

A THOMAS AUSTIN CRIME THRILLER

D.D.

BLACK

THE
SILENCE
AT MYSTERY BAY

A thousand people watched. No one saw a thing.

THE SILENCE AT MYSTERY BAY

A THOMAS AUSTIN CRIME THRILLER
BOOK 8

D.D. BLACK

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A Note on Setting

While many locations in this book are true to life, some details of the settings have been changed.

Only one character in these pages exists in the real world: Thomas Austin's corgi, *Run*. Her personality mirrors that of my own corgi, Pearl. Any other resemblances between characters in this book and actual people is purely coincidental. In other words, I made them all up.

Thanks for reading,

D.D. Black

"The world is full of magical things patiently waiting for our wits to grow sharper."

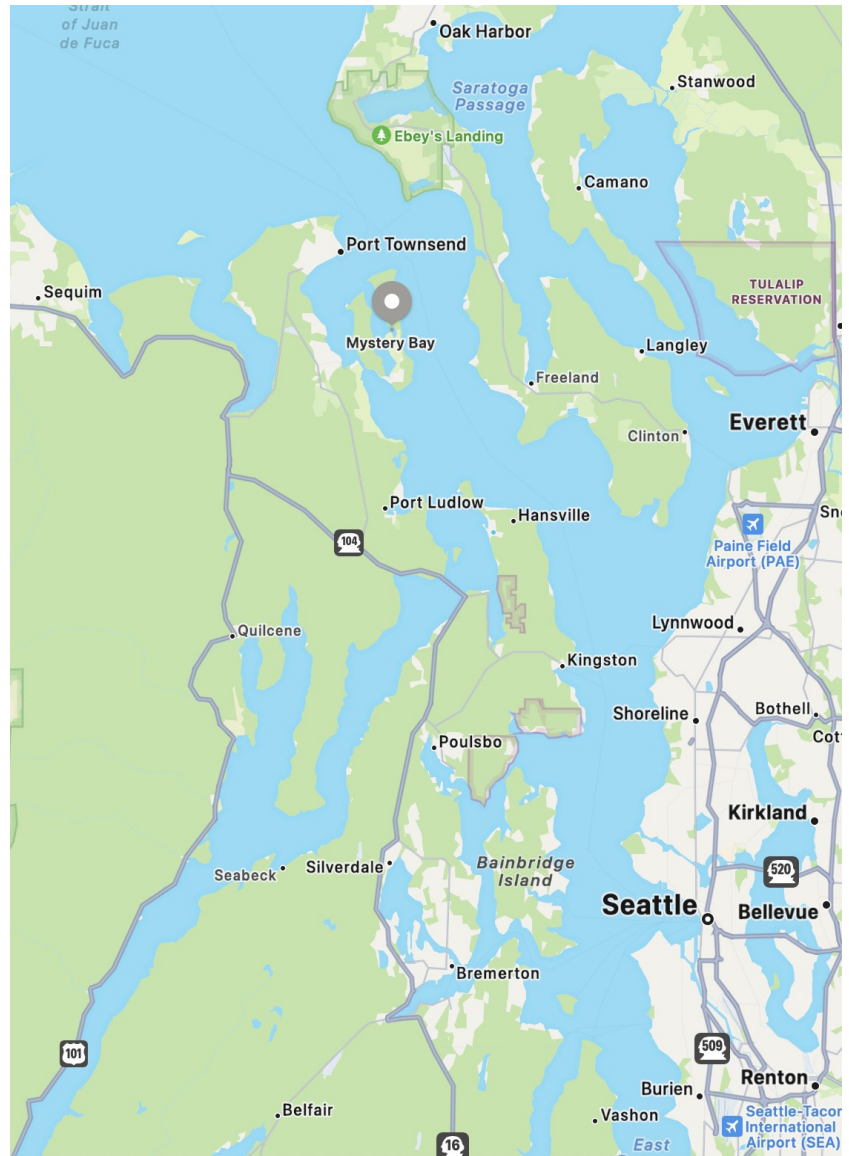
- Bertrand Russell

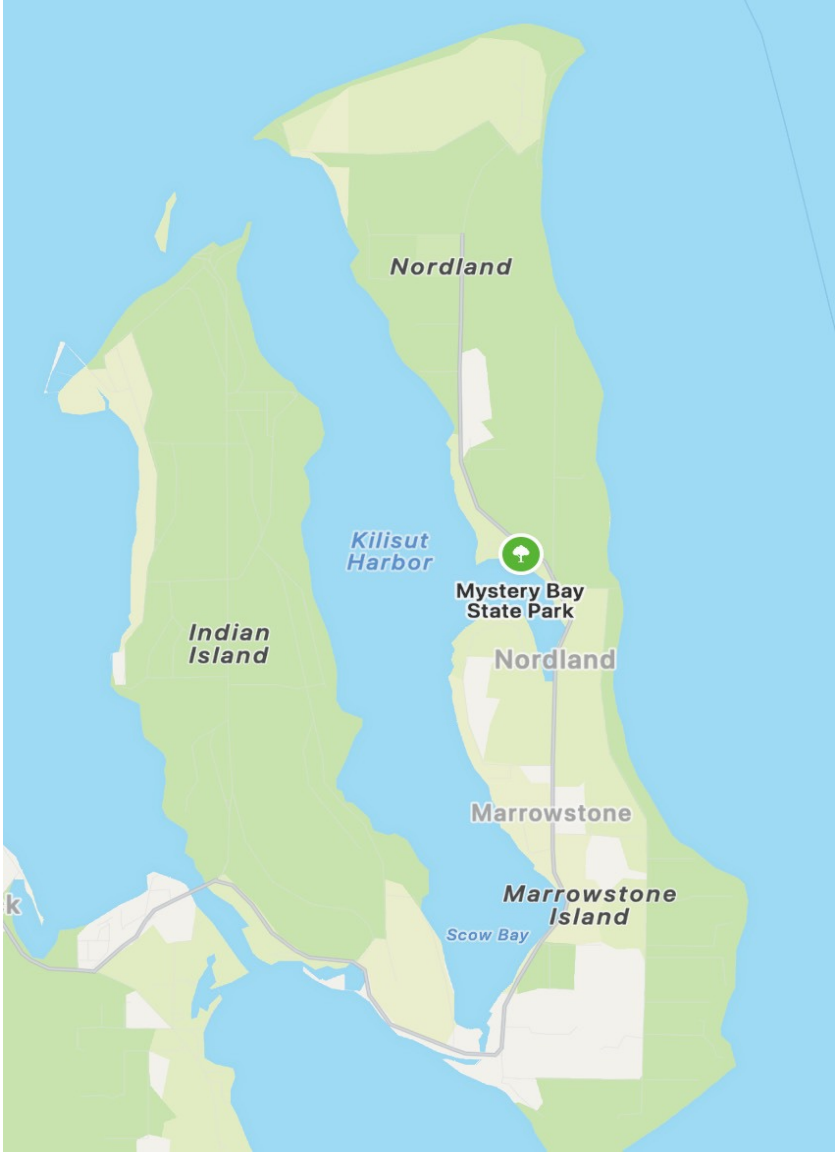
"We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are."

- Anaïs Nin

"Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle."

- Alice





PART 1
DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

CHAPTER ONE

Wednesday: Day 1 of The Rabbit Hole Festival

Mystery Bay State Park, Washington

"I'M SORRY. *You* didn't do this."

The killer stood in two minds both apologizing for and denying what he was doing.

The moon was bright and clear—four days from full—and the little sailboat rocked gently in the bay, as though keeping time with the shallow breathing of the woman.

About a hundred yards away, the shore glowed and almost seemed alive. Colorful lights flashed from the ground and up through the trees. The music's heavy beat pulsed through the cold, crisp air, the electronic trills and sirens like wisps of colorful smoke racing by.

And the people. Hundreds of them gathered together on the shore of Mystery Bay, dancing, celebrating, shouting. Some, he thought, stood on the shore looking out at the little boat. He knew they couldn't see him. And so what if they did? *He* didn't do it and the world was a sparkling miracle.

And the night. It was as clear and crisp as he felt his mind becoming.

It was an odd juxtaposition. On the shore, all the teeming life of the world—men and women, people of all shapes and colors, old and young, some on designer drugs, some sober, some clothed head to toe in fur, some half naked, all jumping and dancing and spinning and carrying on like his ancestors at the Dionysia in Ancient Greece. Disco balls had been strung from trees, Christmas lights lined old wooden fences, plumes of vape smoke rose from little groups.

And he, sitting quietly on the boat, watching a woman die. He was a different person yesterday.

The full moon illuminated her bright red hair, curly and long, almost like the perm his own mother had worn in the eighties. Her hair was an explosion of fire in the night; no one would question why she'd taken the stage name Pyronite.

He gave one last glance toward the shore.

Had anyone seen anything? No, he doubted it. Maybe their heads were pointed in his direction, but at The Rabbit Hole, everyone is in their own altered world. And even if they'd seen something, they wouldn't see him.

After all, he was an unstoppable God-king sent on a mission that he was well skilled to carry out.

He pulled a large, microfiber cloth from his jacket and began moving methodically, his hands clad in gloves as they swept the cloth over the surfaces of the small sailboat. Starting at the helm, he wiped down the wheel. He'd been wearing gloves the entire time, but he knew that more than a handful of killers had been caught because of the mirror image prints left from gloves touched with bare fingers while being donned.

His gaze then shifted to the mainsheet. He had used the rope to adjust the sail's tension during his brief jaunt from shore. He cleaned every inch, erasing any trace of his presence. He bent low, attending to the cleats and making sure to cleanse the raised border around the cockpit, where he had leaned briefly.

Any confusion he might have had he'd honed to diamond clarity.

His actions were precise, an orchestrated effort to leave the sailboat more pristine than the waters of the Salish Sea.

He had everything that mattered to protect. That's why he was here.

He crouched over the body, angling his shoulder so the moonlight could strike the woman's face.

He watched her mouth, her cracked, dry lips. No movement. No breath.

She was dead.

The killer stood and moved to the edge of the deck, taking in the brilliant glow of the moon on the water, like liquid mercury making the tiniest ripples.

Moving his eyes across the little boat, he checked every corner, every surface, to ensure he hadn't left anything behind, then braced himself internally. The water would be cold. High forties. Still, the swim back to shore was only a hundred yards.

Climbing over the edge, he used his core strength to slowly lower himself.

He became the water.

Then he began to swim.

CHAPTER TWO

Two days later

Port Townsend, Washington

SY PEERED at Austin over the rim of her champagne glass, a mischievous look in her eye. "What would you do if you could start your life over again?"

Austin sipped his coffee and glanced through the divider that separated the partially-enclosed restaurant patio from the street. A few Christmas shoppers ambled by, arms full of packages and bags, wool hats pulled down over their ears against the cold.

He looked back at Sy. "What do you mean?"

She sipped her champagne and tossed back her straight black hair, something she often did before speaking. "Knowing what you know now, having lived your forty-some-odd years, if you could choose to start a new career path, a new direction in your life, what would you do?"

Austin considered this and answered honestly. "I'd still be a detective." He paused and studied the remains of his Denver omelet. Then he looked up. "I'm hoping you have a more interesting answer."

Sy set down her champagne glass and smiled, holding her hands up toward an outdoor heating unit that warmed the patio. "If I didn't, I wouldn't have asked the question."

Austin was naturally warm bodied and even he felt the chill. "You too cold? They wouldn't let Run sit inside in a booth." He reached under the table and scratched his Corgi behind the ears. She was tired out from the walk over from the hotel, and didn't seem to mind taking a little nap.

"No," Sy said. "It's nice out here. My hands always get cold."

"So, what is it?" Austin asked. "What would *you* do? I'm guessing you wouldn't still work for NCIS?"

Her face turned a little shy, like she'd been thinking about this for a long time but was now hesitant to admit the answer. "I'd either be a musician or a winemaker."

Austin smiled, studying her face. He couldn't tell if she was messing with him, which, he'd learned over the last week, she enjoyed doing. "Seriously?"

"I've spent a lot of time trying to catch bad guys. And more time than that doing paperwork. I've spent a lot of time in mourning. Like you have. And the older I get, the more I think all that matters is what we feel."

"So why music or winemaking?" Austin asked.

"Because those are the two things that give someone the most direct access to human emotion."

"Okay, music I understand," Austin said, "but winemaking?"

"I know you're not a wine guy," Sy said, adding a faux-exasperation in her voice. "And if this relationship is going to work out, that's something you're going to need to address in therapy." She paused, giving him a mock stern look.

"Ha ha," Austin offered dryly.

Sy handed him her glass. "Seriously, though. Taste it again."

Austin took the champagne—which Sy assured him was perfectly acceptable to have with brunch—and took a little sip. "It's good."

She took back the glass. "You're no fun!"

"Well, what do you want me to say?"

Sy considered this. "I don't know, maybe 'It shimmers in the glass, a symphony of delicate bubbles rising through its golden hue, releasing whispers of brioche and vibrant citrus notes that dance on the palate like a celebration of all that makes life worth living.'"

Austin smiled. "Lemme taste it again." He took the glass and sipped. "I can see the citrus, I guess. I don't know. Maybe it's my synesthesia getting in the way, like the flavors are all too intense for me or something."

"Anyway," Sy said, taking back the glass, "the finest wines touch the senses as much or more than any food. They bring immediate delight in a way almost nothing else can. Similar to music."

Run rustled under the table. She seemed to think it was time to go.

Austin looked down at her. "Ready for the walk back to the hotel?"

Run gave a quiet bark, a tiny little *arphff*, indicating that whatever Austin had said sounded good to her.

He glanced around the restaurant patio, a little embarrassed, then tore a piece of egg off the side of his omelet debris and handed it to Run under the table. He knew he probably wasn't supposed to do that, but he couldn't resist.

An older woman wrapped in a crochet blanket over a thick coat sitting at a table nearby saw him sneak Run the egg and gave Austin a little wink. Austin winked back. The woman adjusted her walker so that a waitress could more easily pass between the tables.

Run started wiggling.

"Well," he said, turning back to Sy, "I've never had any talent for music, and I still don't get the whole wine thing. Anyway, I'd still be a detective."

"I guess that's why you're going back to the job," Sy said. There was concern in her voice, but not disapproval.

Austin had been back from New York for about six weeks, and it felt like he'd spent half that time doing paperwork to have his expired New York police license transferred to Washington State. After countless hours methodically navigating the reapplication procedure for the Kitsap County Sheriff's Department, his dossier of forms and official documents now lay in endless bureaucratic limbo. He hadn't minded the wait, though. His body was still on the mend from his recent injuries, and he was enjoying his time with Sy more than he'd thought possible.

The final step would be a physical exam and fitness test, both of which he expected to pass. Lucy O'Rourke, lead detective for the Kitsap Sheriff's Department, had assured him he'd have a job when the time came. After all, he'd been consulting with them for two years now.

Run continued staring towards the elderly woman and shaking with excitement.

Sy looked concerned. "What is going on with her?"

Austin looked at Run, who appeared fixated on the woman, or maybe her shoes. He leaned over towards the neighboring table. "She must really like you," he said.

Sy stood and finished the last sip of her champagne. "Ready to walk back?"

Austin smiled at Run, who was looking from Austin's face to the woman next to them. "Ready."

As they stood, Run showed her teeth and used the slack on the leash to rush toward the woman then ducked under her chair to the other side of the table.

"My goodness, Run." Austin heard Run release a happy, slobbery snarl. "I'm so sorry ma'am I don't know what's gotten into her."

"I think I know." The woman spoke in a slightly wobbly voice. "By any chance, does Run like to play with tennis balls?"

Austin bent down to untangle the leash from the chair legs and saw what the woman meant. Run had been eyeing the tennis balls stuck to the front legs of her walker. When given slack enough to reach, she'd pounced and locked her jaws on one of them.

After eventually convincing Run that the tennis balls were there to stay, Austin and Sy left the diner's patio. Outside, they walked slowly through the little downtown of Port Townsend. The trees were lit up with Christmas lights, and a cold wind blew in off the water.

Sy reached out and took Austin's hand. "I've liked this last week and a half," she said, stopping to look into the window of a gift shop.

Austin glanced at her. "I've liked it, too."



Over the last ten days, they'd taken a wintry shore-to-summit road trip from Austin's little hometown of Hansville throughout Washington State. Just as the first big cold spell of the winter had set in, they'd traveled to Gig Harbor for an afternoon of antiquing, something Austin had never considered doing before. Sy insisted, and—to his surprise—he'd had a great time.

He'd always appreciated a good chair, but after a few years living in Washington, he was still using the beat-up old recliner he'd picked up for forty bucks at a garage sale.

In Gig Harbor Sy spotted a 1905 Craftsman antique mission style chair made of solid oak. The leather was soft as silk and the brass buttons had been refinished until they shone like gold. Plus, the chair fit Austin's above average height perfectly and was sturdy enough to last another hundred years. He figured it was worth the extra gas to haul it over the mountains and back home. Besides, it would add some weight to the back of the vehicle, which would help them over the snowy passes.

From Gig Harbor they drove to Grays Harbor just before nightfall and Run joined a team of razor clam diggers on a sunset beach walk. It took a bit of convincing and a trade for a nice new stick to get her to return a clam she claimed for herself during the dig. And she either did not understand or did not approve of the concept of backfilling once the diggers got their limits.

While planning the adventure, Sy and Austin agreed it would be best to stay two nights at each destination—one night to settle and one night to rest after exploring the area. Since Austin was hooked, they went antiquing in Grays Harbor, too.

Early the next morning they took the Southworth Ferry to Vashon. They hadn't meant to stop in Vashon, but half the ferries crossing the East and West passage routinely stop there, taking passengers on and off island.

Austin came to understand that crossing the waters to West Seattle was not always a straight shot. He also learned that loading and unloading cars on a boat with two destinations led to a bit of a puzzle. Some of the cars would park pointing one way and some the other, even while in the same lane. Austin couldn't make sense of the system, but it was all sorted out when they landed at the Vashon dock and half the cars disembarked.

Next, Sy and Austin spent two nights at a ski-in-ski-out vacation rental on Snoqualmie Pass. They rented a pulk but Run preferred running in the snow ahead of them. She wouldn't stay put in the thing without a fuss so her tiny legs trecked at least three times the distance of Sy and Austin by the time they reached the cozy little cabin.

After their time in the snow, they drove on to the Lilac City, Spokane. While viewing Spokane falls from their gondola, Sy and Austin agreed that, even in winter, with no lilacs, this city had the most stunning natural beauty of any they knew. Run seemed to agree as she ran from window to window in the tiny cable car to catch the happenings on the Spokane River's edge. The attendant made an exception for Run, who wasn't officially a service animal.

Tearing themselves from Spokane and the lovely, historic hotel at which they'd been staying was difficult. They considered staying longer, but Sy was determined to sample a

Leavenworth strudel so they moved on, sticking to their schedule.

Just outside the tiny Alpine-themed village, they took Run night skiing at a winter sports club the evening they arrived. And the strudels they ate each morning did not disappoint.

Every night Sy opened a new bottle and tried to prove to Austin that there really was a difference between all the different wine types. An Oregon pinot noir, a Napa Valley cabernet, a French Sancerre, an Italian Barolo. He'd had a good time and enjoyed some delicious wines, but still couldn't understand what she meant when she assured him that certain wines had notes of "cherry" or "burnt toast" or "new leather."

By the time they hit their vacation rental near Deception Pass, they were exhausted. They only left the fireside to pick up provisions and spent most of their time enjoying the stunning views of the water.

Having picked up a little history book at a gift shop in Anacortes, Austin was doing a deep dive on the military forts surrounding Admiralty Inlet.

Before they'd boarded the Coupeville ferry to Port Townsend, they'd stopped to explore Fort Casey up close. The remnants of the old battlements stood stark against the winter's touch. Run bounded around independently over the massive grounds, popping out of the deserted underground bunkers, ears first, like a little fluffy bunny peeking out of its rabbit hole. Fort Flagler on Marrowstone Island, along with Warden and Casey, comprised what was called "The Triangle of Fire."

The forts had been built at the entrance of Admiralty Inlet to thwart enemy ships from attacking Puget Sound, but with the invention of functional airplanes at the turn of the century, an attack from sea was not likely. He even learned that there had been consideration for a military fort to be built on Foulweather Bluff, less than a mile from his home. It was now a nature preserve.

Upon arrival in Port Townsend, their final stop, they'd explored Fort Warden, then had dinner at a bistro on the waterfront. Sharing buttery miso cod and littleneck clams in garlic butter, they drank what Sy assured Austin was a very fine bottle of chardonnay from the Walla Walla Valley.

And, after a week of travel and wine, he had to admit that he could almost taste the hints of tangerine and hazelnuts.



Austin's phone vibrated in his pocket and Sy let go of his hand. Checking the caller-ID, he said, "It's Lucy."

"You should take it," Sy said, taking Run's leash from him.

Austin answered. "I'm on vacation, Lucy. Or should I call you Lucy O-Leave-Me-Alone-I'm-On-Vacation?"

"Hey, New York. I know, and I wouldn't bother you if it wasn't important. You still on the other side of the mountains?"

"Nah, back close to home. Port Townsend."

"Seriously?" Lucy sounded surprised and excited. "That's great news!"

Austin was hesitant. "Great news, why?"

"Because I'm only four or five miles from you, at least as the crow flies."

Austin thought through the geography. "I don't get it."

"Mystery Bay. Have you heard about the festival over here?"

He didn't know any details, but the waitress at the restaurant had mentioned it. She'd described it as an annual festival of musicians, artists, anarchists, druggies, and tech millionaires. "Like Burning Man, but Pacific Northwest-style."

"I heard about it, did something happen there? And why you? This is Jefferson County, not Kitsap. Why—"

"Just lemme explain," Lucy interrupted, her tone growing serious. "We have a body. Drug overdose, and at first it looked accidental, but now there are questions. Jefferson

County is overwhelmed right now. Asked us to pitch in."

Austin glanced over at Sy, who was squatting next to Run and scritching her behind the ears. "Okay, so what's the deal? I mean, what do you want me to do?"

"It's a weird situation. There are maybe twelve hundred people here. No one will talk. Like, not anyone."

Austin considered this. "Who's the victim?"

"An electronic musician, a DJ or whatever. Pyronite is her stage name."

"Pyronite?"

"Yup," Lucy said. "Don't know much about her yet. Anyway, you have a way of getting people to chat. Plus, I don't think the folks here like the police much. Might be more amenable to talking with you."

Austin doubted it. He let out a long breath as he looked down at Sy, who was reading the concerned look on his face and offering up one of her own. "Hold on," he said to Lucy.

Lowering the phone, he said, "Wants me to help on a thing nearby. An overdose, or possibly *not* an overdose. You up for a drive?"

"Is it at that festival?"

Austin nodded.

"Then sure. We might visit Fort Flagler after all. But count me out of whatever investigation is happening." She stood and Run ran a few circles around her ankles as though trying to tie her up with the leash. "I have even less jurisdiction out here than you do." Run gave a bark in the affirmative. "Plus, Run and I are only coming for the music."

CHAPTER THREE

AUSTIN PULLED into the parking lot of a campground abutting Mystery Bay State Park and moved quickly to shut off the engine, trying to kill the music as soon as possible. He pushed the volume knob in on the radio dial just to make sure it had turned off completely.

Sy laughed. "Don't like the music, huh?"

"Noise. It's sounds we don't want to hear."

What had been four or five miles "as the crow flies" became a twenty-five minute drive through endless forests with peek-a-boo views of the water in every direction. Each swerve gave a new view of boats, trees, and small homes tucked into the woods, set against the shorelines of northeast Jefferson County.

As they drove around and over the waters of Portage Canal and Scow Bay, Sy played music by Pyronite, the deceased DJ. She'd been able to find it on her phone and, while she and Run seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely, Austin had braced himself against the heavy beats, the futuristic bleeps and blips, and the strange melodies that sounded to him like a bad "world-music" CD playing on reverse. It reminded him of music he'd heard by a DJ named Kellion. Austin didn't think it possible for anything to sound stranger, but the sounds produced by DJ Pyronite proved him wrong. Also, Kellion's music was more forlorn. Austin met Kylon, a.k.a. DJ Kellion during a previous case and, unfortunately, he'd met an untimely end as well. One that Austin still felt partially responsible for.

Sy chuckled. "Do you know how old you sound? That sounded like something Andy Rooney would say to kick off one of his segments."

Austin pulled his mind away from the looming feelings of guilt and back to the present. "I may be the guy yelling at kids to get off his lawn, but I don't care. Plus, I loved Andy Rooney."

"Of course you did." Sy chuckled even more heartily. "I used to watch *Sixty Minutes* from my grandpa's knee on his gin-soaked leather chair. Wasn't Andy Rooney known as America's grouch in chief?"

"Sounds about right," Austin agreed. "I don't remember a segment on noise but I do remember his 50-50-90 rule."

"What's that?"

"If you have a fifty-fifty chance of getting something right, there's a ninety percent probability you'll get it wrong."

"That sounds like something from *Alice in Wonderland*, which is fitting given that this festival is called 'The Rabbit Hole.'"

"I'm still not entirely sure what Rooney meant."

"You're more of an Alice, pre-rabbit-hole I think."

"That's funny," Austin said. "I get that."

"You like things to add up."

"Maybe that's the reason 50-50-90 got stuck in my head. I do sometimes ruminate on things I don't understand."

Sy allowed herself a wry smile. "Right, just like young Alice."

Austin smiled back at her. Sy had a way of challenging him and confusing him in captivating ways, and he had to admit he liked it.

They sat for a moment until Austin broke the silence, "Well, shall we plunge ourselves into yet another rabbit hole?"

"Choice is but a concept," Sy answered.

Austin didn't get it. "What?"

"Nevermind."

"That's... probably for the best. Can you manage Run while I see what's going on here?"

"Sure." Sy turned to Run, who was in the back seat. "Is this your first festival?"

Run stared with her head tilted to the side inquisitively.

Sy scratched her behind the ears. "Dancing can really dehydrate you. The key is to take breaks and drink a lot of water." Sy fiddled with Run's leash, struggling to attach it. "Let's get you ready to join this caucus race."

As Austin got out of the car, Lucy emerged from the thicket of trees and waved from across the parking lot. He waved back and they met on the edge of the forest next to a tree marked with a simple paper cutout of a white rabbit. Austin gave her a brief hug as Jimmy, Lucy's number two, and husband, jogged out of the woods.

Sy, having finally attached Run's leash, caught up with them. "Good to see you both again," she said.

Lucy smiled at Sy. "Good to see you, too." She gave Austin a look. "You didn't mention Sy was in town."

"You didn't mention Run was in town either," Jimmy added.

Austin frowned. He wasn't much for sharing his personal life in general, so he hadn't mentioned to Lucy *who* he was on vacation with. Plus, this thing with Sy was new. Very new. And it felt so good he almost didn't want to speak it out loud, as though that might ruin it.

"We're taking it slow," Austin said.

"So slow," Jimmy said skeptically, "that she flew out from Connecticut?"

Sy frowned.

"Oh c'mon," Jimmy said. "Just messing around. And I guess it's smart you didn't announce Run's visit. You don't want the dog-parazzi following you around."

Lucy rolled her eyes, then waved Austin toward a trail, and everyone followed.

"The festival grounds start a few hundred yards down this way," Lucy said. "Attendees pack everything in and out with them. Leave no trace. It's both a principle of the event and a requirement of the local authorities, who aren't always thrilled to have these folks around."

"Festival started Wednesday night," Jimmy said. "Late that night, the victim died on a small sailboat, just about a hundred yards off shore. Body was found Thursday morning. Roughly twenty-four hours ago now."

"Blood tests?" Austin asked, climbing over a fallen log that blocked the path.

"Positive for fentanyl," Lucy said, her voice pained. "A massive quantity."

Austin was about to ask what made it appear any different than the tens of thousands of overdoses happening every year, but an officer appeared at the end of the trail. He took off his police hat as they approached.

Lucy said, "Austin, this is Augustus Graves. He helped us out a few years back and we owe him one."

Officer Graves wore a brown Jefferson County Police Department uniform, and Austin thought he looked like he'd seen a lot in his roughly sixty years. His posture was a bit slouched and his face had the rugged look of someone who'd spent a lot of time outdoors. He wore a simple, graying mustache and his hair was more salt than pepper. His eyes, deep-set and surrounded by lines, seemed tired but alert, scanning his surroundings with the practiced gaze of a veteran cop.

"Good to meet you," he said, shaking Austin's extended hand. "Everyone calls me 'Guy.'" His movements were slow but purposeful, and his voice, though a bit rough, carried a tone of experience but a touch of weariness too.

He turned and led them down the path, which opened into a small clearing dotted with booths, tents, and clusters of people. "This area is called *Caterpillar*. There are five main areas, growing bigger the further into the woods we go."

"I thought this thing was more raucous. Looks pretty quiet," Austin said.

"The thing goes all night," Guy said. "Six am to noon it quiets down. *Mostly.*"

They passed a few closed booths that sold bottled water and food, stepped over a man wearing sparkly face paint bundled in thick felted blankets, and walked past a few tents, one of which was rocking back and forth rhythmically to the oceanic sound of shifting sleeping bags rubbing together.

Austin followed Guy as he turned and began making his way down a dirt path that seemed to be heading toward the water.

"Tell me about the event," Austin said. "How do they get away with all of this so close to the military facility?"

"It's quite a spectacle," Guy began. "It all takes place on private lands, so the military doesn't care too much. Up until the last few years, the crowds have been small and manageable. But it's grown, and the locals are divided. Some have started to turn up their noses at bad eggs, and this death, well, might mark the Rabbit Hole's swansong."

They crested a little hill and, on the downslope, Austin caught sight of Mystery Bay, a serene body of water with bright evergreens and no houses on the other side. "How long has the festival been going on, and who started it?"

"The scene was started by Lucas Vangard, the musician, programmer, tech millionaire guy. And Zander Silva, the big shot tech entrepreneur. They cooked up this idea out at Burning Man in 2010 and it's been held here since 2013. Scheduled it each year around the winter solstice. It's billed as an 'immersive audio/visual reprogramming of reality.' They've got all sorts of things going on—electronic music that rattles your bones, digital art installations that look like something out of a sci-fi movie, and don't get me started on the virtual reality and psychedelics. It's like they're trying to live in another version of our world. They've got workshops too—new age stuff, survival skills, anarchist politics, something about encrypted tech. The festival attracts a real mixed bag—Vangard's fans, Burners, gamers, hackers, psychedelic explorers, anarchists and other political radicals, even those prepper types who always think the sky's falling. One way or another, everyone here is trying to 'escape the Matrix' of mainstream society." He sighed. "Whatever *that* means."

"How does one get a ticket?" Austin asked as they stopped at the water's edge.

"You mean *boarding pass*," Lucy corrected.

"Right, they call it a 'boarding pass,'" Guy said. "They send out some cryptic puzzle via the gray web that eventually spits out the date and the bill, I guess to keep it exclusive to their crowd. More people would attend if they could afford to. And with half the people in costume, good luck figuring out who's who. Makes our job a bit tougher, you know, when it comes to keeping tabs." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "They talk a lot about expanding consciousness, seeing through the veil. That's code for heavy psychedelic use. The anti-authoritarian ethos runs deep there, so much so that they discourage any cooperation with police."

Jimmy flung his arm over Lucy's shoulder but Lucy parried it off. "That's why Lucy-O'Lovely here called you in."

"I'll help if I can." Austin looked over at Run who'd found something to roll in while Sy had her back turned. "Ever had any trouble at the event before?"

"Not once," Guy said. "To be fair, aside from all the oddities, they've mostly kept to themselves. And they *do* clean up after themselves. We keep an eye out, of course, but they're not causing major trouble. Just a bunch of folks looking to live differently, I suppose. Weird? Sure. But dangerous? Haven't seen enough to say that yet." He pointed at a small sailboat about ten yards away. "That's where the body was found yesterday morning."

Austin tasted tart cherries; the excitement of a new case always triggered his synesthesia. "And what made you think it wasn't an OD?"

"Oh, it was *definitely* an overdose," Guy said. "Just not an accidental one." He stepped toward the boat, swept his arm over it like a game show host revealing a fabulous prize. "Not a single finger print."

Austin cocked his head, a gesture he may have learned from Run. "Really?"

"Not one. Not even from the deceased."

Austin thought back. "Did it rain that night?"

Guy shook his head. "Not a drop. One of the clearest nights we've had all winter."

"And the deceased wasn't wearing gloves?"

"Nope."

Austin leaned over the boat. "And Lucy said it was fentanyl?"

"Massive quantity." Guy's face pinched and Austin could tell this wasn't the first OD he'd seen. "We don't have the full autopsy results but the coroner's preliminary is as tragic as it is clinical. Prolonged and agonizing death due to a massive overdose of fentanyl. The victim's internal organs failed progressively, each succumbing to the toxic effects of the drug. The heart and respiratory systems were severely compromised, leading to a slow and painful cessation of vital functions. Her final moments were characterized by acute respiratory distress and eventual cardiac arrest, a tragically common end in such severe cases of fentanyl toxicity."

Austin clenched his fists. He'd seen his share of drug tragedies, and not just from fentanyl. Addiction, he knew, affected everyone in a family and was wreaking havoc across the country. And even though this festival had a reputation as a playful bastion of psychedelics and designer marijuana, Austin was not amused. He'd seen enough families destroyed to want nothing to do with any of it. "No witnesses yet?" he asked.

"At the time of death, hundreds of people were on shore partying," Guy said, making eye contact with Austin. "And no one saw a damn thing."

Lucy said, "One reason we called you in, Austin. This whole event has an insular, counter-culture, anti-authority vibe. I bet someone knows something, but no one is talking."

Austin nodded. "And with the absence of a single finger print, you're thinking someone else was on the boat?"

Guy nodded. "By the next morning, the boat had drifted back to shore, but we think it was out on the water at the time of the murder."

Austin heard a bark and turned to see Run heading toward them, leading Sy down the path. To her side was a man dressed in a silver leather vest with a wide fringe that cascaded to his knees. His legs were sheathed in an iridescent cosplay mermaid tail that shimmered with every step. He looked like a jellyfish swallowing a salmon.

His hair was a forest of deep green dreadlocks that, along with the overlapping tendrils of his leather vest, bobbed to the rhythm of his erratic dance-walk. Maybe a side effect of the psychedelic concoctions coursing through his veins, Austin thought. He appeared to be of African descent and, as he approached with Sy, Austin could see that his face was marked by tattoos of a fern on either side of his face in the place of sideburns.

Sy said, "Austin, this man loves your dog and is eager to talk to you. I told him you were a private investigator and he thinks you might want to know about a boat that he saw."

Austin extended a hand. "I'm Thomas Austin."

The man's eyes were wide and Austin again wondered what drugs he might be on.

"Right on, Austin," he said. "And I am Seafern Smith, the pooch whisperer, ya know?"

CHAPTER FOUR

"THE POOCH WHISPERER?" Austin raised an eyebrow as he angled Seafern away from the group to have more privacy. "Can I ask you about the boat?"

Seafern let his head fall back and he looked up at the sky, arms wide, as though taking it all in for the first time. Then he began to spin slowly on his tip-toes, his ankles held tight in the tapered mermaid skirt, clearly losing track of the fact that he was in the midst of a conversation. He seemed to be getting more and more out of it by the minute.

Guy touched Austin on the arm and pulled him a few paces back. "I'm gonna excuse myself. We've got a decision to make on whether to shut down the festival. Half the department has been looking for an excuse to do so, but, well, it's complicated. Both of the organizers are donors and they leave a lot of tax money in the community."

Jimmy went with Guy and Lucy joined Austin in trying to get the attention of Seafern, who was definitely in a world of his own.

Sy handed Run's leash to Austin, then excused herself, telling him that she wanted to check out a virtual reality headset demo she'd heard was taking place in the *Butterfly Area*. Austin was left alone with Lucy and Seafern, who seemed to have forgotten he was in the middle of an interview.

"Run, can you speak?" Austin said. She looked up at Austin, tilting her head as if to say *I can, but why would I? I know you don't have any treats*. She even glanced at his hands and, seeing that they were most definitely empty, sat on the ground. "Run, can you say hi to the pooch whisperer?" Austin asked. "Speak!"

Reluctantly, she let out a little bark, which got Seafern's attention. He crouched suddenly and put out a hand. Run darted a few feet toward him and licked it.

Seafern straightened up and began rotating, his arms held wide open, then stopped mid spin. "Whoa, that was real, ya know? Nice perfume too, what is that raccoon? Right on, dog."

"Seafern," Austin said. "This is Run. Pembroke Corgi, as you probably already know, being a pooch whisperer and all. She's very friendly."

Austin tried to think of what Seafern meant by perfume, then he remembered she had been rolling in something earlier.

Seafern crouched down and fell into a side-sitting pose while Run inspected him with a quizzical head tilt before continuing to scan the area with her snout. After a moment, she spotted a small stick, grabbed it, dropped it on Seafern's platform boots, and let out another little bark that was meant to indicate, *Here's a stick! I'm ready to play*. Seafern smiled and tossed the stick a few feet away. Run fetched it within the length of her retractable leash and dutifully returned it. Seafern tossed it again.

Seeing that he'd settled in, Austin asked, "Seafern Smith, is that your given name?"

The man tossed the stick and looked up from the ground. "It is. You'd have to understand Seaography. My parents did. They were sort of intellectual hippies. They also taught me to understand the branches of arithmetic—there's Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision."

The sun peaked out from behind the trees and Seafern, after trying briefly to shield his eyes, put on a pair of futuristic looking sunglasses.

Austin felt weird standing while Seafern was sitting, so he crouched, hoping to capture the man's limited and distorted attention. "How long have you been at the festival?"

"Helped set up starting... I don't know... three, maybe four days ago. It was shortly after my space chum set me up here." His sunglasses had slid down and he nudged them up his nose. "Time isn't real. It's always six o'clock, ya know?"

Austin tried to ignore what he didn't understand and continued the questioning. "Sy said you saw the boat. Did you know the DJ, Pyronite?"

Austin watched the man's face carefully, thinking he detected a slight grimace, but the sunglasses hid his eyes.

"Knew her music," Seafern said. "Not really to my ear, ya know?"

Lucy crouched next to Austin. "Were you at the dance around here two nights ago?"

"I dance every night. Always. I didn't just come out of the ocean and lose my sense of movement."

Lucy touched his shoulder. "See that little boat down there?" She pointed. "Is it the one you saw out on the water two nights ago?"

Run lay on the ground, looking up at Austin with a classic corgi side-eye, as if she wasn't happy with him in the least.

"She's bored," Seafern said.

"You're not wrong," Austin said.

"I am the pooch whisperer," Seafern said, but his voice sounded sad now. "That vessel was a portal to an interdimensional highway. One way ticket, I'm afraid." He shook his head and his dreadlocks swung solemnly.

Austin stood when he heard a commotion coming from the path behind them. It sounded like an argument. Not angry, but tense.

"The festival goes on," a woman's voice said.

Then he heard Guy's voice. "You can't just—"

"We already *have*," the woman said as she appeared from around a curve on the trail. She was close to Austin's age, with medium length blond hair and a cream-colored pantsuit. Her shoulders were back and she walked briskly and confidently down the trail. Next to her, a younger woman with neatly tied back deep-brown dreadlocks kept a determined pace to keep up. Trailing behind them were Jimmy and Guy.

The pantsuit woman marched right up to Lucy. "You're the senior detective?"

"Sort of," Lucy said, pointing at Guy. "This is his jurisdiction, but he called us in for help. We're one county over. Guy is in charge here."

The woman shook her head. "I'm in charge now." She held up a badge. "Claire Anderson. Special Agent, FBI Field Office Seattle." She tilted her head subtly toward the other woman. "This is Junior Special Agent Vivian Greene, she likes to be called 'Kiko.'"

Kiko had already crouched down to pet Run. She stood and nodded politely at Austin, who was surprised to see someone so young introduced as an agent. He knew the youngest you could be to join the FBI was twenty-three and this woman looked barely twenty. The selection process is very competitive and most people that young don't have enough of the right kind of experience to get in. Austin was impressed.

Claire Anderson asked Seafern to stand and he did so. "Were you a witness?"

Seafern shook his head. "Ask any flower—and they will tell you the same." He had an odd pattern of speech, Austin was noticing. His sentences started slow, but picked up on the second clause, rattling rapidly to their conclusions. "But I do know what happens—when you get too close to Indian Island."

"What's that?" Austin asked.

"Well..." Seafern began. "If the aliens see you first—then *they* abduct you. If you see the aliens first—the government does."

"And we're interviewing this guy because..." Claire glanced at Lucy, "Just get his info, would you?"

Lucy, who had already taken down his information, was clearly annoyed and looked at Austin for backup.

Without waiting for an answer, Claire nodded toward the boat. "This it?" she asked Guy.

She began making her way toward the water, trailed by Lucy, Guy, and Austin, who let out Run's leash to give her more roaming slack.

"That's it," Guy said, "and, wait, hold on." He stopped and looked down at his phone. "We just got something. Note from the coroner. We have a time of death. 1:13 AM."

"That's quite precise," Austin said, watching Run sniff at some leaves and sticks by the water's edge.

"Victim wore one of those smart watches. They were able to get into it using her face scan."

Austin grimaced. He'd actually wondered once whether the facial recognition scanners that some phones and smart watches had worked on the deceased. "They used her heart rate or something?"

Guy nodded.

"Makes sense," Claire answered. "Not a smart watch person myself, but it does help establish the time of death."

"Wouldn't the phone paired with the watch have gone into emergency response mode and called him an ambulance?" Austin asked.

"Might not have paid for that feature," Claire said.

"And no phone was found on the victim," Guy added.

"Ah, the disparity of wealth." Seafern pointed a finger to the sky. "It kills us every time, ya know?"

They all stopped at the water's edge as Claire and Kiko examined the boat.

Guy read from his phone, "Heart rate sped up to over 150 BPM at around 12:40 and stayed high for a bit, then slowed and slowed. Then stopped." He shook his head. "1:13 AM."

"So 12:40 he's attacked," Austin said, thinking aloud. "Maybe injected with the drug or forced to swallow it and—"

"It would be the former," Claire interjected. "Fentanyl, right? Thirty-three minutes isn't enough time if it was in standard prescription pill form." She caught Guy's eye. "It could be that she was given illicitly manufactured doses. But more likely, not. We have the coroner's report back yet?"

"Just the preliminary," Guy said.

"Tell them to look for a needle wound. If the victim wasn't an IV drug user or a diabetic—someone who didn't use needles much—it'll be easy enough to find. Ask your coroner to check exposed areas first."

Guy grimaced, seemingly annoyed at being told what to do, but nodded and walked away to make the call.

Austin knew that Claire was likely right and he appreciated how quickly she'd gotten to the point. "Assuming this is a premeditated murder, we've got a wild dance party going on, lots of chaos, the perp attacks the victim, holds her down maybe, causing the big spike in heart rate. Maybe there's a struggle, then the injection."

"Bingo," Claire said. "Then the toxic lull, the period of mild sedation when the victim was still conscious, still able to get onto the boat, or maybe be carried onto the boat. Then the slow slip. The gradual decrease in heart and respiratory rate."

"You've worked similar cases?" Austin asked.

Claire shook her head. "I don't usually work drugs, but I've seen more ODs than I'd like to think about."

Vivian "Kiko" Greene, the young agent, hurried away and threw up in the bushes.

Austin stepped toward her but Claire stopped him. "She'll be fine."

"Her first day or something?"

"She's not nervous. Drugs make her sick. Literally sick. Even hearing about them. Mom died from them."

They stood in silence for a moment as Vivian crouched by the water, looking across the bay.

Guy ambled back over. "Took my coroner thirty seconds to find the puncture wound. Right side of the neck, about two inches below the jaw—not where any junkie would shoot up. Also minor bruising around the left bicep." He frowned as all three of them put it together in their minds.

Austin moved behind Guy, pulling a pen from the inside pocket of his jacket. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all."

"So we're partying, dancing, having a grand old time. I come up behind you and..." Austin grabbed Guy's left bicep. "I want leverage, so I grab your arm to pull you back slightly and, meanwhile..." With his right hand he pretended to jab the pen in Guy's neck. "I inject the poison."

"I stumble forward," Guy said, "maybe collapse toward the water."

"If the perp knew what he was doing," Claire added, "and I'm betting he did, he did the deed near the boat, got the vic right onto it, drifted out, and just let her die." Her voice carried a wave of disgust. After a long silence, she turned to Guy. "Like I was saying before, we're not shutting down the festival. That's not negotiable."

Guy nodded. "Your world, boss."

"Don't patronize me," Claire said. "Try to find that needle. I doubt you will but it's worth a shot. I've gotta get back to the car and make some calls, but remember, we're on the same team here."

Austin considered this. As much as he wanted to believe it, he wasn't sure. After all, what was the FBI even doing here? Even though this clearly was a murder, it wasn't a crime the Feds would normally take interest in. Unless there was something bigger going on. "Can I walk you back to your car?" he asked.

"Only if I get to hang out with the most famous corgi in Washington State," Claire said, her tone growing suddenly more friendly. "Run, right?"

Austin was confused. He looked down at Run, then back up at Claire. "How'd you know her name?"

"The article."

Austin recoiled internally.

Oh, damn.

While in New York City, where he'd worked for years as a detective before moving west, he'd helped solve the murder of his wife, Fiona, and brought down a high-ranking politician turned drug kingpin. Though he'd declined every request for an interview, there'd been footage of him on the Brooklyn Bridge and at least a dozen stories about him had been written by the New York papers and various blogs.

But one story in particular had gone viral. The author dug into every detail of Austin's past and—though the story was largely positive—Austin still hated it. He knew it was the one Claire was referring to because it was the only one that mentioned Run by name. It had even contained a photo of the two of them that Austin didn't even know was public. Anna Downey—a local reporter whom Austin had once dated—had posted it to her personal Facebook page and the journalist nabbed it from there.

"All BS aside," Claire said, leading him down the path toward the parking lot. "I don't know how you came out of that alive, and not behind bars."

Austin wasn't sure if it was a compliment or an insult.

"Good work," she clarified.

"Thanks."

They transitioned out of the woods and stopped by the tree marked by the white rabbit. "Rumor is you might be going back with the NYPD."

"I'm not."

She waited for him to elaborate.

"I've applied to be reinstated as a detective. In Kitsap County."

Claire smiled strangely.

"What?" Austin asked.

"I've got less than six weeks left. Early retirement. If I were you, I'd want to get as far away from law enforcement as possible."

"What makes you say that?"

She crouched down and allowed Run to rub up against the sleeve of what appeared to be a very nice suit jacket. "I don't know," she said. "And look, I know I'm going off a few articles and—"

"A few?"

She looked at the ground. "Most of the stuff in the papers about folks in our line of work are about stuff we screwed up, bad apples doing bad things. Not often we see a wildly positive portrayal." She looked up. "Damn right I read multiple articles. We passed them around the office. Hero ex-detective solves wife's murder, brings down drug kingpin, falls off the Brooklyn Bridge, and lives? I'm surprised you're not already in Hollywood negotiating the movie rights. Run is a shoe-in to play herself."

Austin gave her a side-eyed look, another gesture he'd probably picked up from Run. "Would *you* be?"

"No," she admitted. "I wouldn't either. We don't take victory laps."

"Exactly."

She smiled. "But still, it was a hell of a story. A hell of a thing to live through and still want to take on the job."

"Things are never as good—or as bad—as the press makes them out to be. I was lucky. I really ought to be dead."

"But you're not, and I heard that the DEA and FBI have brought down a few dozen accomplices and—"

"It's in their hands now." The truth was, Austin didn't want to talk about that case. He'd done his part, and the mess would still take years to clean up.

"Do people recognize you all the time now?" Claire asked.

"Only when I'm out with Run. Most people are more comfortable staring at dogs than people, so more often someone will look at Run, then look up at me and say something like, 'You're that cop with a corgi, right? Even though, technically, I'm not an officer.'"

Claire laughed, crouched, and scratched Run behind the ears. "Do you think she knows she's famous?"

Austin smiled. "We want her to stay humble, so we don't let her read her own press."

Claire stood and began walking into the parking lot. "We?"

Austin followed. "Sy and me. She's my..." Austin paused. He wasn't actually sure *what* she was. They hadn't put a label on it, but it definitely felt more serious than anything had in years.

Claire smiled. "Sounds complicated." Then, changing the subject abruptly, she said, "Look, you obviously know what you're doing. So of course you're wondering, what the hell is the FBI doing here?" She paused at a large silver SUV, crossed her arms, and leaned her hip against the front headlamp.

"Can't say it hadn't crossed my mind."

"And you also know I can't tell you. But don't worry, we'll take it from here."

Austin nodded. "If you ask me, the answer might not be on the scene—tracks appeared to be well covered, so to speak—but I'd bet that DJ has something in her past, something that might help."

Claire nodded noncommittally. "Maybe. We'll be looking into every angle." She opened the car door and took out her phone.

"Why are you retiring early?" Austin asked.

She gave him a long look, but didn't respond to the question. "I gotta make some calls."

Austin reached out and shook her hand, then called after Run and walked toward his own car, where Sy was waiting.

He was looking forward to getting back to their vacation. In fact, he was starting to regret letting this Rabbit Hole sidequest come between them.

Besides, Claire Anderson was more than capable, and he was happy this one was off his plate.

CHAPTER FIVE

Saturday, Day 4 of The Rabbit Hole Festival

Hansville, Washington

WHAT WAS on his plate were herbs.

Austin felt as though he'd left a lot in New York. But he'd managed to carry the one thing he wanted to bring home—other than Sy—a chowder recipe he'd discovered in a little cafe. The recent vacation had left him exhausted and he hoped the chowder would help him recover. Now he was adding it to his menu.

Although clam chowder was a staple in the Pacific Northwest, he was cooking a slightly different version, one he'd had while back east. It started with thick-cut bacon, diced small and sautéed with shallots, onions, leeks, and celery. He'd used flour and butter to make a roux, then added the vegetables sautéed in bacon fat in with the cream, clams, and potatoes and a little corn and jalapeño. Now that it was almost finished, he was adding fresh thyme.

"Smells amazing," Sy said, poking her head into the kitchen of his little café, where lately he'd been a fairly absentee owner. "There is already a wait for a table."

Austin smiled. "You better get out of here quick before I make you put on a uniform and have you bussing tables."

"As long as you let me come up with some nice white wine pairings for your chowder, I'd be happy to work for this joint."

"Joint, general store, and bait shop, you mean," Austin corrected with a smile. "Plus, we only offer boxed wine," he added flatly. "Just kidding."

Sy frowned. "Don't knock boxed wine. There are actually a few boxed wines that have nothing to be ashamed of these days. But I was thinking more in line with a nice white Burgundy or perhaps an Australian Sauvignon blanc."

Austin shrugged. "Honestly, most of our crowd are going to want a nice cold beer."

Andy, to whom Austin had passed over most of the control of his little café, came in from the storage room. "Soup smells amazing." He grabbed a taster spoon and dipped himself a large bite. "Needs more pepper."

"Will you finish it?" Austin asked.

Andy nodded. "I hate to say it, but I've become a little territorial about your kitchen."

"Fine by me," Austin said. "You've done a fantastic job and I appreciate it. I'll get out of here and leave you to it."

"No worries," Andy said, "Tammy just pulled in so she'll have my back for the rest of the shift."

Austin smiled, then gazed out across his little dining room. The handful of tables were already full. For the next ten minutes or so, he greeted a couple of the regulars and refilled coffees and waters, trying to deflect questions about what happened in New York. When he'd spoken with every table, he excused himself and headed outside.

Hand in hand, he and Sy meandered down to the beach. Run was back in the apartment resting since they had taken her to play in the sand earlier and it was time for her morning recharge.

They walked about half a mile in silence, then turned around and began walking back.

One of the things Austin liked about Sy was that, like him, she didn't feel the need to fill every silence with words. They had both lost a spouse. They each recognized that grief that significant could never be fully healed, and it didn't need to be. But it also didn't need to be covered up with small talk all the time.

When they were most of the way back to the apartment, Austin said, "I liked our trip. And I wouldn't mind if you stuck around for a while." He paused, taking in her long black hair. "What I mean to say is, I would like you to stay longer if you can. What are you thinking?"

"I'd like that," Sy said. "I've got to make some calls this afternoon and arrange some things, but I think I can stay on at least another week. Then how about we see how we feel? You might grow tired of my wicked ways by then."

Austin squeezed her hand. "Sounds good to me."

As they walked up the slight incline into the parking lot of his café, Austin saw a familiar white SUV pulling out onto the main road. It disappeared quickly, but he was fairly sure it was being driven by Anna Downey. Then he noticed an envelope sticking halfway out of his mailbox.

"You head on up," he said to Sy. "I'm gonna get the mail."

He didn't know what this was about, but one thing he knew was that he didn't want to bring any mention of Anna into this moment with Sy.

"Sure thing." Sy took the stairs up to his apartment.

Austin heard Run barking at the sound of the stairs in use. She quieted when Sy let herself in.

Retrieving the letter, he opened it and read it as he slowly walked up the stairs, one hand gripping the railing.

Austin,

You don't owe me anything, and I don't think you'll accept it, but I do want to apologize. I think you know me well enough to get that apologizing isn't my strong suit. But I offer one unequivocally. I know I made what you just did in New York harder with my article. And I know it was selfish. All I can say is, I've been on my own for a long time and when I see a scoop, I just can't help myself.

But I don't want to make this about me.

I heard through the grapevine that you're going back on the force, and I want to tell you, I'm happy about that. We'll all sleep a little better knowing that you are working to solve the important cases in our area. Remember when I gave you that little plaque?

Austin lowered the paper and looked out at the water. The plaque, which he kept on his desk in the apartment, read: *The world is worth fighting for.*

Anna had given it to him early on when they'd met, before they'd started dating. At the time she'd been trying to convince him to get involved in police work again, and it had worked. Now he was going all the way back in, and he couldn't help but think she had a lot to do with it.

He looked down at the letter again.

I already apologized, so allow me at least one 'I told you so.'

*Sincerely,
Anna*

Austin smiled at the top of the stairs.

"Whatcha reading?" Sy asked, opening the door to let him in.

Run was in the living room, where she was wrestling with a stiffly woven tug-toy.

"An apology, and an *I-told-you-so*," Austin said, shoving the letter in his pocket.

At the sound of Austin's voice, Run dropped her toy and ran towards him.

Sy seemed to accept his answer with a smile and nod.

Austin crouched to rub Run behind the ears. "You didn't even know where we were?" he said as he stood. Run ran around his ankles and did two or three laps around Sy as well, weaving in between her legs a few times.

"It's funny how you say that," Sy said.

Austin genuinely didn't know when he'd started saying it. It was probably when he'd gotten back from New York and she greeted him as though she'd believed he might never return. Now every time he left, he wondered whether she was worried that he was leaving for a long time. So every time he got back, he found himself saying, "You didn't even know where I was, did you?"

Austin's phone vibrated and he found it on the dining room table where he'd left it before heading down to the café. It was a Seattle area code he didn't recognize, but he picked it up immediately. "Hello?"

"Austin, this is Claire Anderson."

The tone in her voice told Austin he should take a seat, and he did. Sy excused herself to make calls in the other room.

"Remember Seafern?" Claire asked.

"How could I forget him?" Austin said.

"Well, we have reason to believe he's onto something. Something real. But, as you know, he has, well, a *unique communication style*."

"That's putting it generously," Austin said.

"He says he'll only speak with you."

"Why is that?" Austin asked, but before she could answer, he figured it out on his own. "Lemme guess. Run?" Austin asked.

"I think the quote was, 'I speak only with the one who protects the Corgi Goddess.'"

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Austin couldn't help but laugh.

"Are you willing to come back out?" Claire asked.

Austin looked at Run, who was sitting in front of him staring up at him with her dark *what's-next* eyes. Then he looked up and was startled to see Sy holding her cellphone to her ear but looking at him from the other room. He made a worried face and pointed toward the door. Sy gave him a thumbs-up and nodded in approval.

Austin smiled at her. "Yup, I can be there in an hour," he said into the phone while still maintaining eye contact with Sy.

"Thanks," Claire said before ending the call.

He thought of Anna's letter—*I've been on my own for a long time and when I see a scoop...* For Anna it was a scoop, for Austin it was a lead. He couldn't help himself.

Austin waited for Sy to end her call.

"More Rabbit Hole business?" she asked.

"I'll be gone four or five hours, tops. Walk and feed Run for me?"

Sy agreed with a nod. "Should I be jealous?" She cocked her head with a wry smile.

Austin was confused. Did she mean jealous of his job? Or, of... "Of what?"

"The blonde."

He could tell by her tone and facial expression that she was joking, but it was the kind of joke that carried with it a whisper of real concern.

"The FBI Agent?" Austin laughed. "First of all, no, you shouldn't be jealous. I asked you to hang around, and I meant it. One thing you know about me is I'm loyal, maybe to a fault. Second of all, even if you *should* be jealous in general—which you *shouldn't*—you should definitely *not* be jealous of her."

"Why not?" Sy asked.

Austin grabbed his coat. "Relationships need contrast. Oil and vinegar. Peanut butter and jelly. I have a feeling that Claire Anderson and I are similar enough that we'd be a terrible pairing. Like a salad dressing made of two different olive oils."

She considered this, then stuck her tongue out at him playfully. "Or, in your case, given your general disposition, more like two vinegars."

CHAPTER SIX

IN A LITTLE CLEARING at the end of the path through the woods, Guy had thrown together a tacky-tack makeshift office under a large red canopy tent, the kind you'd see at a kids outdoor birthday party to create shade. Its walls were just thicker than kite material and held in place by metal poles stuck into the ground.

Claire Anderson's team had constructed a larger tent, black and much higher in quality, like the kind you'd find at a *fancy* wedding. It even had "FBI" and a gold badge insignia embroidered along the side.

Austin was headed for the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department tent when he saw Lucy's bright red hair from behind. She was standing at the entrance of the tent, looking through an open flap and waving her arms as though she was in the middle of a fierce debate.

"Sure they're in charge," he heard her saying as he approached, "but that doesn't mean we just sit around and tweedle our thumbs. I think we—"

Jimmy was standing inside the tent, which was roomier than it looked from the outside. "Tweedle our thumbs?" he asked, laughing. "First of all I think you mean *twiddle*, not tweedle. Second of all, what are you, eighty-two years old? I haven't heard that expression since my grandfather passed away, and he fought in the Korean War."

Lucy shot daggers at Jimmy. "Are you looking to fight?"

Jimmy held up his hands in defense. "I'm the Tweedledum here Lucy, we all know that."

Lucy gave a brief grin, then sat at one of the folding chairs that had been set up around the conference table.

Austin stepped into the tent and nodded at Lucy, who began dragging a stick through the dirt "floor."

"Lucy O'Down-in-the-mouth," Austin offered.

Jimmy clapped his hands together. "Not bad, New York."

Jimmy and Lucy were the only ones who still called him "New York." Austin certainly didn't feel like a New Yorker anymore, but what had once been a bit of a put-down was now a term of endearment, and he didn't mind.

Lucy turned to him. "FBI has taken over and, as you know, they're acting strange." Austin was about to ask how, but Lucy filled in the details. "Usually in this type of thing they'd at least want a thorough debrief, find out everything we know, everything Guy knows. Didn't even want a chat. Now I'm just sitting here in my chair drawing pictures in the dirt, but it's strange, right?"

Austin considered this. "Claire asked me to come in. I'll see if I can find out anything."

"We know," Lucy said, irritation creeping into her tone. "How do you think she got your number?"

"That's what we get for working with a famous former detective," Jimmy said.

"And soon to be *current* detective," Lucy added.

"Hope so," Austin said. "I'll head next door, then fill you in on anything that happens."

"Next door" was about ten yards away on the other side of a large root system that broke through the dry ground. Austin found Claire, Kiko, and two others sitting around a twelve foot folding table. Seafern Smith had changed into a pajama-like adult onesie, its coloring reminiscent of a jellyfish, silver and rainbow iridescent, but it looked warmer and like he would have much better range of motion in it than the outfit he had worn the day

before. He was standing barefoot in the corner of the large enclosure, playing with a loose tent flap.

Over the mostly-flat ground, someone had set up a temporary floor of sorts, a carpet-like swatch of thin rubber like you'd find in the freeweights section of a gym.

"Classy," Austin said as he walked in. "We don't have a floor in ours."

Claire glanced down. "Not as nice as the parquet I danced on at my wedding, but it'll do."

Claire waved Seafern over and he sat at the head of the table. Austin sat across from him and folded his hands in front of him. One of Claire's assistants—a young man Austin took to be a field tech—handed him a paper cup of coffee.

"Black, right?" Claire asked.

"You did your homework," Austin said.

Claire nodded. "Mr. Smith, um, Seafern, you said you'd only speak with Austin. Here he is. He—"

All of a sudden, Austin felt the ground shaking slightly and noticed that, somewhere nearby, music had started playing. A thunderous bassline accompanied by what sounded like the entire percussion section of a large orchestra. "I thought the main soundstage was further into the woods," he said.

Before anyone could answer, he began hearing what he thought was a fight, but it was punctuated with shouts of joy and the rise and fall of laughter. "What the hell is going on?"

Seafern's voice was tired. "The main stage is further into the woods," he said, "in the big clearing. But the Rabbit Hole is all about spontaneity, man. People bring their own sounds, their own music. Little parties break out everywhere, ya know?"

Austin's forehead was beginning to throb from the noise he did not want to hear. "Any chance we can get them to turn it down? I don't want to be the old guy shaking his fists at the clouds, but come on, it's not even noon. I mean I—"

He stopped mid-sentence when Seafern held up a hand, not quite violently, but like a conductor at the end of a crescendo. "Where..." He said the word as though it was the beginning of a long monologue, but then dropped his head and went quiet.

Austin was confused and looked awkwardly at Claire, then Kiko and the others. "Uhh, I...Let's just get to it, Mr. Smith, if we might. Special Agent Anderson told me you had something to share with me about the night of Pyronite's death."

Seafern looked up, his expression suddenly dark, as though realizing he'd made a terrible mistake. He put on his glasses, probably a way of shutting Austin out, punishing him. "No, I said I had something to share with *Run*, and I would also share it with her protector, or should I say, her *captor*." The last word was directed at Austin with the force of an ice pick being stabbed under one of his fingernails.

Austin glanced at Claire, who brought her hand up to her forehead as though wiping a line of sweat. Inside the tent it was no more than fifty degrees, so he took it as a gesture of annoyance.

"Run is at home, snuggled up on the couch where it's warm," Austin said, trying to sound conciliatory. Inside, he was cursing himself for his stupidity. It had never even occurred to him that Run's presence would be required. "And I promise you, if any of us are captive in this situation, it's me. Now, can we pretend that she's here and—"

Seafern folded his arms. "Nah, man. It's something only she would understand. Animals, you see, they may not be able to build airplanes or write computer code, but they also don't start wars. And they understand the deeper layers of consciousness in which I vibe, ya know?"

"True enough," Austin admitted. "And I can tell you're someone who abhors violence. I... I didn't understand that you needed me to bring Run. Would it work if I showed you a picture of her? I have a lot on my phone. Hundreds, actually."

"The camera steals the soul, man. You can't capture her spirit with a picture. Technology is soulless."

Austin felt like mentioning the fact that Seafern had a cellphone on his lap and was again wearing futuristic sunglasses that had a little blinking blue light on the side, indicating... well, Austin didn't know *what* that indicated, but he assumed they were some of those new "smart" glasses that paired with your phone or had access to the internet.

"I have an idea," Claire offered. She leaned down and whispered something to Kiko, who'd sat silently, bundled up in a dark parka, watching the ridiculous scene unfold as though she was at a bad movie.

After a moment, Kiko hurried out of the tent.

"While we wait," Claire said, how about you tell us more about the last couple days of the festival? It ends Sunday, right?"

Seafern said nothing.

"Big storm might be rolling in," Austin said. "But I assume you all will dance your way through it?"

He hadn't intended to sound insulting, but Seafern frowned at him.

Austin was about to apologize when he was jolted by the deafening shriek of what sounded like a bicycle horn blared right outside the tent.

Austin followed Claire to the tent opening and ducked his head under the flap.

Outside, a throng of maybe fifty people were jogging behind a two-story bicycle fitted with thick, dirt bike tires. All of them, including the woman on the bicycle, were naked except for tennis shoes.

Seafern called something from inside the tent. Austin stared another moment as the men and women leapt over roots, leaves, and small shrubs before disappearing deeper into the forest, then pulled his head back inside the tent.

"What was that?" he asked.

"Morning tea," Seafern said. "Must be around noon."

Austin checked his watch. "Yup."

"Well, time isn't real anyway, ya know?"

"In the book, isn't tea time at six?" Claire asked.

Seafern shrugged. "Yes, but in the book it's *always* six. Naked tea starts at homosapien noon around here."

Austin did not want to know what kind of tea they were running deep into the forest to consume. He was guessing it wasn't English Breakfast or Chamomile.

Luckily, no one had time to tell him. Kiko appeared in the doorway of the tent, pulling aside the plastic flap and proudly holding up a small metal cage.

Seafern let out a delighted squeal. "LC!"

"LC?" Austin asked.

"Lewis Carroll," Kiko said.

"How are you our little muse?" Seafern asked the rabbit. "Will you, won't you, will you, won't you?" He cooed.

"I'm not one to interact with animals," Kiko said, handing the cage to Claire. "And it took multiple threats of federal lockup to get the rabbit for the next ten minutes."

Claire opened the cage carefully and took out the rabbit, who seemed to be quite friendly. After delicately handing LC to Seafern, she sat and folded her hands across her lap. "Now will you talk to Austin?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I KNOW YOU." Seafern pet the rabbit as though it was the most precious thing in the world and might reveal the innermost secrets of the universe if he stared at it hard enough. "We have never been alone."

Austin knew a fragile witness when he was sitting across from one, so he hesitated before beginning. Finally, he said in his quietest voice, "It's good to see that you're feeling a little better. I know that animals always bring me calm when I'm upset."

Seafern didn't look up, just stroked the rabbit slower and slower. As before, Austin wondered what drugs he might be on. From everything he'd heard, exotic psychedelics were all the rage here, and many weren't even illegal because they were synthetic compounds created in overseas labs, too new to even be banned yet.

Austin had always avoided the druggie kids in high school and never tried drugs himself. So, he wasn't entirely sure of what was going on with the guy in front of him. Seafern's behavior was erratic, oscillating between excited and intense, and slow, almost lethargic. All he knew for sure was that he needed whatever information Seafern was willing to share.

"The first night of the festival," Austin began, "what time did you arrive?"

"Like I said before," Seafern said, "I was here already to help set up, but I became the immortal jellyfish in medusae form you see before you and started partying when the sun set." He held up the rabbit to look deep into its eyes. "Will you merge with me and become one with my immortal experience?" He set the rabbit against his chest, petting its ears downward. The animal stretched along Seafern's torso, tucking its head under his dreadlocks and into his neck as though it consented to his request. "Right on," Seafern whispered.

"Seafern," Austin said his name to bring him back to the present. "What can you tell us about the DJ? Who might have wanted her to die?"

On the ride out to the festival, Austin had called Claire to get a quick debrief on Pyronite and learned that there wasn't much that would answer the questions they had about her murder. Born and raised in Portland, she'd dropped out of music school when she was twenty, bummed around for a bit leaving little trace, then popped up on the U.S. festival scene about eighteen months ago.

"I told you, I didn't know her in her terrestrial form," Seafern said, and then he looked up slowly, or at least he raised his head. With the sunglasses on, Austin couldn't tell where exactly his eyes were pointing. "I presumed the boat was headed to the alien aquatic research laboratory off the coast of Indian Island, ya know? But, they don't want us to die, they just want to use our DNA. Was she RH negative, do you know? *That there* might tell you something." Seafern spoke this last sentence definitively.

Austin placed his hands on the table flat, trying to avoid revealing his excitement, or his annoyance. "Was she alone?" he asked, as casually as he could.

"We have never been alone. Panspermia is alive and well on earth," Seafern said. He looked down at the rabbit for a long time, then looked back up. "This is not the aftermath of some kind of primordial soup situation, man. Light and smoke and the stars were whirling, and everything was beautiful, just beautiful. Even the Ningen were surfacing on the shores to check out the happenings. The moon was directly over my head while I danced, little silver swords of light coming through and blessing me, man. Pyronite was supposed to go on around 2 AM. Her set was scheduled to take us into the sunrise, into the glory of day,

and I was planning my next transdifferentiation." He stroked the rabbit once and cocked his head to the side, then continued. "I watched her, man. Watched that little boat."

Seafern paused, and Austin almost interjected. In his mind, there was a knowable reality. Something had *actually* happened, and he was quite sure that the boat, which was a sailboat without a motor, was not shooting out trails of anything. So he assumed that Seafern was just imagining those. But at the same time, it was possible he was referring to something real and adding his own imagination to it. But he decided to let it go because it was clear that Seafern was thinking hard and Austin did not want to provoke a cognitive melt down.

"She was there," Austin said slowly, "was anyone else with her?"

Seafern shrugged.

"When you saw her, where did you think she was going?"

"Like I said," Seafern insisted, "I assumed the extraterrestrial genetics laboratory. That's where we come from, why would we return somewhere different, right?"

Austin was growing exhausted by Seafern's esoteric hyperbole. "Tell me what you saw on the boat? With your two *physical* eyes."

"Right on. I was dancing with a soul mirror—ya know?"

Austin didn't know, but he nodded along anyway.

"I'd glance out to the bay after a few minutes just to see if she was getting closer to the laboratory." He smiled and lowered his sunglasses briefly to meet Austin's eyes. "People think we're all closed in here man, on this wet rock, spinning around a ball of fire forever. But it's not that simple, man. They don't know that we're free. The boat just drifted, then stopped. It didn't hit anything, just stopped. And I was like, 'Yeah, that's it... just drift, just stop, just relax.'"

A sharp wind whipped the flaps of the tent and brought cold air into the enclosed space. Everything else was quiet.

"Can you tell me any more about what you noticed on the little boat?"

"The moon was so full that night, casting a silver glow over the water. Like Goddess Octopus had blessed us, man. I remember seeing her standing at the front of the boat, what's the homosapien word for that?"

"The bow," Claire offered.

Austin shot her a look. Her tone had been a touch too direct and he feared it would break whatever dreamlike trance Seafern was in.

"That's right," Austin said softly, "the bow."

"Right on." Seafern began rocking back and forth in the chair, then his face broke out into a massive smile. "I remember I stopped dancing and shouted 'To be the man, you gotta beat the man!' And when I'd finished shouting I just sat and stared out at the water, ya know drifting, stopping, just letting the world spin. Thinking of how the fern is the jellyfish of the land and how I am the seafern of the human. I am the bipedal *turritopsis dohrnii* and thus will always *be*. The moonlight was bright and I watched her steer the boat from both bows."

Austin's mind began to whirl. "So, the boat had two bows?"

Seafern nodded.

"Seafern," Austin said slowly, "would you mind taking off the glasses just for a moment? I have something important to ask you."

Seafern shook his head. "I'll answer, but the glasses stay on. My space chum says they keep me protected, man, ya know?"

Austin nodded. "I understand. Seafern, is it possible there were two people on that boat?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

"NAH MAN, NO WAY," Seafern said. "At one point she split in two, that's all I know. Two Pyronites"

Austin sensed that although his story was conveyed without clarity, his tone and the way he moved his eyebrows up from under his sunglasses expressed sincerity.

Austin glanced at Claire and knew she was thinking the same thing he was. He was *fairly* sure he'd just confirmed that someone else was on that boat.

"What did the other Pyronite look like?" Claire asked him as calmly as she could manage.

"Like Pyronite." Seafern nodded and stroked the sleeping rabbit on his chest.

A little red light on the side of Seafern's glasses blinked. Austin heard a slight vibration and realized it was the smartwatch on Seafern's wrist. Then the face of the watch lit up, and although Austin couldn't read it, he knew that Seafern had received a text.

Seafern's shoulders slumped, and he looked like he was going to melt into the chair. Slowly, and ever so carefully, he handed the rabbit to Claire, who immediately placed it back in its cage.

Then, before Austin could figure out what was happening, Seafern bolted up, kicked the chair out from under him, and sprinted out of the tent, ducking down and practically sliding under the half-open flap.

"What the hell?" Claire said, shooting a look at Austin. "Kiko, take that rabbit back to wherever. Austin, let's go."

Austin was right behind her as she raced from the tent.

Outside, Austin saw Seafern's dreadlocks swing to the left as he made a sharp right turn and disappeared behind a large cedar at the edge of a clearing.

Claire was already a few yards ahead of Austin and he trailed her. She moved with agility. Instead of a pantsuit, today she wore slacks and a button down, but still it was an outfit more suited to office work. Leaping over fallen logs and small muddy patches, she weaved left as the trail broke down toward the water, then back right as it headed into what appeared to be acres of dense forest.

Ferns and stray branches leaned out over the path as though trying to trip them. At least, that's what Austin thought for half a moment before he realized that the festival, and Seafern's way of thinking, might be getting to him. Ferns and sticks don't try to trip people. They just sit there. And then people trip over them.

At a fork in the trail, Claire stopped suddenly. "You go around to the right, I'll go around to the left."

"Did you not see which one he took?" Austin asked.

Claire pointed at a faint set of footprints. "I think that's him, to the left."

"Then why am I going right?" Austin asked.

"Because you can run faster than me, and you've been staying behind me when you should have bolted in front of me in the first place. These paths are probably going to connect. Head right and don't hold back, and maybe you'll catch up with him when the paths converge. Or you'll see him if he breaks right off the trail. The bank will cut him off from the left. We'll get him from two sides."

Without another word, Austin took off at a full sprint. Quickly, he realized that what he thought was acres of dense wood was nothing of the kind. The path curved around to the right where a series of small clearings had been cut out of the forest.

Slowing, he scanned each clearing. In one, densely packed tents of all colors dotted the landscape. Some were rocking and emitting moans and cries that made Austin blush. Another hosted what appeared to be an impromptu musicless dance party. In another, a man at a lectern with some kind of wireless microphone read from *Alice in Wonderland*. In yet another Austin saw a full portable kitchen setup and a line forming behind a large grill. But he didn't see Seafern.

If Claire was right that Seafern had gone to the left, he wouldn't be in any of these clearings anyway. Austin needed to find a path that connected to the one that had gone left. When he passed the area of small clearings, the path did just that, jutting sharply to the left and curving around a stand of some of the tallest, oldest trees he'd seen since his arrival.

Taking off at a full sprint, he hit a long straightaway, a flat and rootless trail. Suddenly he heard rapid footfalls and panting and, glancing to the left, saw Claire, who was also in a full sprint. She pointed toward a spot where the trail shot down to the left.

Austin saw what appeared to be a cabin. A large, fancy cabin that would have looked at home in a rich ski area in Aspen. Continuing down the trail, Austin spotted Seafern's green dreadlocks disappearing through a small door on the side of the cabin.

Claire held out her hand and stopped him.

"What?" Austin asked. "Let's follow him."

Claire had her phone out and seemed to be checking something on it.

"Why aren't we following him?" Austin asked impatiently.

She held up a single finger to silence him, which just made him more frustrated.

As he stood there, a heavy waft of marijuana smoke came out of nowhere and hit him directly in the face.

Austin looked up and saw a man in a sleeping bag dangling from some kind of rope system twenty feet above them in the trees. On any other day, and in any other place, this would have shocked him. But here, it only brought momentary surprise.

Claire glanced up at the man as well, but she too remained unruffled.

Something was off about the scene. The man was speaking into a walkie-talkie of some sort and Austin got the sense that he might have some official role in the festival.

"Who are you?" Austin craned his neck, looking up through the branches.

The man lowered his walkie talkie and looked down over the side of his sleeping bag chrysalis as he let out a thick plume of billowing smoke from his mouth and nose.

Austin didn't have time to wait for an answer. Claire was heading down the trail away from the cabin, and Austin followed after her.

"Claire, what the hell is going on?" Austin asked.

She didn't answer.

She walked briskly, clearly in a hurry to get back but in no hurry to explain her unwillingness to go after Seafern.

What Austin couldn't understand was why.

CHAPTER NINE

AUSTIN LET Claire walk ahead of him for the first couple of minutes, then, when he could no longer contain his curiosity, he jogged to catch up with her. "What was that about?" he asked.

"We don't know what was in that cabin," Claire said.

"What the hell kind of answer is that?" Austin demanded. "We know our witness was in there after fleeing."

"Some witness," Claire scoffed. "That guy is the poorest historian I've ever spoken with."

Austin wished his father with dementia had half the storytelling power of Seafern.

But something was off. Claire was hiding something. She wasn't obligated to be fully forthcoming with him, but if they were going to be a team on this thing, keeping secrets wasn't going to work.

Austin walked beside her for a few more paces, then hurried forward and jumped in front of her, stopping her in her tracks.

"You asked for my help, Claire. I left my café to be here. I left my lady and my dog, understand? While we were interviewing Seafern, I think you and I both saw that he was trying to tell us about someone else being on that boat. His watch lit up. He received a message. Those glasses lit up too. Maybe he got some message telling him to get out of there, I don't know. Maybe he was about to tell us too much. What I do know is that someone else was on that boat. And I think if we could get him to sober up enough to remember what happened, he might be able to tell us who it was. From what you told me, this is the only lead we have."

Claire put her hands on her hips. "And?"

Austin was flabbergasted. "And? What do you mean 'and'? The guy who might be the best possible witness, who could solve this case, just disappeared into a strange cabin, and we just let him go."

Claire's face relaxed, and she let out a long sigh. "I'm not going to give you an 'I do things by the book' sort of speech," she said. "Given the way you operate, I'm sure you've heard that speech more than once, and you've gotten pretty far by ignoring it. Most detectives wouldn't get away with half of what you've done. And honestly, I can respect it. So no, I'm not going to give you a 'play by the rules' kind of thing and tell you that we're going to go back to the cabin with appropriate backup rather than rushing in, guns blazing. And you're not even carrying a gun, are you?"

"No, but—"

"What I'm going to tell you is this..." She waited until Austin had fully locked in on her. "I want your help, yes. But I'm not going to tell you everything. You are going to have to decide if you can live with that. If you can't, the parking lot is about a half mile that way." She pointed back in the direction they'd come. "If you can, head back to the tent, talk with Guy, talk with Lucy and Jimmy, see if they found any more witnesses who might have seen who else was on that boat. Ones that are not only willing to talk to us, but also *can*."

She held his gaze a second longer, then shoved her hands in her pockets and walked around him.

Austin shoved his hands in his pockets as well, walking a couple of yards behind her.

The day was growing colder, the air picking up that crisp, sharp tingle that told Austin it was in the low thirties with a chance of snow. A hundred yards or so from the clearing, near

their makeshift offices, he stopped to tie his shoe on a bench made of driftwood.

"Hey Austin."

Austin stopped lacing and looked up to see Guy. He was walking up to him coming from the direction of the tent offices where he and Claire were headed. He must have just passed her.

Austin nodded a greeting.

"What's up with the blond FBI lady, you say something to piss her off?"

Austin's mouth formed a tight line and he shook his head *no* in frustration. "Hey, can you find out who the big cabin belongs to, back in the woods there? Claire and I, we were chasing that witness, Seafern, and he ducked into it. It was strange. Claire had us stop pursuit as though the case went cold just when I felt like it was heating up. Something's going on in that cabin and I think it might have something to do with the murder."

"Yeah, I've had concerns about that woman since we met yesterday. Finding out should be no problem Austin. I'll meet you back at the tent with the information once I get it after a visit to my cruiser."

Guy left Austin, walking in the direction of the parking lot.

Austin finished tying his shoe, looked up, and saw something on the ground across the path from the bench where he was sitting. He noticed a little blue blinking light. Austin crouched down to get a closer look.

Seafern's glasses.

They must have fallen off in his sprint and now lay half-buried under a small pile of leaves.

Austin glanced left and right, then casually picked them up and stuffed them into his jacket pocket.

CHAPTER TEN

AS AUSTIN DUCKED into their tent, he heard a familiar voice, deep and full of energy. But it wasn't coming from any of the detectives in the tent. It was coming from a phone set in the center of the table.

Jimmy, Lucy, and Guy sat around the tiny screen, speaking with Calvin Ridley, the former lead detective of the Kitsap Sheriff's department and now the governor of Washington State.

"The thing no one tells you about being governor is that you actually have to be governor," Ridley was saying as Austin nodded at the others and took a seat.

"What do you mean?" Lucy asked.

"It's like this. From afar, you always think you can do a better job than the person doing it, right? All you see, all you think about is how whoever is in charge is screwing up. Especially with politicians. It's like that guy sitting at home watching football on Sunday. He's having a cold beer, snacking on chips, maybe he's gained thirty or forty pounds since high school and he's sitting on his couch yelling about how the guy on his TV set is a bum because he dropped a pass or missed a block." Ridley paused, chuckling to himself. "Hell, I've *been* that guy. It's easy to criticize from the sidelines while having a beer on your couch. Fun too."

Austin leaned in toward the phone. "So what's changed since you got in the chair?"

"Austin? That you?"

Neither of them could see very clearly on their compact screens.

"It's me," Austin said. "Good to hear your voice, Rid."

"Likewise," Ridley replied. "What's changed is that when you're in the chair, and you learn about all the different interests that need to be balanced, all the competing agendas, all the conflicts with no easy solutions, all the local laws and federal laws that have to be reconciled with any state laws, all the entrenched power structures..." He trailed off and a silence hung in the tent. He sounded down, though not defeated. "And on top of everything, I didn't realize how much more *govenoring* than governing I would be doing. The public relation events are an endless interruption. It's not as simple as storming into the governor's office, kicking ass and taking names."

Ridley, an already highly respected member of law enforcement for years, rose to statewide and even national fame after helping thwart a terrorist attack in Seattle. A video of him doing just that—kicking ass and taking names—had gone viral and helped lead to his meteoric rise from lead detective of a medium-sized county to Governor of a pretty big state.

"You'll settle in," Jimmy said. "Give yourself some time."

Lucy made an exaggerated shocked face. "Actual wisdom coming from my husband. It's the first time, Rid. You better listen to him." She leaned in and whispered, loud enough for everyone to hear, "Turns out you're the Tweedledee."

Jimmy tossed a balled-up napkin at her head, but Lucy nabbed it out of the air and, after a pump fake, threw it back, hitting him in the chest.

"Thanks, Jimmy," Ridley continued. "Hey, anything you guys want to tell me about what's going on down there? It hasn't hit my desk, and I hope it doesn't, but any time the FBI is on a case side-by-side with local police, there's a chance I'm gonna hear about it. Jurisdictional issues."

Lucy's tone grew serious. "Nothing yet. We don't have enough to make it worth your time."

"Keep me posted?" Ridley asked.

"Will do," Lucy said.

Ridley waved at the screen. "Gotta go. Good luck."

"Good luck to you, too." Jimmy picked up the phone and ended the call.

Austin filled the team in about the race through the woods, the disappearance of Seafern into the cabin, and the finding of the strange glasses.

Lucy inspected the glasses and Austin was relieved to hear that Samantha—who was the only member of the Kitsap Sheriff's department who could be considered a tech expert—was already on her way.

Guy, returning from his cruiser with news, burst through the flaps of the tent.

"Lucas Vanguard," he said, his voice full of an excitement Austin hadn't yet heard from him. "That's his cabin. Owned by one of his companies. Although from the records I also learned that it's bigger than my house."

All Austin knew about Vanguard was what Guy shared with him the previous day. He was a tech mogul of some sort who'd gotten his start as an electronic musician.

"Apparently," Guy said, "the thing gets set up and taken down each year. It's actually six of those new 'tiny homes' put together into one."

"How does the permitting on that work?" Jimmy asked.

Guy shook his head. "Believe it or not, he actually *has* one. This whole event, as annoying as it is, is above board when it comes to that stuff. They have lawyers and accountants, and they can afford the best in their field."

Austin's mind was on Claire. "Any reason why Claire Anderson would've pulled back when we reached the cabin?" He turned to Guy, who still stood by the entrance of the tent. "Would *she* have been able to find out it was Vanguard's cabin?"

"Sure," Guy said. "But I've learned through thirty years of this work that, when it comes to the Fibbies, it does a cop no good to ask too many questions."

Lucy stood and walked a lap around the table. "I don't know for sure, but my read on her was that something fishy's going on here."

"Not exactly a stretch," Jimmy said.

"What do you mean?" Guy asked.

"FBI shows up a couple days into a local murder investigation? You can bet they're not telling us everything."

Lucy reached her hand behind her head and gripped a large swath of her hair then gently pulled it upward in frustration. "It's a damn queen's game of croquet."

"I don't get it," Austin said.

"It's like... It's like..." Jimmy started.

"We're playing a game with inept tools, where the rules change arbitrarily." Lucy spoke rapidly as her cheeks turned red with her increasing exasperation. "And now they've got me speaking *Alice-in-Wonderland*-ese."

Austin drummed his fingers on the table. "She came right out and told me that she couldn't tell me everything."

Lucy sighed, sitting back down. "We're not gonna figure out exactly why the FBI is here. Not yet, anyway. But we have something they don't." She pointed at the glasses in the center of the table. "And I think..." Her phone buzzed and she glanced down at it. "Samantha."

"What is it?" Austin asked.

"She texted. She's stuck at the Hood Canal Bridge, waiting for a boat to pass through. She says... hold on..."

Austin loved the Hood Canal Bridge, a floating bridge that connected the Olympic Peninsula to the Kitsap Peninsula. It had a retractable design, allowing a portion to open for maritime traffic—boats and submarines, even important traffic from the nearby Kitsap

Naval Base. Austin loved driving over it because it was so close to the water and the view on both sides was majestic, even on gray winter days.

Lucy shook her head. "I told her not to text from the car, even if she's parked."

"Lucy O'Law-and-Order," Jimmy said. He spoke in a mock formal voice. "Ahem, let the jury consider their verdict."

"Jimmy, she's *literally* breaking the law." Lucy rolled her eyes as she spoke.

"So... sentence first then?"

Lucy's glare alone could melt Jimmy's face. She looked like she would order his head to be offed if she had the authority.

"Sorry," Jimmy said to Austin, "We've been listening to the *Alice in Wonderland* audiobook on the drives back and forth."

"What did she say?" Austin's interjection brought them back to the right side of the looking glass.

"The glasses," Lucy said. "She'll be here in half an hour or so, but she says she got an ID on the glasses. *SkärmBlick Prism 7*, they're called."

"What does *SkärmBlick* mean?" Austin asked. "Anyone speak... what? Is that Swedish?"

"I've got it here," Lucy said, looking down at her phone. "Samantha sent me the onesheet on them. *SkärmBlick* means Screen-Glance and, well, I'll read. 'The *SkärmBlick Prism 7* redefines the frontier of wearable technology, merging the elegance of traditional eyewear with the cutting-edge capabilities of a fully integrated digital interface. Equipped with an ultra-high-resolution camera, these glasses offer real-time augmented reality overlays, instant web browsing, and seamless social media integration, all controlled through intuitive eye movements and subtle gestures. With advanced AI-driven voice commands, a high-res camera, and video recorder with broadcasting capabilities, the *SkärmBlick Prism 7* will turn the world around you into an interactive, information-rich landscape, making it the ultimate tool for professionals and tech enthusiasts who *want* to use the tools of the future today.'" She set down the phone and stared at it like an alien spacecraft had just landed on their table. "What in the name of Jabberwock did that mean?"

Jimmy said, "Video recorder and *broadcaster*. That means he could have been filming and broadcasting our entire interview."

Austin reflected on the interview with Seafern, the way he'd said his space chum gave them to him to wear for protection. He thought about Vangard, the Swedish tech maestro and founder of The Rabbit Hole experience. Then he thought of the way Seafern jumped up suddenly after a light had blinked on the side of the device.

Austin spoke to the group, "It's Vangard's cabin. The guy's a Swedish tech genius."

"Plus, it's his festival," Lucy added.

"I think there's a very good chance Seafern was broadcasting our interviews to *him*." Austin rapped his knuckles on the table. "Do you guys think Vangard could be pulling the strings?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AN HOUR LATER, Samantha hunched over the glasses while Austin and the others watched over her shoulder.

The day had gone from gray to grayer. In the dim glow of the makeshift workstation, Samantha's fingers danced across her keyboard with rhythmic precision. She wore fingerless gloves and a thick wool jacket that was colorful enough that she could have blended in as a Festival attendee.

"I connected them to my terminal via a custom-made data interface," she said, "bypassing their standard wireless functionalities."

"Clearly," Jimmy said sarcastically.

At one time he'd been the tech expert in the Kitsap Sheriff's Department, but Samantha had quickly taken over establishing her dominance in that role.

"Now let's see what secrets you're hiding," she murmured, speaking to the glasses. Then, back to the group, she added, "I'm initiating a sequence of algorithms designed to infiltrate the glasses' encrypted file system."

Her screen flickered with lines of code. "These things aren't even on the market yet, and there's no way a random Rabbit Hole attendee got their hands on a pair."

"Looked them up," Jimmy said. "They haven't announced a price but they are rumored to be \$20,000 a pair."

"Imagine losing twenty K in the woods?" Jimmy said.

"You'd be better off forgetting your name, and mine for that matter," Lucy said.

"Eventually," Samantha said, "they will come up with a consumer version to compete with Apple's new headset thing. Probably for two or three grand. But for now they're selling only to certain people. Celebrities, billionaires, influencers. Building hype and all that."

"Vanguard," Austin said. "He's Swedish, he's rich, he's tied into the tech market."

"Whoa. They've got thick layers of security." Samantha eyed her screen, sounding impressed. "This might be impossible."

"I've seen you do six impossible things before breakfast," Jimmy said.

"Hold on." Samantha typed what looked like nonsense. Cryptic letter and word combinations, numbers, and symbols sped across the screen. Some she typed and some populated on their own.

"So what are you seeing?" Lucy asked.

"I'm deploying a custom script to exploit a zero-day vulnerability within the operating system's kernel, effectively granting myself root access and allowing us to sidestep the multi-factor authentication checks that protect the device's most sensitive data."

"Clearly," Jimmy said again, even more sarcastically.

Austin didn't understand anything about what she'd just said and, apparently, neither did Lucy. "Sometimes I think you're just making up BS so we'll give you a raise."

Samantha laughed. "Maybe I am." She hit enter, and a bunch of what appeared to be normal computer file folders appeared on her screen. "Here. We. Go. Video recordings and search histories, every digital footprint left by its user. We're in."

"How far back do the videos go?" Austin asked.

Samantha clicked through a few files. "Damn. Not far enough. They start early this morning. These things aren't always recording, so either he wasn't recording before then or the new video automatically records over old video you haven't saved."

"Damn," Austin said quietly. It was too much to hope that he'd been recording on the night of the murder.

"Let's go back to this morning," Lucy said.

Samantha clicked on a file. "It'll be better if you put the glasses on. On my screen you won't see it as it appeared to him, in augmented reality 3D." She held up the glasses, which were connected to her terminal by a thin wire.

"No way," Lucy said. "I tried one of those 3D VR headsets and it made me throw up."

Samantha chuckled. "Not much of a gamer, huh? They can be disorienting, especially at first."

Austin took the glasses out of her hand. "I'll give it a go." Putting them on, all he saw was a black screen. He was about to complain when it lit up. He felt dizzy for half a second as he adjusted to the augmented reality. He could still see Samantha and the tent but in front of them, on the glasses, he could also see the file system as though it was floating in the space before him.

Reaching out a hand, he steadied himself on a chair. The last time he'd worn a 3D headset was ten or fifteen years ago. He'd gone to a mall arcade with Fiona and her brother while they were waiting to see a movie. At the time, it was a massive, heavy device worn like a helmet. The visuals were blocky and laggy and had totally unrealistic graphics. He'd left unimpressed, but 3D had come a long way.

These glasses seamlessly integrated the real world and the virtual world. As Samantha clicked through various files, he saw them appear in crisp, sharp resolution on his screen, and, simply by shifting the focus of his eyes, he could decide to look at the image or look at the real world.

"This morning, around what time?" Samantha asked.

"I think it was around nine that we began the interview," Lucy said.

On the screen in front of him, a video file opened, and then when he shifted his gaze, the video was all he saw. He was seeing, he realized, Seafern's point of view. The audio played from invisible speakers in the glasses, and though the quality wasn't perfect, it was good enough.

The whole thing was remarkable and deeply disconcerting.

In the pale morning light, a woman approached, handing him a bottle of water. "You want some Secret Sauce?" she asked. "X1."

"You *knooooow* I do," Seafern said, and Austin thought for a moment it was him saying it because an arm reached out and took the water, then held it up and drank a few swigs.

"Scroll forward a little bit," Austin said. "Does this thing have a fast-forward button?"

"It stores the files in ten-minute chunks, so I will have to click through," Samantha said.

The screen went black again, but only for a fraction of a second, and a new video appeared. Austin figured that Seafern was now sitting on the ground because of the change in perspective. He tracked his eye movements from the trees to a group of people dancing, then to the sky like he'd allowed his head to tilt back. He stared up at the sky for a long time, then his eyes slowly lowered to ground level.

Austin saw a blur of orange and white fur, then heard a little squeal from Seafern. Then he heard Seafern speak. "We are witnessing panspermia's finest fabrication. Corgi, corgi, corgi."

That's when Austin saw himself and Sy emerge from the path and, tugging at her leash and leading the way, Run.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WATCHING himself made Austin feel as though he'd entered into an alternate reality. He remembered Seafern speaking to the rabbit—*we have never been alone*. It made Austin wonder how long Seafern had been wearing the glasses and if wearing them was a choice he made freely.

Wearing the glasses himself also made him despondent. Austin valued his privacy, and the fact that anyone could wear glasses like this and record both the sights and sounds of everyone they interacted with was distressing. But he didn't have time for that now.

It took a lot of starts and stops, and many clicks through various files, but eventually, they pieced together what happened. During the interview in the tent, Seafern received a message from someone in his contacts labeled "WR."

The two had exchanged hundreds of messages, but the one that came in during the interview had been exactly what Austin had guessed, an instruction to get out of there. Someone was telling Seafern what to do, and Austin thought he knew who it was. He took off the glasses and reached toward a bowl of fruit someone brought in that morning. He had to adjust his reach several times as his depth perception had not completely normalized.

Peeling an orange he said, "I'm guessing the WR is Lucas Vanguard, the guy who came up with this festival in the first place. But what do you think the initials stand for?"

"White Rabbit," Jimmy said. "The one who peaks Alice's curiosity, leading her down the rabbit hole. The White Rabbit is Alice's interpretation of what a grown-up is."

"Of course," Austin said. "Vanguard would want a few folks recording different areas of the event. He's the only one lending cohesion to the chaos here."

"What the hell?" Lucy exclaimed. "I just got a text and..." She trailed off, ducking under the flap and heading out of the tent.

Jimmy followed her and Austin followed more slowly as his senses were still slightly confused from the glasses that had augmented his reality.

Lucy stopped abruptly at the edge of the clearing, looking down toward the water. "What is going on?" she asked no one in particular.

Austin stopped beside her and looked out. Two FBI boats had entered Mystery Bay. They moved slowly, equipped with gear for searching the water below. The scene was stark, with the cold, clear sky above and the agents aboard focusing intently on their task. The crisp cold air made their every breath visible as the boats moved methodically through the bay.

"What are they... oh, damn," Lucy said.

A body, Austin thought. They were dragging the bay looking for a body. This thought struck him with a stark clarity. As did the thought that maybe this was what Claire Anderson wasn't telling him.

"There must have been another death," Austin said aloud.



It took Lucy over an hour to find Claire and convince her to meet with them.

They gathered in the FBI tent and, with Claire's team out overseeing the search of the bay, she faced the three of them alone. She sat at the head of a rectangular table, hands folded in her lap, her expression calm, her blonde hair neat. She could have been mistaken

for someone awaiting high tea in a fine dining establishment rather than one put on by a mad hatter.

Lucy, in stark contrast, was visibly upset. "What's the deal?" she demanded.

"We have reason to believe someone else may have been killed," Claire responded. "Or, at the very least, is missing."

Austin was formulating a question, but Lucy's incredulous expression spoke volumes.

"I'm not able to say a lot more," Claire continued, "but I think you know we wouldn't have two boats dredging that bay if this wasn't serious."

"You've been stiff-arming us since the beginning," Lucy said. "Austin told us how you obstructed an attempt to follow up on a crucial witness. Is there something you want to tell us?"

Austin noticed a brief grimace on Claire's face, which quickly smoothed over. She crossed her arms. "Not especially," she replied with a sweetness that didn't quite reach her eyes.

Lucy gave Austin a nod, signaling it was his turn.

"So, if you cannot tell us who you think might be in those waters," Austin began, "can you tell us if you have any reason to believe Lucas Vanguard could be involved in nefarious activities related to this festival?"

Claire's response was non-verbal, a squint that said a lot without uttering a word. Austin's synesthesia kicked in at that moment, presenting him with a sensory mix that was unusual for him—a saline freshness reminiscent of the sea or a bustling fish market. This new sensation was not only novel but also oddly pleasant, accompanying a gut feeling that Claire was on the cusp of a significant revelation.

Her smile, tinged with resignation, was the precursor to her truth. "Pyronite, the DJ," she began, "the victim. She was an undercover FBI agent. She was at this festival as part of an undercover drug operation."

Austin's mind raced, connecting dots at breakneck speed. The prevalence of drugs at a festival like this wasn't surprising to him, but the idea that it was under investigation as a drug operation significant enough to involve the FBI hadn't crossed his mind. The limited information on the deceased DJ's past suddenly made sense—it was a fabricated identity from the start. But as quickly as he put that together, a new question formed in his mind. "So, if Pyronite was one of yours, who is it you're looking for in those waters?"

"A partner?" Lucy asked.

"Actually, no," Claire responded, her voice steady yet hinting at the complexity of the situation. "And this is where it gets confusing. Apparently, there was an undercover DEA agent present at the festival as well. And he's now missing too."

Jimmy shook his head. "Not to make jokes, but we are indeed falling down a rabbit hole."

PART 2
LOOKING GLASS SHATTERED

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ALTHOUGH IT WAS NEARLY 5:00 PM, everyone needed coffee. Luckily, someone had thought to bring a coffee maker, and as Jimmy set down little paper cups in front of each of them, Claire placed her hands flat on the table and sighed. "Look, I'm going to start from the beginning. This thing could be about to spin out of control, and you guys deserve to know what's going on."

She took a sip of her coffee, then carefully pushed the cup toward the center of the table. "The agent's fake name was Pyra Knightly. Real name was Chloe Graber. I didn't know her, and I had nothing to do with the drug investigation she was here to do. In fact, I'm still not entirely sure what's going on here. But I believe that someone in our office screwed up, and that's why they're not here and I *am*. Agent Graber never should have been here undercover alone."

Austin was confused. "I assumed the other agent, from the DEA... what's his name?"

Claire read from her phone. "Apollo Tsopanidis. Six years on the job. Family immigrated from Greece when he was a boy and he graduated from UW with a degree in criminology in 2014."

Austin turned to Claire. "I assume he was a cross-agency partner on this. No?"

"We don't think so," Claire said. "I don't think the DEA and FBI were together on this thing. Crossed-wires or just living in parallel worlds."

"That makes *no* sense," Lucy said.

"Not everything necessarily makes sense," Jimmy said.

"But most things do," Austin countered, shaking his head. "I'm with Lucy. How is it possible the DEA and FBI both had an undercover agent here and they weren't working together?" It wasn't uncommon for agencies to keep secrets from one another or simply not to inform one another of operations. But normally the FBI would disclose an undercover operation like this to the DEA and vice versa. "If that's true, it's a bad miss."

Claire nodded. "A bad miss, but not a shocker, right? You know how these inter-agency rivalries can get. Apparently, this festival is suspected of being a front for a drug operation. There are all sorts of designer drugs here, including ones that aren't even illegal yet because they're being synthesized in labs in Eastern and Northern Europe with unknown compounds."

"So, what about the witness going into the cabin?" Austin pressed. "Why didn't you want to follow him?"

Claire retrieved her coffee, finished it slowly, then passed the paper cup from hand to hand. "When we got sent out here, I was told not to mess with Vangard. I was told that he's eccentric, but isn't involved in this. I didn't want to go into what I knew was his house before looking into some things."

"Wait, wait," Lucy said, "that's a bunch of crap. Told by whom? And that's not how an investigation is supposed to work anyway. If he's our guy then he's our guy."

"Hold on," Claire said, exasperated. "You're sounding like one of my kids. Investigations work in all sorts of ways, including this one. I was told by my bosses. You don't need to know who they are. And it's not like they weren't telling me because they're in bed with him or something."

Lucy scoffed. "I don't know *that* to be true!"

"Look," Claire continued, "I don't know everything that's going on here, neither do my bosses, and neither do you. That's why we call it an investigation. But there are hierarchies

in place for a reason. Bottom line is, now I'm ready to go talk to Vanguard, and that's what we're going to do."

"I'm going, too," Lucy said.

"Me too," Jimmy said.

Austin stood, indicating that he was more than ready to go as well.

Claire was already shaking her head. "No. No way. I'm taking Kiko; she's my right-hand woman right now." She nodded at Austin. "You can come." And then she nodded at Lucy. "And you, too."

"What about me?" Jimmy asked.

Claire looked him up and down, long enough that it became uncomfortable. Austin looked to see what she was trying to discern. Jimmy's sizable bicep muscles were barely contained in his crisp white button-down shirt and his face had a chiseled, Disney-prince structure.

"What?" Jimmy asked, clearly uncomfortable.

"Nothing," Claire said.

"What?" Lucy asked. "If you're wondering if he's a meathead who might jeopardize your interview, or if he just likes to workout. And he's my husband so I feel at liberty to say this. Honestly, it's a little of both."

"She's not wrong," Jimmy admitted. "I'll stay here and work with Samantha."

Claire nodded and turned to leave.

Lucy blew Jimmy a kiss, which he caught, then followed Claire, Kiko, and Austin out of the tent.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"APPARENTLY SATURDAY IS one of the craziest nights of the festival," Lucy said.

Austin could tell. The music was loud enough to shake the ground in some spots as they navigated back through the trees and toward the cabin. But it was the attendees who seemed to have taken their celebration to a new level. Everywhere he looked there were people dancing and singing solo and in groups. Many had light wands or strings of lights tied around various parts of their bodies. Some were wearing glow-paint. In the cold night, it was as though they were walking through a darkness populated by a thousand swinging arms and legs lit by white and yellow and blue lights.

He smelled fruity and sweet vape smoke, marijuana smoke, and half a dozen other scents he didn't recognize.

"Kinda like old times," Lucy said. "It was almost exactly two years ago we did the Lorraine D'Antonia case."

Austin nodded, although he knew she couldn't see his head as they entered a dark patch of forest. For a while they followed a little trail between the openings in the trees. At the next clearing, he said, "The case that somehow convinced me to get back into this mess."

"What mess?"

"Police work. You know." He felt a pang in his stomach when he thought of Run and Sy back at his apartment. He realized that what he thought would take him four or five hours had taken the whole day and left him on an island with a bunch of kooks for an indeterminate amount of time.

"You mean you didn't picture yourself trying to solve a murder at a festival?"

Austin laughed. "I think I'm getting a contact high."



Claire glanced back to make sure Austin and Lucy were still nearby, but not close enough to hear them. "They seem to know what they're doing," she said to Kiko, who was keeping up with her fast pace, stride for stride.

"For small towners, yes. That Austin, though, he's a bit of a silver fox."

"Doesn't a guy have to be in his fifties or sixties to be a silver fox?"

Kiko shrugged. "Nah, to me, anyone in their forties on up can be one."

Claire realized, that for a woman in her early twenties like Kiko, a guy in his mid-forties could theoretically seem old.

"So?" Kiko asked.

"What?"

"Soooo?" Her tone had grown mischievous.

Claire understood now. "No."

"Why not?"

Claire sighed. "Why are you always trying to set me up with someone?"

"Because your soon-to-be ex-husband is about to be out of the picture for good. Claire, you're a brilliant woman who deserves a decent guy. And because I shouldn't be the only one having fun out there."

Claire knew that Kiko was active on all the dating apps. She didn't drink or do drugs and her active social life didn't affect her work, but still. She seemed to have a new

boyfriend every week.

"Anyway," Kiko said. "Wouldn't kill you to have a good time."

Claire didn't reply, but as they transitioned from the dark trail to another clearing, this one even louder and busier than the last, Kiko's words hung with her.

Between her divorce, her two daughters in college, and her twelve-year-old son—with whom her husband had almost no relationship—her life was full enough without dating.



"Is that... it is." Lucy stopped at the end of the trail and pointed into a small group standing at the edge of a clearing. "That's Zander Silva."

"He's... uh..." The name rang a bell but Austin wasn't sure why.

"The co-founder of the festival." Lucy began walking toward him, clearly intending to speak with him.

As they got closer, Austin could make out his face. He had olive skin and a neat black beard that seemed to disappear into the edge of his turtleneck sweater.

He was also in the middle of recording a video.

"Out of the light!" a young woman yelled as Lucy approached. Apparently she'd crossed through the beam of one of the spotlights in the trees, messing with the shot.

Lucy ignored her and stopped in front of Silva. "Mr. Silva, Lucy O'Rourke, Kitsap County Sheriff's Department. Got a second?"

He studied her for a moment, then offered a sad smile. Waving at the young woman, he said, "Pause, dear Flamingo, we can finish the TikTok later."

"But, the clouds are forming," Flamingo whined.

Austin wasn't sure if he'd heard her say "clouds" or "crowds." A crowd of people were silently moving in toward Silva like water-vapor gathering into cloud formation, and there were clouds to the South that one might consider ominous. A storm of weather—or people—would interfere with the footage she seemed intent on capturing.

Flamingo—which, apparently, was the young woman's name—stepped back, glared at Lucy and Austin, then popped something under her tongue but didn't pause the recording.

"How can I help you?" Silva asked. "I assume you're here about the death." He shook his head. "Pyronite was one of the good ones. I was really sorry to hear it."

"How well did you know her?" Lucy asked.

"Not well, just from her music. I've already reached out to try to find any family, see what I can do to help. Haven't found anyone yet, but please let me know if you do. Funeral arrangements, children, whatever I can do. Whatever happens at my festival is my responsibility."

"Thanks," Lucy said.

Flamingo sidled up next to Silva. "You don't have to talk to these people. They're pigs. Scum. The state."

Silva sighed and looked from Austin to Lucy apologetically. "I'm sorry. She's young." Then he turned to her. "We can oppose the state, oppose the police, oppose any intervention in our individual freedoms *without* insulting individuals." He stepped back. "I'm sure these are decent people just doing their jobs."

Flamingo crossed her arms. "So were the German soldiers in World War Two." Her voice was full of venom.

Lucy seemed unbothered by the comparison, by any of this. Austin knew that, like him, she'd heard much worse in the line of duty. She handed Silva a card. "I know you've already chatted with Officer Graves. He filled me in. I hear you managed to say a lot of words without saying anything."

Silva smiled. "I genuinely had little to offer. As you can imagine I'm quite busy at the festival, not to mention running my companies."

"And," Flamingo added, "creating tens of thousands of jobs and billions of dollars of wealth for this country, which wants to tax him into the poor house."

Lucy again ignored her. "Well, if you think of anything," she said to Silva, "let us know."
Lucy turned and led Austin through the mob of people, which seemed to be growing denser and pressing in from all sides.



Claire looked up toward the buzzing sound that had slowly entered into her consciousness. "Is that a drone?"

Kiko glanced up, then stopped and pointed. "Yup."

Some of the festival attendees were looking up and pointing as well.

Claire saw a small beige or brown drone flying overhead, just visible against the dark sky. "Has that been following us?"

Kiko shrugged. "Probably just videoing the festival, like for the social media channels or whatever."

They walked on, leaving one clearing and turning down another path. When they made it to the next clearing, the drone was still overhead. It had risen above the trees, then dropped back down and was now only about thirty feet above their heads.

"It's following us," Claire said definitively. "Someone is watching."

"Is that the house?" Kiko asked, pointing.

"Yeah, end of that path." She glanced back. "Where are the locals?"

Kiko stopped. "You think they're having an affair. Austin and Lucy?"

Claire slapped her arm playfully. "Does your mind ever leave the gutter?"

"Occasionally, but I try to wedge it back in there as soon as I can."

Claire sighed. "Lucy is married to that other one, what was his name?"

"Jimmy."

"Right, Jimmy. Anyway, we need to find them. Where... oh..." She spied Lucy and Austin hurrying down the path and gave Kiko a look. "No comments about anyone dating anyone."

Kiko nodded.

As they waited for Austin and Lucy to catch up, Claire glanced toward the cabin, which was lit up on the inside and also illuminated by colored spotlights attached to nearby trees.

Then she saw it, though she wasn't sure what "it" was. Netting, maybe, or ropes. It reminded her of the netting in the obstacle course she'd trained on when prepping for the FBI's physical test.

And it was stretched along the path in front of the cabin like a spiderweb waiting to catch its prey.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WHERE AM I, the man thought. *Where the hell am I?*

It smelled like a basement, dank and full of strange scents like motor oil, musty old boxes of books and papers, stagnant water, and moth balls.

His wrists itched, and he wiggled them, but they didn't move the way they should.

That's right. His wrists were bound together with duct tape.

He blinked.

The room was dark, only a faint hint of moonlight creeping in through a window at the top of the wall. Definitely a basement, he thought.

The window was the sort that, from the outside of the house, would appear to be almost at ground level. But it did open. It was closed now, but he could see a lever. It was probably the sort of window designed to allow a little air in. He was definitely in a basement.

And he was definitely cold. Those things he knew for sure. Also, that he was bound. But he didn't know much else. He didn't know how he had arrived in this situation or who had put him there.

And where was his jacket?

He'd been trained to stay calm in difficult situations, and he knew that whatever was left of his mind was being used entirely to bypass the terror he felt.

The terror.

It was as though he was a hard shell of a man, just a surface. A man who could function and think and decide that he was in a basement because of that window and the smells. But underneath was the terror.

Who had put him here? And why?

Or, worse, had he come here himself?

What had he done?

He doubled over, his chest heaving. That's when he realized he was sitting on the floor. His chest and head were free, but his wrists were bound with duct tape, his legs bound at the ankles, legs stretching out before him.

The terror—it's what brought the memories back, but not the memories of how he got here or what he had done and why he deserved it. The memories that came were from his first day in America when he was seven years old.

His mother had taken a job as a professor at the University of Washington, which is what had gotten them into the country. His father, who stayed behind, would be joining them later. They arrived in the summer, July, so they had time to get situated before the beginning of the semester.

He remembered how beautiful Seattle was in the summer. All the water and all the green and the bluest skies. And his mother was so happy. For once, they had money. Real money. Enough to get an apartment, and ice cream almost every day.

Everything had been so simple.

There was nothing better than simplicity and hope, he thought. When put together, they combined into an emotion that was so pure, so great. As he inhaled he could smell that summer, the scent of earth after a brief rainshower, crisp fresh cut grass, and the motor oil from the lawnmowers cutting it.

He decided there should be a name for a new emotion that was hope mixed with simplicity. Something that children usually felt or maybe adults sometimes if they were

lucky.

He'd rarely felt that as an adult.

And as the sweet earthy scents of the past slowly morphed into the dank odors surrounding him, yanking him back to the present, he knew he never would again. Because of the terror.

Because of what he'd done.

He blinked, taking in the darkness.

Yes, it was definitely a basement.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

AUSTIN NOTICED the look of concern on Claire's face.

She pointed at the path leading up to the cabin. "Was that netting there before?"

Austin shook his head. "I don't think so."

Kiko, the young agent at Claire's side, pointed up at the sky. "There's been a drone following us as well."

"I saw a drone too," Lucy said.

Claire led the way, angling them off the path before they ran into the netting spread across it.

They veered around a tree, and as they cut back, Austin spotted two men standing shoulder to shoulder, both wearing black shirts and slacks and black hats, almost as though they were attempting to disappear into the night. He stopped suddenly, noticing Claire's hand dropping toward the weapon holstered on her right hip.

The two men said nothing and didn't make any move. Their arms were folded like bouncers at a nightclub. As they got closer, Austin noticed that one wore a plain black ballcap while the other wore a black ski mask with a tiny white rabbit patch on the forehead area.

Austin stepped up somewhat aggressively. "Who are you?"

Neither of the men spoke.

Claire tapped Austin on the forearm and pointed at the ground nearby.

In front of the cabin, a series of trenches had been dug out. One of them was full of water, the other full of barbed wire. Both could be leapt over easily, so they didn't have much of a deterring effect. So what were they doing there?

Claire glanced at Kiko. "Intimidation?"

Kiko nodded. "Ain't gonna work, but yeah."

"Between the drone, the netting, these goons, and that," Lucy said, nodding at the trenches, "that's what I'm thinking."

"It could also be some kind of performance art," Austin said. "Who knows with these folks?"

After leaping the trenches and navigating a wobbly staircase up to the cabin door, Claire knocked heavily. The door had a large window, and inside, Austin could see movement. To his surprise, Seafern answered the door.

His dreadlocks were tied up in a bun and braided with hundreds of colorful beads. But his clothes, like the two men out front, were all black.

Austin smiled at him, but Seafern either didn't recognize him or pretended not to. Austin believed it was probably the latter.

"We are here to see Lucas Vanguard," Claire said, waving a badge.

Seafern said nothing, but offered a strange, distant smile and gestured them into the foyer.

The house was larger than it looked from the outside and it already looked fairly large. A staircase led up to a grand loft-like space, and doors on both the left and right side of the foyer appeared to lead to different sections of the house.

Seafern stepped back, giving them space to enter. "No room! No room!" His words were disjointed, his physical cues obviously indicating for them to enter.

With that, he simply strolled back the way he'd come, back toward what Austin assumed was the kitchen based on the smells coming from it. He thought it might be

kimchi or some other fermenting vegetables. And also grilled meats of some kind.

"This is weird," Kiko said.

Austin couldn't agree more. He was beginning to think that this was all some elaborate joke. He couldn't believe they were actually in any real danger; the whole thing was too absurd, too artistic, too unbelievable. And yet... it was bewildering.

"We will head to the left," Claire said. "Austin and Lucy, you head to the right."

Austin nodded and, trailed by Lucy, he ventured through a door to the right, stepping into what appeared to be a room of mirrors. It was brightly lit, with no windows and, as they moved forward, the reality around them shifted into a disorienting, maze-like environment, far removed from the rustic exterior of the cabin.

The room was equipped with advanced projection and sound technology, transforming their surroundings into an immersive experience that blurred the lines between the real and the surreal. Mirrors and screens projected images that seemed to extend the room infinitely, while light distortions played tricks on their eyes. Phantom sounds whispered from unseen speakers, creating an auditory labyrinth that echoed the visual one.

Austin found a door leading to another room, which was similarly decked out.

As they navigated through the interconnected rooms, the environment seemed to pulse with life. Reflections danced across the surfaces, merging with projections of dilapidated houses and swamps and clear blue skies, scenes both eerie and beautiful. The air was charged with the scent of artificial fog, mingling with both the scent of the forest that seeped in from the outside and the food from the kitchen. The temperature fluctuated, too, cold in some areas where the light was dim and warmer where the projections simulated sunlight.

The further Austin and Lucy ventured, the more the boundaries of the space seemed to dissolve. Walls that appeared solid from afar revealed themselves to be mere projections upon closer inspection. The sound of their footsteps was sometimes absorbed into the silence. At other times, it echoed back at them from multiple directions, disorienting their sense of direction.

Jimmy had been right. They had most certainly fallen deeper down the rabbit hole.



Claire, with Kiko close behind, stepped through the door on the left into a room that immediately challenged their understanding of space and reality. The walls around them shimmered, not with the reflection of light on a smooth surface, but with the vibrant life of holographic projections. The floor beneath their feet seemed to intermittently vanish, revealing a digital abyss that threatened to swallow them whole, only to reappear just as their hearts leapt into their throats.

As they moved forward, the air around them became a canvas for an extraordinary display. Characters from "Alice in Wonderland" materialized from the ether—Cheshire cats grinned from midair, only to fade into a wisp of pixels; Mad Hatters tipped their hats in greeting before dissolving; and a holographic White Rabbit scurried past, perpetually late, disappearing into walls that seemed no more substantial than a mirage.

The technology was bewildering, creating a sense of being unmoored from the physical world. Claire could hear the sounds of footsteps and voices, but these were not their own echoes—they were part of the room's auditory illusion, adding layers of depth to the high-tech hallucination. The temperature shifted inexplicably, cold one moment as they passed through a digital winter landscape, then warm the next as they found themselves surrounded by the holographic glow of a bountiful tea party with hundreds of place settings.

Claire tried to maintain her composure, but even she couldn't help but be drawn into the spectacle. The characters from Alice in Wonderland, each a phantom of light and sound, seemed almost to interact with them, acknowledging their presence in this fabricated wonderland before vanishing into thin air.



The next room was dark, nearly black, and Austin blinked, waiting for his eyes to adjust. He knew the kitchen was to their left but what was this room? There was something about it, a smell.

Yes, that was it.

"Lucy, do you smell... what is that?"

"Tea," she said. "Black tea."

"Okay, this is getting weird."



"Do you smell tea?" Claire asked as she turned the handle on the doorknob at the end of the room of holograms.

"I guess," Kiko said, "but I also smell grilled steak and kimchi."

Claire stepped into the room, raising her flashlight. She saw Austin and Lucy who, inexplicably, were in the dark. "Forget your light?" Claire asked.

"I figured this is probably gonna be my last music festival," Austin said. "I wanted to go through the haunted house as it was intended."

Just then a strange laughter filled the room, echoing as though it was being looped over itself digitally. Then the lights went on.

The room was actually quite ordinary aside from the multiple clocks on the wall, all of which were stopped at six o'clock. The space was maybe fifteen by twenty feet, with a window to the left and a large table in the center. The table was spread with multiple teapots and a tray full of scones and other pastries, all of it real.

Sitting at the head of the table was a shirtless man with long blond hair. When he stood, Claire saw that he wore nothing except for a pair of... what were those?

They appeared to be thick underwear made of white fur.

Lucas Vanguard smiled. "You found me. How nice." He took a sip from a dainty tea cup. "Welcome to our house in the woods."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AUSTIN SAT ALONE with Claire in the makeshift headquarters of the FBI, the large tent now equipped with portable heaters, keeping the temperature somewhere in the fifties. "Now," he said, "I guess we wait."

It turned out that Lucas Vanguard was perfectly happy to chat, but not before finishing his tea and scones. Vanguard made it clear that even though he had place settings for two dozen and was taking tea alone, there was no room for others. Shortly after greeting them he had rung a bell on the table, which summoned a team of three lawyers from the kitchen. They explained to Austin, Claire, and the others that Vanguard would finish his evening tea then would be happy to meet for an interview on their turf.

Claire had asked Lucy and Kiko to stay behind to ensure he didn't disappear, but Austin knew he wouldn't. The elaborate series of distractions had been his way of messing with them, or possibly just his normal Saturday night activities. Either way, it didn't matter. Austin could tell he seemed to be looking forward to speaking with them. This was the kind of guy who liked the sound of his own voice.

After returning to the tent, where Vanguard was set to meet them, they'd done a quick debrief with Jimmy, who'd made friends with one of the FBI agents dredging Mystery Bay for a body. No body had been found, but they had found a size twelve Adidas jogging sneaker.

Together, Samantha and Jimmy had combed publicly posted photos from the first night of the event. They'd managed to pull hundreds of photos from social media sites and drop them into an AI image reader on her laptop, looking for a match on the shoes. One had come up as 90% probable.

It appeared to be attached to a man who was about six feet tall with an athletic build. The only problem was, they couldn't see his face in the photograph because he was crouching behind another crowd of people, but they could see he was only wearing one shoe. Jimmy and Samantha had then excused themselves to go back to the other tent and continue the search.

"Indeed," Claire said, "although I'm not much for waiting. If he's not here in the next twenty minutes..." She sighed. "I've been told I'm a touch impatient."

Austin could understand the frustration, but sometimes one had to resign themselves to the fact that men as powerful as Vanguard knew the law—or had lawyers around them that knew the law—and the fact that he'd agreed to speak at all was a blessing. Certainly he would be able to convey more information than Seafern had.

"By the way," Austin said, pulling up the collar on his jacket. "There's something I didn't tell you about Seafern."

Claire sipped her coffee and raised an eyebrow in his direction.

"As he was fleeing us the first time, his glasses fell off and our team retrieved them."

She raised an eyebrow. "Our team?"

"Well, me."

"They're special VR recording glasses with internet access. Vanguard was using them to surveil the festival and communicate with Seafern, who I guess works for him or, I don't know. Wouldn't shock me if he was trading his services for whatever high-end hallucinogens Vanguard is pushing. That's why Seafern left the interview. Vanguard told him to. And I think Vanguard's been watching us through those glasses the whole time."

Austin watched Claire's face to see if perhaps she already knew this. But her look gave away nothing. "Interesting," she said.

"I didn't want to go into this interview without you knowing that."

"Good. That's useful," Claire said. "In the interview, let's take him on together."

"Sounds good," Austin said. "I didn't tell you about the glasses at first because I knew you were holding something back."

"Fair enough." She looked at him "No secrets from now on, in either direction?"

"Deal."

"How long do you think teatime will take?" she asked.

Austin shrugged and sipped his coffee. "I'm sure it will be over by six o'clock."

"Right, some Wonderland reference again. Why is it always six o'clock here?"

"I actually know because Jimmy told me," Austin said. "The Hatter sang to the Queen and she accused him of murdering time."

"Ah. That Jimmy, he does look all muscle and beauty but also seems to have a teddy bear feel to him as well."

There was a long silence, but not an awkward one. Ever since his wife died, he sometimes felt awkward around women his own age, like there was some sort of expectation. But not with Claire. It was almost like she was a sister or an old friend from highschool. "Why did you become an FBI agent?" he asked.

"Long story."

"Given that Lucas Vangard was dressed wearing only a pelt of what I'm guessing was white rabbit skins, I think we've got some time."

Claire chuckled. "When I was little, and I don't remember any of this, but when I was little I lived on a strange commune with my parents. Actually, I was born there. Central Washington." Her face grew hard, and Austin thought she might be holding back tears, as though just the mention of her early life brought on a wave of emotions that she was practiced at distancing herself from.

"I'm sorry," Austin said. "We don't have to talk about it if you don't want."

"No, it's okay." She laughed at herself. "My therapist says it's good if I get used to just talking about it, then it won't own me so much." She laughed again. "I started going to her when my husband and I decided to split—you know, help me get through that—and yet all we talk about is my childhood. I should ask for a refund."

Austin smiled.

Claire finished her coffee, then got up and refilled the cup. Sitting back down, she said, "When the police found me, I was the only person alive on the commune. Thirty-seven people, including my parents, were dead. I was one year old." She swallowed hard, then continued. "The leader of the religion, actually it was a strange cult, had disappeared. In the paperwork that he left behind, it was clear he had convinced everyone that they were going to ascend straight to heaven, become one with some alien race or something."

Austin was listening intently, but said nothing.

"Anyway, I was raised by my foster parents. And when I was a teenager, I looked into what had happened a little bit. I still don't really know. No one knows why I'm alive. The other kids were killed, too; everyone was poisoned."

"Kind of reminds me of the Jonestown Massacre. I hope that's not too insensitive."

"Please, don't worry about it," Claire said. "And yeah, it was a lot like that, but on a much smaller scale."

Austin shook his head. "I'm really sorry. That's, I don't know what that is. I've never met anyone who's gone through that kind of thing."

"Usually, the parents in these horrific crimes kill the children first."

Austin almost doubled over, sickened by the thought.

She'd said it so matter-of-factly, it was almost unsettling. Then again, she was trained to look at the most horrific cases humanity had to offer with rationality and calm. Austin figured she'd learned to do it even when it came to her own life.

Gathering himself, he said, "So, did you become an FBI agent because you were interested in that particular crime or more from a sense of wanting justice?"

"Actually, it was sillier than that. In college, when I was a freshman, I took a class on criminal justice. I had some vague notion of seeking justice or something, but then I got a crush on the professor. He was only ten years older than me, so I thought, 'Hey, ya never know.'" She laughed at herself. "Of course, nothing happened. But I took his classes my first three terms, and by the time I actually *realized* nothing was gonna happen I was a third of the way to a degree. I guess I got hooked on the process. The right and wrong of it all. The clean lines, the black and white. Something is either a crime or not a crime, ya know?"

Austin knew what she meant, but didn't really agree. "I don't know. Half the perps I caught while I was with the NYPD got off because high-priced lawyers were paid to obscure the facts, to make things look like they *weren't* black and white."

"True, but still... *you* knew the truth. All the slimy lawyers on earth can't take it away when you know what you know."

She had a point. "It's the not knowing that drives me."

"Is that what drove you to the NYPD?" she asked.

A gust of wind blew under the flap of the tent and, in the distance, Austin heard the heavy bass thump of music.

"I don't know. I just signed up."

"C'mon, I went first. You can't bail on me. Everyone has a real reason, something that gets them in the door. And yours *can't* be any sillier than mine was."

"I was eleven years old," Austin said. "Sixth grade. There was a kid in my class named Michael who was always pretty disruptive, often hadn't bathed. He wore smelly clothes, probably had what we'd now diagnose as attention deficit disorder. But, at the time, I don't think that sort of thing was diagnosed as much.

"He was also the *biggest* kid in the class. I don't know if he had been held back or if he was just large, but I was above average size, and he was at least four inches taller and fifty pounds heavier than me. Some of the kids teased him, mostly behind his back, but more than that, everyone just sort of looked the other way around him. He had to sit at a special desk off to the side so he wouldn't bother the students or staff, and everyone just ignored him.

"That's what hurt him the most, I think. Not the cruel attention but the total disregard. Sometimes his antics became like a TV on in the background, and even the teacher didn't pay attention. And I was no better than any of them. I wanted nothing to do with him."

Austin paused, thinking back with regret. Fiona was the only person with whom he'd shared this story, and he had no idea why he heard himself sharing it with an FBI agent he'd only recently met.

"One day, I was walking home from school and saw him standing out front of an ice cream shop, just kind of hanging on a parking meter and whacking it with his hands like he was killing time. I began to cross to the other side of the street. Like I said, it wasn't just the other kids who avoided him. But he saw me and called to me like we were old friends.

"I didn't feel like I could avoid him, so I slowly walked over and he began making kind of hyperactive small talk. But at the same time, he kept glancing through the big plate windows of a laundromat next to the ice cream shop. I looked in and realized that a man and woman were arguing in there. From the way he seemed interested, and the massive size of the man, I figured they were his parents. And they weren't just arguing. It was really heated.

"After a few minutes, the shouts grew louder, and his father struck his mother across the face. I looked at Michael, who winced, but just kept slapping the parking meter over and over again. I told him that's not okay; we should call the police. He said he'd done that before, and nothing happened.

"He said the police had even come out once or twice, and nothing ever happened. He said his dad hit his mom all the time. Nearly every day. And nothing ever happened."

Austin felt his throat tighten. "'Nothing ever happens. Nothing ever happens.' Michael said it over and over again and just kept hitting that parking meter.

"Anyway, there was a pay phone at the end of the block. I told Michael I had a quarter, and we would call right now, and I would help. I would tell them what I saw, and maybe they would listen to me. Maybe they would listen if someone who wasn't in the family said something. He got really big and really angry and threatened me and made me promise not to call. 'It'll just make everything worse,' he said. After a minute or two, I kind of slumped down and walked away. I did nothing."

"That's what a lot of kids would have done," Claire said.

Austin waved away her reassurance. "Four days later, his father *killed* his mother. Beat her to death. In front of Michael. A neighbor heard the whole thing go down, and his father went to prison for life. Michael took his own life a year later."

Austin bit his lower lip, trying to hold back the tears. The guilt still hit him whenever he thought about it.

"Anyway," he continued after a long silence, "I don't know if me calling the cops that day would have changed anything. But I was a hundred percent sure what the right thing to do was, and I didn't do it. I'm not arrogant enough to *know* that it would have helped, but it might have. But that doesn't matter. That's not the thing that matters. What matters is you do the thing that you know is right every single time."

"That's why you joined the NYPD?"

"It wasn't as linear as that, but I'll tell you this: the day I signed up I had Michael on my mind."

Austin heard voices.

Jimmy was speaking excitedly.

Samantha was as well, and she burst through the tent first. "Austin, ya gotta see this."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE NEXT TWENTY minutes were some of the worst Austin had experienced, and that was saying something because only a couple of months earlier, he'd taken a fall off the Brooklyn Bridge and survived, just barely, to live in excruciating physical pain for weeks.

But what Samantha showed him brought a different kind of pain.

The first thing she showed him was a list of the trending topics on the app X, formerly known as Twitter. Austin was one of them. The surreal nature of Vangard's cabin seemed to be extending far out into the world and across the internet.

"Tens of thousands of accounts are tweeting about you," Samantha said.

"Why?" Austin asked. He felt as though the little tent was closing in around him and the air was growing thin, leaving him lightheaded and confused.

"It's complicated," Samantha said. "Don't worry, they're mostly bots."

"I know that bots is short for robots," Claire said, "but what the hell? Like, what does that even mean, really?"

Jimmy grabbed himself a cup of coffee. "There are lots of real accounts on these sites, but also lots of what are called 'bots.' They're scripts that are tied to accounts that automatically reply to and forward certain messages to make some topics trend. The sites can be manipulated, and someone is manipulating it to make *you* trend, Austin."

"And *you*," Samantha said, nodding toward Claire.

Samantha pointed at the screen, and Austin leaned in. Claire was reading over his shoulder, and he saw that her name was trending too.

Samantha clicked on a photograph that showed a clearing in the trees with Claire and Kiko walking amongst the festival-goers.

Austin was confused, but Claire didn't seem to be. "There was a drone following us."

The caption on the photo read "FBI infiltrating peaceful music festival."

As Austin watched in stunned silence, Samantha clicked through another dozen posts. Some photographs showed Austin alone at the festival, others pictured him with Lucy and Jimmy, still others with Officer Guy Graves. In addition to the real photos, there were videos that were completely fabricated. One was the Kitsap County team depicted as cartoon eggs sitting on the Brooklyn Bridge. The video ended with the egg that portrayed Austin falling backwards from the bridge, then it slowly transitioned into an actual person falling from the bridge. It was cellphone camera footage of Austin's actual fall, footage Sy had told him was out there but that he'd avoided seeing.

But what he found most disturbing was that many of the photographs and videos were not fully real and it wasn't immediately obvious that they'd been faked. Some were real photos that had been edited to show him and Claire holding weapons they hadn't been holding. Some video clips had sounds of gunshots in the background, gunshots that hadn't happened. And there were even a few videos that were clearly AI-generated deep-fakes of Claire and Austin running through the festival grounds and knocking people over violently, none of which had actually happened.

Other posts brought up Austin's past, his exploits in New York, including some information that was true and some that was false. Quite a few posts mocked the tragedy of Claire's upbringing. Others claimed to know the truth of what happened.

Next, Samantha showed them similar things on Facebook and Instagram. "There is even a Wikipedia page about the death of Pyronite," she concluded, "with links to some of these posts."

"How did this all happen so fast?" Claire asked.

"It's getting easier than ever," Jimmy said, "to spread information, both true and false. On the level of the individual files, it is often possible to detect which are real photographs, which have been doctored."

Samantha chuckled. "But the 19-year-old stoner in his parents' basement who's scrolling through his feed and re-sharing this stuff isn't exactly making that distinction."

All in all, Austin got the sense that a firehose of information about them and their investigation—both true and false—was being sprayed out across the internet at mind-bending speed.

What he didn't know was why.

Austin stood up, let out a long sigh, and did a lap around the table. The one thing he had never wanted to be was famous. After the attempted attack at CenturyLink Field, he'd declined dozens of interviews and pushed all of the acclaim onto Ridley, who genuinely deserved it and had used it for a good cause, to run for office and keep a couple of corrupt politicians out of the governor's mansion.

After the recent events in New York City, he'd done the same. But what he was beginning to understand about the modern world was that declining newspaper and morning television interviews was not enough to stay out of the public consciousness. At any time, anyone who wanted could spread any information about anyone, with little fear of repercussion.

"But why would someone do this?" Austin asked, his voice weak.

"Easy," Jimmy said. "Something shady is going on here, and whoever is behind it has an army of posters and bots and is trying to flood the zone with BS."

"Okay, I get that," Claire said, "but *why* exactly?"

"There's a famous saying," Samantha said, "and I can't remember where it came from. Something about how in dictatorships, the people in charge never try to convince their subjects that a particular lie is true. They just lie so much that they convince their subjects that nothing is true. That the truth itself isn't knowable."

Austin glanced at Claire, remembering what she'd said about liking things in black and white, true and false. And he thought he saw on her face an anguish that mirrored what he himself was feeling.

"But again," Austin said, "why?"

Jimmy sat down, his usual positive attitude dampened. "So that whenever we solve this case, no one believes what we say. It's a shattered looking glass—the pieces fly into the air and land on the ground pointing in all directions. There are so many ways of seeing the story, you can't tell which one is the true picture."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BY THE TIME he heard Lucy and Kiko approaching, Austin's head was spinning and he'd begun to wonder what the world would be like if the internet had never been invented.

Kiko sat next to Claire and Lucy sat next to Jimmy.

"He's right behind us," Kiko said.

Then things got weirder. Lucas Vanguard was... was he singing?

"Knowledge is...

A deadly friend...

If no one sets the rules..."

As they'd discussed, Jimmy got up and stopped him before he came inside. The plan was to make him wait. Get him to feel uncomfortable, then get him to feel bored and anxious enough to leave. That way he might be more likely to tell them what they wanted to know just to get himself out of there.

"I know that song," Claire said. "King Crimson."

"I can't see you being a fan of a rock band from the sixties and seventies," Kiko said.

"It was just something I happened on that stuck with me," Claire replied.

"So, how did *you* come upon a British rock band that was at peak popularity a decade before you were born?" Lucy asked.

"I knew I was adopted, you don't get blonde hair like this from two brunette parents. But, when I was about ten, they told me what happened to my biological parents and gave me the choice to meet an uncle who wanted to connect. I only met him the one time but he gave me a record player. I think he felt so guilty that he wasn't able to tear my parents away from their cult that it was too difficult for him to see me again. Anyway, he told me to listen to everything—music, stories, people, the sounds of nature. He told me the record player would help me do that. He also told me—*If you ever find the truth, find something else*. What he said stuck with me. I would go to the library and check out records at random and play them. When I was fifteen or so, one of the records I picked up was King Crimson. There was something about their music that was so different, kind of like how different childhood is from adulthood."

Vanguard didn't seem to mind being made to wait because as the time ticked by he only sang louder.

"If we make it we can all sit back and laugh..."

"The jazz and the symphonic sounds," Claire continued, "mixed with rock and heavy metal and unfamiliar frequencies. I hadn't heard anything like it before. I know it sounds weird, considering who I am now, but, while I was a teenager their music kind of vibed with my internal landscape. The music had a way of breaking me apart so I could put myself back together."

"Confusion..."

Will be my epitaph..."

Vanguard continued to belt the song such that it vibrated the tent flaps.

"I don't think this man is going to get bored any time soon," Austin said.

Kiko laughed. "He sure does seem to like the sound of his own voice."

"Maybe even as much as the look of his own body," Lucy added.

Claire chuckled and Austin stood to open the flaps of the tent.

He'd assumed Vanguard would have changed his clothes, but he'd assumed wrong. He was still wearing the rabbit skin... what was it? Underwear, a swimming suit? Austin didn't

know the correct term for it, but, other than sneakers and an ankle-length black wool open-front coat, it appeared to be all that Vangard was wearing.

He stood around six foot two, the same as Austin, but was a good ten years younger and in phenomenal physical shape. His chest and stomach were hairless and chiseled, and, despite residing in northern Europe most of the year, he had richly tanned skin.

He strolled in belting one more chorus before Claire shut him up. "Enough with the singing," she said. "Take a seat."

Austin appreciated how Claire took charge. As Vangard sat at the opposite end of the table from Claire, the tent grew crowded. Lucy, Jimmy, and Kiko all stood along one side of the tent. Vangard's team of lawyers, all three of them, stood on the other. Austin sat next to Claire, who decided to start off the questioning by throwing a little bit of a curveball.

"Is that rabbit fur synthetic?" she asked.

Vangard smiled, and his teeth were some of the whitest Austin had ever seen. "Absolutely not." He spoke with the faint hint of a Swedish accent and an arrogance that made him thoroughly unlikable.

Claire tapped the table. "I would have thought that killing animals so you could wear ridiculous underwear would be frowned upon in your circles."

"You misunderstand me," Vangard said, "you misunderstand *us*." He waved his arm slowly in a circle, indicating the whole festival. "We are not just a bunch of vegan tree huggers around here. We advocate for a radical break from society, and that can mean different things at different times, and to different people. We are able, believe it or not, to revere rabbits as well as to eat them and wear their fur. When I began my disconnection, it started with vision quests, with taking LSD, peyote in South America, ecstasy in nightclubs in Helsinki and Munich and Singapore. But at the further reaches of my consciousness, I realized that reconnecting with the primal was what I was missing. Raised in and around technology, I needed to reconnect with the part of me that could *kill*." He added a special emphasis to this word, his bright blue eyes nearly twinkling as he looked straight into Austin's. "We live in a world where we get little packages of meat in the grocery store, the dead carcasses of chickens and cows slaughtered in some factory a thousand miles away. Industrialized murder. There's a lot more honor, a lot more spirituality in taking some X1 and hunting the rabbit yourself, naked in the woods."

"You hunt naked?" Claire asked.

Vangard looked away from Austin and stared at Claire as though he'd just remembered she was there. Nodding slowly, he said, "I find that part of reconnecting with myself and disconnecting from the Matrix is an embrace of my physical body. We are taught shame, a shame that is not natural."

Claire had heard enough. "Before we get into the night of the death of Pyronite, allow me to ask you this, did you have anything to do with all of the footage that has been leaked on the internet about us?"

Vangard ran a hand through his thick blonde hair. "All of the footage was gathered legally."

"You didn't answer her question," Austin countered.

Vangard stared at Austin for a long time. "You really need to relax, my friend. I used to be a little bit like you. Sweden, you know, raised in a very strict family, I was taught to wear proper clothes and do the right thing and tell the truth and all that stuff you probably believe. I was so guilty all the time. Like I'd done something bad and had to pay the world back for it forever." Vangard's eyes dropped from Austin's to the table before him as though he was looking through it to study Austin's clothes. "I've never met a man who needed to take some mushrooms and wander in the forest more than you. And good God, friend, when was the last time you got laid?"

Austin conjured up his best New York City glare, one he hadn't needed in quite some time, and set his balled-up fists on the table. This guy was starting to piss him off. "Talk about my personal life again, Lucas, and tonight will not end with you on stage being adored by your minions. I assure you of that."

"Of course," Claire interjected, "it is legal to film in public and to put it on the internet. What I'm asking is whether you orchestrated it."

Vangard shook his head. "Why would I do a thing like that?"

"Because you know," Claire responded, "that convincing the public of your innocence is half the battle."

At that point, one of Vangard's lawyers chimed in, a woman with gray hair and a bright, youthful face.

"Innocence? I would like to remind you that we are here voluntarily and that Mr. Vangard has not been accused of any crimes that we are aware of."

Vangard waved her away. "Get out of here, Myrtle, and you, Benjamin, and you, I forgot your name." He pointed at the third lawyer, an older gentleman with thick glasses. "Out! I don't need a shield."

He stared at them hard for a long time, and eventually, they scuttled out of the tent. "Having lawyers is one of the curses of being successful. No one wants them, but *everyone* needs them." Vangard used his hands to gather back his long hair like he was making a ponytail, then let it fall to its natural state.

"In this case," Austin said, "it seems as though you don't need them, correct?"

Vangard replied by raising his eyebrows.

Claire said, "We have reason to believe that you were recording us as we interviewed Seafern. *That* interview was not in a public space, and if you recorded it, that was a violation of the law."

"How could I have recorded it?" he asked. "I wasn't even there."

The smile on Vangard's face told Austin everything. Vangard had directed Seafern to record the interview. They knew it, and Vangard knew that they knew it. And he didn't care. He *wanted* them to know it. He was daring them to do something about it. And he knew they wouldn't.

"We'll save that for another day," Claire said. "Nakedness and drug use notwithstanding, there's a very serious case pending here, and we intend to get to the bottom of it."

CHAPTER TWENTY

WHERE WAS HIS JACKET? *And why was he only wearing one shoe?*

The basement was cold. He knew he'd been wearing a jacket when it all happened. It was his favorite jacket, a light one, almost a windbreaker. He liked to wear a thin cashmere sweater with a light jacket. It's what his father had always worn.

He blinked rapidly. His head was clearing.

Clearing from what?

He looked down at his side and saw a little spherical piece of cardboard. Not spherical, more like an *O* shape. What was that? It was like a big Cheerio made of cardboard. He shook out his head.

Duct tape. It was the empty roll of duct tape. Why had his abductor left that roll there? He didn't remember being duct-taped, but he had been.

He looked down at his hands. His wrists were *not* duct-taped.

Only his feet.

He was holding his wrists together tightly as though they were bound, so tightly they'd been rubbed red and raw.

What the hell was going on?

He blinked rapidly and shook his head. It was as though a bright rainbow fog had taken over his brain and was slowly lifting. His hands were free. Only his ankles were taped and... he was remembering now...

He reached down and began to yank at the tape violently, crazily. His mind flashed with memories.

He didn't remember being in this room with another person. In a moment, he realized he could not yank himself free of the duct tape. Instead, he had to slowly and methodically find the end of the tape and carefully detach it, going in loops, reversing the order in which it was wrapped. It took minutes, but he slowly removed the tape, and, as he did, he remembered.

He had taped his ankles himself.

Then the memories came like a wave, a tortured, bloody wave. He had come here on his own, back to where they'd made him watch the videos. He hadn't known what else to do.

Where was his jacket? And his shoe.

He was so cold.

Finally free of the tape, and balancing himself carefully, he stood. His legs were stiff.

It took him a moment to get steady on his feet.

He was in a basement. Definitely a basement, but where? How far from the festival? He remembered running in the woods. Pricking his bare foot on something. His jacket falling off.

He remembered coming here. But where was it?

He was so cold. He had to go find his jacket. In the far corner of the basement, he found three stairs that led up to a little door. He opened the door and took in the beautiful smell of the forest.

The air was crisp and cold. It felt like snow.

Where was his jacket?

The colorful brain fog was lifting, the memories were coming back.

Memories of something horrible, something confusing. What had he done?

Then it struck him. He had one more person to kill.
He heard music and took off at a full sprint.
What had he done? What was he about to do?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

FOR THE NEXT TWENTY MINUTES, Claire, Austin, and Vanguard exchanged questions, quips, and looks.

Austin could tell that Claire had done this a time or two. She wasn't intimidated by talking to a half-dressed millionaire who clearly knew that he was, if not above the law, something close to it. She was drawing him out, trying to piss him off, and trying to figure out what his motivations were.

But finally, Austin grew impatient and decided to play a little bit of hardball. "Where were you exactly when Pyronite died?"

"Pyronite was a good DJ, not an exceptional one, not a revolutionary; she didn't break any new ground. But with tools I largely invented and popularized, she did her best."

"You didn't answer the question," Austin said.

Vanguard cocked his head. "Well, you saw all the stuff on the internet about yourself, didn't you see the video of me?"

"What video?" Claire demanded.

"From what I read," Vanguard said, "the time of death was exactly 1:13 AM. Tragic death, that is. You two are both living in a digital world, but your brains are analog; you live in a world of bits, and I navigate in a world of qubits; you live in a classical world, and I am a Quantum World being."

Austin folded his arms across his chest. "It sounded like you were about to get to an actual point before you interrupted yourself with another self aggrandizing rant."

"What's a qubit?" Kiko asked.

"A qubit is a unit of quantum information," Vanguard said, "the quantum version of a classical binary bit." It was apparent that Vanguard didn't miss an opportunity to show off his superiority in physicality or digital literacy. "It's a central concept in quantum computing."

"Can we get back to this?" Claire said. "Why did you tell us what time she died, and how did you even know?"

"I knew because it is all over the Internet," Vanguard said, his voice growing hot. "And I mentioned it because there is a video of me on the internet that will prove I had nothing to do with this." He pointed at the computer in the corner. "May I?"

Claire nodded, and Kiko grabbed the laptop, sliding it across the table to Vanguard.

Staring Austin directly in the eyes, he tapped on the keyboard, glancing down at it only long enough to make sure he landed on the intended page. Seeing that he had, he clicked one more time to press play and swiveled the computer around so Austin and Claire could see it.

The video was on YouTube, and it was time-stamped at 1:00 AM. It showed Vanguard fairly clearly standing on stage, holding a metal bottle of some sort and dancing. He wore the same white rabbit skin loincloth along with a puffy blue jacket, and appeared to be having quite the time.

"When my lawyers approached me," Vanguard said, "I honestly didn't know where I was at 1:13 in the morning. If you look in the comments section of this video, you will find four or five more. Cell phone cameras, even a surveillance camera we have backstage. They will prove beyond any doubt that between midnight and 2:00 AM, I was either on stage or backstage, or for about ten minutes, I was in the bathroom with—how should I say this?—a young lady of sorts."

Austin grimaced. "Were you intoxicated during this time?"

"I don't see what that has to do with anything," Vanguard said, "but yes, of course I was. I'm intoxicated right now, if you must know. Perfectly legally intoxicated, I should add. I don't do illegal drugs anymore. I have everything to lose."

He didn't seem drunk, so Austin assumed he meant something else. "What drugs are you on right now?"

"I microdose. X1, I call it," Vanguard replied with a smirk. "Trust me, you would not understand."

Claire waved Kiko over and asked her to send the videos to their tech team back at the FBI field office in Seattle. "Have them see what they can do to verify the times on those videos and their authenticity."

Kiko wrote down the website addresses and hurried out of the tent to make the call. Looking back at the screen, Claire said, "These videos were all posted in the last fifteen minutes, while we were here."

"So?" Vanguard asked.

"You timed them to be posted while you were speaking with us," Claire said.

Vanguard smirked again and slowly ran his index fingers over his bushy blonde eyebrows. "Despite what my accountant Seafern might have told you, timing is everything, Claire."

"Seafern is an accountant?" Austin asked.

"Damn good one," Vanguard said. "Comes here to escape the monotony for five days a year. Next year, I strongly recommend you come as well. As guests. You could use it more than anyone, Austin. But, word of advice, if you dabble in any of our concoctions, don't start with the X1."

"Speaking of Seafern," Guy said. "Where is he?"

Austin hadn't even noticed when Guy had come into the tent. Now he stood at the very back and had his eyes planted squarely on Vanguard.

"What do you mean?" Vanguard asked. "He was at my place an hour or so ago."

"People are saying he's missing. Didn't show up for the peace pipe ceremony he was supposed to lead starting twenty minutes ago. We asked around, checked your place. No one has seen him."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

HALF AN HOUR later they all sat around the table in a kind of strange silence. Jimmy was the one who finally broke it. "Does anyone else think it's strange that Vanguard showed up with a ready-made alibi? He whipped that thing out like a sharpshooter at a firing range."

Lucy said, "We need to get home. It's almost midnight. But yes, that was strange."

"My read on him," Austin offered, "is that he's an arrogant bastard. But probably not a killer. Samantha is looking into the videos, as are Claire's people. If they are fakes, we will probably be able to tell."

Jimmy frowned. "Are we sure our people are better at hunting down fake videos than *his* people are at creating them?"

"Sure? No," Claire said. "But let's wait for their reports."

Claire stood and shoved her hands in the pockets of her slacks, which were still somewhat crisp and clean despite a full day at the festival. "Our guys on the boats have given up. There's no body in that water. Apollo Tsopanidis is missing, nowhere to be found. Not to mention Seafern, though that could be a lot of things, given the nature of this event and, well, of *him*. I've got multiple calls in to contacts at the DEA, and I can't get a straight word out of anyone there."

"If they sent you in to clean this thing up," Austin said, "why wouldn't they give you the full story?"

"My boss at the FBI sent me in. Not the DEA. I honestly don't know what is going on, why the DEA doesn't have their own team here by now. Cleaning this thing up is like trying to mop peanut butter out of a shag carpet with your hands tied behind your back and a blindfold on."

Austin smiled, thinking that Run would be able to make quick work of that—she loved peanut butter—but he didn't have the energy to laugh. He was exhausted and Sy was waiting for him back at his house. Run had probably already written him off and made Sy her new best friend. He missed them both. The drive home was about an hour and he was ready to get on the road. "I'm going to get out of here too," he said. "Should we reconvene in the morning?"

"I'm getting a hotel nearby," Claire said. She nodded toward Kiko. "Her too. We will be back here at 6:00 sharp."

Kiko was packing up some papers. "Oh boy," she said. "With driving time, that means we might grab four or five hours of beauty sleep."

Austin would be getting even less.



Walking through the festival toward the parking lot after midnight, Austin felt dejected. They still didn't know where Apollo was, and they didn't know who was spreading the online lies about them or why.

He trusted Claire, but he didn't trust that she was getting all of the information from the people above her. If she was somehow being used in this, it wouldn't surprise him. In fact, it was possible she'd been sent in not to actually *solve* anything, but to make it look like they'd tried to solve something.

About a hundred yards from the parking lot, Austin heard wild cackling and shouting and the thunderous beating of hundreds of footsteps. He jumped out of the path, senses on

high alert for danger.

But it wasn't danger.

Forty or fifty people dressed like lions and bears were chasing a white rabbit down the path. After spending a couple of days here though, he was no longer shocked. He figured it was just part of the festival, part of the ritual, part of this giant crazy thing that was one big indication that the world was passing him by.

Watching them disappear into the forest, he realized that, at least in this respect, that was for the better.

When he reached his car, his cell phone dinged with a series of text messages and calls that hadn't come in while he was in the forest. A couple of them were from Sy and he quickly replied that he was leaving now and would be back in about an hour and could she give Run an extra treat for him. Another call was from Ridley, and that was only fifteen minutes ago.

He decided to risk it and call Ridley back from inside his car.

Ridley answered on the first ring. "I figured you were still awake," he said, "because Lucy texted me to say you folks were just breaking up for the night and you hadn't made much progress. I wanted to get your read on things."

Austin started his car and turned on the heater. It blasted ice cold air onto his face and feet. "Let me give you the short version," Austin said, fumbling to shift the jets of air away from him. "Lucas Vanguard. Imagine the stereotype of every arrogant, rich, tech guy druggie pseudo philosopher you've ever met. And then put him in the body of a California surfer bro and give him a Swedish accent. Then put him on some sort of designer drugs, the chemical name of which no one can pronounce. Then turn the volume up to ten."

Ridley was laughing hard. "Sounds like a charming fellow. Let's make sure to have a beer with him when this is all over."

"Seriously, though," Austin said, "we're lost. Do you have anything on what the FBI and DEA are really doing here? We've got a dead FBI undercover agent and a missing DEA agent. According to Claire, they *weren't* working together."

"I haven't been able to find out a lot," Ridley said, "but I did confirm that this was not part of some multi-agency effort. Those agents did not know each other."

Austin considered this as he continued his drive toward the mainland. "And Claire, why would she be sent in here without complete information?"

Ridley was quiet for a long time, considering this.

One thing Austin liked about Ridley is he didn't talk just to talk. Like Sy, he was comfortable with long silences. Comfortable not knowing. He was the kind of guy who didn't speak as much as he could, but when he did, people listened. It's why he became governor. Not that he was perfect, no one was, but people had voted for him because, for the first time in a long time, when they saw him, they didn't think they were looking at a politician.

Finally, Ridley spoke. "The FBI is federal. It's more difficult for me to get information from them because I'm not their boss. Some dude in a suit in Washington D.C. is. My guess, someone actually wants to figure out what happened to their agent. But they need to do so slowly and carefully in order to control the narrative for the public. I would bet they sent Claire because they're on a bit of a fishing trip. Let her see what she can find out without making too many waves."

"That's probably why she didn't want to shut down the festival," Austin said.

"Makes sense. And didn't they send her with a super young agent?"

"I think she's barely old enough to sit for the tests," Austin said. "She seems smart enough, but yes, they didn't exactly send in a team of twenty of their most-experienced investigators, did they?"

"No, they didn't," Ridley said, "and wouldn't they have with a murdered undercover agent? I mean, if they really wanted it solved."

"But why wouldn't they want it solved?"

"I don't know, but if you want my advice, for now, go home. Let Sy pour you a glass of wine and sit on the couch with her. Look out the window at the dark water. All of this can wait until the morning."

"How did you know she was into wine?" Austin asked.

"She texts me sometimes." Ridley let out a long, thin stream of air. "Apparently she and my wife are talking about starting a Washington State wine club."

"I didn't even know she knew your wife."

"Met her briefly when we worked the Foulweather Bluff triple homicide. At the time, Rachel was pregnant and wasn't drinking, but she told me she enjoyed living vicariously through Sy. She described some of the Washington State wines she was sampling during her visit here and Rachel was captivated. Anyway, speaking of my bride, I should get back to spending the evening with her. And, Austin, you should take my advice about spending time with Sy. She may have good taste in wine, but I'm not so sure the same can be said for her taste in men."

Austin thanked him and hung up.

Of everything Ridley had said, the thing Austin most cared about was the mention of the wine club. Not that Sy intended to start one, that made perfect sense. It was the fact that she was considering starting one *here*, with Ridley's wife. Maybe she was just blowing smoke, but maybe it meant she was planning to stick around long term.

Driving across the Hood Canal Bridge in the darkness, and despite everything, Austin felt a wide smile break out across his tired face.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

FOR HOW LONG HAD HE *been running*?

His whole life?

An hour?

He'd gone toward the festival, toward the sound of the music. But he had never reached it. He tripped a few times; his face was scuffed and dirty. And eventually, he'd reached a road, but not the festival road.

Cars passed, lights in the distance. He ran toward the lights, but eventually, he found a gas station instead of the festival. He'd gone the wrong way.

How had he ended up here?

The memories were becoming clearer, and now that's what he was running from. The colorful rainbow fog lifted from his brain entirely, but it had left a residue, as though the moisture in the fog had soaked into him and was now mildewed.

He was so tired.

He yearned for the smell of the olive trees, the bright sun on his neck.

Instead, he was in this godforsaken gray, drizzly hellscape of the Pacific Northwest.

He had done things he never thought he could. Things he wouldn't tell his mother. Things that he would be ashamed of forever.

And now he had nowhere left to run.

He ran anyway.

He ran for as long as he could, this time away from the lights. Then he gave up, sat against a tree, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Sunday: Day 5 of The Rabbit Hole Festival

IT WAS ALREADY 5:30 AM, and Austin still hadn't gotten out the door.

He didn't like being late, but he'd taken Ridley's advice the night before. Arriving home around 1:00 AM, he accepted a glass of red wine from Sy and strolled out to the beach with her and Run. He rarely went to the beach that late, but he owed Run a trip, and on their tour around Washington State, they'd purchased her a nice sweater. He wasn't sure she needed it given how she sprinted around like the rabbit at the festival, but better safe than sorry.

They'd stayed on the beach for about ten minutes, Sy and Austin both sipping what Sy promised him was a phenomenal Washington State syrah. There in the cold he couldn't taste any of the "peppery notes" she told him to taste for, but it was pretty damn good nonetheless. He was starting to believe that there actually was a difference between Two Buck Chuck and the pricier bottles she was pouring.

Standing at the coffeemaker, he swigged half a cup leftover from the day before, then tossed the ball across the kitchen floor to Run, who sprinted after it, skidding into the living room. Hurrying back, she dropped the ball at his feet.

He tossed it again and put on a fresh pot of coffee. He'd woken up feeling tired and dejected. He wasn't hungover. He'd only had a glass and a half of wine. But he decided that he needed some air, and that's what Run wanted as well. He could add another fifteen minutes to his already-late arrival time.

As he swung open the gate of his little yard in front of his Café, General Store, and Bait Shop, squinting against the bright morning sun, he felt inexplicably terrible. He turned as he stepped onto the beach and heard Sy's voice calling after him. He hadn't known she was even awake. She was carrying two cups of coffee. He waited for her and took one of the cups.

"Thank you," he said. "I put this on to brew, then forgot about it."

Making sure there was no one else nearby, he took Run off her leash and pulled a tennis ball from his pocket, launching it as far as he could down the beach. It bounced off a piece of driftwood and rolled into the water. Run, apparently not caring that it was the dead of winter, sprinted into the shallow water and grabbed it. It made wrestling that sweater onto her last night seem more for torture than protection. Only her legs got wet, but it still made Austin cold just thinking about it.

"How are you feeling this morning?" Sy asked, taking out her phone.

She crouched down to take a video of Run sprinting back toward them.

"What are you doing?" Austin asked.

"Taking a video," she said.

"But why?"

"You'll be glad you have these later, I promise."

Austin couldn't deny that she was probably right, but he was still uncomfortable with the constant filming that seemed to have taken over the world. He'd been shaken by seeing all the footage of him on the internet, shaken that he could be recorded at any time by anyone using any one of a hundred kinds of concealed device, not to mention their

phones. He had always thought that science fiction fantasies of total surveillance were overblown. But he couldn't deny that he was in fact living under a different form of surveillance. Or at least, *possible* surveillance.

Run dropped the ball at his feet. He tossed it down the beach again, walking slowly toward the lighthouse at Point No Point.

Pulling out his phone when it buzzed, he read a text from Jimmy.

Got here early. According to Guy, Seafern is still missing. They questioned a few dozen people late last night, even talked with Vangard again. I'm not buying it, but Guy says that Vangard seemed genuinely concerned. I hate to say it, but I wonder if he overdosed, or... well.. I don't know. I'm just speculating. Anyway, no one has heard from him since you saw him at the door at Vangard's that night.

Austin swallowed hard and looked up at Sy. "Want to hear some depressing news?" he asked.

"Is this about the man who's missing? Seafern?"

"Yes." At first Austin was confused that she had heard about it, then remembered he'd told her last night after the first glass of wine.

Austin shoved his phone back in his pocket, crouched, and pet Run for a few seconds. She was sandy and wet from the belly down, but the top of her was still soft, though cool, and her fur felt good on his hands. Standing, he tossed the ball again, and she took off like she'd been shot out of a gun fired at ankle height.

"I hope he's okay," Austin said.

"You sound down," Sy said.

"I don't know, maybe it's just because it's the dead of winter, or maybe it's because I want things to be clear and settled, and they're not." He took Sy by the hand, and they continued walking.

"I'm sorry," he continued. "I don't want to get you down, too. You know that plaque I have? 'The world is worth fighting for.' Sometimes I think you have it right. Just be a winemaker or a musician. Do something fun that brings people joy. That gets them into their life. And let the world take care of itself."

She let go of his hand and stopped, looking him in the eyes. Her expression was more of concern than anger. "That's not really what I said. I wasn't implying that you can let the world go to hell in order to do something else. Just that it might be what *I* am better suited for. You are best suited to do this."

"Think so?" Austin glanced down the beach, instinctively knowing that Run should have been back with the ball by now. He spied her sniffing around the feet and running between the legs of a young man Austin didn't recognize. The man stood a little ways up the beach, and he had his phone pointed straight at Austin.

He was filming them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

AUSTIN SAW RED.

Marching down the beach, fists clenched, he headed straight for the young man, who eyed Austin from over the top of his phone and continued filming. When Austin reached him, he slowly, carefully—and as politely as possible—pushed the phone out from between them with the back of his hand.

"What the hell are you doing?" Austin asked, trying to sound calmer than he felt.

"It's a free country," the kid said.

And he *did* look like a kid to Austin. He couldn't have been more than seventeen or eighteen years old.

"Why are you filming me?" Austin asked.

"I don't have to tell you that. This is a public beach, Austin. And you're not supposed to have your dog off the leash anyway."

Austin knew that. Technically, the kid was right.

When there were other dogs or kids or people around, Austin kept Run on a leash. But he tried to take her to the beach at times when she could run freely. He crouched and put Run back on the leash, then stood, growing angry. "Why the hell are you filming me? How do you know my name? Do you work for Vanguard? What's going on?"

"Vanguard? I wish." The kid brushed his bushy hair out of his eyes. Austin inhaled and got a lingering smell of marijuana and noticed that the kid was holding a vape pen in his free hand.

"Let me get this straight," Austin said. "You're out here smoking weed at six in the morning and filming me for no reason?"

"Sure, dude. I think in your days they called it a 'Wake-n-Bake.' Now we call it a Green Sunrise."

Austin frowned at him, but said nothing.

"Anyway," the kid continued, "I didn't say it was for no reason. I said I didn't have to tell you. But the truth is, it's 'cause you're famous."

"What do you mean?" Austin asked.

Sy had caught up with him and stood close by, touching his arm with the tips of her fingers. It was clear to Austin that she was trying to calm him down, and it worked. Looking into the kid's eyes, Austin realized that he wasn't a threat, and Austin no longer felt like pounding him, though he still would have loved to toss his phone in the water.

"You started trending yesterday on all the platforms. There's a whole big thread on Reddit about you and that blonde FBI agent. Plus, that married couple. It doesn't happen often that Kitsap County goes viral nationally. So all the locals are watching it. Is it true that a DJ died out at The Rabbit Hole?"

"It's true," Sy confirmed.

The kid shook his head sadly. "Oh, dude, that's why you asked about 'Vanguard,' huh? Why would you think I work for him? I mean, it would be an honor. Do you know him? Could you hook me up with an internship or something?"

"No," Austin said, flatly.

"I've always wanted to go to The Rabbit Hole, well not always but since I was fifteen. My parents won't let me, even if I earn money for the ticket on my own. And all my friends, like, turned their profile pics to black squares to honor Pyronite even though most of them hadn't heard of her until she died. Life is like, fragile, bro."

"How old are you?" Austin asked.

"Seventeen."

"And why were you filming me?"

"I don't know," the kid said. "That's just what we do. I thought maybe I could post it and get some likes. Get some views. Ever heard of social currency?"

Austin unclenched his fists and stepped back. "So you're out here at six in the morning smoking weed because you probably still live with your parents and you don't want them to know. You see me on the beach after seeing me on the internet yesterday and you just took out your phone and started recording me for no reason—well, for social currency and likes?"

"Bro, it's not that big a deal," the kid said. "If you want, I won't post it tho."

Austin frowned.

The kid seemed to read his expression. "How about a selfie with your dog? I can't remember her name, but she's famous too, right? There's a whole thread going on on Reddit about how the Kitsap Sheriff's Department can't afford a full-size police dog, so they got a corgi."

"She's not part of the Kitsap Sheriff's Department, and they can afford all the dogs they want. She's my *personal* dog, and I brought her along. That's why she is in the pictures at the festival."

"Whatever, dude, but can I like at least get a selfie with her?"

Before Austin could respond, the kid sat cross-legged on the sand. Run, seeming to know that she was about to go viral, leapt onto the kid's lap and seemed to almost pose for the photograph.

The kid snapped a few pictures, pet Run on the head, and stood. "Bro, seriously, you need to chillax."

Then he shoved his phone in his pocket and put his vape pen to his lips as he slowly strolled away from them up the beach.

"Can you believe all this? Here in this tiny beach town?" Austin shook his head. "What do you think the value of a picture with Run is in social currency anyway?"

Sy responded without missing a beat. "Priceless. In any coinage."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

AN HOUR AND A HALF LATER, Austin strolled into the FBI tent back at the festival, finding the meeting already in full swing.

The morning was cold and bright, but inside the tent, it was dark. That wasn't enough to dampen Austin's mood, however. During the drive from Hansville, as he was making the sharp left turn in Port Gamble toward the bridge, his mood had lightened. He wasn't sure why, but somehow their failure to make a break in the case, the fact that misinformation about him had gone viral, and the kid filming him that morning—somehow—none of it bothered him anymore.

Maybe it was because of Sy. Maybe it was because of what he'd gone through in New York City. The fact that he'd come out on the other side due to sheer luck. He wasn't sure. As he'd crossed over the waters of Hood Canal, he remembered falling from the Brooklyn Bridge, remembered the anguished cry of the homeless man in Brooklyn and how it expressed all the sorrow that can befall us in this world.

Then the bright sun had hit the water like a million sapphires, and even though he knew the water would be very cold, he'd wanted to stop the car and dive in. There was something about experiencing a kind of anguish and then letting go that was freeing.

Even the walk from the parking lot had been fun, watching Run dart along the path like an escaped rabbit. Now she was tired, and she lay under his chair the moment he sat. He hadn't intended to bring Run, but as he'd headed for the door, she'd given him a look he couldn't ignore. A look that said, *I just want to be part of your day*. And as inappropriate as it might be to bring her, he knew there would be no shortage of people eager to hang out with her if he needed help.

At the meeting, Jimmy was in the middle of explaining how Samantha managed to authenticate the videos of Vanguard overnight, and Austin quickly got the idea that the FBI team had done the same.

"Interesting how one millennial young woman in the Kitsap Sheriff's Department can achieve the same as your entire FBI team in Seattle," Jimmy said with a smirk.

Claire raised an eyebrow in his direction. Then she glanced at Lucy. "I can see what you were saying about him being a meathead."

"The bottom line," Austin said, "is that it sounds like those videos are real. Vanguard is absolutely not the killer. If there was someone on that boat, it wasn't him."

Claire nodded.

"And apologies that I'm late," Austin added. Everyone shrugged, and it was clear that it wasn't a big deal.

"There's another big development that happened overnight," Claire said, "and Austin, I was waiting for you to arrive to announce it. This perked Austin up more than the large coffee Sy sent him with for his ride toward Mystery Bay."

Claire opened her laptop and spun it around so everyone could see the image on the screen. It was a picture of a jacket taken from about five feet off the ground. It looked like a standard type of jacket that a Pacific Northwest man might wear—a thin, down-stuffed thing just above windbreaker thickness, not enough to protect against the freezing temps, but perfect for days between forty and fifty, which were most winter days around here.

The jacket lay on the ground against a backdrop of dirt, leaves, and pine needles of the sort that were everywhere around the forest.

"This was found this morning. It belonged to Apollo Tsopanidis. We still don't know where he is, but, given the footsteps that accompanied it, we believe he fled through the forest."

"Fled?" Austin asked.

"With Vanguard in the clear, he is our lead person of interest," Claire said.

Austin considered this; it made sense that he would be a person of interest, but he didn't see how this guy could actually be involved in the murder. "You don't think he's the killer, do you?"

He studied her face to see if it betrayed anything she wasn't willing to say. "I don't know. But the shoe makes me think he was on that boat and the jacket makes me think he's still alive. It was still wet."

Austin turned when he heard the flaps of the tent rustling. Officer Guy Graves walked in, looking like he'd slept even worse than Austin. "But we do know something else." His voice sounded like a bucket of gravel had smoked two packs of cigarettes, then discovered the ability to speak. "Seafern Smith is still missing. And two of his friends are afraid he overdosed."

Austin's shoulders slumped.

"What makes them say that?" Jimmy asked.

"They say he was on a bunch of designer drugs, not making safe choices. One guy told a friend of his he'd seen him purchasing some harder stuff before going off by himself. I've got an officer leading a team of volunteers—mostly festival-goers. They're searching the woods. But no one has seen him since."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

CLAIRE WAS TWENTY MINUTES INTO A “WALK-AND-THINK” when she decided to watch Vangard introduce the next musical act. “My people,” he began in a tone that somehow seemed to have grown more arrogant overnight, “allow me to introduce the next artist who’s come to my little tea party in the forest to expand your—”

She tuned him out. She wanted to keep an eye on him, but she couldn’t stand listening to that man speak for another moment.

After the meeting, she’d needed a break from everyone. It wasn’t that she didn’t like or trust Austin, Lucy, and the other members of the Kitsap Sheriff’s Department. One of the reasons she was leaving the FBI was that she preferred to work alone or, at most, in small groups. She just had her own way of doing things and thought better when she was by herself.

So for the last ten or twenty minutes she’d strolled the festival grounds as the morning got into full swing. She matched a few faces with people she’d seen online the night before. She chatted with a couple small groups, just trying to find out what they were saying about the death of Pyronite and the disappearance of Seafern. She wasn’t surprised to find them largely unhelpful.

After checking into the hotel in Port Townsend late the previous night, she’d worked for another hour, slowly sipping a half bottle of Chardonnay as she went over pictures. She’d gone over every photograph taken at the crime scene before browsing ones posted online by attendees the night Pyronite died.

She looked into Seafern’s background even more and discovered that he was indeed an accountant. In fact, there were photos of him wearing boring brown business suits, his dreadlocks, tied up neatly, were draped to cover his tattooed fern sideburns.

Thankfully, Vangard no longer wore the white rabbit loincloth. Instead, he wore what looked to be a bright red ski outfit. And he was DJing. Or, at least he’d joined the musician he’d just finished introducing, who was playing what appeared to be an electric accordion.

But Vangard wasn’t playing the loud, thumpy, heart-pounding music of the night before. It was more King Crimson—a slow, ethereal version of *I Talk to the Wind* with some overdubbing of an acoustic rendition of *21st Century Schizoid Man*. To her shock, it actually blended well with the accordion. Vangard seemed to be in a trance, and Claire didn’t even want to think about what drugs he was on. Probably the X1 concoction he’d mentioned, which she’d looked up in the FBI database and learned was also known as DreamWave, Nexus-1, and X-Stream. It was a novel psychoactive substance invented by a Swedish psychoanalyst only a few years back and used to treat depression and trauma illegally. Word had spread and it became popular in the club scene. Apparently it combined the euphoric and empathogenic effects of MDMA with the antidepressant properties of Bupropion and the perceptual alterations found in classic psychedelics such as LSD or psilocybin. Usually not deadly unless taken in large quantities, but certainly dangerous.

Something caught her eye: a man rushing into the crowd from her left. He bumped into a few people, causing a commotion, and then leapt up on stage.

She didn’t know who he was, but she knew something was wrong. He had wild hair, and his clothes were muddy and wet.

He was only wearing one shoe, he was carrying a gun, and he was heading straight for Lucas Vangard.



"What's with the pep in your step?" Jimmy asked as Austin started in on his third coffee. He'd been drinking coffee and pacing since the meeting with Claire disbanded.

"I don't know," Austin said, rubbing his hands together. "I just think today is the day."

Lucy didn't look quite so optimistic. "Today *has* to be the day. This festival powers down in about twenty hours. Tonight is the big event, *The Circuit Breaker*, and tomorrow everyone will go their separate ways. This is the best chance we have to solve this case. Not that we'll stop trying if we don't get it by today, but it'll get harder."

"So what's the plan?" Jimmy asked.

Austin's optimism hadn't exactly been accompanied by a plan. "I have no idea," he said, "but I have a few thoughts in no particular order. Maybe both Samantha and the FBI were wrong. Maybe Vanguard *is* able to make videos that are fake but look real. The ultimate alibi: a technology that is more advanced than the FBI can detect. This entire festival has felt like it's about absurd and unpredictable rules and our perceptions of reality. It's Vanguard's specialty, and he revels in it."

"Eh," Lucy said, "I still don't think he's our guy."

Austin didn't disagree. There was something off about him, but he didn't strike Austin as a murderer.

"Or maybe there are more clues when it comes to Seafern. Maybe we can find new evidence, talk to some witnesses or something that will help us locate him." He stopped and looked around the tent, shoving his hands in his pockets. "Where are Claire and Kiko?"

Jimmy shrugged.

Lucy shrugged.

Guy, who'd been sitting silently in the corner, arms folded and looking half asleep, slowly raised his chin. "They're around somewhere. They went for a walk after the meeting."

Austin heard a shout outside the tent. Then another. Then something like a scream.

What was going on?

Jimmy was already dashing through the exit flap, and Austin followed him into the bright sun.

He stopped just outside the tent and glanced back in. Run lifted one of her eyebrows, then gave a yawn that told Austin she was a little anxious, but willing to wait things out. She was tethered to the leg of a heavy table, so she couldn't go anywhere. Not an ideal situation to leave her in, but Austin knew she would be safer here than in the middle of whatever the commotion was outside. "I'll be back," he said before leaving her.

He saw a wild-eyed man waving a gun on the stage.

And that's when he saw Claire.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

AUSTIN SAW Claire standing just behind a patch of metal fencing designed to keep people away from the stage. Next his eyes found the long blonde hair of Lucas Vangard, who was on his knees on stage wearing a ridiculous outfit that made him look like a red version of the Staypuff Marshmallow Man.

Nearly every head in the crowd was turned toward him, and there was a man, wild-eyed and crazed, holding a gun to Vangard's head, looking out over the crowd as though seeking some kind of answer there.

The sun reached a spot over the trees where it shone brightly down on the stage, and a strange orange and rainbow steam drifted up out of hidden pipes all around it. It must have been part of the festival's lighting and pyrotechnics display, but designed for an easy Sunday morning. Later that night, they would be shooting off fireworks and colored smoke as part of the Circuit Breaker event.

Austin raced toward the stage, darting around small crowds and onlookers, almost all of whom were aware something more serious than a bad trip was going on. Despite the fact that Vangard was on his knees with a gun to his head, the strange sound arrangement continued to talk to the wind over the speakers.

Austin stopped about twenty yards before the little staircase that led up to the stage. Claire, having leapt the low fence, now stood at the base of the stage, probably only five feet from Vangard and the man who Austin now recognized as Apollo Tsopanidis, the missing DEA agent.

As Austin observed, Claire inched forward, her steady presence and precise movements a stark contrast to the chaos swirling around them.

He eased up the steps on the side of the stage, but paused when Apollo shot him a look and waved the gun in his direction.

"Consider the impact of your actions," Claire implored. She spoke with a clarity that cut through the tension, her tone full of compassion but also crystal clear focus.

Austin caught a subtle shift in Apollo's stance, a loosening of his rigid shoulders, a crack in his armor revealing the internal conflict he felt.

"This moment doesn't have to define the rest of your life," she reasoned. "I've failed a lot in mine, done a lot of things I regret, and taken a lot of falls from which I thought I'd never rise. But I did rise and you can, too. This can be the lowest moment you ever have, the start of a great comeback. It doesn't have to be the end, but if you pull that trigger it will be."

Claire's strategy was not just about negotiation; it was an intricate dance of psychology and empathy. Watching Apollo's face, Austin saw the chaos of his emotional world soften briefly, betraying his inner turmoil. It was as though Claire had reached the storm within him and touched something long buried.

"Release doesn't signify defeat," she continued, "it opens the door to recovery, for everyone involved."

For an instant, the hardness in his eyes melted, revealing a hint of the human being entangled in a web of grief and vengeance.

Then the strangest thing happened.

Lucas Vangard tilted his head until it was almost horizontal, then looked up into the frightened eyes of Apollo, whose hand had gone slightly slack on the gun.

With his bright blue eyes, he seemed to draw Apollo toward him before whispering something in his ear.

Apollo seemed to think for a moment, then raced across the stage, but he tripped on some wires and fell headfirst into one of the pipes releasing a thin wispy stream of orange smoke. The pipe fell and began shooting out smoke in a loud hiss straight into the faces of people in the crowd. And onto Claire, who'd leapt up on stage the moment he'd lowered the gun.

Standing, Apollo wobbled, then fell again, this time onto a large soundboard, and as he toppled toward the back of the stage, a loud hissing sound shot through the crowd and blue smoke began to rise from some unseen location.

Claire bust through the orange smoke and reached for her gun, but it was too late. Apollo had regained his balance and suddenly he raced at her like a linebacker coming in for a tackle. Connecting shoulder to shoulder, he knocked her back, then stopped for half a second, glanced at Vanguard, and turned to the back of the stage, which opened through a curtain into the forest.

With one final glance at Claire, who was reaching for her weapon, he leapt a full two yards into a patch of grass, then disappeared into a thicket of trees.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

CLAIRE SAW Apollo Tsopanidis careening through a patch of ferns, then looked back to catch Austin's eyes. "Stay with Vanguard," she shouted. "We don't know what this is."

Then she raced to the edge of the stage and jumped, following Apollo's path at something close to a sprint. She knew she had to get eyes on him before he disappeared entirely. Bounding up a slight hill that seemed to be heading toward the water, she didn't see him.

Then a voice she couldn't see shouted, "That's right man, you have to run fast if you want to stay in one place."

She followed the voice and came across a man sitting cross-legged, drinking from a bizarrely large jug labeled *Treacle*, surrounded by quotation marks.

"Did a man just run past here?" she asked.

The guy bobbed his head sleepily, then took a swig and pointed toward the water, away from the trail.

"Thanks," she said, taking off in the direction he'd pointed.

She heard the man's lips smack away from the jug. "Don't forget to feed your head," he called after her, as she dashed toward the water.

At the beginning of a steep slope, Claire saw him. He had turned to the right, running down the rocky bank that led toward the water. Suddenly, he cut back, angling away from the water and back up toward the forest.

Was he heading to Vanguard's cabin?

Maybe the DEA agent had been working for Vanguard all along. Perhaps he was corrupt and somehow assisting the bastard with the import of his concoctions. Maybe the death of Pyronite had somehow broken their bond and...

She didn't have time to think it all through right now. She wasn't even certain this was the right way to Vanguard's cabin as she didn't have the geography of this place memorized. Angling away from the water, Claire continued up the slight hill. She was winded, and her legs burned. She hadn't made this kind of foot pursuit in quite some time.

She stopped, panting, and placed her hands on her hips to steady herself. To the right, she saw Vanguard's cabin, and she expected Apollo to appear and try to head inside.

That's where she'd get him.

But he didn't appear.

She waited a beat, and then another. Five seconds, then ten seconds. Then she realized she'd made a mistake. He had cut back and was still heading along the bank near the water.

Slightly rested, she took off again at a full sprint.

CHAPTER THIRTY

AUSTIN WASN'T certain what was going on, but he knew he had to get Vanguard off the stage. A small crowd was gathering around him, including someone who claimed to be a doctor who began inspecting him.

Vanguard took off his puffy jacket, revealing a tight black shirt made of some kind of synthetic fiber. It almost looked like a wetsuit. Some folks were congratulating him, some reassuring him, but most were simply freaked out by the extra layers of chaos. When Apollo had fallen into the sound panels, he'd somehow triggered a smoke machine and a few fireworks that shot off into the canopy above the stage. A small fire that broke out was quickly extinguished by festival staff.

Smoke and gas still wafted up around the stage, though, causing Austin's eyes to water. But not so badly that he wasn't able to check that the tent Run was in wasn't getting hit by the smoke.

Shoving a few people aside, he yanked Vanguard up by the crook of his elbow. "We need to talk."



A few minutes later, Austin, Lucy, and Jimmy stood, arms folded, staring down at Vanguard, who was sipping from a metal bottle of water labeled H2OX. "What's going on here?" Austin demanded.

"I legitimately have no idea who that guy was," Vanguard said.

"What did you say to him?" Lucy asked.

"Nothing important," Vanguard said, sipping his water as though nothing about the events of the last half hour were even slightly unusual.

Austin's eyes and throat burned from the strange smoke. It was like he'd inhaled pepper and rubbed some into his eyes. Coughing and wiping away tears, he said, "I'm sick of your arrogant, drugged-out, narcissistic act." Austin sneezed twice. "I don't know exactly how you are involved in whatever this is, but I know you *are* involved." He leaned in close to Vanguard's face. "Tell us everything right now."

Covering his mouth, Austin turned away, sneezed again, then began to cough violently. He doubled over for half a second and Run looked up at him with concern on her face. "I'm okay," he wheezed.

Lucy handed him a bottle of water and he chugged half of it in a few large gulps. The water was cold, fresh, and delicious, flavored with a hint of mint, cucumber, and fresh citrus. It was, in fact, the most delicious water Austin had ever tasted, although that may have been because of the burning in his throat and the way the water soothed it.

He drank the rest of the water and set the bottle on the table.

Vanguard said, "You owe Lucy \$50 for that water."

Austin didn't believe any bottle of water could be \$50, even a bottle this fancy at an expensive festival, but he wasn't about to argue. Feeling a little better, he handed Run a treat from his pocket, then looked back up at Vanguard. "Are you ready to tell us what's going on? I have a feeling those videos are fake, even though the best tech experts I know can't prove it."

Vanguard folded his arms.

Austin leaned in again, practically spitting in his face. "I don't know how you did this, but I *know* you did."



Claire had cut him off, forcing him toward a section of high bank that appeared to go on indefinitely, but then ended abruptly with a long drop to the rocky beach below.

Apollo came to a skidding halt at the edge of the cliff.

He turned, gun in hand, but she had hers in hand as well. All her training told her to shoot, but she didn't.

What stopped her were Apollo's shaking hands and the tears streaming down his face.

She believed this guy to be closely involved in the murder of Pyronite. But she also suspected something much larger was going on, and this man would know what it was. If she shot him, the truth might die with him. All of this thinking happened in an instant, as though the correct thing to do had simply landed in her mind. But still, her finger had been on the trigger when she'd seen his shaking hands.

"I don't want to shoot you," she said. "I truly don't, but if you don't lower the gun in the next five seconds, I will."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

IT STRUCK Austin all of a sudden that he may have made the wrong decision. Claire told him to stay with Vangard, but what about *her*? Apollo was clearly deranged, plus he had a weapon. He should have gone after them despite what she said, but instead he was standing in a tent with a man he loathed.

Feeling a sense of urgency, he decided to tell Vangard the truth. "The man who held you at gunpoint is an agent of the Drug Enforcement Agency. He's been missing for a few days, and we believe he may have been on the boat with Pyronite the night she was killed."

Austin watched Vangard's eyes closely, and he believed what he saw there was genuine surprise. Then confusion.

"A DEA agent?" Vangard asked, running a hand through his long blonde hair, shaking his head slowly. And then he grew quiet, quiet enough that Austin became certain that he hadn't known.

"That's right," Austin said, "and Pyronite was actually Chloe Graber, an undercover agent of the FBI."

This time, Vangard did not look as surprised.

"You knew that already, didn't you?" Austin asked.

"There's something about corgis," Vangard said, reaching out his hand with an open palm toward Run, who was laying on the ground under the table.

Run, sensing that Vangard was trying to interact with her, stood.

"They look like little foxes, at least this one does. Maybe that's why the Queen of England had them—all those fox races the royals have but never a fox you can tame to sit on your lap. But why do *you* have one Austin?"

Austin said nothing.

Run, looking back and forth between them then, taking her cue from Austin, sat heavily and yawned with a high pitch yowl that ended in a quiet—*rhupf*.

"I wonder what a tough ex-cop like yourself would see in a cute little corgi like this. The stereotype would be that you would have a pitbull or some larger dog. Something more badass."

Still, Austin said nothing.

"And yet you chose a cute little furball."

Finally, Austin spoke. "They are very smart dogs." His tone was as dry as the burnt toast he tasted in his mouth.

Vangard looked up. "You finally speak and it's to defend her, now I know you have that dog for a reason and I think I get it. A corgi uses its intelligence to be tamed. It's given up the freedoms it once had as the fox for the comforts of a predictable mindscape. Act. Reward. Act. Reward. Now you're scurrying about on your little legs to catch a rabbit—are you planning to turn him over to your captor for your treat?"

Austin was fed up. "You knew that Pyronite was an undercover FBI agent," Austin said. "How?"

Vangard stood slowly, turning away from them and staring at the tent fabric as though he'd fallen asleep on his feet.

Austin realized that he'd likely slept only a handful of hours since the festival began, or maybe not at all. He wasn't sure if that would make him more capable of telling the truth, but he decided to go right for it.

"This entire festival is a drug smuggling operation, isn't it?" Austin asked.

Vangard spun around, but didn't approach him.

Jimmy put his body between the two of them just in case. "You really don't want to do anything stupid," he cautioned. "I have never hit a suspect or a witness, but beating the crap out of you would make this the best unbirthday I've had in awhile."

Vangard smirked. "It sure would make my legal team happy. We would sue you from every possible angle at once. I would *own* Kitsap County within a year. All your cute little wildlife preserves and beaches and quaint little small towns, I would turn them into the industrial base of my operation. Factories, brothels, and sweatshops. And I don't even believe in sweatshops, but I would do it just to screw with you."

Jimmy smiled a bright, white-tooth smile, leaning in as though begging Vangard to hit him in the face.

"I'll let my lawyers do the punching," Vangard said.

"You know, you might fancy yourself a White Rabbit," Jimmy said. "Leading everyone down a hole where they think they can discover themselves. I know who you are. You're the crocodile, welcoming fishes in with gently smiling jaws. You're the Cheshire cat. Popping in and out of the picture. Watching from above. Giving people what they think is direction that instead sends them further into madness."

"That's right," Vangard said. "And when I'm done here, the last thing you'll see is my giant grin."



Claire was counting down in her head from five, and she had only reached two by the time the agent fired.

She had misread him terribly, but it was too late.

The bullet struck her shoulder, knocking her sideways. She fell onto one knee, dropping her gun as she collapsed. Then, to her shock, Apollo threw down his gun and ran up to her. "Oh God," he said, "I'm so sorry. I never meant to... I never meant to..."

The pain was excruciating, and she was losing blood.

"What have I done?" he said. "What have I done?"

"Put pressure on it," Claire said, "my wound, put pressure on my wound."

Her own voice sounded strange to her, as though she was hearing herself from outside her body. And the whole thing was made stranger by the fact that the man who just shot her was now ripping down a little Rabbit Hole festival boundary marker flag to press into her wound.

"Why did you shoot me?" Claire asked. "And if you were going to shoot me, why didn't you try to kill me?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

"KILL YOU?" the man said to Claire. "I don't want to kill you. I don't want to kill anyone. It was all a big mistake. A big mistake. He threatened me, told me I had to do it, and I still refused. Still refused. I told him I wouldn't do it, couldn't do it, but when he put me in that basement, showed me the videos..." He broke off into a sobbing cough. "The videos... And he knew I was using again. He knew it, and he used it. I didn't do it. But I did. I did it and then I went back to the basement, to punish myself."

Claire's face was sideways on a patch of grass, and she was looking out over Mystery Bay as the man mumbled and stuttered and ranted while pressing the flag with a Queen of Hearts printed on it into her bleeding wound. She'd received a few confessions in her time, but nothing quite like this.

"He made me do it. He gave me the drugs. I wasn't in my right mind, and then I was in a basement, and where was my jacket, and what have I done? And the videos, oh, God. What did I do?"

She watched his eyes look up in recognition, and then he leaned away from her, releasing the pressure on her wound.

"Please," she said. "I'll bleed out."

She felt herself growing weaker. Watched his eyes get far away. A look she'd seen only a couple times before.

"I'll bleed out," she repeated.



Vanguard's voice was a bizarre blend of arrogance and revelation. "You see, at the zenith of this world, there's a rarefied circle, a cabal of minds so advanced, so far-reaching in their influence, that the rest of humanity might as well be pawns scurrying about hoping to advance to the opposite side of the chessboard and be promoted. We're the puppeteers, the architects of the very reality that these unsuspecting souls inhabit. It's not about pulling strings; that's a simplistic view for simplistic minds. It's about crafting the stage and directing the actors so well that they believe they're the ones making choices."

His eyes danced with contempt and excitement. "Think about it. People rage over sports, politics, the news. All mere distractions, shadows on the wall of Plato's cave. They're engrossed in what they believe to be reality, but in truth, they're just threads in a tapestry we weave with every decision, every innovation, every secret maneuver. While they argue, love, hate, and dream within the confines of this tapestry, we're the ones designing the world's patterns and textures."

Austin stood stone faced. Vanguard was angry, his arrogance a defense, and Austin hoped he'd slip up in his anger. "Pawns? Puppets? Tapestries? Your speech would be a lot better if you weren't mixing your metaphors."

Vanguard's lips curled. "You might call us evil, but that's a matter of perspective, isn't it? We're the unseen hand guiding the evolution of human thought, society, technology. We're not gods, but the closest any human has come. We're the red queen. And in this game we move as fast as we want in whatever direction we want. So, tell me, are we evil, or are we just the only ones brave enough, smart enough, to see the world as it truly is?" His voice dropped to a whisper, "The real question is, what role shall we have you play in our design?"

There was something about the way Vanguard was speaking that reminded him of someone. A couple of months back, he'd brought down an up-and-coming politician named The Nightmare. He'd died in the investigation, but if he'd lived, he would have been able to draw out many court cases for years. Austin had also met various tech billionaires in his time. Some of them were quite nice, others felt themselves to be above the law, usually because, in some ways, they were.

Vanguard had the hubris of a man who was both naturally arrogant and lived under the protection of corrupt government or law enforcement.

And it made Austin think.

He was getting ready to launch into another line of questioning when Jimmy tapped him on the shoulder. "Austin," he whispered, "Guy has something big."

Jimmy waved him out of the tent and they huddled with Lucy and Guy as a cold wind blew through the trees. It felt like it was going to snow.

Guy looked five years younger than the last time he'd seen him. "Three different witnesses say they saw Apollo Tsopanidis in this jacket," he began as Lucy, wearing gloved hands, held up the jacket he'd seen in the picture earlier. "And two of them admitted to seeing him get in the little boat on Mystery Bay that night."

"How did you get them to talk finally?" Austin asked.

"Wasn't hard once they saw him threaten their Dear Leader, King Vanguard. Same little pigeons who kept their silence for days are now crying serpent. But there's more. One of the witnesses who saw him get on the boat said he was pushing a woman. Said they thought it was part of the show, whatever the hell that means."

"So we know Apollo killed Pyronite," Austin said. "But I believe Vanguard is behind this, and I think I'm starting to understand why."



"Where are you going?" Claire asked, blinking to try to keep Apollo in sight. She could hear the weakness in her voice. She slowly lifted her head and watched him inching backwards, his steps small as though he were trying to keep his balance.

She'd seen the look in his eyes in three people.

The first was her adopted grandmother, who had died at age 94 after a full life. Claire was with her towards the end and watched her grandmother's eyes grow far away a few days before she died. Claire realized later that the look had come into her eyes at the moment she understood she would be dying soon, the moment she'd come to peace with it.

The second time was in the line of duty, a witness in a murder investigation eight years ago. Claire showed up at the house for what she thought would be an interview, and the suspect lay dying on the floor. The same vacant look of acceptance was in *his* eyes.

The final time she'd seen it was more recent. The day she'd known for certain that her marriage was ending, she stared at herself long and hard in the mirror after crying herself out of tears. She saw that empty look, that resigned look that everything was over and she was dying, in her reflection. The only difference was, she went through it then came out the other side fighting.

Now Apollo was nearing the cliff, that same look in his eyes. For a brief moment, he looked at her. Then again his eyes went vacant, his feet slowly, slowly shuffling against the ground. Using all her strength and pressing her right hand into the wadded fabric over the bloody spot to slow the bleeding, Claire stood and took a sluggish, unsteady step toward him.



Austin told Jimmy and Lucy to keep an eye on Vanguard. "Don't let him off the festival grounds, no matter what BS chess moves his lawyers pull. I'm going after Claire."

He knew there was no way he could track them. Even if he'd had expert tracking skills, the fact that hundreds of people were coming and going and parading and dancing over the grounds would be working against him.

Determined, he moved slowly and methodically, asking each person he met on the trail whether they had seen a wild-eyed man or a forty-something blonde woman who seemed out of place.

"Yeah," one man told him, pointing toward the water. "I saw her. Those reptilian humanoids have infiltrated our government at the highest levels, and now they're here." The crazy thing was, Austin believed he'd actually seen Claire, so he followed his direction.

Coming to a narrow path where two men were wrapped in a heated debate, he stopped.

"No way man," one was saying. "If that were true, then how can the Federal Government have a covert extraterrestrial research lab on Indian Island? *Huh?*..."

"Excuse me," Austin said.

But the man he'd interrupted continued. "...*Don't believe me?* Check out Google Earth—that whole area's pixelated, man. The FEDs aren't gonna just let those aliens virus us like we're their bioengineering babies." He threw air jabs like he was punching ultraterrestrial aliens in parallel dimensions.

"Look," the other man continued. "alls I'm saying is, I was told they shut down Rat Island on account of the alien viruses. That's alls I'm saying."

Austin edged between them. "It's an avian virus," he said. "*Avian*. Not alien."

That got their attention, and, after he'd repeated the description of Apollo and Claire, the men were happy to tell him that they had run past them toward the water.

Austin knew that Indian Island was a non-civilian Naval Reserve. It was rumored that it's where military detritus was left to safely decay. He hadn't heard of anyone installing a space life sciences laboratory there, but he knew that Rat Island, situated just north of Indian Island, was a small swath of land with a diverse ecosystem connected to Marrowstone by a land bridge when the tide was low. He'd read that it was currently under protection due to an avian flu outbreak.

Austin began calling out Claire's name as he jogged. Though he didn't receive any response, he figured they might be heading for Vanguard's cabin, so he turned back away from the water to look there.

When he reached it, the cabin was dark and silent. His gut told him they weren't there after all. Taking a guess, he headed back up the hill toward the water.

That's when he saw them.

Claire stood about ten feet from the edge of the bank on a patch of high-bank waterfront. Crimson blood soaked through the back of the jacket of her cream-colored pantsuit.

She had one hand outstretched to Apollo, who faced her, his heels only inches from the cliff.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

"DON'T," Claire said. "You've made horrible mistakes, but it's not too late. Think of Pyronite's family. Only you can bring them peace at this point. Don't take the easy way out." She extended her hand, taking the pressure off her bloody shoulder, causing it to throb with pain. Thankfully, the bleeding had slowed to a trickle, but she still felt her knees wobbling.

Apollo shook his head forcefully, then more slowly. "It was the drugs," he said. "I never meant to let it get like this. And then the videos, and... how did it get like this? I was supposed to go back to Greece. Take my family. We had even thought of moving there. This is too much. How can I live with this? I won't live with this. I swear I didn't know she was an FBI agent. He told me she was just a snitch. Please tell everyone I'm sorry."

Claire braced herself for the leap she was about to make.

Apollo's head turned slightly, assessing what was below him off the cliff's edge. Claire didn't want to think about it. As he turned back toward her and opened his mouth to say his final words, she sprang forward and dove for his feet.

But it was no use. Her legs were too weak and she reached only his foot, grazing the laces as he sidestepped her easily. She tried to stand again but couldn't. She heard footsteps behind her and a man's voice shouting, "No, stop!" It was Austin.

But everything was too late.

Looking up from the ground, she saw Apollo gather his strength and spring off the cliff like a diver. The next thing she heard was a meaty *thud-slap* against what she assumed were the jagged rocks below.



When she came to, Austin was kneeling over her. He had taken off his coat and was pressing it into her shoulder.

"He's the killer," Claire said.

"He *is* the killer," Austin said. "Guy got a couple people to talk. We had him."

Claire rolled onto her back and looked up at the sky. She felt herself drifting in and out of consciousness. "I don't think I am going to die, but I need to get to the hospital."

She heard Austin fumbling with his phone and she closed her eyes.

She'd never been shot before, and it hurt both more and less than she'd anticipated. The sheer pain of it was much worse, but the emotional pain was less. Somehow her mind was calm, even peaceful.

She truly didn't think she was going to die, although it seemed to be taking Austin longer than she expected to get someone on the phone.

Her mind faded out for a moment, then came back.

How long had it been?

Seconds maybe? It felt more like minutes.



Austin was having trouble with his phone. The colorful screen was wavy and seemed to be moving. He'd been running hard, and maybe he just needed to catch his breath. But he wasn't even especially out of breath. He'd been training hard for his physical exam and,

despite having to be put back together after falling off a bridge, was in the best shape he'd been in since his thirties.

And it wasn't only his vision that was failing him.

As he tried to tap the screen to call Lucy, he missed so badly his finger poked the ground.

Something was wrong.

"Oh no," he mumbled, "oh God, no."

Squinting as hard as he could, he locked onto his phone and saw the number for Lucy waving colorfully across the screen. He slowly moved his finger toward it, pressing it as firmly as he could. Then he heard the sweetest sound.

The phone was ringing—once, then twice, then three times.

"Pick up, pick up, pick up," he mumbled, his voice echoing into the sky like thunder.

Then the line went dead. He squinted at the screen again.

The call had dropped due to poor reception.

"Phone dead," he said. "Claire?" He leaned over and gently shook her shoulder. "Claire, wake up."

"Take mine," Claire said. "In my pocket. It gets reception places some phones don't. I can do speech to text."

Even in his current state, his mind was sharp enough to know that she was weak and didn't have much time.

Austin saw his hand moving through the air toward her pocket, and it was terrifying. A trail of translucent afterimage hands shuffled behind it, each more golden than the last. He was afraid he would pass out and they would both die.

He re-focused as hard as he could and was able to locate Claire's phone and hold it up near her face, brushing her nose.

"Call Lucy O'Rourke," Claire said.

Austin's mind was fuzzy, but he had enough clarity to realize how useful it was that she had already entered Lucy's number in her phone.

He heard the line ring once, then Lucy's voice. "Claire, where are you?"

It was the sweetest voice he had ever heard. Even though she had Irish heritage, she had no accent, having been born and raised in the area. But this time, he pictured her red hair and pale skin and imagined her speaking like a little leprechaun.

He heard laughing, which frightened him. And he looked around to see who it was that was laughing. Then, terrified, he realized it was himself.

"Austin, is that you? Why the hell are you laughing? What's wrong with you? Where are you?"

It was Lucy's voice again.

"I ran," Austin heard himself saying, and the words were like little shooting stars. "I ran from some alien guys. Claire was shot. And I think I'm on drugs. We need ambulances."

He let the phone fall out of his hands and stared up at the sky. He was startled by a beep he heard inside his head. "What was that?" Austin's heart raced, and he started screaming internally, something told him it was a bomb implanted in his brain that was about to detonate.

"The call ended." Claire's angelic voice reached his sober realms and he calmed immediately.

"I hope they find us."

For a moment Austin thought she meant she hoped the aliens found them. Then he realized she meant the ambulance. What the hell was happening to his mind?

"They will," he finally responded. "There's a road not far past here."

The sky was a canopy of the softest gray he'd ever seen and he wanted to touch it. He believed he could look through it to the infinite space above.

"Play new voicemails," Claire said.

Austin laughed a giant bellowing laughter, but it wasn't audible. It was all inside, as though his body were an infinite cavern of laughter. Claire was bleeding out, but still so on

the ball that she still wanted to check her voicemails with her last gasps of consciousness. Or maybe she just needed a distraction to stay awake.

He heard an unfamiliar voice. "Claire, this is Violet. Good news, bad news, but I knew you needed to hear it right away. The videos of Lucas Vangard *were* fake. All of them. It was the most sophisticated fake I've ever seen. He somehow managed to utilize an advanced AI deep learning algorithm, integrating real-time environmental data to generate hyper-realistic deepfakes. By compiling vast amounts of publicly available footage and employing cutting-edge facial and voice synthesis technology, he—or someone—crafted a series of time-stamped videos that mimicked his appearance and voice with uncanny accuracy. These videos, embedded with fabricated metadata, fooled us. I kept digging, though, and... well... you know me. Anyway, his lawyers must have known we'd figure it out eventually. They gave Apple permission to give us access to data from his smart watch, which has GPS tracking data. They normally don't give out that information, but his lawyers approved it. He absolutely was *not* where he said he was. He was not on stage at the festival. He wasn't the man in the videos. But he wasn't on the boat, either. If the data from Apple can be trusted—which it can—he was at a little roadside bar six miles away. Vangard wasn't even at his own festival that night."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

HIS EYES WERE CLOSED, and yet he still saw bright and beautiful colors swirling about behind his eyelids. Gold dancing with blue dancing with orange dancing with pink. A serenade of yellow falling from a bubblegum sky. He ran his fingernails over some cloth. A sheet maybe, or perhaps his own shirt. He wasn't sure. They made a sweet soothing feeling and a warm scratching sound.

Then Austin was four years old again.

There was a book. "Pat the Bunny," it was called, and it wasn't a normal book. More of an interactive "touch and feel" book. It didn't follow a linear narrative, but rather invited him to test out tactile activities, such as patting the fake fur of a rabbit, feeling sandpaper that stands for "Daddy's scratchy face," trying on "Mummy's ring," reading a book within a book, playing peekaboo with a cloth, and gazing into a mirror.

He hadn't thought about that book for years, but when he was little he'd read it until it fell apart, then demanded another one. He hadn't even cared about the little stuffed white bunny that came with the book. It was all the interactive things in it he loved.

He blinked, and it was like walking out of a darkened movie theater where you've been transfixed for two hours and entering a bright and garish lobby.

Where was he?

He heard a few beeps and voices which thankfully were in the distance. His mind had reoriented to the difference between inner and outer auditory stimuli. Then he closed his eyes again. Listening. He was in a hospital. The fluorescent lights that nearly blinded him when he opened his eyes told him that.

Then he remembered being on the bank with Claire.

Where's Claire?

He was hit with a wave of guilt and shame. The part of him that wasn't on some strange psychedelic drug cocktail kicked back in and the horror of the experience swept through him. He'd never wanted so badly to crawl out of his own skin.

But *how* had it happened?

Then it struck him.

Be careful of the water around here, someone had said.

He'd gotten smoke in his eyes, his throat was burning, and he'd chugged the water. The \$50 bottle of water. It was laced with some strange designer drug.

He felt a hand touch his. "You woke up. Austin, you're at Jefferson Hospital, in Port Townsend."

It was Sy's voice, but he didn't open his eyes. Her skin melted into his, and he couldn't discern the place where she ended and he began.

Trying his best to sound normal, he asked, "How long have you been here?"

She was quiet for a moment, then said, "About an hour. You were in and out of consciousness. You were talking like we were in the parking lot of a Grateful Dead concert in 1973."

Austin could tell it was funny, but he wasn't laughing.

"The doctors," Sy continued, "are running some tests, but they believe you took some kind of synthetic hallucinogenic. Maybe the X1 stuff that was floating around the festival."

"Vanguard. I drank some water."

"I know," Sy said. "Lucy told me. And don't worry about Run."

"Run! Oh, no. I left her."

"She's fine. Jimmy took her and she's having a blast."

Austin again tried to open his eyes, to look at her, to reassure her that he was okay. But he couldn't. The light was so bright, so sharp.

She squeezed his hand, and, for half a moment, he again couldn't tell where he ended and she began. He liked that feeling, but hated its origin, yet he was sad to sense it fading away.

"You're going to be okay," she said. "You just need to rest and let it wear off. Just go back to sleep."



It was an hour until Austin woke up again, and another before he began to be himself. All it took was three bottles of untainted water, two cups of black coffee, half of a turkey sandwich, and time.

Now, as the sun began to set, he was almost starting to feel like a human being and no longer an undifferentiated accumulation of lights and particles.

As Sy pushed Austin down the hall in a wheelchair he didn't feel he needed, he tipped his head back to look up at her.

Sy looked down to meet his gaze and smiled. "I'm guessing you never experimented with drugs?"

Austin shook his head.

"Talked with a doctor and, apparently," Sy said, "the stuff they gave you is a synthetic form of something like magic mushrooms, mixed bupropion and something like ecstasy. I'm not gonna lie, I took ecstasy once and smoked a little weed in high school. I can't even imagine taking it by accident, and not knowing I was high."

Austin shook his head slowly. "Not to mention while being in the middle of a murder investigation." He laughed, which made him realize that his ribs and chest ached. "People take that stuff on purpose?"

"It's actually really scary. Doc said he's had two ODs from the stuff so far during the festival, not counting you. No one died from it yet, but it's not the fun little party drug those people want to make it out to be."

"It's scary that they're mixing it with the most delicious tasting water," Austin said. "What if kids could get a hold of that stuff?"

Sy stopped his wheelchair outside another hospital room just as Claire walked out, her shoulder heavily bandaged. But she looked much better than Austin thought she would. She wore blue jeans and a crisp flannel button-down shirt, and the young agent Kiko was trailing her.

Claire crouched next to Austin's chair. "They tell me you're not supposed to stand up for a while."

Austin wheeled himself up against the wall and slowly stood. He still felt a little wobbly, but he knew himself well enough to know that he was okay.

"I'll be fine," he said. "I'm sorry. I never should have let you go after him without me."

Kiko came from behind Claire and stood next to her. "There's some other news," she said. "There is someone here who wants to speak with both of you. And I don't think either of you are going to enjoy the conversation."



Ten minutes later, they sat around a small table in what Austin thought was the break room of the hospital. The curtains had been drawn, and a man in a black suit stood near the door, guarding it.

David Baker, the head of the regional office of the Drug Enforcement Agency, sat in front of them, hands clasped in his lap. "You two have really done it," he said.

Austin felt his annoyance shake off whatever remaining X1-cobwebs still lingered in his mind. "Wait, wait, wait," he said. "We've done it? This woman was just shot by one of *your* agents."

Claire seemed just as annoyed. "We don't have to take this."

Austin jabbed a finger at him. "Tell us what this is about before you start accusing us of anything."

Baker sighed and scratched at a mole above his ear.

Despite feeling mostly better, the way the fluorescent lights gleamed off Baker's pale, shiny, bald head made Austin's eyes ache.

A young woman in a blue suit had been fiddling with some sort of speakerphone device in the center of the table. "We have him."

"Have who?" Austin asked.

"Hello?" A deep voice came through the phone.

"Mr. Attorney General," Baker said, "I'm here with Special Agent Claire Anderson and Thomas Austin, who is working with the Kitsap Sheriff's Department. We recently found Asset Number Seven dead on the beach. These are the folks that drove him there. And these are the folks who have been harassing Asset Number Nine."

He figured Asset Number Seven was Apollo, but Asset Number Nine?

Then it hit him. Vanguard.

Baker looked at them. "Austin, Anderson, we have the U.S. Attorney General on the line, conferencing in from Washington D.C." His voice became pointed, and he looked straight at Claire. "I think you know that he outranks you and could get your boss on the line in seconds. I'd listen to what he has to say."

The Attorney General spoke with the authority of the head law enforcement official in the entire country, but Austin did not like the words coming out of his mouth. "Apollo Tsopanidis was working undercover for us and lost his mind. We know that multiple witnesses saw him get on that boat. As far as we are concerned, taking his own life was the final piece of evidence. This case is now closed, and we expect you both to move on."

Claire frowned. "Hold on a second. First of all, he *did* kill Chloe Graber, you have that right. Before he took his own life, he confessed it to me. Said he didn't know she was FBI, and I believe him. But moving on is the last thing we are going to do. I believe he was coerced, possibly even blackmailed. He kept mentioning videos. I believe someone put him up to it, someone ordered him to do it. And Asset Number Nine, you're talking about Lucas Vanguard. He works for you?"

"I'm not at liberty to say," Baker said. "But I will say this. Apollo *did* work for us, for me. I was his direct supervisor, and I screwed up. He convinced me he was alright, could work this festival on his own." He sighed, clearly pained. "I didn't know he was using, had no idea he was capable of what he did, and the fact that he took an agent's life kills me. But you have to understand, there are larger issues here."

And then the Attorney General, his tone one of finality, said, "There's a lot going on here, a lot at stake. We expect you both to stand down. That's all I have to say on the matter."

The line went dead, and Baker chimed in, "I hope you two will listen to him. Let us take it from here."

PART 3

WHY A RAVEN IS LIKE A WRITING DESK

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

AN HOUR later the whole crew was gathered at a diner down the street from the hospital.

"The final night of this hellish party is about to kick off," Jimmy said. "They call it 'The Circuit Breaker.' It's the main event, the big party at the end of the whole festival. Apparently, there's some big thing where they destroy some giant circuit board in order to 'free their minds.' Kind of like how they burn the big wooden dude at the end of Burning Man, and it symbolizes something or other. They parade out a rabbit and its ears are pointed either up or down, I don't know what it means, but it's like some groundhog day moment kinda thing."

Austin sipped his mocha, which was rich and delicious. He rarely ordered sugary and milky drinks, but this thing tasted fantastic. Sy had her hand casually on his leg under the table. Offering a comforting gesture.

Across from him in the booth sat Jimmy and Lucy, both sipping hot drinks as well. Claire sat at the end of the table on a chair that had been pulled up to the booth. Despite the gunshot, she looked like she was full of energy. Next to her was Kiko, who'd dropped Run off with Guy who had offered to take her to his son's house, which was nearby, for his grandkids to look after her. She assured Austin that she'd had her dinner and was likely happily licking the sticky fingers of Guy's grandkids for dessert.

Through the large windows of the diner, Austin saw the first snowflakes begin to drift down from the black sky. As Austin's head had cleared, he'd constructed the story in his mind. Taking his last sip of the mocha, he put his hands flat on the table and spoke.

"I think I know what's going on," he said. "The way Vanguard was speaking made me think that he's being protected. Not exactly a shock for someone with his level of wealth and power. But the way he openly flaunts his drug use, it was getting to me. I thought he just had corrupt officials in his pocket, but if he's an actual asset of the DEA, then something else is going on. The data on his Apple Watch said that he was at a bar six miles from the festival when the murder took place. Why would that be? Despite everything, we know he genuinely enjoys the festival. Why would he miss the first night unless it was something important? I believe this entire festival is a cover for some major drug operation, and possibly Vanguard was caught and flipped. And if he's working for the DEA, I don't think it's only to stop the import of the weird psychedelics I accidentally took."

Lucy bit the inside of her cheek, clearly annoyed. "But why would the DEA be working with him unless there was someone much more powerful than him that they're trying to bring down?"

"Bingo," Austin said. "That's what I think is happening."

"But who?" Claire asked.

Austin said, "I have no idea. It's possible they let him dabble in his designer drugs, designer drugs I am regrettably intimately familiar with, and in exchange, he is helping them with something else. Maybe they even helped him with the alibi videos in order to cover the whole thing up."

"Possible," Jimmy said. "Leave it to the DEA to come up with deep-fakes sophisticated enough to fool the FBI."

Claire was clearly annoyed. "*Temporarily* fool the FBI," she said. "We got it eventually. And this interagency infighting drives me crazy. And may have cost that agent his life." She sipped her drink, then continued. "So Vanguard is bringing designer drugs into the country and gets caught. But either because he is so powerful or maybe because he has more

information, he's not prosecuted. Someone said, 'it's just a bunch of rich techies and some hippies and teenagers taking drugs that aren't even illegal yet, so what's the big deal?' But Vangard is a sick bastard. Somehow, he hears that there's an undercover FBI agent at the festival as well. Maybe he thinks the FBI is coming for him despite his deal with the DEA. Spending time in an American prison is the last thing that guy would let happen. Meanwhile, we have the Justice Department involved, possibly to protect Vangard, who could probably turn off half of their cellular phones and steal private information from their computers if he wanted."

"Maybe," Austin said. "Or maybe *someone else* forced Apollo to do the murder. Either way. I don't plan on sitting this one out."

Sy gave him a concerned look, but he knew she wasn't going to try to convince him to back off.

"So what's the plan?" Lucy asked.

Claire turned to Jimmy. "You said that the last festival event is the biggest night, right? I imagine people are wearing costumes and dancing, and there's probably all sorts of fun being had. Tell me more about it."

Jimmy nodded. "The DJs start around 10:00 PM and go all night. I watched some clips from last year on YouTube. I—"

"We watched some clips," Lucy interrupted. "So there's this massive structure right in the middle, looks just like a circuit board. But not just any circuit board. This one's made from local timber, and they trace out all these intricate 'circuitry' patterns with this bioluminescent paint. You know, the kind that glows in the dark, made from fungi or minerals. So, this thing is huge and glowing, visible from anywhere in the clearing. Everyone at the festival is encouraged to bring something from their life, something that ties them to the mundane, mainstream world. These items get attached to the structure over the days leading up to the event, creating this collective tapestry of stuff we're all leaving behind."

"And Lucas Vangard," Jimmy said. "He kicks off this symphony of electronic music that fills the forest. It's not just any music, though. He uses sounds he's gathered from the attendees throughout the festival, weaving everyone's experiences into a communal sound narrative."

"The main event," Lucy said, "happens at midnight, right as the winter solstice hits. First they cut the music and there is total silence as Vangard and Silva come together and hold up one of the two white rabbits. Ears up means listen and cooperate in the coming year, ears down means stick to your own insights."

"Ears up they cheer, ears down they Om," Jimmy interrupted excitedly.

"Right," Lucy continued. "Then they lower the structure into this giant glass combustion control system and somehow burn the thing in this eco-friendly way, bright but clean, no smoke to choke you up. It's controversial whether it's actually eco friendly, but the producers wave their hand over the details of the mechanism. Anyway, as it burns, it leaves a prophetic trail of resin on the inside of the glass. It's an encrypted message, something only the tech heads can decipher, revealing a positive mantra for the year. The fire, the music, it all builds up to this climax at the exact moment of the solstice," Lucy's voice rose with enthusiasm. "The 'circuitry' on the structure glows against the fire, symbolizing us all cutting ties with the 'Matrix' of society. And when it burns brightest everyone dances, cheers, and howls, united in a moment of defiance and liberation."

"And as dawn creeps in," Jimmy said, "the remains of the structure smolder, a reminder of what they've all committed to: resisting societal norms, choosing their own paths. They leave feeling liberated, defiant, united. A sort of Phoenix rising scenario."

Claire looked at Austin, eyes full of skepticism. "Well," she said, "I don't know about the rest of that stuff, but I do feel like dancing."

Austin looked at Sy. "Can you pick up Run and take her back home? I promise this'll be over by tomorrow."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

LUCY AND JIMMY dropped them about a hundred yards short of the festival parking lot. Claire was still dressed in her jeans and button-down, but she'd added a wool hat from the back of Lucy's cruiser. At the hospital, Austin had changed out of his gown into a pair of slacks and a black button-down that Sy brought him from his apartment when she rushed to the hospital.

Sy hadn't tried to convince Austin not to go back to the festival. She'd probably known it wouldn't have worked, and, under different circumstances, might have done the same herself. But Austin was glad she was keeping clear of this investigation and liked being with Run.

Contemplating Jimmy and Lucy's description of the final night, a thought occurred to him. Making sure there was no one around to overhear, he asked Claire, "Are these people anti-technology or pro-technology? I really can't seem to tell, and now they're burning a massive circuit board."

"I've been trying to figure that out, too," Claire admitted. "When I learned about my parent's cult, I started studying groupthink. The more minds an ideology is filtering through, the more difficult it is for a group to maintain order. Remember being a kid and trying to hold a fan of cards and the cards fumble about and fall out of your hands. Now you can hold five or so cards, maybe even a whole deck fanned out in perfect formation. But, if you keep adding more the whole thing gets flimsy and falls out of your hands. Maybe the festival started out as one thing a number of years ago and the cult had a clear ideology, but now I'm not sure that the Rabbit Hole philosophy is consistent."

"Yeah, and to make things even less coherent, the dealer is on some kind of hallucinogenic trip," Austin said. "It seems to be at the same time the most tech-savvy group I've ever seen, but then again, they're also talking about unplugging from the matrix and all that. All that alien theorist stuff is bonkers to me, too." He shook his head. "I think I'm too old for this."

"I assure you, we are both too old for this," Claire said.

It was nearing 10:00 PM and they followed a small crowd down a path that weaved through the woods toward the largest clearing and the main stage.

He'd run through the clearing at least twice, on his way to the cabin and on his way back. But as they approached, he could tell it had changed. More lights than ever lit the trees, and it was more crowded than ever, too. It seemed that all the dispersed groups that had done different things during the festival had now gathered in one place.

On stage, a few hundred yards ahead of him, was Lucas Vanguard. The snow was coming down heavy now, and people were bundled up in jackets and hats. But still, they danced, danced to the ethereal music wafting from speakers all around them.

On the ride over, Austin had continued thinking through what could explain the strange series of events and the involvement of multiple agencies. In particular, he couldn't let go of the fact that Vanguard lied about his whereabouts, that he or the DEA had gone to great lengths to create fake videos to fake an alibi, but that he *hadn't* done so to cover up the fact that he had committed the murder. He'd done so to cover up the fact that he was elsewhere, at a bar six miles from the festival. Right now, Lucy and Jimmy were headed to that bar, trying to figure out who he'd been there with, or if he'd been there at all.

Claire, it seemed, was on a similar line of thinking. "This is what I can't get over," she said, leading him to the edge of the crowd along the left-hand side of the stage. "Assuming

that the DEA is not entirely corrupt here—and I think that's a safe assumption—why would they go to such great lengths to stonewall us? Maybe they are just embarrassed about having a rogue agent, a screw-up who committed a horrifying crime. But Baker admitted that to us. Admitted he screwed up to let him come here on his own. And if the AG is involved... That's huge. The only way I can make sense of it is—this has to be the site of some massive operation. And that explains why they don't want us here; they have plans to take it down themselves."

Austin agreed, but that still didn't get them anywhere. "And yet, here we are," he said. "Ignoring their orders. Plus, maybe they *don't* have plans to take it down. At least right away. Maybe they're playing some long game we're not invited to."

Claire smiled. "They're not my boss, and they tried to close the book on the murder of an FBI agent. To me, that leaves pages left to turn and I'm going to keep reading."

They watched the show for twenty minutes, mostly staying quiet and thinking, watching the crowd for anything suspicious and, as they had planned, trying to stay out of sight of any DEA presence that might be there.

"What if we decide to believe they're actually trying to do the right thing?" Claire said finally.

"That's exactly where my mind was going," Austin agreed. "My hunch is that this is about a lot more than some designer drugs brought in from northern Europe. Like you said, for the AG to be involved, it has to be more than that. So what is the only reason they would allow such a shitshow to take place and try to stonewall us?"

"Because an election year is coming up," Claire said, thinking aloud, "and they're trying to make something happen that will be big enough to break through the noise and affect public opinion."

"And what would that be?" Austin asked, knowing what Claire's answer would be.

"Only a drug bust of absolutely epic proportions," Claire said.

"Right. And I don't think that is something Vanguard would be behind."

Claire walked a little circle around a small pile of dirt, then stopped and put her hands on her hips, looking up at the stage. "As much as the interagency stuff pisses me off, it's often not done with mal intent. If I put myself in the shoes of the DEA, and assuming I'm working in some way with the Justice Department, why else would I keep the FBI in the dark?"

"That's exactly what I was thinking," Austin said. "I think we accidentally wandered into the largest drug sting in the country and—depressing as this is—*Lucas Vanguard* might be the government's best asset."

Claire cringed. "God help us all."

Austin followed her eyes to where Vanguard and about a dozen other musicians were now taking turns on a long bank of turntables and computers, penetrating the entire forest with the sounds of both ancient and ultra-modern influences as the crowd swayed in mesmerized bliss. There appeared to be dozens, possibly hundreds of speakers woven through the trees above and beside them, some possibly even buried in the ground because, when a certain kind of beat hit, the earth shook.

"They may even have good reasons for wanting to keep us in the dark," Claire said, "but I have to admit, I don't care."

"Why would Vanguard be so valuable, though, unless he has info no one else has?" Austin asked, his voice barely audible over the pulsating beats echoing through the forest.

Claire turned suddenly and looked at him. "Silva."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

"DIDN'T Jimmy and Lucy say that the two founders were always on stage together for the performance on the last night?" Claire asked.

"They did." That triggered a thought in Austin's mind. Something Vangard had said when they located him at the cabin. He'd called it "our house."

"It's all coming together," Austin said. "Silva and Vangard were a team, working together to import drugs. At some point, Vangard flipped on Silva, probably because the DEA had gotten evidence against him and threatened him with jail time."

"Or maybe Silva had a side thing going, was trying to do more than Vangard wanted, and Vangard went to the DEA himself."

"Possibly, but for now we just need to find Silva." He looked at her shoulder, and Claire read the look of concern on his face.

"I'm fine, Austin," she said, correctly reading his guilt over the fact that they'd separated and she'd been shot. She pressed her hand against her bullet wound. "I make my own choices in this life. Let's split up."

Austin pointed to the right side of the stage. Claire nodded and took off in that direction, while Austin circled the stage from the left, then scanned back toward the crowd, weaving his way through and looking for Silva. He didn't expect to find him.

At the very back of the crowd, he ran into Lucy and Jimmy, who had just arrived with Kiko. "The bar owner confirmed that Vangard was in the private room in the back that night. He had set up a meeting with three or four others. They didn't even want a waiter to come into the room. It sounds highly suspicious," Lucy said. "At first I thought it was evidence of a drug meeting."

"But then," Kiko interrupted, "I found the owner of the bar and put on a little show for him." She must have seen the look on Austin's face. "Not *that* kind of show. I'm a trained actor. I gave him my best flirty FBI agent act and had him handing over the security footage from the back alley within seconds. The cars that pulled up to meet with Vangard had government plates."

As far as Austin was concerned, that confirmed what he'd suspected.

On the night of the murder, Vangard was meeting with his handlers in the DEA.

"Come with me," Austin said. "It's time to do a little more acting."

While they walked the trail back toward the cabin, Austin popped off a quick text to Claire. "I'm with the others. Vangard was meeting with government officials at the bar that night. Confirmed. Keep your eyes on the stage in case Silva shows up there. We're heading for the cabin."

On the way, Austin told them his plan. "Jimmy and Lucy, get your badges out," he said. "I have a feeling that Silva has been staying here all along. I think Vangard wanted him to think everything was normal, but by now Silva may well have suspicions that we're on to him. There will be guards, or staff, or lawyers. Maybe all three. Tell them—make yourself sound like regular cops who've been here to help out at the festival. Security or whatever. Tell them you found Silva's wallet. You just caught someone who had stolen it. See if you can get Silva to come to the door. Kiko—"

"Lemme guess, you want me to be the thief they caught?"

"Only because you're the youngest. And you said you were a trained actor. I imagine you're a good one."

She smiled. "I was supposed to be the next Halle Berry, at least according to, well, to me."

"Will you do it?" Austin asked.

"No problem." Kiko crouched down, picked up a little bit of dirt, and rubbed it across her face. Next she pulled her dreadlocks out of the neat bunch she'd tied them in and, placing them about unevenly, made herself look disheveled. She unzipped her vest, which was neat and clean, and pulled at the neck of her shirt to stretch it out to appear more ragged.

She slouched her shoulders a little and crossed her arms. And then she did the most remarkable thing Austin had seen in quite some time: changing her facial expression and the way she held her head, she subtly transformed from a twenty-something FBI agent to a scared festival-goer of no more than eighteen. Next, she put her hands behind her back and wedged herself toward Jimmy. "You may arrest me, sir."



Austin watched from behind a tree as Jimmy and Lucy led Kiko up the stairs. It took a while for someone to come to the door, and Austin was reminded of a couple of days earlier when Seafern had greeted them there. It seemed like a long time ago, and he wondered whether Seafern would ever turn up, or if he was somehow a victim of this whole thing.

The man at the door this time had a much more official look, possibly some kind of assistant, and he looked confused as Jimmy and Lucy spun their story. But he let them into the foyer, which is exactly what Austin intended.

Edging around the house, he looked for open windows or a basement. There were no footprints in the snow. It was pure and white under the bright lights that lit the side of the house. If anyone was looking out a window, they would see him, but he had to take the chance.

At the back corner of the house, he found precisely what he was looking for. Down a few steps, a door. And it was unlocked.

Stepping into the basement, he smelled the faint smell of gasoline. He also saw an empty roll of duct tape and, in the corner, a small television set up connected to what appeared to be recording equipment. At the far end of the room was another door, which Austin assumed led upstairs into the kitchen or another room in the house.

He dialed Claire and, keeping his voice as low as possible, said, "Did the agent mention being held somewhere?"

The line was silent for a long time.

"He did," Claire said at last. "A basement, and something about videos."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

"HOLD ON," Austin said to Claire. "I think I may have found the videos."

Austin crept over to where the TV was set up and turned it on. The screen appeared to be paused on a video. Next to the TV was a small table with a digital tablet device on it.

He pressed the power button and, to his surprise, it was unlocked. He pressed play on the video, which triggered it to play on the television. The video showed a leafy street in a suburb. Judging by the mountains in the background, he thought it must be somewhere in or around Seattle.

A small boy came into the picture, riding a little bicycle. Leaves slowly tumbled across the road, then a male figure appeared. It was Apollo, looking leaner and healthier and much, much happier. He wore shorts and a T-shirt and stood waiting for the little boy, who was riding the bike toward him. Then a woman came into view and put her arm around him, chastising him for wearing shorts on a cool fall day. The audio recording was surprisingly clear.

They jabbed at each other playfully, both watching the little boy riding down the street. It looked like a perfect home movie, but then a thought occurred to Austin: who had been taking the video? The more he watched it, the more it appeared to be taken from far behind the couple, possibly from a surveillance van.

Whoever had taken the video had been using fairly advanced surveillance techniques.

"I'm watching it," he said. "Home movies, but creepier. I'm thinking Apollo was held here and forced to watch them. Used his family to blackmail him. That, plus the drugs, convinced him to kill Chloe Graber, Pyronite."

"Things Apollo said made me think he might have already been working for Silva. Wouldn't be the first time an agent got flipped. A little info here, a little info there. Then, when they learned an FBI agent was present at the festival, they had him kill her. But it took something more to get him to kill, the videos and threats toward his family." She paused. "Silva is nowhere in sight at the main stage. Austin, you should get out of there."

"Don't worry," he said. "Kiko and the others have everyone upstairs distracted. I'm going to take this."

"I'm heading up there," Claire said. "No chance Silva is down here by the stage."

"No I—"

"Don't argue," Claire interrupted. "You know I won't listen."

And with that, she ended the call.

Austin used the slider on the tablet screen to scroll to the end of the video, then back to the beginning.

It was blank other than that short clip.

Then he clicked a back arrow and was taken to a folder that contained multiple videos. Jackpot.

There were too many to watch now, so he decided to stash the device and get out of there.

Following the thin cable to the back of the TV, he saw that it was screwed into the television. He began fumbling with it, trying to unscrew the little metallic brace in the dim basement light.

Then he heard footsteps. Light and fast, almost gliding toward him.

Turning quickly, he raised his fists, but it was too late. He saw the shovel coming at his head, metallic and rusty, and faster than he could swing his arms up to block it. It

connected, and he fell, knocking over the little table next to the television. Straining his neck as he fell, he barely kept his head from striking the floor hard.

From his back he blinked up at a thin young woman who stood over him holding a shovel in one hand, a gun in the other.

He recognized her as the cop-hater who'd been recording Silva.

Flamingo.

Seeing stars, he stared up at the ceiling and noticed that the exposed beams of the basement were lined in a few spots with what looked like small amounts of explosives. And in two spots were little cans of gasoline.

Someone had set this house up to burn.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

CLAIRE REACHED the cabin and glanced up at the porch, where Kiko was sitting, looking like a dejected teenager who had just been caught trying to buy beer at a 7-Eleven. She was staring stupidly up into the sky letting real tears fall from her eyes. Claire couldn't have been more proud of her performance.

Lucy stood over her, and she saw Jimmy from behind. He stood in the foyer speaking with a man who she was fairly sure was not Silva.

Following the footsteps in the snow, she traced Austin's path along the side of the house to the back. Finding the door, she poked her head in. But no one was there. She saw the tablet and television Austin had described, but not Austin.

Something was wrong. And why did the room smell like gasoline?

She glanced up at the ceiling.

Oh no.

For Silva to cover his tracks, he would have to burn down the house.

On the other end of the room was a door. Hurrying over, she cracked it open and listened. Judging by the direction of the staircase, she believed the door would lead up to the kitchen, where she could hear Jimmy and another man speaking.

Although she couldn't make out their words, it sounded like a tense conversation.

Inspecting the wall, she found another door, this one somewhat hidden. It was painted white, the same color as the paneling, and instead of a regular doorknob, it had a little latch, also painted white. She took her weapon out of the holster and, gripping it firmly with her right hand, reached to pull open the door with her left.

Then she heard a young woman's voice.

CHAPTER FORTY

"YEAH," the young woman was saying. "I came down to the basement to set it off, and there was someone here."

Silence.

"The one we met earlier. The detective or whatever."

Silence.

"Yeah, yeah, he was watching the videos."

Silence.

"He's alive, yeah."

Silence.

"No, I don't know. I didn't shoot him because there are more cops upstairs."

Silence

"I don't know *who* exactly, but I think they are real cops."

Silence.

"Just be ready to go. I'll have the car at the spot in ten minutes."

Claire stepped into the hallway, bounded forward, then kicked open a door, which led into a small basement room. She recognized Flamingo Flores, whom she'd looked up when Austin and Lucy described their encounter with her.

Flamingo spun on her, but Claire had her gun aimed at her chest and the woman, still holding the phone, moved her hands above her head quickly.

"You know as well as I do that you'll be dead within seconds if I pull this trigger." Claire was in control. "Nice and easy now. Set the phone down, nice and easy."

Flamingo's eyes darted around the tiny room, but she was out of options. She slowly crouched, maintaining eye contact with Claire, and gently set the phone on the ground, then returned her arms to the raised position.

Claire moved forward cautiously and, after patting her down, pulled a gun from a hidden holster under her shirt. "Where is he?" Claire demanded, removing the magazine and clearing the chamber of Flamingo's firearm.

The woman smiled slightly, then pointed to a closet across from them.

"Is he alive?" Claire asked.

"I think so," she said, her voice flat.

"Turn around and put your hands behind your back," Claire said.

The woman's eyes darted around the room again, as though she was going to make a run for it, but there was nowhere to run. She knew that a single step forward and a double tap to her chest would end her. She turned around and slowly put her hands behind her back.

Claire stepped forward and slapped a pair of handcuffs on her. "Sit in that corner," she ordered, "cross-legged, and stare at the wall."

Hurrying over to the closet, the first thing she saw was that it was locked. "Keys," she called. "Where are the keys?"

The woman turned her head, smirking. "I just know the lock, I don't know the keys."

"Try harder," Claire said, pointing her gun at Flamingo.

"Uh." The woman's eyes scanned the room hurriedly. "There are some over there." She nodded toward a hook on the wall.

"Which one?" Claire demanded, seeing that there were at least a dozen keys on the ring.

"Honestly, I don't know," she said.

Fumbling, Claire tried one, then another, then another. She heard a voice, but it wasn't the woman; it was whoever was on the other end of that call.

A man, and he seemed to be shouting into the phone.

Claire picked up the phone and held it between her shoulder and cheek as she readied the fourth key. "Who is this?" she demanded.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

"WHO IS *THIS*?" the voice on the other end of the phone said.

"This is Claire Anderson, special agent, FBI Seattle." Claire wiggled the fourth unsuccessful key out of the lock and readied the next with shaky hands. "And don't bother answering my question, I know who I'm speaking with."

"I was just speaking with my associate."

"Silva, we have your number. You forced Apollo to kill a member of the FBI. He confessed."

"I very much doubt he said anything about *me*," Silva's voice was calm and cool.

"But I bet we'll find your fingerprints, digital or otherwise, all over the tapes you used to blackmail him. Are you in the house?" Claire demanded.

"This entire festival was founded on the principle that reality as people normally understand it does not exist. We create it, and when we create reality with our minds, we can create almost anything. And the things I have created with my mind are far more rich than the reality most people have experienced or will ever experience in their lives."

"You didn't answer my question." Claire tried another key on the lock. "I have your little goon cuffed down here. I know this house is full of evidence. And we plan to gather it."

"You don't know as much as you think," Silva retorted. "I find that law enforcement officers rarely do."



When Austin came to, it was dark.

But, to his great relief, his mind was clear. He would take a shovel to the head over an unexpected hallucinogenic poisoning any day.

He vaguely remembered being dragged in here, and he thought it was only a few minutes ago. But he wasn't sure. Then he heard Claire's voice. Who was she talking to, and why hadn't she let him out if she was here?

He heard jingling, the sound of keys. Then he remembered, the whole house was wired to burn.

"Cl—" He tried to speak her name, but his throat was tight. He cleared it and tried again. "Claire, the house is wired to burn. Get the hell out of here!"

He reached up and felt the growing welt on his head, just above his temple. "Get the hell out of here, just leave me!" He tried kicking at the door, but he didn't have enough room in the closet to get any leverage.

He heard keys jingling and Claire mumbling to herself and also speaking with someone in the room with her, apparently. But, she was saying the same words.

"Which one is it?—Which one is it!"



Claire heard Austin's shouts, but focused on her task. She didn't need him to waste energy arguing about what she should and shouldn't risk. She had made up her mind and she was going to get him out of there or the house was going to explode on her first. She tried the next key as she replied to Silva. "And I find that drug dealers who believe they know more than law enforcement often underestimate us."

She wanted to keep Silva talking, keep him on the line, but she needed to focus on freeing Austin, too.

Managing the keys, keeping an eye on her hostage, and keeping Silva on the phone was a tough act to juggle.

"I've got a question for you," Claire said. "I've spent enough time with Vanguard to know that when he started this thing, he actually was an idealistic man. He wanted to change the world. He still thinks he can. He's on stage right now, partying, despite the fact that, well, you probably know what happened with him, don't you?"

Silva said nothing.

"So I guess what I want to know is, for you, was this always about importing drugs? I'm thinking maybe your tech company billions are just smoke and mirrors. BS. And that fentanyl and heroin have been your real business all along."

Again, Silva said nothing and yet another key didn't budge the lock.

"You know Vanguard has flipped on you, right? He's working with the DEA."

Again, silence, but the silence on the other end of the line had changed. She no longer heard his breathing.

Silva had hung up.

"You better find it quickly," Flamingo said. Until then she'd followed her instructions to the letter and sat silently in the corner.

Claire tried the last key, which didn't work either. She'd been in too much of a hurry, but she believed she tried all of them. She took two large steps and grabbed Flamingo by her hair, twisting her neck back so she was facing her.

Claire leaned closer to her face and growled, "Is it one of these keys or not?"

"You better get out of here," Flamingo said looking down at her watch.

And then she did something odd; she raised her nose and sniffed, like a little dog trying to indicate to its owner that she smelled something delicious and would like a taste.

Claire inhaled instinctively. Smoke. "Did you?"

"I'll tell you what," the woman said. "I'll give you the real key, but you have to let me out of here."

Claire crouched a little, then yanked her up by her bicep and turned her around. She pointed the gun at her chest. "Where's the key?"

"This whole place is going to burn down in the next five minutes. Maybe two minutes. I'm guessing everyone upstairs cleared out already. The house is empty. We're the only ones left to burn. They have a remote starter." She smirked. "I guess they used it."

"Where's the key?" Claire demanded.

Flamingo slowly lowered her chin toward the left front pocket of her jeans. Claire stepped forward and reached her free hand to take out the key, gun never leaving the woman's chest. The key was tiny, and she cursed herself for missing it during the pat down.

The smell of the smoke was growing stronger and stronger, and she hurried over to the closet. This time, the key worked immediately.

As she pulled the door open, she turned her head toward a shuffling sound behind her. She saw her captive darting out of the room, arms still cuffed behind her back.

Claire decided to let her run. She wasn't armed, and she wouldn't get far.

And Austin needed her.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

AUSTIN EMERGED from the basement just a few steps behind Claire and almost ran into Lucy.

"We need to get out of here," Claire said.

"Where's Kiko?" Austin's skull was throbbing, but he was focused enough to do a head count.

"I'm here," Kiko said, pulling back her dreads. She had done what she could to wipe the dirt and tear stains from her face. But a sleeve couldn't do the heavy lifting that soap and a washcloth would.

Austin looked up when he heard a scuffle. Jimmy had tackled Flamingo easily and was now yanking her up and pushing her against a tree.

"I'm assuming you want her arrested," he called out to Claire. "Since you went to the trouble of cuffing her, I mean."

"Yes," Claire called.

"What's your name ma'am?" Jimmy asked her.

The woman didn't answer.

"Her name's Flamingo," Austin said. "She's the one who hit me over the head with the shovel."

"She's also Silva's assistant," Lucy added.

"Executive Social Media Videographer," Flamingo corrected.

"Right," Lucy said. "She's Silva's... what she said."

"Everyone," Claire interrupted, "we need to move clear of this building. Now."

Smoke began billowing out of the basement, and Austin, for the first time, felt the heat.

Lucy pulled out her phone to call in the fire department as they all dashed to a small clearing about a hundred yards into the woods, watching as the house went fully ablaze.

Snowflakes drifted into the fire and disappeared.

"What should we do?" Austin asked. "Should we get these people evacuated?"

"I think the moisture from the snow will be enough to keep the fire from spreading," Claire said.

Austin agreed. "There's already over an inch of powder surrounding everything."

"I've called the fire department. And Guy. They can access the house from that side."

Lucy pointed into the darkness. "Logging road is only a couple of hundred yards down there."

Austin didn't think it would matter anyway. The house was going to be completely destroyed, and it didn't look like the fire would spread.

Jimmy joined them, leading Flamingo, whose face seemed to be etched with a permanent scowl.

"Silva wasn't in the house," Austin said. "Was he?"

It was a question for Flamingo, but he already knew the answer.

Jimmy said, "We don't think he was. The man at the door was stalling us, and I think he was the only one in there."

"Wait, where is he?" Austin asked, looking around.

Jimmy indicated a spot up a little hill. "Cuffed to a tree. He was trying to run off as smoke started pouring out and we thought we better keep an eye on him. We were about to run in to save you all but I see you two know how to take care of yourselves."

"He gets so sad when he can't show off his hero skills," Lucy smiled at him. "Have I mentioned how strong and handsome you are lately?"

"Not recently, no." Jimmy smiled back. He read Flamingo her Miranda Rights. "Well, here she is." He led Flamingo toward Claire and passed her off.

"We already have you assaulting multiple officers," Claire said. "Well, a PI and an FBI agent—and arson, and destroying evidence to conceal federal drug charges. Tell us where Silva is, and maybe we can go light on you."

Flamingo said nothing.

"I think I might know where he is," a voice came out of the darkness from the direction of the festival, and Austin heard footsteps accompanying it coming toward them down the trail. He turned and saw Ridley.

"What the—" Lucy said.

"What are you doing here?" Austin asked.

Ridley was a couple of inches taller than Austin and at least thirty pounds heavier, but it was all muscle. Coming out of the darkness dressed in a finely tailored gray suit, he looked like something close to a superhero poised to rip off his outfit to reveal the cape beneath.

"Lucy called me while you were in the hospital," Ridley said. "I decided to come down. Did you know they give you a helicopter when you're Governor? I also heard that there may be a territorial spat here between us and the Feds and the DEA. I figured if I showed up on your side, I could at least make it a fair fight."

Lucy leaned in and gave him a hug, but pulled away quickly to resume her all-business exterior.

"I spoke with Baker, local head of the DEA," Ridley said. "And the AG. You're good to go. Well, not *good*. They're still pretty pissed. But I smoothed it out."

"What were you saying about Silva?" Austin asked.

"There's another house, actually more of a shed," Ridley said. "They use the logging road down that way." He pointed into the darkness. "Technically, it's a storage area for some of the lights and pyrotechnics and technology they use for the festival. Actually, it has a small apartment in it and is used to store Fentanyl brought in on the ferry system from Canada to Port Angeles, then shipped out of here on private boats. DEA was gathering evidence for a major bust. Swept the place fifteen minutes ago, but Silva was nowhere to be found."

Austin was impressed with how much Ridley had been able to get out of Baker and the AG.

"This woman was on the phone with him not more than fifteen minutes ago." Claire jabbed a thumb in the direction of Flamingo, who looked dejected. "What would he be doing now?" Claire asked her.

Flamingo didn't respond to Claire, instead looking up at Ridley. "You're the governor, right?"

"I am," Ridley said.

"I voted for you because of that video. I saw you on the socials."

"Thank you." Ridley looked embarrassed. "I know if you're voting, you care about our state. If you want to help the state of Washington, tell us where Silva is before he escapes."

The woman shook her head. "There's a car in the trees about two hundred yards from the storage cabin. It's like you said, it's not far, just through there." Flamingo nodded back in the direction of the supposed logging road. "But I don't think he'll be trying to leave. He never goes anywhere alone. He's a brilliant guy, but also deeply fragile. Without me, I don't think he'll even try to escape. And if his shed was raided, he knows the game is up."

Claire met Austin's eyes. "When I was speaking with him," she said, "I told him about Vanguard flipping. I don't think he necessarily knew about that."

Flamingo said to Jimmy, "Take these cuffs off me, and I'll tell you what I think."

"Tell us what you think," Jimmy spat back, "and I'll consider *loosening* the cuffs."

"This really is your shot at redemption." Ridley's voice was full of authority. "You have about ten seconds to choose. Consider how you want your life to end up, then decide which direction you need to take to get there."

Flamingo thought for a moment, then let out a long breath. "Silva didn't know about Vanguard. He sensed the distance growing between them, but I don't think he would ever think that Vanguard would double cross him. They had been bringing in only the designer stuff at first. What he's doing now is bigger than even *you* know."

"But, you don't think he'll try to escape?" Claire asked.

"I really don't. No, I don't think he'll try to escape. But, I do think he will try to get revenge on Vanguard." She looked up at the falling snow. "Tonight is the Circuit Breaker. They've always hoped it would snow during the Circuit Breaker."

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

TEN MINUTES LATER, they were back at the festival, which was in full swing. Most of the crowd seemed to have as much or more energy as when they'd arrived, but some were in obvious fatigue. But they continued to party as though a house hadn't burned down in the woods next to them.

The crowd had grown. The thousand or so people who'd spent the first nights had swelled into at least a few thousand, and even Austin had to admit, it was a magical scene.

The giant colorful circuit had been lowered into the enclosed glass combustion system and there were spotlights strategically placed above and below to draw attention to the centerpiece of The Circuit Breaker event. The eclectic piece of art was encircled by rope and stanchions that allowed people to get close enough to enjoy the details without being able to reach out and touch them.

Throughout the day festival goers had been adding the items they wished to burn. And now Vanguard was on stage, leading an ecstatic dance around the circuit, which had yet to be set ablaze.

On the jog over, the team had decided that Kiko and Claire would take one side, Austin, Lucy, and Jimmy the other. Even though the night was deeply dark and the sky black, bright lights from huge video boards illuminated the crowd and the snowflakes as they fell.

Next, Vanguard hushed the crowd.

Austin scanned for Silva. He didn't believe that Flamingo was necessarily right, or necessarily telling the truth. Facing life in prison could make even someone who is terrified of being alone run in the other direction all by themselves. And every criminal he'd ever known cared more about freedom than they did about revenge.

"It's time to bring out our mascot. Let's see what perspective LC thinks we should lean into for the coming year." A large black box with white lettering "LC" painted onto the side was brought onto the stage and set down in front of Vanguard. The crowd remained suspended in anticipatory silence as Vanguard reached into the box.

Austin remembered Lucy telling him that an ears-up rabbit meant listen and cooperate in the coming year, and an ears-down rabbit meant stick to your own insights. He'd never been in a crowd *this* large that kept *this* quiet for *this* long, and Austin had to admit that he was swept up in the excitement waiting for the big reveal.

And then Austin saw him. But it wasn't Silva in person; it was on the giant video board above the stage. The music had faded, and a previously taped video of Silva and Vanguard was now playing. The recording was being broadcast on the screen above where Vanguard was reaching into the box. Everyone who had been watching Vanguard to see him pull out a rabbit looked up. And then the audio began.

"What would you do with your life if you could start all over?" It was Vanguard speaking with Silva, and they were in the same room where Austin had originally met Vanguard, with his table set for tea. The recording was taken at a strange slanted aspect from the corner with a wide-angle lens that made Austin think it had been captured surreptitiously. The way that Vanguard watched the screen with a neutral look on his face made Austin think he had been the one to record it.

"I would find a way to get richer even sooner," Silva said. "There's something about being rich, you know, and I don't mean just millionaire rich, and I don't even mean tech CEO rich. I mean dictator of a country rich. I mean drug kingpin rich. The kind of wealth that doesn't make it into Forbes Magazine because there's too much to track and no one

knows how to track it. Kim Jong Un rich. Putin rich. I want to be so rich that if I lost enough money to purchase a Private SpaceX fleet in the cracks of my couch, I wouldn't notice."

Vangard ran a hand through his blonde hair. "The point of Rabbit Hole was never to get rich," he said. "I thought we were just going to have some fun. Expand people's minds. Make people question their reality and find new ones. You always wanted more than me."

"You wanted quite a bit yourself," Silva countered. "You wanted the power, too."

"I did," Vangard admitted. "I did want the power, too."

On the screen, there was a long silence as the two men stared at each other.

What was Vangard doing? Austin wondered. *Why would he be showing this video?*

Vangard finally continued the conversation, "I just wanted to expand people's minds. What you're doing doesn't do that. It's killing people. Killing their minds. I know I'm a bastard. Some people hate me. Some people love me. And I don't really care. I'm above all of them anyway. But I never thought they should *die* for our profit. The opioids you're bringing in are weapons of self destruction. They're killing actual people. The very same people whose minds we set out to enhance and expand."

Silva shook his head and stood. "You are right about one thing. You are above all of them. We are above all of them. And people like you and I? Do we really need to worry about who lives and who dies if what we're doing leads us further into a stratosphere that belongs to us? Does a great marathon runner pause to see if he stepped on an ant while winning the New York City marathon?"

Vangard shook his head.

"That's a quote from *you*," Silva spat. "You asked *me* that ten years ago."

"I know," Vangard said. "Like I said, I'm a bastard. And all I can say is that the people you're killing aren't just ants. They're important textiles in the fabric I want to weave with. They have unique stories. They have children that will grow to further enhance our understanding of ourselves as an evolving species. If children are supported through strong bonds with their families and communities, and people like us have the chance to mold the most intelligent of the next generation, we can expand their potential. They will grow and thrive and elevate the commerce of mind just like we did in our zenith."

"The progeny of ants are ants." Silva scoffed, stood up, and shoved his hands in his pockets. "I understand the difference between us. Yes, you and I are above all the little ants we've run past together," he said to Vangard. "But, I can't stop the race to make sure I haven't stepped on you. I'm *still in* my zenith Vangard, and don't forget it. This is the last time we'll speak. I need to keep running."

Austin looked up at the stage. Vangard stood like a blonde Norse statue, staring up at the video board as the screen went dark then reverted to live video of himself on the stage.

Austin realized exactly what he was doing.

This was Vangard's attempt at redemption. He knew as well as anyone that someone like Silva might be able to wiggle out of any legal ramifications his actions might lead to. But this video, which was certainly already spreading across the internet like wildfire, he couldn't escape from that. It was essentially an admission of guilt, and one that would turn the entire world against him because of its sheer arrogance. In the strangest way, this was Vangard trying to do the right thing.

Something to the left grabbed Austin's attention. It was Claire moving up the stairs, and she was trailing a man.

It was Silva. He had crept to the corner of the stage and was eyeing Vangard. What the hell was he planning on doing?

Austin wasn't going to find out because Claire grabbed Silva's wrist from behind. But another man, possibly one of Silva's bodyguards, had trailed her up the stairs and threw her off of him. Vangard turned and saw Silva, and for a second, they exchanged a long look.

Claire was now on top of the bodyguard, wrestling with him.

Austin whistled at Jimmy and Lucy, who were about ten yards away, scanning the crowd. He nodded up at the stage. Then he bolted toward Vangard as Silva did the same.

Weaving through the crowd, bumping and careening off people, he dove over a low fence and then sprang up onto the stage, intercepting Silva just as he was about to hit Vanguard.

Maneuvering quickly, Austin rolled on top of him and got him in a chokehold. But Silva threw him off and leaped on top of Vanguard, toppling the box that let out not one but *two* rabbits to hop about the stage. An outcry of *cheers* and *Oms* erupted from every corner of the festival field as Austin noticed that one of them had its ears up, the other down.

A foot swung in from out of nowhere, possibly Vanguard's, striking Silva in the ribs. He let out a grunt and rolled away. Austin took the opportunity to grab Silva's wrist and bend it back behind his body, pressing a knee into his hamstring and pinning him to the ground.

"You don't want to move anymore," he said to Silva. "You really don't."

When he looked up, Claire was smiling at him, having pinned Silva's bodyguard in the exact same position.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, Austin stood, one hand holding Sy's and the other holding Run's leash, watching as the cleanup crew shoveled ash into large black garbage bins. He had stayed the night in a hotel in Port Townsend, where Sy met him. After the previous evening, he hadn't had the energy to even drive home.

Claire finished up a call and joined them. "Crews were able to put out the fire at Silva's house, but only after it had destroyed most of the structure."

"At least he's in custody," Austin said.

Overnight, Silva's conversation with Vanguard had gone viral, and multiple local law enforcement agencies had announced that they had investigations pending on Silva as well. In fact, it seemed like just about every law enforcement agency in the country had been coming after him.

"Look," Sy said, and Austin followed her pointing finger toward the woods.

The snow had mostly been trampled and turned to mud around the circuit, but in the forest, it was still pristine. Wearing plain blue jeans and a black ski jacket and matching hat, Lucas Vanguard strolled out of the woods and joined them.

Vanguard surveyed the scene. "Well I've sure made a mess of things, haven't I?"

"Maybe for yourself," Austin said. "But, you've also tidied up a few things."

"You did some good last night." Claire nodded at him. "Thank you."

Jimmy and Lucy came up behind them and Vanguard addressed Jimmy right away. "Sorry I threatened to turn your little county into a post-industrial hellscape."

"Don't mention it," Jimmy said.

They were interrupted by a rustling in the woods and all turned to look in unison. Austin squinted against the glare, which had become intense since the sun peeked out behind the canopy of gray.

"That's Seafern!" Lucy exclaimed.

"We thought we'd lost you," Austin yelled.

Seafern raised his arms. He was holding a white rabbit in each hand, one with its ears pointing down and one with them pointing up. He was wearing a bright pink snowsuit and orange snow boots.

"You found the rabbits!" Vanguard yelled.

"Hey, it's my space chum, right on!" Seafern answered. "Actually, *they* found *me*. Burrowed in last night when they saw I was in my hydroid state, man."

Lucy and Jimmy ran up and took a rabbit each.

Run tugged against the leash. Austin wasn't sure if she was interested in running to Seafern or Seafern's rabbits. Probably both. Glancing around, Austin didn't see anyone who he thought would care, so he crouched down to let her off leash. The minute she heard the clasp click free, she ran.

Bolting through the snow, she bounded straight up to Seafern, ignoring the rabbits altogether. Seafern crouched and took her into his arms. She licked his face, and he fell back into the snow as Run practically ate him alive.

"Where were you?" Austin asked.

"I told you. I'm the pooch whisperer," Seafern said. He sat upright again, and Run curled into a ball on his lap.

"And the rabbit whisperer," Lucy added.

"Not, what are you?" Austin couldn't help but be mildly frustrated when interacting with Seafern and his unique way of communicating. "Where were you?"

"Keep your temper." Seafern was petting Run and she rolled over in his lap to offer him her belly. "Time and space are on a continuum. So, I believe I've answered your question just by sitting here. I have been smaller and I have been bigger since we last spoke. My transdifferentiation cycle tied me down and then set me free. Who am I to question the complexities and absurdities of my identity?"

Seafern no longer appeared high, but his choice of language made it difficult for Austin to tell. Austin smiled, finally letting go of his attachment to understanding him. "We thought you might be dead. We were worried."

Vangard smirked. "And I was afraid I was going to have to find a new accountant."

"You really are a bastard, aren't you Vangard?" Sy asked.

"I've been contemplating that most of the night," Vangard said. "Clearly, I am. I mean, that's obvious enough. But I read in a book once—it was a fantasy world, kind of like 'Game of Thrones' or 'The Lord of the Rings,' that sort of thing. But it was set in more of an ancient world, like the ancient Greeks and Romans. There was a woman whose husband had died, and he was apparently a great warrior, and philosopher, and a brilliant guy, and she said of him that some men are so blessed, they make the gods jealous. And that simply telling the truth about themselves is enough to make people think they're arrogant."

Sy cocked her head. "Are you really trying to justify the way you are?"

"No," Vangard said. "I was just contemplating that."

Austin noticed that Vangard had a bottle of water in his hand. "Did you know that you were giving me tainted water?"

"Tainted?" Vangard asked. "That's ridiculous. Besides, I believe it was Lucy who gave it to you. I think you will find that in the coming weeks your consciousness will be permanently affected, in a positive way, by your experience. Everyone reacts differently to X1, but everyone's lives are improved by it."

"You really believe that, don't you?" Austin asked.

"I do, very much so," Vangard said. "And I meant what I said on the videos with Silva that I shared last night. We got into this thing idealistically. I'm never going to deny that I want to make all the money that I can, but I believe that actually helps the world. But Silva didn't care about anyone other than himself and what money could do for him, mostly the way money could make him feel. I know you may not believe this, but I didn't know he was importing fentanyl and heroin until after I was busted by the DEA." He shook his head. "I thought it was just X1 and the like."

"Dude was an obligate parasite," Seafern said.

Run jumped off his lap, apparently now interested in a new group of people who had joined the cleanup crew.

"What's that you're drinking?" Austin asked Vangard, who had just taken a sip from a metal bottle.

"I'll have you know," Vangard said, "this is *regular* water. I've been moving from place setting to place setting for too many years. I need to take a break from the exhausting tea party Silva and I have been throwing and take time to wash some dishes. Plus, now that Silva is under arrest, I have to answer for my share of this."

Austin had heard from Claire that the DEA had offered him a deal: provide information on Silva and testify against him, and he'd never serve jail time. But he would be banned from the country permanently and stripped of any ill-gotten wealth.

Vangard gave Austin a long look. Austin didn't like the guy and never would. But he was beginning to understand him. And while he doubted he would ever look back fondly on his hours in the hospital, he could understand why people wanted to escape this reality so badly.

Everyone had their own way of doing that. Even him.

He flashed back to his conversation with Sy a few days earlier. "I'd still be a detective," he'd told her. At the time, he wasn't certain it was true. It was just the first thing he thought

of. But now he realized just how true it was. When he'd told Claire about why he'd become a detective, the story about Michael, he'd told it as though it was somehow a catalyst. As though that experience had changed him and made him become a detective. The truth was, he was going to become a detective all along, and the incident had just solidified something that was already inside him.

Investigation was his way of escaping, just as much as mind-altering tech, drugs, and music was Vangard's.

But Vangard had taken things too far and Austin wanted to make sure not to do the same.

"By the way," Claire asked. "What did you say to Apollo when he had a gun to your head on stage?"

Vangard contemplated this. "I truly thought I was going to die, and I told him I loved him."

"But you'd never met him," Austin said. "And Silva had told him to kill you."

Vangard smiled. "It was the first thing I thought of."

Austin nodded at Vangard one last time, took Sy by the hand, and walked back down the trail toward the car with Run following in the lead.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

THREE DAYS LATER, Austin walked out of a grueling six-hour interview at the FBI field office in Seattle. Claire had been there for the first half but had excused herself and left Austin to recount the details of what had occurred to two other agents who took copious notes while he walked them through everything he had done and seen during his time at the Rabbit Hole.

Claire assured him that he wouldn't catch any flak for anything that had happened. But what had made him truly happy was the news that Silva was going down.

The videos Vanguard had on him were just the beginning. The DEA had been building a case on the bastard for over a year. Surveillance video, travel receipts, fingerprints, text messages, and finally Vanguard's testimony. The case would take a long time, a year or more, but eventually, Vanguard would officially testify in court, and Silva would go to prison. He had allegedly been one of the major fentanyl suppliers to the Pacific Northwest for over ten years, and now he was going to be behind bars for life.

That was what mattered; the rest was only details.

Austin found Claire waiting in line at a little coffee stand in the lobby.

Strolling up to her, he said, "Can I buy you a cappuccino? Or a coffee or whatever you like to drink?"

"You guessed right. Double cappuccino is my drink, no sugar." Austin pulled out his wallet. When they got to the front of the line, he ordered one for her and one for himself. "I usually don't drink fancy drinks," he said, "but Sy is trying to convince me to try a few of the finer things in life. I figure a little bit of cappuccino won't kill me."

Claire chuckled. "No, but she must understand why you would want to be cautious when trying new beverages."

They both laughed.

"I think she and I would be friends," Claire continued. "I heard that she is into wine. I'm no expert, but I do enjoy a lot of the great wines we produce here in Washington State. Sometimes it's what gets me through the day, you know, the thought of going home to a glass of Cabernet in my garden."

"I can understand that," Austin said.

They strolled out of the FBI building onto a busy street. The sun had gone down recently, and people were coming and going, mostly on their way home from work Austin assumed. The weather had warmed slightly, and it was in the mid-40s, a pleasant respite from the frigid temperatures during the festival.

"You're pretty good at this," Austin said. He didn't like the way it had come out. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that to sound patronizing. What I mean is, I'm surprised you want to give it up."

"*You* did," she said and sat on a bench.

Austin sat as well. "I know I did, but I'm back now. At least I will be soon."

She whacked him on the shoulder. "Come on, you're already back. You are all in. One good person leaves law enforcement," she tapped her own chest, "and another joins it," she pointed at Austin. "It's a fair trade-off."

Austin reached into the little backpack he brought with him for the day and pulled out a small brown paper bag. He handed it to her.

"What's this?" she asked.

"A little gift," Austin said.

She set her cappuccino down on the bench and carefully opened the package. "*The world is worth fighting for*," she read out loud from the plaque.

"What do you think?" Austin asked.

"You got this for me?" Claire asked.

Austin nodded. "Someone gave it to me a couple of years ago. A friend, I guess."

He wasn't sure whether he could consider Anna a friend, although he had gotten her permission to regift the plaque when he had decided to do so. Even if he hadn't been with Sy, he would never again be in a relationship with her. That door was closed forever. But something in his mind changed over the last week.

Forgiveness, he thought.

People did what they did for lots of reasons, many of which he would never understand. They were all coming from different life experiences, different wants, needs, and desperations, and life was too short to hold a grudge.

"A friend gave it to me," Austin repeated, "a couple of years ago. After I told her I wasn't going to get involved in law enforcement again. Now I'm giving it to you. I don't know. I'm not trying to be pushy, but I think you're too good at this to walk away."

Claire put the plaque back in the bag. "I know I'm good at this," she said, "and I appreciate you saying it. My life is complicated right now. Two daughters in college, a fabulous son, but he has special needs. Down syndrome. He's going to be a famous game designer one day. Or maybe a YouTuber. I don't have a lot of years left with him before he goes to college, and I want to spend them at home and not chasing down animals like Silva or spending my time with whatever Vangard is."

Austin laughed. "That guy."

"Yes, that guy," Claire said. "I know I need to start thinking about dating again but when I meet a guy like that it's terribly discouraging. How'd you do it Austin? How'd you find Sy? I mean... I'm sorry... I know my divorce is nothing like what happened to you."

"No, no, it's okay," Austin said. "Actually, I think it helps to talk about it. I'll tell you... I did learn something recently."

"What's that?" Claire asked.

They sat quietly while Austin gathered his thoughts.

"We were visiting Fort Casey, one of the state parks that make up the Triangle of Fire. Fort Flagler, just north of where we were at the Rabbit Hole festival, is one of them."

"Then there's also Fort Warden," Claire said.

"I was reading about them," Austin said. "But you know what? The state of the art peek-a-boo cannons, manufactured in New York, shipped to the west coast, and installed in the bunkers—they never fired a single hostile shot. By the time the forts were built, the world had changed and their strengths had become obsolete. I'm thinking so much of life is like that. You gear yourself up for battles that aren't gonna happen. You plan for where your future is headed and then life has a way of throwing your cards in the air with its chaos. My love was attached to pain when Fiona was killed, so I fortified myself against it. But the love I'm starting to feel for Sy isn't attached to pain at all. Those forts were ready for marine attacks when the war had shifted to the skies, and I was needlessly defending myself against love."

"I'm sure I've constructed some fortifications, too."

"The good news is, you can lay down your arms any time you like." Austin smiled and reached into his pocket. "I almost forgot, I got you one more thing." He handed her a tiny rectangular box.

"What's this?" Claire asked as she accepted it.

"A lock pick set." Austin chuckled. "You can use it the next time you can't find the right key."

"You didn't like how long it took me to break you out, huh?" Claire laughed. "Austin, you weren't even singing."

Austin laughed as he stood. "Well, Claire Anderson, it's been great getting to know you a little bit."

Claire stood as well.
Cappuccino in her left hand, she held out her right.
Austin shook it, and without another word, he walked away.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

AUSTIN STOOD AT HIS MAILBOX, watching a cruise ship headed for Alaska slowly move through the water. Looking down, he read the letter again.

Dear Mr. Austin,

I am pleased to inform you that the Kitsap County Sheriff's Department has approved your application to join our team as a junior detective. After careful review of your credentials, references, and performance on all preliminary examinations, we are confident you will be an excellent addition to the force. There is just one final physical test remaining, which at this point is merely a formality. Assuming you pass as expected, we anticipate your start date will be February 1st.

We are truly impressed by your many years of experience in law enforcement and your sharp investigative skills. Your insightful analyses of sample cases during the interview process demonstrated you will bring a thoughtful, discerning approach to solving crimes. The citizens of Kitsap County will be well-served by your dedication to justice.

Congratulations again on reaching this last step in the hiring process. We eagerly anticipate welcoming you as our newest detective very soon. Please let me know if you need any additional information as you prepare for this exciting transition.

Sincerely,

Lucy O'Rourke

Lead Detective

Kitsap County Sheriff's Department

PS: Can't wait to have you here full time, New York. (Love, Lucy and Jimmy, and Samantha)

When Austin got back inside, Run was lazily lapping water from her little bowl in the kitchen. She looked up at him and then lay down in a patch of sunshine on the floor.

They had already played a lot that day, and she was clearly worn out. And it was a good thing because Austin wanted to spend the rest of the evening and the next morning with Sy. Tomorrow she'd be heading back to the East Coast. But before driving her to the airport, he planned to take her where he had the day they met, for a walk to the beach on Foulweather Bluff.

Sy joined him in the kitchen and handed him a glass of wine. "2016 Quilceda Creek Cabernet," she said. "Did you know that you live right across the water from one of the great wineries in America, one of the great wineries in the world?"

"I did not know that," Austin said, giving her a faint smile.

"Don't make fun of me," she said.

"I'm really not," Austin said. "I like your passion for wine. Especially Washington State wines."

"So, what is this?" Sy said, leading him into the living room where they sat on the couch. "Me and you I mean. What are we doing here?"

But before Austin could answer, she continued.

"I've had a great time with you. I think you know that. I expected to come out for a few days and stay until one of us got too annoyed with the other. Then I'd head back home, no harm no foul."

Austin laughed. "That's not what I expected. I wouldn't have invited you if I wasn't serious." He sipped the wine.

"And—" she began.

But Austin cut her off. "Holy cow, this wine is incredible!"

"Are you making fun of me?" she asked. "I ask only because—nobody says 'holy cow' anymore."

He took another sip. It was an explosion of sensory information. It was tart and sweet in perfect balance, with a richness that almost reminded him of eating a savory food. And when he swallowed, the flavor kept developing in his mouth for a good thirty seconds.

"I'm really not," he said. "That is the best sip of wine I've ever had. It's like the highlights of my synesthesia coming into reality."

She smiled. "I'm glad you like it. This is not an inexpensive bottle. It's one of my all-time favorite wines."

"So have you decided for sure about leaving the NCIS?" Austin asked.

"I don't know what I should do. Go back to NCIS, which I know I'm good at, sometimes love, and feel useful doing—or follow my other passions."

"You know," Austin took a sip of wine, "maybe you're asking the wrong question."

"How do you mean?"

"It's like that riddle: *Why is a raven like a writing desk?*"

Sy swirled her wine around in the glass. "That's so familiar. Remind me where it's from."

"Lewis Carroll. I've been revisiting the *Alice in Wonderland* story."

"Right, I remember now. It's one of the riddles from the tea party. But, what's the answer? I've forgotten. Why is a raven like a writing desk?"

"That's just the thing," Austin said, "it isn't."

"Oh yeah." Sy's eyes cleared in recognition. "It's a nonsense riddle."

"Right. The question should you or shouldn't you has no true answer. You're only going to frustrate yourself looking for a solution where there isn't one. You'll take the path you take."

They stared across the water, which reflected the pink, purple, and golden scattered hues of the sunset happening behind them.

"I like this path I'm on right now." Sy reached out for Austin's hand.

Austin took her hand in his and squeezed gently. "I like it too."

After a long moment, she looked at the floor somewhat shyly, like she wanted to say something but couldn't bring herself to do it. Austin thought he knew what she was thinking.

"I'd like it if you moved out here," he said. "I mean, if you decide to leave NCIS on the east coast for good."

She looked up slowly. "You would?"

"I absolutely would," he said.

They'd spent nearly every day together over the last three weeks and had grown closer than he expected, closer than he thought was possible for him after losing Fiona. "And I think Run would like it, too. Her approval of you means something to me, you know. Plus, as you've already pointed out, we've got great wineries around here."

She smiled at him for a long time. "I wouldn't want to move in or anything," she said. "I have a little money saved, and I won't get my full pension, but I'll get a little something if I do decide to retire early. It would allow my life to take me in an entirely new direction."

Austin sipped the wine again, then swirled it around in his glass. It had a deep ruby color, almost opaque, but just light enough to let through a few rays of sunset. He leaned in and Sy moved toward him to accept a kiss on the cheek.

No moment needed to be perfect, but this one was pretty close.

THE END

If you're enjoying the series, check out Book 9: The Darkness at Deception Pass. And did you know that Claire Anderson stars in her own book, [The Fifth Victim](#)? If you like the Austin series, you're not going to want to miss it.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thomas Austin and I have three things in common. First, we both live in a small beach town not far from Seattle. Second, we both like to cook. And third, we both spend more time than we should talking to our corgis.

If you enjoyed *The Silence at Mystery Bay*, I encourage you to check out the whole series of Thomas Austin novels [online](#). Each book can be read as a standalone, although relationships and situations develop from book to book, so they will be more enjoyable if read in order.

If you enjoy pictures of corgis, the beautiful Pacific Northwest beaches, or the famous Point No Point lighthouse, consider joining my [VIP Readers Club](#). When you join, you'll receive no spam and you'll be the first to hear about free and discounted eBooks, author events, and new releases.

Thanks for reading!

D.D. Black

ALSO BY D.D. BLACK

The Thomas Austin Crime Thrillers

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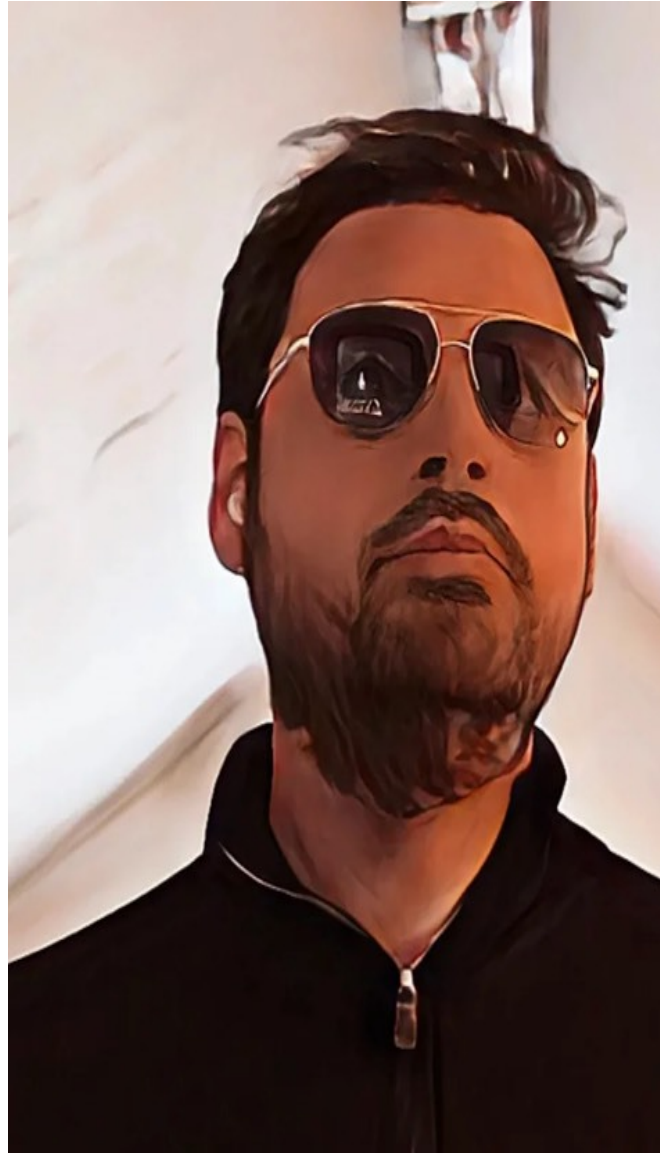
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ABOUT D.D. BLACK



D.D. Black is the author of the Thomas Austin Crime Thrillers and other Pacific Northwest crime novels that are on their way. When he's not writing, he can be found strolling the beaches of the Pacific Northwest, cooking dinner for his wife and son, or throwing a ball for his corgi over and over and over. Find out more at ddblackauthor.com, or on the sites below.

