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PNEUMANAUTS

by Cameron Armstrong

CHAPTER ONE

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SEVEN YEARS SINCE THE ANCHORS' DESCENT

Three runaways sat on steaming asphalt, their sweat-stained backs pressed against the underside of a stolen 1973 Ford Econoline E100. A nosedive into the roadside ditch had toppled the van on its side. It lay there like the carcass of some great beast, its shadow the sole relief from the bludgeoning sunrays. The small mercies, the eldest boy reflected, were all that made life in this wasteland bearable.

Kirk was too wispy and pale to last long in the heat. Seventeen years as a clergyman's son had spared him the ruddy skin and callouses of his peers, most of whom spent their summers on the farm. Already his cheeks were sunburnt – he could feel them crinkle as he squinted at the driver's side mirror. The van's tilt gave it the appearance of thrusting heavenward like a hitchhiker's thumb asking God for a lift. He smirked, then winced. Both he and the Good Lord knew that the Spirit drew nearest to war widows and Third World orphans, not degenerates chasing a death wish down a Saskatchewanian highway. The thumb had a better chance of hailing the BDOs. At least they were in the neighbourhood.

“Jesus. We didn't even make it to Assiniboia,” said the boy on his right.

Kirk sat with the back bumper supporting his spine, a cigarette hanging limp from his parched lips. The other two, hunkered like urchins under a shadowy crag, had taken the better part of the shade for themselves. They blamed him, of course. Not for the lack of water – they had planned to stop in nearby Trossachs and stock up on the resources they couldn't raid from their own pantries at home – but for the crash, even though he'd been in the backseat. There wasn't much point in arguing with Louis incapacitated and Roland *indisposed*, as old Mrs. Bates would have said, casting her Gorgon's glare around the classroom.

"Been over two hours since that guy stopped for us," Kirk said. "Nearest payphone's at that gas station we passed a while ago. Only a hundred K or so back to town from there." He wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. "Truck should be here soon."

Roland kept turning over stones with his Swiss Army knife. "Did the Good Samaritan drive a Cadillac?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You saw his car. That was a Levite's ride, man. Guy like that wouldn't part with a nickel for a couple of burnouts stranded on the 13. It'd be a perversion of justice."

"That's just your paranoia talking."

"Yeah? Either way, we're somebody's charity case," he muttered.

The heat was getting to them all. Kirk could see Roland's face was flushed crimson, his nose and cheekbones scorched. The neckline of his undershirt was discoloured yellow, and the chain necklace hanging there glistened with moisture. Still he refused to remove his leather jacket.

Roland elbowed his shoulder and reached for the cigarette. Kirk let him pluck it from his mouth. Roland took a long drag, then exhaled. There was no breeze to carry the smoke away – the miasma settled on their skin, hair and clothes.

“That’s the last one,” Kirk said.

“I know.”

Kirk reached for the cigarette, but Roland leaned away.

“What’s that look for?” Roland said, seeing the flicker on Kirk’s face. “This is your fault.”

“Who was driving?”

“Who was on lookout?”

“It’s a straight road, Roland. You could see just as well as me.”

“Those are just excuses.” Roland tossed a stone across the road. It clattered as it bounced off the pavement and rolled into the ditch opposite. The third boy, hunched over to Roland’s right, gave a start before sinking back into his stupor. “We all had jobs, didn’t we? I drive, Louis navigates, and you keep the goddamn lookout.”

“For cops.”

“For anything that can fuck us up! Cops, yes. But what about ourselves, huh? Maybe we’re our own worst enemies. You never thought of that, did you?”

Kirk turned his head. Roland met his gaze, eyes rheumy and dull.

“If I’d known you were stoned, I wouldn’t have let you drive,” said Kirk.

“You couldn’t tell? I thought you just didn’t care.” He closed an eye and held his arm level with the horizon. The highway lashed across the prairie, a thin cord of gravel and concrete binding east to west. “You’re telling me it’s a straight road. I’ve been looking at it through a kaleidoscope this whole time.”

“You made it to my house this morning just fine.”

“Edibles hadn’t kicked in yet.”

“And you picked me up last. How was I supposed to know when I was in the backseat checking for highway patrol?”

“You’ve met my old man. Would you steal off him sober?”

Kirk had no answer. Roland’s fingers slid to the front pocket of his jeans and produced a lighter. He flicked it open, then closed. *Srrick. Srrick.* Sunlight glinted off the silver lid with each motion.

“You want to see the mountains, don’t you?” Kirk asked. “Make it to the Wedge?”

“Sure.”

“Alive?”

“I mean, whatever works.”

“Then why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“This!” Kirk gestured toward the van, the road, the waves of swaying canola. “We’ll only get one shot, and you’re wasting it.”

“I’m on vacation, man. I’m not trying to hold it together anymore.” Roland nudged the third boy’s shoulder. “How about you, Louis?”

Louis sagged deeper into himself. There was a gurgle, and then curdled spittle on the dirt in front of him.

“Damn straight,” said Roland. “You’re taking yourself too seriously, Kirk. Weyburn’s behind you – out here’s the Wild West. Nobody makes it far unless they embrace the anarchy.”

Roland grinned and put the cigarette to his lips once more, now little more than a stub. After another long drag he flicked it into the ditch across the road.

Kirk bit the inside of his cheek, a habit he'd formed after growing tired of reciting Scripture on demand. James 3:6 had been a family favorite. His father often told him he possessed two tongues – one of flesh and one of fire. *The first you must learn to control*, he would say, staring unblinkingly through wide-frame glasses, *and the second, when your heart is set right, controls you.*

Kirk nodded toward the undulating sea of grain and prodded Roland.

“Are you going to get that?”

“Get what?”

“The cigarette.”

“No.”

“It’s dry as hell out here. You could start a fire.”

“What’s so bad about that?”

Roland picked at his teeth with an uncut fingernail. Kirk wondered if he kept them long for playing guitar. He'd never mentioned being a musician, but the notion suited his image – brown hair worn long and shaggy, wiry frame with no muscle definition.

“I’m not saying it’s good,” he went on. “But why not let it burn? I mean, if there are a hundred million-something planets just like Earth, what’s so special about it? Where’s the moral imperative in preserving it?”

“I’m not in the mood, Roland.”

“Hold on, this is some real philosophy right here.” Roland straightened his back. “Imagine us in the future, capable of interstellar travel, okay? The universe expanding before us. We burn up all the oil we have, enrich every uranium atom – leave the planet fucking hollow, right – and build one gigantic spaceship. Like, massive,” he said, stretching his hands apart. “Then we sail

that mother across the stars to the next planet. Rinse and repeat. Couple generations later, we've got our own interstellar empire. Nobody even thinks of messing with us."

"That's not philosophy, that's capitalist propaganda," said Louis, raising his head. "Besides, we'd be too late. The galaxy's already been conquered, right?" He leaned forward, seeking their gazes to share a grin. Kirk still had trouble knowing which eye to meet.

"Then we take it back. Manifest fucking destiny," Roland said.

"I'm being serious, guys," Kirk pressed.

"So am I. I mean, obviously we're never gonna get off this rock. All I'm saying is there's a good argument for adopting a scorched earth policy." He leaned back and shut his eyes. "Why should we leave anything behind? Just to be neighbourly?"

Again Kirk tilted his head up to the stark, empty sky. The local BDO was somewhere overhead even now, silent and watchful behind the blue vacancy. It was easy to forget there was anything there, which suited most people's sensibilities. That's what daytime was, in Kirk's mind – a curtain cast over the birdcage.

"Do you remember the last time it rained?" he asked.

"Do I look like a weatherman?" Roland replied.

"Three weeks. Record low," Louis said.

Roland cast him a sidelong glance. "Yeah? Well, if it does burn, we'll be long gone."

"Go get it," said Kirk. "I'm not going to be the reason some farmer lost his whole crop."

"You get it. You smoked the last one. I'm not doing shit."

"You'd seriously drive off and let it burn?"

Roland picked at a tuft of sun-beaten wheatgrass near his feet. *Srrick*. A flash of metal, a click and ignition. He held the blades over the flame. Once they were lit, he threw the burning clump backward over the toppled van.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” Kirk exclaimed, socking him in the shoulder. Roland collapsed with the punch, falling into Louis and shaking with laughter.

“Calling Captain Kirk – the planet needs you!” he said before Louis shoved him off.

Kirk gritted his teeth and stood, shouldering a familiar burden. He’d never been high, and only the odd time drunk. He was often the lone sober person among his friends whenever they hung out or went to parties. It was easy to resent them and their rollicking while he looked on, battling temptation. He had to remind himself that if they were shouting, slurring, fighting, making out, passing out, spilling their drinks, vomiting or laughing too loud, it wasn’t really *them* doing those things; it was altered brain chemistry. Likewise, until Roland’s head cleared, he couldn’t appreciate what a pyromantic asshole he’d turned into – though knowing this didn’t make Kirk’s indignance any less bitter to swallow.

The clump had landed a foot short of the field’s edge. Kirk kicked dirt over the flame, extinguishing it.

“Mission accomplished!” he heard Roland shout. “Report back to base!”

Kirk climbed out the ditch and crossed the road. Tire marks had been burnt into the asphalt, tracing the Beast’s wild stagger as it had lurched into the pit. They drew a swerving line that directed the eye toward a granary some kilometers back, monolithic against the monotony. Glaciers, God’s steamrollers, had death-marched through these lands millennia ago, trampling hills and knolls in their wake. All that remained was a uniform desolation. This country was, in effect, the warpath of long-lost titans.

Kirk surveyed the field opposite to the crash site. A light breeze brushed his ear, clipping at the folds in his loose shirt before rustling through the heads of grain. Little point in searching for the cigarette among the stalks. No point searching for him, either, if he chose to abort now. He could cross the ditch, part the golden sea, and abandon the Beast to its fate. Reaching town would not be difficult. The boys had only travelled in straight lines since departure.

He'd never quite managed to dissuade himself that all this was not a mistake; not even as he'd packed his bag and thrown it in the rear of Roland's van. The Rockies seemed impossibly far way, akin to the distance between planets. Weyburn, meanwhile, had only just disappeared from the rearview mirror. A younger Kirk would have taken the crash as a sign – a more innocent Kirk, his faith in higher beings exerting sovereign wills not yet distorted by the arrival of the BDOs. That was the Kirk he was meant to be leaving behind. Now that the day had come, he found the act to feel strained. Violent, even. Perhaps he'd been naïve. Moulting creatures needed to carve themselves out of their old skin.

In barren places like these, thoughts could wander far and tangle themselves up in strange knots. It took a dust cloud rolling down the prairie to disrupt Kirk's mental meandering. Somewhere within, he knew, a truck hurtled toward them.

Kirk placed himself in the middle of the road and waved his arms. He could see the tow truck clearly now, along with a dark shape behind the windshield glass. Gravel crunched underfoot as he trod back to the wounded Beast.

“Get up,” he said. Roland was still lurking in the shade like a scorpion. “Truck's here.”

“Jesus,” Roland rasped. “Now? Feel like my head's caving in.”

“Mine's filled with helium,” Louis said, a cough strangling what might have been a giggle.

The truck pulled onto the shoulder and braked. 'AUTO REX' was painted on the side in bold yellow letters. Louis uncurled himself from underneath the Beast, though he kept a hand resting on its side for support. The door swung open and a cowboy boot crunched on the gravel. A heavysset man with a snowy handlebar mustache emerged from the cabin and tipped his hat.

"Heard you'd had some trouble," he said as he walked toward the ditch. He spat something black and oily into the dirt, then reached into his pocket and withdrew a canister of chewing tobacco. "How'd you boys manage this?"

"Moose," said Roland. "Jumped right in front of us. Must've been suicidal."

"Ignore him. He's been in the heat too long," Kirk interjected. "It was an accident. Car coming the other way. We drifted into their lane and had to swerve to avoid them. Lost control."

The man nodded and pushed a wad into his cheek.

"You were driving, then, son?"

Kirk forced a smile. "Yeah."

The man narrowed his eyes and wandered over to the edge of the ditch. He peered down at Louis, who had crumpled over again.

"He injured?"

"Nope, all good." Louis answered, before Kirk could.

"He looks sick. You should've called an ambulance, not me," the man said.

"Carsick. That's all," said Kirk.

The man frowned, glanced at his watch, then up at the sky. He called down to Louis directly. "When was your last dose, son? This morning? Afternoon?" He gestured at the spittle in the dirt. "You toss up your tranqs just now?"

“He took one right after the crash to calm down. We all did,” Kirk said, but the lie didn’t feel smooth. He reached into his back pocket and produced a plastic capsule. “Got mine right here.” He gave it a shake; there was an encouraging jostle. “Opened this just three days ago. I can count them out, if you want.”

The man lingered in silence, brow furrowed, his jaw pumping like a piston. It was fortunate that the worst of Louis’s sickness had already passed. After the crash he’d vomited and sunken into a state of shock, but those weren’t symptoms. None of the telltale signs were on display – no wild babbling, no foaming at the mouth. Had he appeared the least bit fried, the man was just as likely to shoot them as desert them.

The man spat again and broke into a crooked-toothed smile.

“I ain’t a cop. Settle yourselves down. We’ll get you sorted out.”

He walked over to the truck and sat back down in the cabin, leaving the door ajar. Kirk and Roland exchanged looks. When he remerged, he had a notepad and pen in hand. His smile seemed carved from wax.

“So, we’ll have to haul it back to the garage for repairs, I’m guessin’. Wreck like this usually knocks more than a few screws loose. The trip back to town alone’ll cost you—”

“No garage. Just get us back on the road,” said Kirk.

“No garage? Son, you faceplanted in the dirt. Your engine’s going to need an inspection, at least, and then—”

“We just need out of the ditch, that’s all.”

The man grunted. “In a rush, then. Fine. Let’s see,” he said, raising the pad and scribbling something. Kirk trailed his line of sight – the Beast’s plates. “You prepared to foot the bill? What’s your name, son?”

“Kirk.”

“And last name.”

“Ingersoll.” The name had been printed on a realtor’s sign they had passed earlier, hawking some forsaken property on Weyburn’s outskirts.

“How’re you planning on paying for this? You got insurance?”

“Cash,” replied Kirk.

“No insurance? What about a driver’s license?”

“I thought you said you weren’t a cop,” said Roland.

The man’s smile twisted.

“I’ll tell you what else I ain’t – a fool. How old are you all? Fifteen, sixteen? Think you’re the first bunch of joyriders I’ve seen needin’ somebody to dig ‘em out of a ditch? Somebody who doesn’t ask too many questions?”

“You’ve been asking questions plenty,” Roland snarled.

“Easy,” said Kirk, holding up a hand. “We can figure something out.”

“No, I want you jackasses to know right where you stand. You’ve got no cards to play, alright?” The man spat at his feet, then kicked the gravel into the ditch. “What if I opened up those rear doors there? How many beer cans and whiskey bottles are gonna spill out on my feet? I’m sure you’d thank the Lord Almighty if that’s all that did spill out.” He turned a menacing gaze on the boys in the ditch. “Doubt I need to explain to a bunch of dope fiends what they’ll get for possession.”

“Relax, I’m sober, alright?” Kirk said. “These guys just got carried away last night. I’m trying to get them home safe. That’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

“You want my help with that, you give me three hundred.”

“You gotta be shitting me!” yowled Roland. “A shakedown?”

“Spare me, you ain’t victims. Could smell the bullshit reeking off you a mile away. Fact is, it’d serve you right to spend a few nights downtown, waitin’ for your parents to bail you out.”

“What’d I tell you, Kirk?” Roland spread his arms. “This is justice. We *deserve* to be here. What a fucking joke.”

“It’s a favor, is what it is,” said the man. “I’ll tell you how it works. You’re gonna put the cash in my hand, then you’ll stand there while I pull your van up. You’ll unhook the chain, back away ten steps, and then I’ll drive off and forget all about you. I’ll be so forgetful that I’ll forget to stop by that RCMP outpost in Crane Valley on my way back.”

“What makes you think we have that kind of money?” said Kirk.

“I don’t think you do. I think you wanted to con me into takin’ you back to town, then give me the slip first chance you got. Leave this hunk of junk for me to deal with. It’s stolen, isn’t it?”

Kirk opened his mouth to deny, but the man waved him off.

“And even if you don’t have the money, what’s it to me? I’ll leave you boys out here to bake in the sun and get on with my day.” He squinted at them, measuring their unease. “But I’m guessin’ that you want to avoid all that hassle. You’d much rather I handle things discreet and delicate, that right?”

The question hung in the air, dead on arrival.

“Well, if I’m gonna do you a service, I expect fair compensation. Commies ain’t turned this into some damned socialist state just yet, God help us.” The man grated away furiously on a fresh wad of tobacco, like a mad cow sawing through its cud. “So, what’s a blind eye and an open road worth to you boys?”

“Forty-six dollars,” said Kirk. “That’s all we’ve got on us.”

Another grunt. “Well, I can say it’s been a pleasure not doing business with you.”

The man tipped his hat again and started for the truck. Kirk resisted the urge to grab him by the shoulders and spin him around.

“Wait a minute. We’re not finished!”

The man rested a hand on the truck’s open door.

“What else you got for me?”

“I’m telling you we don’t have that kind of cash!”

“Course you don’t, you’re teenagers – entitled assholes who never worked a day in their lives. No wonder you thought a stunt like this could work.”

“What do you want from us? A confession? An apology? You want–” Kirk said as he spun to face the Beast, “–our beer? Go ahead, take it!”

The man guffawed and slammed the truck shut.

“Hey! I’m still talking to you!”

Kirk felt the fury knotting itself in the pit of his stomach. He strode over to the door, fists and teeth clenched. His parents had taught him that violence was never a solution – *just look at Cain and Abel* – but as it felt much too often, violence was the only thing the world understood. All his parents had equipped him with was a head full of doxology.

“Kirk, stop!”

Roland’s voice jolted him. The man, too, leaned his head out of the window.

“We’ll pay it,” Roland said. Gaunt-faced, ragged and surrounded by fields, he looked more scarecrow than human. Sweat dripped down his face unimpeded. There was a slight tremor in his limbs. And still the leather jacket.

Kirk stood still, calculating. Three hundred gone from their stash – it didn't leave much for gas, food or any maintenance they'd need to make the Beast roadworthy again. Not an impossible hit to recover from, but substantial enough to slow their progress. They could not afford any delays so early in the journey, barely a hundred kilometers from home and well within the soon-to-be established search radius. It would be an end before a beginning.

"We'll pay it," Roland said again, his voice withered to a whisper. Kirk reached a hand to hold him back, but the second boy brushed past.

"Roland! What are you doing?"

"Trust me. I'll solve this." Kirk watched as Roland heaved himself on top of the Beast. He wrenched the driver's door open and dropped inside.

There was the sound of rummaging. Empty cans clinking, something tumbling and crashing. Muffled profanities wafted through the gasoline-tinged air.

A moment later Roland reappeared and clambered out of the cabin. A wooden box that Kirk had not seen before was in his hands.

The tow truck driver's interest was piqued. He opened his door and stepped out again. As soon as he'd closed it behind him, his smile vanished.

Roland staggered up the ditch. Fresh blood poured from his nostrils. He clicked the latch on the box open and lifted the lid. There was a flash of reflected sunlight.

A revolver, framed in velvet.

Roland reached for the gun with shaking hands. He stumbled, dumping the gun out on the ground at his feet. It landed with the barrel pointing west, straight down the highway. Drops of blood painted the road crimson.

“Chrissakes,” the man wheezed. His eyes flitted between each of the three boys. His hands rose slowly as he edged backward. “You’ve *all* been fried.”

Roland appeared not to hear him. Wobbling, he pointed down at the gun.

“How’s a bullet sound for fair compensation?”

CHAPTER TWO

Come twilight, the Beast had put over two hundred kilometers between itself and the lonely stretch of highway where it had been stranded. Kirk had taken the wheel, resigning himself to the role of mute chauffer until the other two got their heads straight. Neither of them had suggested turning back, but he doubted they understood why they couldn't now, even if they'd wanted to.

Roland's fumble spelled it out: *west or bust*. After leaving their Samaritan by the roadside, knife holes punched in all four tires, Kirk had thought it would ease his mind to have a measure of clarity about the path forward. Instead, doubt clung to him like wet clothing. As the hours passed, it only dragged him deeper into despondency.

Splashes of light on the horizon roused him from his brooding. Kirk gripped the wheel tighter and squinted to pierce the diffusion. As dusk settled on the prairie, blue sky had rusted away to burnt ochre.

"That another gas station?" Louis's voice floated from the couch fitted behind the driver's seat.

"Can't tell yet."

Roland, coiled up in the passenger's, raised his head to peer across the dashboard.

"Cops?"

No one answered. Kirk heard rustling – Louis had moved to the aisle between them and put a hand on each headrest.

The lights took shape. There was a flicker of neon.

“It’s a diner, I think,” said Louis. “And a store, maybe.”

“Keep driving.” Roland folded in on himself again, planting his temple against the window.

“We’re not going to find an auto shop out here,” said Kirk. “You want to pull into the nearest town and try our luck?”

“Tried it already. Got me here, with you. Like this.”

Kirk glanced at the crumpled boy. Gripped in the throes of the comedown, Roland had shrunk to the proportions of a soft-spined geriatric. Pitiful, and not in the least pitiable. Everyone knew that weed and tranqs didn’t mix – two substances with opposite effects clashing in the bloodstream, seesawing with chemical balances in the brain. Kirk had trouble believing the high was worth it, which was one of the reasons he refrained whenever others around him smoked up.

“Look, I know you’re feeling like shit right now, and honestly, you should,” Kirk said. “But wallowing in it isn’t going to help us get out of this mess – your mess. So if you’ve got ideas on how to fix things, let’s hear them.”

Roland curled his fingers toward his chest.

“This is my mess?”

“Hell yes. You trashed the van, you pulled the gun–”

“Man, don’t talk like you were actually going to pay that asshole.”

“I would’ve, actually. I would’ve cleaned us out, if that’s what it took. We can always get more money. If you’d followed my lead, we wouldn’t have to worry about cops on our tail.”

“We’re carjackers, Kirk,” said Louis.

“You think that’s the same as threatening to shoot somebody?”

Roland tilted his head. He was too sick for his eyes to flare; only a smoulder in the dark coal of his irises made it to the surface.

“This isn’t *my* mess, Kirk. It’s all of ours, okay? That’s the only reason I agreed to steal the goddamn van in the first place. We made an indissoluble pact, hombre.”

“I didn’t agree to you pissing all over everything before we even started—”

“Hey, pull over,” said Louis. “We can check out that store and see if it’s got anything to help us.”

“Like what?” said Roland, twisting to face him. He stuck out his thumb, pointing to the broken stub where the passenger’s sidemirror had once been. “What’s your strategy for that? We just gonna tape one back on?”

Louis shrugged guilelessly. “If we got a spare, sure.”

“Think that store of yours sells them? How about new license plates?”

“Leave him alone,” said Kirk. “At least he’s coming up with suggestions.”

“Bullshit suggestions. You guys are clueless. I’m trying to help you and you resent me for it.”

“You call what you did ‘helping’?”

Roland nudged the glove compartment with his toe. The wooden box was stored inside, and the pistol with it.

“I’m the only one who thought to bring along some protection. We’re back on the road because of me.”

“We’re on the run because of you. Thanks for that.”

“See, that’s what I mean. Your mindset’s all wrong. You’re still thinking like you’re back in Weyburn – like you gotta give a damn about what you say or do because you’re stuck seeing the same people every day.” Roland tilted his chin toward the coalescing glow. “Go ahead, then. Let’s see how far you get on your own. I’ll be here, taking a nap – like Jesus on the Sea of Galilee.”

The diner was coming up on the righthand side. Kirk slowed the Beast and scanned the parking lot. It was empty save for a boarded-up chip truck set on bricks.

“There,” said Louis, leaning over Kirk’s seat and pointing. A side road jutted perpendicular to the main about quarter of a kilometer from the diner. “Let’s get around the side, so they don’t see us.”

Kirk took the turn and drove past the diner. Once it was behind them, he edged the van onto the shoulder and braked. The engine’s rattle slowed to a guttural purr. A wide field separated them from the parking lot and anyone within earshot, but Kirk turned the radio down anyway. The quiet settled his nerves. He kept his arm on the wheel and turned to face Louis.

“Right. Who’s going to scope it out?”

“Me, obviously.” Louis stroked his burgeoning mustache, flattening it against his lip as if it were a pasted-on fake.

“Have you ever used that ID before?” Kirk asked.

“Not yet.”

“Let me see it.”

Louis pulled a card from his vest and handed it to Kirk.

“Who made it for you?” Kirk asked, flipping it over to examine the photo. The figure pictured there bore some resemblance, but the eyes were both staring straight ahead.

“Sidney Camden.”

“From French class?”

Louis nodded.

“Why didn’t you talk to Fletcher like I said?”

“Jeffery Fletcher? I never talk to him.”

“Well, Sidney ripped you off, man.”

“What, ‘cause the guy in the photo’s not walleeyed? All I need is a good cover story. Car accident. Bam, settled. It’s even kinda true.”

“Not that. Nobody’s going to believe you’re twenty-five and from Nova Scotia. Where’s your accent? What the hell would you be doing this far away from the fish?”

Roland snickered. Kirk ignored him and handed the card back.

“I’ll go. Least I know mine works.”

“Would you relax, Kirk?” said Louis. “That pickup driver didn’t get a good look at me. Nobody’s got any reason to be suspicious. I’ll be real casual, alright?” He tapped Roland on the shoulder. “Give me fifty.”

“What for?”

Louis cleared his throat.

“Ya want some more smokes there, dontcha, bud?”

“That’s your hoser impression?” said Kirk. “Sounds more like Yogi Bear.”

“Whaddarya talkin’ about, ‘impressions’? We’re all hosers here, bud,” Roland said, mimicking Louis’s poor rendition of Canadian drawl. “Newfies, Frenchies, fuckin’ Ontarians.” *On-tair-ee-anns*. “We’re just prairie flavoured, eh?”

As he spoke, Roland pulled the glove compartment open. He reached for the wooden box and pried a few bills from the wad stashed underneath and handed them over.

“Marlboro,” he said as Louis took them. Louis pushed his wide glasses up the slant of his nose, counting the bills before slipping them into the back pocket of his corduroys. His smile verged on mischievous – a sloppy, lopsided endeavor.

“You’re the boss, Jesus.”

Louis clapped Roland on the shoulder and pulled the Beast’s dented sliding door open. Kirk watched him trudge a meandering path through the wild grass toward the convenience store.

“He’s gonna come back with Camels, just to spite me,” Roland said.

“You’d deserve it,” Kirk returned, killing the engine.

“Man, what is with you? I already feel like my skin’s peeling off – I don’t need you on my case. Thought I was leaving my dad behind in Weyburn.”

Roland touched his nostrils gingerly, dry now for a few hours. He’d offered no explanation for the bleeding, and Kirk hadn’t asked.

“Is that what you think this is all about?” said Kirk. “Escaping from nagging parents?”

“Oh, sorry, didn’t realize we were on a vision quest. God didn’t descend from heaven and tell me personally, or anything.” Roland’s eyes were nearly closed. “What’d He say to you?”

Kirk scowled, refusing to be baited.

“How about your mom, then? Next best thing.” Roland continued. “She was always nice. Did she give you her blessing?” Silence. “I didn’t think so. Tell me again how this isn’t about escaping.”

“I didn’t tell her anything.”

“Did you leave a note?”

Kirk shook his head. “Didn’t know what to say.”

“Why not the truth?”

“Right, say I’m skipping town in a stolen van to see the Wedge for myself? She’d think I’d fried myself.”

“So what? That’s what I said.”

Kirk gave him an incredulous look.

“What? It wasn’t hard.” Roland mimed holding a phone to his ear. “I just called her up one night and said: ‘Hey Mom, I’m headed out your way – maybe I could stop by for a visit? Got a couple of guys with me from the Mission, you’d remember them. Yeah, yeah, just sightseeing – the Wedge, you ever heard of it? Shit’s loco, I know.’”

“Doesn’t she live in the States now? How’s that on the way?” asked Kirk. Roland didn’t respond. “What’d she say?”

Roland lowered the finger-phone and shifted in his slouch.

“Doesn’t matter, she didn’t believe me. That’s not the point, anyway. She’s the woman who birthed me. She deserves some honesty. Doesn’t yours?”

Kirk shrugged. He didn’t know what his parents deserved. They would be home now, starting to wonder, but not yet suspect the truth. There was a precedent for him missing six o’clock dinner. Once, when he’d been with Helen Saunders and she’d gotten picked up for shoplifting, the cops had dragged him along too, believing him to be her boyfriend and accomplice. Kirk’s father had come down to the station, signed him out, and brought him straight back to the dinner table. He’d found his mother sitting rigid in her chair with an empty plate in front of her, waiting like a watcher at a tomb. He’d taken his seat across from his sister; a blessing was said over the cold food, and the family ate dinner together as always.

He’d been honest then, after the meal finished and his sister had been sent to her room, explaining to his parents that the police had misunderstood and accused him falsely.

“Don’t think it’d make a difference,” he said at last.

Roland let out a low whistle.

“Stone cold. That’s why you never get laid, man.”

“I’m not a virgin.”

“Girls like a rough exterior, sure,” Roland said, ignoring him. “They think if they can just be the one to crack through the shell, it’d be like, I dunno – like looking at a block of granite and knowing there’s a David in there somewhere, if you can just carve him out. But they gotta believe there’s some softness, some vulnerability under the surface, right? They dig into you, man, all they find is ice – layers of it, all packed in on top of each other. If you want ‘em to stick around long enough to–”

“I said, I’m not a virgin.”

A wry grin ratcheted Roland’s mouth open. “Come on, nothing? No rise out of you at all?” he said. “Jesus, you scare me. Far as I can tell you’re ice all the way through.”

“Far as I can tell–” said Kirk, staring into the driver’s side mirror, lest he betray a sign that Roland was succeeding in getting under his skin, “–all you want to do is get wasted. So what do you need us for?”

Kirk heard Roland rolling over in his seat to look at him. Instead of meeting his eye, he reached across the cabin, over Roland’s chest and opened the passenger door. It swung wide to reveal the cracked asphalt and the canola fields beyond. Cricket chirrups polluted the dusky air.

“The hell are you doing?” Roland said.

“Nearest town’s only a couple kilometers that way,” Kirk answered, nodding down the road. “You start walking now and you can make it back before it’s pitch dark. Probably.”

“This supposed to be a joke? Like I’m walking anywhere in my condition,” Roland said, planting his skull back against the headrest.

“Call a cab, then. There’s gotta be a payphone around here. Or hitchhike. Sleep in the dumpster behind the diner, for all I care. Just make yourself happy and let us get on with it.”

“You seriously trying to get rid of me?”

“Long as you’re holding us back, yeah.” He twisted in his seat so he could face Roland head on. “I’m going to make it to the Wedge. I’m going to see the City, the lake, the mountains, and then I’m coming back. You’re either on board with that, or you’re getting out and walking home right now.”

“You’re going to kick me out of my own van? The one I stole from my dad’s shop, for you? *You* can get the fuck out and walk, buddy.”

“It’s not a vacation!” Kirk shouted, his frustration bubbling over. “If that’s what you wanted you could’ve blown your money on beer and weed and thrown a week-long rager. You could’ve invited the whole school, partied with the cheerleading squad, whatever you wanted. But that’s not what you signed up for!”

“Yeah, I could’ve.” Roland crunched his eyes shut. “Jesus, Kirk, you don’t have to yell. I know what I signed up for.”

“Yeah? What is that exactly, because it seems to me like you forgot about it as soon as we left Weyburn. Before that, even, since you were already stoned by the time I got in the van.”

“Chill out, man. I didn’t realize I was living under fucking Prohibition.”

“It’s not like that and you know it’s not! I don’t care if you get high. But you’re acting like you’re on some kind of suicidal death trip, and you plan on taking as many people down with you as you can.”

Roland creaked open his right eye and massaged his forehead.

“I’m here for *you*, man.”

Kirk sputtered a laugh, then stifled it. Roland’s face remained drawn.

“Sure you are,” Kirk said. “Didn’t realize our Mission days meant that much to you.”

“God no! I erased that shit from my mind, dude. Only went as long as I did ‘cause Dad forced me to. Said he’d get me a motorcycle if I kept it up until I was sixteen.” A smirk crossed Roland’s lips. “Mom always called it Brainwash Club.”

“As if she’d know,” Kirk said in a voice as brittle as damaged glass.

“I’m not trying to offend you. I’m just saying, it wasn’t for me.”

“What offends me is how stupid you think I am. You’re not here for me. After two years of ignoring each other, now I’m suddenly supposed to believe we’re friends? I’m not the Weyburn High Jesus Freak anymore?”

“Come on, man, I didn’t start that. Everyone already knew who your Dad was.”

Kirk gestured in the direction Louis had taken through the field.

“He’s not the homeschooled kid they kept on a leash until tenth grade?”

“Okay, fine. Not friends. Something more important, then.”

“What?”

“How about allies?”

Allies. Kirk turned the word over with his tongue. Coming from Roland, it took on an uncertain shade of meaning – as if borrowed from dialect he didn’t yet fully understand.

“That’s why I’m not gonna take any crap from you, Kirk. It’s beneath both you and me. None of us is better than anyone else. I’ve seen the same crazy shit you have – and probably more besides.”

“Doesn’t feel like we’re allies when you’re sabotaging the plan.”

Roland gave a dry chuckle.

“If you have a plan, then you have to stick to the plan, and how’s that any different from what we’ve doing our entire lives? All we need to do is get the fuck outta Dodge.” Roland raised a finger to the twilight sky. “They’re up there right now, waiting for the right moment. Could be any day now. You can’t ‘plan’ around that.”

Kirk followed the line Roland had traced. Starlight was beginning to lance through the purple mire above their heads. Only the red rim of the sun remained visible on the horizon’s edge, dousing the golden fields in flames.

“Nothing suicidal about it,” Roland added. His eyes were closed again. His voice had grown faraway, as if he were slipping off into a dream. “Just inevitable.”

Kirk resisted an instinctual shiver. Roland’s words resonated somewhere deeper, in the hidden parts of him, like a tuning fork vibrating at an inaudible pitch. It was almost profane how casually Roland mentioned it. The utterance was like a tectonic shift, opening up a chasm underneath Kirk, reminding him that he did not stand upon solid earth, but a molten, roiling ocean.

It was a surreal experience anytime the Doom was called to the forefront of the mind. Of course, the Doom was always present, lurking, whether people spoke of it or not. It could be pushed to the fringes of the collective consciousness, but it always kept a fingerhold, tugging and plying at the corners of the subliminal. It was there when Kirk went to class, when he walked through the downtown, when he sang hymns in church, when he lay in bed willing himself to sleep.

To Kirk, the Doom was a vast and unstoppable army thronging on the far side of a mountain; invisible for the moment yet poised to spill over the ranges and valleys without warning. He was drenched in the knowledge of it, seemingly inured, until a word or a thought fluttered

reality's curtain and he caught an involuntary glimpse of the truth hidden behind. He had grown up in the shadow of Armageddon – seven years of holding his breath alongside the billions who woke each morning to find their jobs and schools still waiting for them, the planet still turning under their feet, the BDOs as silent as blank-faced headstones.

Kirk leaned over the dashboard and folded his arms on top of the wheel. He lifted his gaze, tracing the heavens for the resident BDO's faint green glimmer. Roland had pointed to it earlier, but clouds had obscured it since. Only one was ever visible from this vantage point on the Earth. The other thirty-nine were scattered disproportionately across the planet, locked in their orbits. They called the western Canadian one Lambert, after the University of Winnipeg professor who'd discovered it one evening while teaching undergraduates how to measure the Moon's albedo. She'd been fifth to spot one – once the interviews had all been conducted and the calculations made – but at the time she'd thought herself the first. Kirk still remembered the CBC news coverage from when she'd announced her discovery: an asteroid, she claimed, headed on a collision course with British Columbia. Not too large, all things considered, but even the smallest space rocks made a big bang when they slammed into the planet at hundreds of thousands of kilometers an hour. Kirk's father had gathered the family in the living room to pray, right in front of the television with the broadcast on behind them. Kirk had kept his eyes open and watched the entire time.

That was when the BDOs were still too far away to examine effectively; when everyone thought Jupiter was picking pebbles out of the Asteroid Belt and skipping them across the solar system. By the time the BDOs had passed Mars, their trajectory bizarrely immune to the push and pull of gravitational forces, their speed *decreasing*, it was clear that they were not asteroids.

Spectroscopic readings indicated that they were not composed from stone or metal, but a substance which mystified scientists could only describe as ‘synthetic’.

The world wasn’t ready to believe in forty-odd unidentified flying objects sailing through the cosmic neighbourhood at first. It was only when they fell into lockstep with the Earth’s rotation and lowered their anchors through the stratosphere that people truly believed. With that belief and the first anchor grazing the canopies of the Amazon, the Doom found its purchase.

Kirk chanced a look at Roland. His ostensible ally was asleep, or at least doing his best to close himself off to the outside world. His arms were folded over his chest, his head slumped against his shoulder at a crooked angle, his face and eyes scrunched shut. The leather jacket was wrapped so tightly against his body that it creaked with every breath.

It was Kirk’s first moment alone since leaving town. In the coming days there would be few closed doors and silent rooms for him to retire to, he anticipated. Few opportunities to be still and listen for a heavenly voice.

Kirk rose and moved to the backseat. The van’s original owner had converted the interior into a semi-furnished living space with a carpet, beaded curtains over the windows and a couch lining the rear. The customizations hadn’t progressed much further than that – there was room for a small cabinet, possibly even a miniature bar, but the Beast had been sold to Roland’s father before it could be installed. Roland had mentioned to him in the days leading up to their escape that his father had promised they’d work on making further improvements together, but nothing had come of it.

Kirk clambered over the couch and reached for his knapsack behind it. He rummaged through the clothes and toiletries, then withdrew a book bound with a strap – his Bible. Compared to Roland’s knife, the pewter buckle reflected little light. But the book had real weight; something

akin to Judas' thirty pieces of silver. He lifted it from the bag and maneuvered back into the driver's seat, leaning forward so the moonlight illuminated the pages.

He opened it to the page where he'd left the tassel – Acts 13:41, a Scripture his father had wanted the congregation to memorize a year or so ago. Kirk read the words, underlined in blood-red ink:

*'Look, you scoffers,
wonder and perish,
for I am going to do something in your days
that you would never believe,
even if someone told you.'*

After a moment of gazing at it, Kirk lowered his head, only to raise it again. He'd always prayed with his head bowed, just as he'd been taught. But now, with Weyburn behind him, it seemed foolish. There wasn't any need to follow such rituals, he knew, but his conditioning had been a lifetime in the making. Resenting its influence over him, he kept his head raised, eyes forward, taking in the full breadth of the prairie flatline as the night swallowed it whole.

Dear God, he began. He crooked an eye at Roland, who remained inert.

Dear? Was that how he and God had been corresponding all this time – a child writing letters to Santa Claus? Kirk's father had always used 'Holy Father' or 'Merciful Lord' at the dinner table, during service, at family devotionals. Some he knew used 'Abba, Father', but Kirk had never felt himself familiar enough for diminutives. He realized now he had never graduated from Sabbath School salutations. He lowered his head again, closing the book and setting it on the dashboard.

Dear God. Little point changing his habits now. *This is your last chance.*