

TERMINAL BREACH

STEVE BRADSHAW



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“No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same
river and he is not the same man.”

Heraclitus

THE LEGEND

On the seventh day of the seventh winter, the flying eagle drops her head and the gray wolf howls ...

Long ago, on the frozen banks of the Yellowstone River, the one is given the name *Jumping Badger*. He reveals courage and vision and patience. He displays a deep understanding of human existence. He would lead the resistance of the peaceful, nomadic hunters against the erring ways of the flying eagle. And he would be known to all of the Standing Rock Sioux Nation as Tatanka Iyotake—Lakota language for the Buffalo Bull Who Sits.

The elders also spoke of another worthy nomadic hunter of the Great Plains, the one who stood vigil the first day on the frozen banks of the Yellowstone and on the prairie the night *Tatanka* took his last breath and his spirit soared. *Canis lupus*—the Gray Wolf, knows all the world's beginnings and all the world's futures. Gray Wolf is the follower of an ever-changing course, hearer of the clouds passing overhead, and seer of two looks away.

On the seventh day of the seventh winter, the Gray Wolf speaks to the moon, touches the spirit of Sitting Bull, and roams the Great Plains to evict evil and protect the descendants of peaceful men. It is said the sacred mission of the gray wolf can be heard in the whispering winds, but only in the tongue of the Lakota—*Ktè iyúha hè Iya*.

PROLOGUE

WASHINGTON D.C.

“Mr. President, we have a situation.”

Mr. Cameron Scofield would never enter the private quarters of the POTUS for his own purposes, but now he had to. Explicit instructions had been left the day William Landon stepped into the White House—*Cam is the only man allowed to poke me in the middle of the damn night.*

The retired Dallas County Sheriff had lost his wife to ovarian cancer ten years earlier. Then senior Texas Senator (great grandson of Horace Alsbury Landon, the courier sent from the Alamo upon the arrival of the Mexican troops) had removed a gun from Cam’s shaking hand and got him back onto his feet. From that day forward, the two were inseparable. Few would ever know Scofield returned the favor a year into Landon’s second term. No one would have considered the possibility of a sitting President taking his own life.

“Mr. President,” Cam whispered as he turned on the lamp by Landon’s head. “They need you now.”

He had heard the door open. He rarely slept anymore—not since Barbara. Through one slitted eye, he watched his old friend creep across the room, bumping into furniture. If Barbara were still alive, she would have pinched his backside and played dead. Instead, there was nothing but cold sheets, bulky blankets, and Cam feeling his way along. In the fog of the early morning, President Landon reveled in the fond memory of his wife until he would have to do more.

She had talked him into the second term. Barbara always told him to ignore the negative people. She said there were not that many—they were just a tiny bit louder than the rest of us. Then Barbara had died, a month after the second inauguration. Now he slept alone in the White House. After Cam had stopped him from ending his life, Landon decided he would do the best he could for the country over the next three years. Then he would disappear—no libraries and no pontificating.

Cam leaned inches from the President's chiseled face and poked his shoulder with one finger. "I know you're awake, Bill," he whispered so the Secret Service could not hear his familial tone. Everything had to be "presidential."

Cam cleared his throat and spoke louder. "Mr. President, they need you."

Landon opened his eye all the way. "What's going on?"

"North Dakota, sir." Cam straightened and held out the President's pants.

"Lord Jesus," Landon huffed, swinging his legs from the bed. There was only one reason to get a President of the United States out of bed for *North Dakota*.

The cold, early morning silence swallowed the room as he stepped into his pants and backed into his shirt. Seconds later—surrounded by dark suits, narrow ties, and ear pieces—they walked a stiff pace down the main hall in the private-quarters of the White House.

“Are we in the bunker?” Landon breathed.

Cam passed the note and watched the transformation as Landon digested the words. His brow dipped. His eyes narrowed. And his face hardened like cut granite. The most powerful man in the world seemed to grow six inches as he turned the next corner and dropped the balled paper to the floor.

PART ONE

CANARIES **DIE**

Five Days Earlier – Somewhere south of Minot, North Dakota

CHAPTER 1

“Death is the solution to all problems.”

Joseph Stalin

They're not gonna kill me...

I gotta be the smallest cog in the whole operation. But someone thought enough of us to give me more money than I make in ten years.

Still, I'm just not important. Maybe they won't come after me.

If I wasn't the son of a stinkin' criminal—especially someone with his resume'—I bet I wouldn't have even gotten the call.

But I am, and I did.

I shoulda' listened to the old man this time. He's not that crazy. But I never trusted him. He's evil. He chose to live in hell with all the other monsters.

They're gonna kill me ...

Roan threw the chrome skull forward, ramming his knuckles into the dash. As blood came to the surface of his ragged fingers, he slammed his boot on the gas pedal and leaned into the curve. Rounding the north end of Lake Vernon, he increased speed and did all he could to hold the old truck onto the snow-dusted road, the only visible line in the endless white landscape.

The frozen plains of North Dakota would never change. They would forever be an unsung graveyard of men. Over the centuries, many men had dropped in its vast emptiness and died a hideous death. Legend says they were killed by the real monsters. Their carcasses were dragged away by the gray wolf and their bones picked clean by the red-tailed hawk. Some men

are missed. All men are lost forever, their mangled remains swallowed by an indifferent world.

Roan's familiar lease, the 1952 B42S Mack tow truck, whined and moaned. It did not like going over forty. The rebuilt Cummins diesel engine, cradled two feet above the frozen tarmac on iron mounts, screamed bloody murder as the vintage pile of rusty, red-painted metal neared seventy for the first time in decades. Roan had to get far away, fast.

He kept his boot to the pedal and eyes on the road as the last of the sun dipped below the horizon behind him. The kaleidoscope of oranges and reds reached across the endless snowfields, changing into greens and purples and blues. Although bathed in a spectacular wonderland, Roan knew the realities ahead. Dangers come with a rapid temperature drop after a winter sunset in North Dakota. In minutes, the world drops to twenty-below and all the rules change. The air sucked into the diesel gets choking thick, the shatter-point of the windshield is reached, and the rock-hard tires on the frozen asphalt lose traction—just a few of nature's hurdles to test a man's true desire to live. Roan knew that if he let up, or if his truck gave out, he would be the next warm carcass torn to shreds and dragged away to the middle of nowhere.

He tried to focus on the road. The hundred times he'd traveled the frozen, desolate plains of North Dakota, he'd always thought about being eaten alive by a drove of toothy predators with constant smiles. Each time the flesh-tearing images tormented him until he had reached civilization. This time, Roan did not need to repress Indian legend, or ignore superstition, or block his overactive imagination. This time, real monsters hunted him. He knew because he had seen them.

Several long minutes and empty miles passed. The eastern horizon had darkened and the old tow truck had settled into its once-intolerable speed. Roan's white knuckles on the cold

steering wheel stopped bleeding, and his skin started to regain color. At the very moment when he started to believe he had a chance, an explosive impact rolled through the vehicle from behind. It lifted its rear end and propelled the tow truck forward with enormous force.

The violent collision whipped Roan's head back into the cab window. A hundred cracks shot in a hundred directions from its bloody epicenter. Roan was thrown into the passenger seat and slammed against the door. The whirling eruption sent the wounded truck down the frozen highway in a slow tail spin and imminent death roll. Every rusty bolt strained as the freshly crumpled metal rocketed forward, shedding glass and shrapnel onto the frozen tarmac.

As the smoking heap moaned, Roan climbed back to the steering wheel. Like an elk bull asserting dominance, the intensity of the collision had delivered a chilling message—the monsters had arrived. Roan cringed. Unsure of what bones were broken and organs bruised, he squirmed into position and grabbed the wheel. He cut it into the sideways slide, down shifted, popped the clutch, and stomped the gas. The disoriented diesel coughed and came alive. Its tail slid back where it belonged—Roan had retaken control of the crippled truck. His heart pounded in his throat as he rebooted his brain. He knew he had to escape the fog of confusion or accept his imminent death.

Whatever hit me is onboard, he thought as he looked over his shoulder. The back of the truck hung low with the added weight. He could see a spray of sparks that shot ten feet into the sky. He attempted to keep the speed above fifty. The diesel could just not lose the battle.

Roan grabbed the dangling mirror. He studied the large shadow sitting behind the bent, twenty-ton winch. *What are you?* He squeezed the mirror in his bloody hand and moved it around

in a desperate attempt to understand. *Are you fused to me? Are you dead?*

He threw down the mirror and looked straight ahead. *Fight or flight? Flight!*

Roan rejected the existence of monsters. He rejected his impending death like a child refusing to eat vegetables. There *had* to be another explanation. *Why do I always go to worst case? Maybe this is just an accident. Maybe the friggin' cold is messin' with my head, making me think unclearly. This could be a random person in the wrong place at the wrong time. Maybe they ran into me by pure accident. They were speeding in the middle of nowhere, like a lot of people do. My taillights are not the best—very easy to miss. Hell, they're always covered with grease and mud and ice. I never clean this old rental truck. Why should I? It's not mine. Granted, I do rent the thing a lot ...*

His head kept saying *maybe*. His heart kept saying *no way*. Roan continued to rationalize away his fears until he ran a cold, trembling hand over his wet face. *How can I be wet? It's freezing outside and almost as cold in here, for God's sake. How can I possibly be sweating?* Under the flickering dash lights, he found the blood on his hand. Then he spotted his reflection in the windshield. The diesel coughed. Roan's rationalizations began to fade as reality took hold. The old tow truck would die soon—and so would he.

Don't be stupid. Nobody runs into the back of a big-ass tow truck goin' seventy on a flat damn prairie at sundown. I got hit on purpose. They want me. He squeezed the wheel and bit his lip. New blood rolled down his chin. *The monsters are here!*

He folded his aching body over the steering wheel, his nose inches from the ice-flecked glass. Hot breath fell from his bloody mouth as he looked through his reflection and got lost in the sliding lights on the empty road.

Stay calm. If I'm lucky, the collision killed the bastards, he

thought. *This truck is tougher than she looks. Joe's always sayin' they don't make 'em with real iron anymore. That's what happened; those bastards hit a damn iron wall back there. It coulda' been just enough to break their collective, over-aggressive necks.*

He glanced into his side mirror. Nothing moved except a swinging cable hanging from the bent winch. *I gotta get to Minot! It's not that far—ten to fifteen miles. This old truck can make it. I bet it got through a lotta worse shit over the years.*

When I get to Minot, I'm goin' straight into the Ward County Sheriff's Office. I'm gonna tell 'em everything. I'm gonna tell 'em exactly what's goin' on here. I'll tell 'em what I did, too.

He swallowed hard. *I didn't do anything real bad. I just got 'em to the place that nobody remembers, the place my old man showed me when I was a kid—back when I didn't know he was a monster, too. Yeah ... I got 'em inside that place. That was not easy. Way more complicated than I remembered. I sure as hell earned my money—but they were never going to pay me. When we got inside, they had all they needed. It was pretty much over right then. I could tell. The way they looked at me. I wasn't important anymore. They treated me real good for a year, and then it was time for me to be eliminated. I was just one more fattened pig for their luau.*

I even went through all the ritual shit! Never bought into any of it. Roan pulled up his shirtsleeve and rubbed his tattoo—it burned. He stared at the beams on the snow-dusted asphalt. All that time, I was with some real teeth-gnashing predators. I heard them talkin.' I know what they do to people. I shoulda known they'd get around to me sooner or later.

His eyes dropped to the speedometer. The cracked glass had fallen out when the Mack got hit. Now the bent needle wobbled below fifty. Roan leaned to the side mirror. The sparks still sprayed into the night and the rear end still dragged on the

asphalt. The diesel could not handle the stress much longer. Smoke had started to pour from the hood and seep into the cab.

Reality crept in. Even if Minot was only one mile away, it no longer mattered. Roan choked on the diesel fumes. His end neared. He would black out first. Then the truck would run off the road and plow into a snowdrift. Roan would die the horrible death he had feared for years. He would be the helpless victim of the monsters clinging onto the back of his truck or the toothy scavengers of the Great Plains. As his fingers numbed and his hopes faded, the horrific images of his worst nightmare grew.

Through the smoke-filled cab, the Lake Vernon Quarry loomed in the distance—the only sign of life on the snow-covered prairie. He saw a dozen enormous mounds of gravel and sand covered in white. It looked like an elephant graveyard on the Serengeti in a snowstorm. Roan had passed the same quarry a hundred times before, but he'd never given the place a second thought. Now everything was different. Still, the small flash of hope died. Roan knew the Lake Vernon Quarry would be closed during these winter months. There would be no employees, no witnesses, and no one to help him. The small business on the desolate highway would not save him from his terrible fate. There were no humans. He could only stare at the winter ghost town.

Maybe his deepest fear of being dragged away and eaten alive made him think more. Maybe the monsters clinging to his tail helped spawn the idea. *The old truck could handle it*, he thought. He created the plan in a split second. *I will maximize speed and drive head-first into the piles of rocks. At sixty, the sheer momentum will take me through at least two piles. The impact and the tunneling will kill and scrape off my passengers.*

He fastened his seatbelt, tightened the strap, and swallowed his fear. He glanced up at the fat roll-bars on the inside roof of the cab. *Always wondered why you guys were up there.* He patted

the dash. “You may be old as hell, but you’re built strong. Hope Joe forgives me.”

Roan downshifted and floored it. To his surprise, the Mack lurched forward like a bear bolting from the brush for prey. Roan picked up speed. Smoke bellowed from the hood. The strained metal whined in the freezing wind.

“I hear ya. Let’s shake off these sons-of-bitches!”

At fifty-yards from the piles, the rear window exploded. Shattered glass flew throughout the cab. The choking smoke rushed out. Roan took a deep breath as the spastic speedometer needle climbed to sixty. “I need all hundred-fifty horses to kick some ass now!”

He pounded the clutch to the floor and threw the chrome skull into the last gear, reopening his wounds on the jagged dash. When he hit the gas and popped the clutch, the Mack leaped forward a second time. “I knew you had more to give,” he boomed with blood dripping into his eyes and rolling down his neck. This time a hand-wipe of the face would not matter. Roan’s newest wound lay open on the side of his head. Raw flesh hung from his grazed skull.

At twenty yards from the snow-covered piles the front windshield exploded—he had no time to understand why. Roan saw his bloody face in the swinging mirror. Before he could blink, the nose of the Mack found the first mound. In a millisecond, the rock-lined snowdrift exploded in a volcanic eruption. The rusted chrome grill and red-painted metal hood collapsed like a crushed beer can. The rebuilt diesel tore off its iron mounts. Sand and rock and ice poured into the cab. Then the dual fifty-gallon tanks torpedoed the piles, followed immediately by the bent winch, and then the monsters.