was a momentary return to a normal world, where he hadn't yet seen what the depths of life could inflict.

It didn't last, and he opened the rear door. He slid the duffel containing all their cubes into the small space on the metal floor not occupied by the rest of the items he'd already loaded in. He unzipped it, and took out the eight cube-multiple. He looked up at Jake in the driver's seat, and saw that he was looking back at him. Jake asked,

"You did test this already, right?"

Bear grinned at him.

"As far as you know."

Then he twisted four cubes loose from the other four, waiting to see what would happen himself.

The truck continued to idle.

Bear disassembled the cubes, and stored them in the duffel. He zipped it closed, and shut the rear door, then climbed up into the passenger seat next to Jake. Jake tapped his arm with the back of his hand.

"Nice job, old man."

"Call me that again. I dare you."

Jake coughed out a small laugh and put the truck into gear, and they left the station. It was clear to Bear that the initiation of movement toward Brin had released Jake from his internal conflict. If only a resolution like that would remain as simple and freeing for him, Bear thought.

They reached the interstate interchange just before dawn, but Bear told Jake to pass it by, at least for a few more miles.

"Why?"

"I told you. I have to test-fire the .50 first. We need to know for sure before we do this. Sound will travel a long way, but if we get behind that ridge up there, I'm hoping that'll mask it. *You* set this time-table, by the way, so don't give me any shit about it. This is us making sure they don't have any advance notice."

Jake didn't respond, just complied.

The sun was scarcely above the horizon when Bear directed him off of the road onto a dirt track that soon entered into a forested section. He held up his hand after a minute or so, saying,

"Good enough."

Jake stopped immediately. Bear climbed into the back, and then up into the turret. He'd already loaded the belt-fed ammo into the receiver, so it was now just down to whether it would work or not. He sighted in on a tree, and depressed the trigger.

The bark of the rounds, the concussive recoil, and the metallic ting of expended brass took him back to another time he didn't want to remember. He watched the Douglas fir splinter low on the trunk, its skin exploding outward before he let off.

He climbed down again, and rejoined Jake. Several statements occurred to him, but in the end all he said was,

"Let's go."

Jake reversed, and then headed back to the road.

They soon reached the interstate again, and headed towards the exit leading to Garnet. The last thing they did before reaching it was to stash the duffel with all of their remaining cubes not currently tied to the operation of the Humvee and the other two taped to their wrists allowing them to shoot. Bear chose the engine bay of the same lifted pick-up on the highway where they'd had their conflict after losing Brin. It was a huge risk, but if they had to flee in a hurry, they could access it quickly. It seemed a better choice than burying them again.

After closing the hood just enough to engage the latch but not require getting into the cab to pull the release handle, Bear climbed back into the Humvee. He looked at Jake.

"I won't ask you if you're ready. I know you are, but it's balls-out from here. If we make it inside, there's no plan. Just reaction time against whatever they have. Oh, and remember to stop after the buses."

Jake just nodded as he looked away, once again putting the truck into gear. The last thing Bear said to him before making his way back to the turret was almost an afterthought, a cast-backward encouragement.

"You can do this."

The response was muted, almost lost in the engine noise.

"I think my father would've disagreed with you, but Dave might be fifty-fifty."

