

JONNY VEE

AND THE

GRINGO



SHAMAN

A PSYCHEDELIC
ADVENTURE

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*For those who believe that
illusion is real, it is dynamic,
it is interconnected and
it is constantly changing.*



“They say every case has a beginning.
This one started with twenty-eight messages,
a woman with a lightning bolt scar,
and a simple job that turned into something
I’m still not sure I can explain. All I know is this;
I walked into it thinking I was chasing
a criminal organization—I walked out
as a guardian of secrets that shouldn’t exist.
And the burro? He was there the whole time,
waiting for me to catch up.

If you’re reading this, you already know
more than you should. So buckle up, friend.
Reality’s about to get negotiable.”

~ Jonny Vee



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FOREWORD

This is not a detective novel pretending to be philosophy.

This is philosophy disguised as a detective novel, filtered through mescaline and DMT, and delivered by a narrator who may or may not be a reliable witness to his own story.

When Jonny Vee walks into an overflowing answering machine filled with twenty eight messages from a stranger—he has no idea that he’s about to cross into territory where noir conventions dissolve.

Where a criminal case becomes a cosmic awakening. Where reality itself becomes negotiable.

You won’t either. Not at first.

The early chapters play fair. They’re noir. They’re hardboiled. They’re familiar. A private detective, a beautiful client, a case that seems manageable. You’ll think you know where this is going.

Then the drugs arrive. And the narrative destabilizes with them.

By the time you reach the ventilation shaft, the Gringo Shaman, and the machine elves that manifest as living geometry, you’ll realize this book isn’t what you thought it was. The case was never the point. The investigation was never about rescue.

It was about seeing.

What you’re about to read contains elements of psychedelic philosophy, cosmic horror, noir tradition, and mystical revelation. It’s disorienting by design. The prose fractures when Vee’s perception fractures. Your certainty about what’s real should erode as his does. By the climax, when the Monad reveals itself as the consciousness that dreams universes into being, you should feel as unmoored as he does.

Some readers will find this exhilarating.

Some will find it unsettling.

Both reactions are correct.

This book asks you to surrender certainty. To sit with ambiguity. To accept

that consciousness might be far stranger than we've been taught, that entities exist on frequencies we don't normally access, and that sometimes the real work isn't solving the case—it's surviving the awakening the case reveals.

That a burro's advice throughout these pages is sound: Don't lose yourself in the haze.

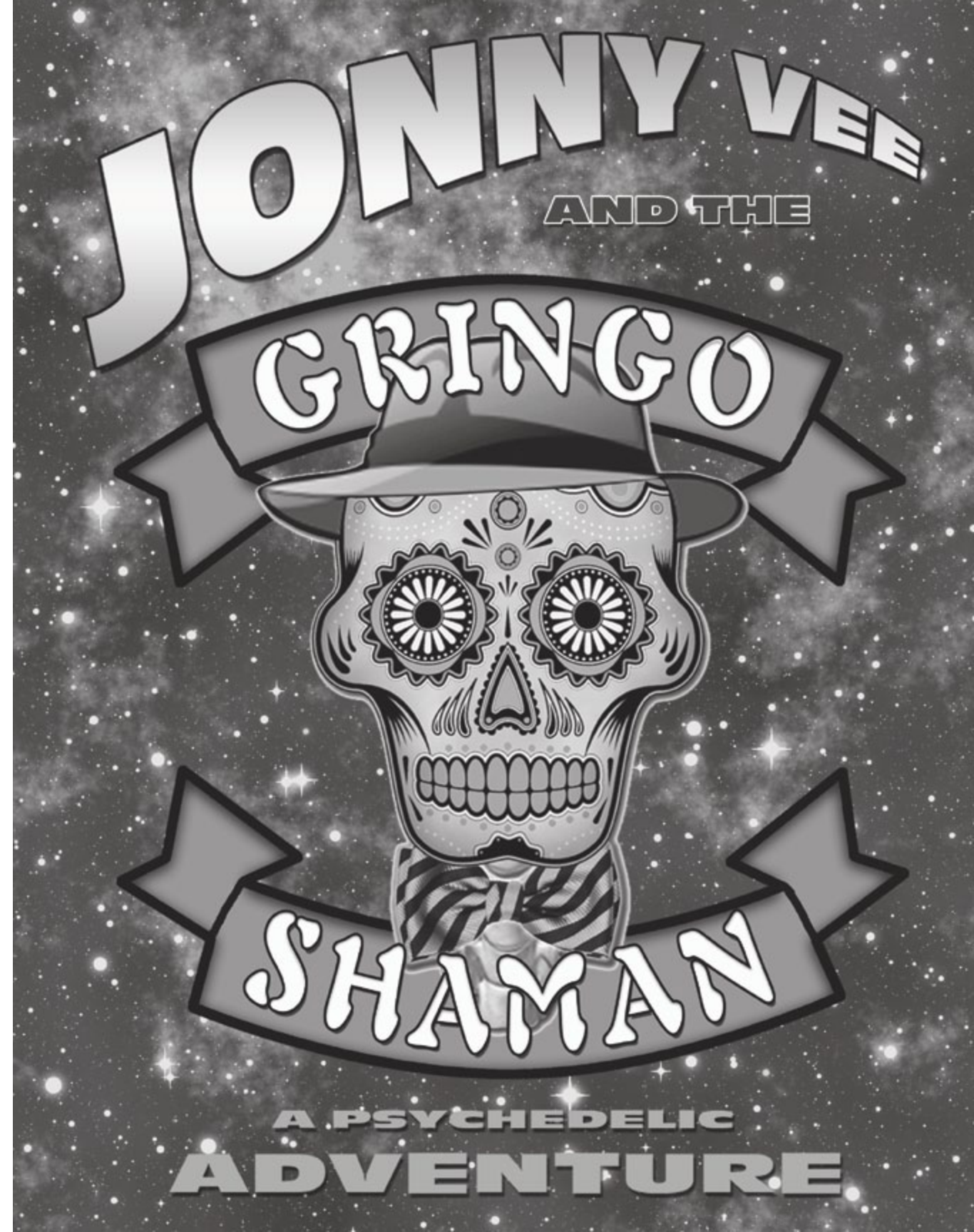
But maybe a little haze is necessary to see what's been hidden all along.

Welcome to the Jonny Vee & The Gringo Shaman. Welcome to Jonny Vee's descent, or perhaps his ascent, it is a story that will remake you slightly if you let it.

The machine elves are watching.

So is the Monad.

And they've been waiting for someone like you to read this. They have been patiently waiting, anticipating, for a very long time.



Chapter 1

It was a hot and humid day in the valley. I didn't much care for days like these. They left me feeling limp and lifeless. It was a good day for lazing about the side of a pool, if you had one, or atop the sun deck of a yacht, if you happened to have one those. I had neither. So I was hot. I was miserable.

On days like these the creeps and goons were out in force. You'd think even they would be affected by the miserable heat. You'd think wrong.

There are a lot of people in this world who think wrong and end up getting stung by some two-bit excuse for a human. If they were fortunate enough to get stung by a truly stupid goon in front of a truly awake cop, they could seek retribution. If they were like the rest of the poor fucks out there in the world who have thought wrong once too many times, they had no recourse but to come to me. The law couldn't help them any more than a tan would help an Eskimo.

My name's Vee, Jonny Vee. I'm a private dick. Point of clarification, I'm actually a psychedelic detective.

I'd taken the last couple of weeks off to recover from a case that had pretty much strapped me mentally. Some joker decided it would be fun and games to run around town torching rich people. The police couldn't find the creep, so the rich people hired me. I always find the creep. That's how I stay employed.

When I found the sorry bastard that was responsible for the torches it turned out to be the local chairman of the biggest bank in the valley. Said he got a thrill from watching his friends go up in flames that no other urge could satisfy.

It takes all kinds to make this world. Me? I get a thrill out of seeing a nice pair of legs in fishnet stockings. A lot safer thrill than torching people.

I also get a thrill out of being paid for my work. Which this time, I actually did.

The police took the guy away, babbling about emotional retardation and sexual repression. I took the money and booked a flight to see an old pal. It was too damn hot in the valley this time of year. I needed a break.

So here I am two weeks later, my pal's as crazy as ever with his kids, a wife

and a regular job, and I'm back in the valley and it's still fucking hot.

I tell ya, there is no justice.

While I felt bad for leaving my pal and his suburban life, one can only handle a dive motel for so long. More importantly, my pharmaceuticals were beginning to run low; it was time to head home.

I came back to a mail slot overflowing with past due notices. You'd think by now the utilities and the landlord would have figured that I always pay late. I always managed to pay. It was just late. So the bills were no big deal but the message machine was. It registered twenty eight phone calls on its electronic screen. I'd never had more than five phone calls in any one month in my entire life. There were twenty eight of them? I knew something had to be screwy.

The first message was from my ex-wife wondering if we would ever get back together. Jeez. We've been divorced for over twelve years and she's been married to the same guy she married after the divorce for the whole twelve. Nah, babe, I don't think it would work.

The next call however got my attention. It was a frantic young woman pleading for me to call her back. She had found herself involved in something way over her head and she needed out. Fast. She left her number and begged me to call her back. The other twenty six messages were identical.

Two weeks of calling and no one answered and still she left messages? I took it to mean she wasn't in too deep of a situation, or perhaps she was just playing with a deck full of jokers, a little slower than the rest. Perhaps both, which, I took to be a good sign. Why, I wasn't sure. I generally stay away from frantic young women playing with a deck filled with jokers. They'd managed to get me in trouble a few times before. You start to get old and you tend to get wise. Or so the story goes. I reached for a cigarette and dialed her number. Guess I wasn't really getting old after all.

So the frantic young thing answers the phone and immediately starts telling me she'll do anything if only I'd help her. I get her to slow down a bit and pull a couple of key facts from her. Her name is Amanda and she needs my help. I tell her the fee. At first, I think I hear the usual hesitation that comes from a dead-beat that more than likely won't pay me. It's generally at this point that I hang

up the phone. But something told me not to. This time, I was glad I trusted my instinct. She'd merely sneezed. The fee was fine.

"Amanda," I tell the frantic young woman, "we're off to a good start."

She set a meeting with me for the next morning at a fancy coffee shop with a name I couldn't pronounce, but it did come with an address, so who needs correct pronunciation?

After meeting with Amanda it turned out that Amanda's problem didn't have so much to do with her, as it did with her brother, Alex. Amanda. Alex. You have to admire parents with creativity.

Alex had found himself involved with a group of corrupt politicians—professionals, sophisticated, the kind that had been running their game for a long time. Politicians. The worst criminals there were.

So now my client, Amanda, brought me into the picture to rescue her brother, Alex. Up until now, I'd left politicians alone. Up until now I hadn't been paid to put my nose into their business. That was then. This was now. Like the man in the funny suit says, "You going to roll the dice or hold them?"

I planned to do more than roll the dice. I planned to upset their precious machine. It was nothing personal. It was purely business. I was sure they'd understand.

I told Amanda we needed to continue the conversation at my office. She agreed. Off we roared to a future neither of us would ever believe.

Chapter 2

Amanda's parents had left her and her brother, Alex, a tidy sum. Not a fortune, but more than my miserable excuse for a living would produce over the next thirty years.

I didn't envy them. Every lowlife in the city would be after their money as soon as the politicians received word about their great "fortune." I tell you, it is times like these that make me proud to be content with my cheap women, tasteless gin, and roll your own cigarettes. I might be cheap, but brother, I own what I have and there's no one wanting any part of it.

So the pol's had gotten their screws into Alex pretty tight. Amanda was right; she was in trouble. Or, rather, her brother was in trouble. Either way, it would appear that I had a client. And that, as I always told my cheap, tasteless women, was what put the fortune into the cookie.

Amanda, like most clients, started in on instructions as to how to proceed. I politely put my cigarette out in her drink and told her that I would be the one to decide how I worked, or didn't work. Since it's my neck that's out there on the line, I kind of liked to keep the reigns in my own hands. Besides, sweetheart or no, I never believed a dame.

The Collective—that's what they called themselves, though the official letterhead said "Committee for Political Investments and Gifting"—ran a simple con. They'd front charitable organizations, skim the profits under the guise of "operating costs," and pocket nearly everything. Alex had fallen in with them at their headquarters, a greasy spoon called Eats. The cheap, greasy spoon for a headquarters didn't bother me, what bothered me was that they wanted his inheritance, and they wanted it bad enough to hold him hostage until he gave it to them.

Something just wasn't adding up. I'd had enough of this case for one night and escorted Amanda to her car.

"You just go on home, pour yourself some milk, heat it, and stay inside until I call you." It was a corny line, but what the hell, it was a corny situation.

"I think you're blowing the 'problem' way out of proportion, Mr. Vee."

She talked to me like my mother used to talk to me when I was found playing rubber gloves with the twins next door, Doris and Delores. I wasn't sure I liked it.

Some would say that the organizations that got scammed got what they deserved. I could care less. What bothered me was that my client's brother had fallen in with these vermin and I knew nothing good would come of it.

"Listen, kid, these guys are no small thing. It seems your brother is in this pretty deep and I think it would be wise if you trusted me until this whole thing blows over. Then, you can tell me to hang my tail off the edge of a cliff and set sail. But until then, I call the shots. Okay?"

She reached into her purse for her car keys. That look that all women get when they agree with me but don't want to admit it started creeping across her face. I knew I'd won round one.

"Okay. Mister Vee. But I still think you should..."

She didn't get a chance to finish. As soon as she hit the button on her car alarm the damn thing blew. Not the alarm, the car. The whole thing blew. The whole fucking thing! Next thing I know I'm flying across the air and then I'm flat on my back. I can hear Amanda crying out for me from across the road. Her car, a once gorgeous white Mercedes, sat afire in the middle of the street. The heat seared my skin from across the road and Amanda was even closer.

I struggled to my feet and managed to get to her before the second explosion hit. Not as violent as the first, but pretty close. I covered Amanda with my body and waited for another explosion. Nothing. It was over. I looked down and saw that she had a 6-inch gash along her temple and her hair, once so neat and perfect, was now singed in various lengths and colors.

"What happened?" she asked as she tried to stand up.

I held her down and told her to lie there till the ambulance came.

"But what happened?"

"What happened, sweetheart, is that The Collective left their calling card. Things happen fast in this business. Word that you hired a private dick is one of them."

"Oh." And with that she passed out.

The fire and ambulance boys managed to arrive before the police. They wheeled Amanda off to a hospital after I bribed the ambulance driver with a fifth

of scotch to conveniently forget which hospital they took her to. It wasn't that I didn't want the police involved. It was, well, I didn't know who I could trust at that moment. The ambulance driver I'd known since the war. Only person I knew, outside of myself, that could drink a fifth of scotch and still walk straight. So him, I could trust. Trusting the cops or anyone else? Not likely.

The Collective had definitely left their mark. They wanted me to stay away from them and the message came across loud and clear. What I couldn't figure was how had they found out so quickly? Christ, I'd just decided to take on the case. How the hell did they know?

Was it The Collective that left their calling card? Or was there more to this than was being let on? There were far too many questions. That's the one thing I've always hated about this business; too many damn questions. But that's what I get paid to find out; answers to all these damn questions.

I figured a good place to start would be with Amanda's brother, Alex. The cops were already on the scene. It would take them a while to notice that her car was parked across from my office. By then I'd be long gone.

I got as far as the alley behind my office when I heard it. I'd heard it a thousand times before and I still hated hearing it.

"Hello, Jonny, looks like we've had a little action tonight."

Damn, didn't this guy ever sleep?

"Hello, Lieutenant. Looks like it. It has nothing to do with me, though."

"Well, I'm sure you wouldn't mind answering some questions."

"Always glad to assist the city's finest, Lieutenant."

I knew the routine. I wouldn't be out of their cop shop for another two hours or more. Damn. How did this guy manage to show up at exactly the wrong moment every single time? It was uncanny. That's what it was. It was uncanny.

"Lieutenant, where in the hell were you when I was getting married to my first wife?"

"You're a funny guy, Jonny. In fact, you're a riot. Now, where in the hell were you when Amanda LeMar's car blew up?"

LeMar? How'd they find out her name so soon? Something was wrong here. Very wrong.

"Jonny, you have problems with your hearing," I could feel the foul warmth of the Lieutenants' breath on my face.

"No. I was...thinking of my reply. I think I'm not sure."

I had to buy some time before I could figure this whole thing out. I had to find out more information. Obviously, the Lieutenant knew something more about Amanda than I did; like her last name. What else did he know?

"Okay, wise guy. Let's head downtown."

Perfect. I'd let them scream at me for a couple of hours or so and then they'd let me go.

I couldn't think of a better way to find out what the Lieutenant knew.

Chapter 3

The rookie cop that escorted me to the police station had all the makings of a fine officer one day. Clean shaven, wide eyed, alert and dumb as a fence post. I politely offered him a mint from a well used tin. A little something I picked up in Mombassa a few years back. The tin was nothing extravagant; silver with inlaid pearl. Fit nicely inside my jacket pocket and held a wide assortment of mints and other delicacies.

Naturally, since the Lieutenant wanted to question me, I was a deviant. This went without saying. The peach fuzz on his precious cheeks just glowed with pride at escorting me downtown. So when I offered the mint there was no way in hell his sorry young ass was going to accept. Accordingly, he turned me down with a smug smile on his cherubic face.

“Thank you, sir, but no.”

My god, I was certain I heard his voice crack. Never mind, the offer had been made. Later, at the precinct, when I had to turn over my weapons, my identification and all the various doodads I carried with me, the silver mint tray would elicit short amount of notice. It was, after all, only a mint tin, he would tell his pals, I had even offered him one. Then, as they were all having a good laugh, he would tell them how he steadfastly refused. It went like clockwork every time I was questioned. Every time.

“Yeah, he always has those stupid mints,” was the usual response from the desk monkeys.

In fact, I did. But mixed in with the various mints were assorted delicacies that, well, they allowed me to free my mind a bit.

Most people fear being interrogated. In truth, it can be a fun experience, if you are properly prepared. In my case my preparation was a disgraced pharmacist and chemist in charge of the mint tin who always made certain I was never lacking for preparedness. I loved that man.

Somehow, the mad chemist had created a way to condense Mescaline into a pill form, and a small one at that. Sure, most all Mescaline came in either liquid or capsule form, but the mad chemist was indeed, mad. Positively, he was a ge-

nius. Colored a soft Easter egg pink, a couple of these boys and two hours later you would be soaring. But, leading up to the flight, the take off if you will, was a magnificent sense of relaxation and all encompassing awareness. So, in essence, two hours of superb mental acuity. Just the necessary item to figure what the lieutenant knew, and how long he had known it.

I threw a couple of the Easter egg delights into my mouth and quietly smiled as they dissolved with all the clandestine fortitude of a pedophilic priest. Who would suspect?

“Vee! Over here.” The lieutenant didn’t so much speak as he barked. His voice called to mind a wounded bull mastiff I owned as a child; gruff and deep with just a hint of sadness in his voice when he barked. It was eerily similar.

“You know the drill,” he said to no one in particular.

I opened the door to the interrogation room and walked in, closing it behind me. The lieutenant would be in shortly. He was nothing if not predictable.

I was twelve the first time I encountered an interrogation room. A bunch of us kids from the neighborhood were rounded up after old man Turner’s car blew up on a lukewarm Sunday evening. The crazy old goat had terrorized us for the last time. His sport of running us up against the red brick walls of Patterson’s Chrome Works had ended. Crazy old fuck. One of us, and to this day not a single one of us can remember who, had the brilliant idea to take an ice pick to old man Turner’s gas tank. Timmy was the skinniest, and he was quick too. He crawled underneath the shining hulk of steel and put just the right amount of holes into the tank to allow the fuel to slowly drip out.

We monitored the increasing puddle from a safe distance, watching its sheen appear then disappear in the light of a half drawn moon. As we were patiently waiting for just the right amount to flow out, Sammy had finally had enough. In one swift move he grabbed his lighter, lit the business end of the deftly prepared cocktail made for just this occasion, and threw it.

The glass bottle exploded upon impact sending a nice volume of flame to indicate it had found its intended target. There was a slight whoosh, and then all hell broke lose as the old mans car exploded, rising and flipping in the sweet night air. In a word, it was awesome.

An insomniac old biddy from down the street told the cops she saw a group of kids running around the block right before the explosion, so we, meaning all

of us “troublemakers”, were rounded up and brought in for questioning. Not a single one of us broke. Not a one. Even when we heard that senile old fuck was passed out in his front seat after a night of heavy drinking. It took the coroner a couple of days to positively identify the body, but it was apparent from the beginning that it was him. There was just enough of his gleaming bald head to make recognition possible. Oops.

That’s when I learned to read what cops weren’t saying. Years later, when the Lieutenant sauntered into the room full of himself, I played the idiot private detective. We’d performed our roles so many times a script was no longer necessary.

The Lieutenant circled the table. His footsteps echoed off the concrete walls. “Tell me about the girl, Jonny.”

I shifted in the metal chair. “She was banged up pretty good. Is she okay?”

A lame opening move, but things were not feeling right. The fluorescent lights hummed too loud. Something was different.

The Lieutenant leaned forward, palms flat on the table. “Look, we know she’s your client. We had her phone tapped, genius. All the phone messages she left, we know all about them.”

A small bead of sweat formed on his forehead, right at the hairline. I watched it develop with rapt attention, unable to look away.

“Vee!” His fist slammed the table. “Are you with me here?”

His voice boomed but seemed distant, like he was shouting from the bottom of a well. The lone drop of perspiration had been joined by several cousins. The Lieutenant’s forehead was materializing a massive typhoon. What the hell was going on?

He grabbed the back of the empty chair across from me, knuckles white. “Listen, Vee, we’re not after you. You’re about as insignificant as a pimple on my ass. Painful, but insignificant. I want to know about the girl. What did she tell you?”

His forehead was now furiously inflamed, alternating in color between red and bright orange. The first drop of sweat found freedom, plummeting down to the rough wooden table below. I watched its death with miraculous wonderment. The edges splayed outward in quiet symmetry as it flattened upon impact. Beautiful.

The Lieutenant kicked the chair. It clattered against the wall. “Okay, tough guy, have it your way. We can do this all night.”

I heard the words through a rainforest torrent of water falling from his head. His eyes bulged bright as a Tibetan god of salvation. His tongue snapped out of his mouth and twirled in the air as he carried on about oblique references to time. Something about the entire night and no air conditioning in the room. He was right about that. It was unbelievably hot. Much worse than any time in the past. I was dead on—something was definitely wrong.

He leaned in close. I could smell his coffee breath, see every pore on his face expanding like craters. “You’re in way over your head this time, Vee. You have one more chance to come clean with me.”

I wanted to respond, but I could not form the words. There was a huge chasm between what my mind thought and what occurred next. I watched the words leap out over the canyon between us and fall flat on the valley floor below. So many tangled and jumbled words, syllables lying dead amongst the cacti waiting for a wayward mule team to come along and rescue them. The Lieutenant had completely transformed into his native self. There was no longer a need for the disguise. I was hip to his covert operations. He must have sensed my insight, deftly shedding his false exterior as he revealed his true, alien self.

He grabbed my collar, yanked me forward. “Where is her brother, Vee? Where is he!”

A beacon of consciousness called out to me from what was left of his earlobe, lying flaccid amongst the puddle of sweat in front of me. The memory of something the chemist had said, almost an offhand remark, was carried with the beacon into my mind: “Be careful with this batch, Jonny. It’s a new recipe and I’m not certain how fast it will react. You might want to start with a half tab.”

The Lieutenant released me. I slumped back in the chair. He straightened his tie, smoothed his shirt. “Alright. We’re through here. But know that we’re watching you.”

His words now filled the air with sounds of Mozart when he spoke. A beautiful sound, really. I was certain I had never heard Mozart in my life. But, there it was.

“Officer, take him back home. He’s of no use to me.”

The floor of the interrogation room was now flooded with his forehead sweat. Large torrents of water rushed out as the Lieutenant opened the door. The peach faced rookie went to help me up, his arms stretching out in front of him for miles. There was a stillness in the air and I was certain it wasn’t me. I watched

the Lieutenant storm out of the room and down the narrow hallway outside. Peach face was grinning this maniacal, tortuous grin. How could his face contort like that, and why were his lips buzzing with the sound of mariachi music?

“Let’s go, bud. It’s time for you to go home. I gotta hand it to you, Vee, you’re one cool customer. Never seen anyone as calm and collected as you. You absolutely know how to get under the Lieutenants skin.”

The rookie was blathering on and on about something about the Lieutenants skin. The mariachi music from his lips was insanely loud. Did these bastards not have volume control? And what about my shoes, who was going to pay for all this water damage? A wayward mule team had managed to just crest the canyon rim as the lead burro called over to me, *better adjust your time line for the cute, pink Easter eggs*, he said.

The burro was a smart little ass. But it was sage advice none the less. I thought about how when old man Turner’s car flipped into the air we all stood transfixed on the image, ignoring the screams from within; he’d run us down for the last time. Asshole. Where was the burro then?

“Come on, Vee, let’s get going.” The rookies outstretched hands waved in front of me twelve miles from his shiny peach of a face. “I haven’t got all night and I actually do have police work to do.”

The burro called out to me one last time as I left the room, *don’t be rude, offer him a mint*.

I mechanically reached inside my jacket pocket for the silver and inlaid pearl container, deftly opening it with one hand while expertly snatching up two of the pink Easter eggs.

Care for a mint, officer? That fucking burro spoke excellent English.

“Really, Vee, pink?” His peach faced laugh echoed off the narrow hallway walls.

No need for waste. I popped them into my mouth as we walked out of the precinct. Oddly enough it was a bright day today. Very nice indeed.

“Will there be enough room for the burro,” I asked the rookie?

“You’re a funny man, Vee. Just get in the car and shut the fuck up.”

I watched the precinct station disappear as we drove away. The burro would be fine on his own. He spoke excellent English.

Chapter 4

The interrogation was a bust, but the Lieutenant’s anguish told me something big was happening—and Amanda was in the middle of it.

The rookie drove me through the Valley in silence, the mescaline painting streetlights in halos and stretching shadows into impossible shapes. By the time we hit downtown, the drug had tightened its grip—the world settling into something resembling a 1940’s horror movie, edges soft and negotiable.

A parade had clogged the streets. Bodies and noise everywhere. I could see roller skaters weaving through the crowd from blocks away.

After Peach Face dropped me off, I tried navigating toward Amanda’s house. The parade made it impossible. Tourists of all designs crammed the streets, and the mad chemist’s pills were still active in my system. A statuesque redhead and her roller skating girlfriends in short shorts caught my eye as I sat trapped at an intersection.

“Hey sweetie,” the lovely redhead called out. “You’re going to get nowhere in that car today, babe.”

The rookie drove me through the Valley in silence, the mescaline still painting the streetlights in halos and stretching the shadows into impossible shapes. By the time we hit downtown, the drug was really tightening its grip—the world settling back into something resembling a 1940’s horror movie, though the edges still felt soft, negotiable. A parade had clogged the streets with bodies and noise, and I could see roller skaters weaving through the crowd from blocks away. My head was clearing, sort of, but then again, maybe it wasn’t.

After Peach Face dropped me off I navigated the city streets to her house, which was no easy event. There was still some sort of parade taking place downtown and all the streets were crammed with tourists of all designs. Add to that fact the mad chemist’s pills were still active in my system, it was a mighty fine day or night, whatever, indeed. A statuesque redhead and her roller skating girlfriends in short shorts caught my eye. It was all I could do to keep my mind focused on the task at hand. You know, driving.

“Hey sweetie,” the lovely redhead called out. “You’re going to get nowhere in that car today, babe.”

She had accosted me at an intersection with her long, shapely legs, leaning into the window giving me a nice view of her assets. They were indeed, nice. Swinging free, too. I so love roller skating.

“Why don’t you park your car right over there, handsome? Come have some fun with me. You’re locked up tight until the parade is over anyway’s.” She batted her large green eyes, winked, and melted what little brain I had.

By some force of galactic luck there was a space open right in front of me. Go figure. And she was right about not moving, not a chance in hell of getting out of that madness for a long while. She was busy turning figure eights and swaying with her own created rhythm. Nice assets, I remember thinking as I pulled over to park. It was right about then that I saw her smile, wave, and motion to someone to come over. Just when I thought it might have been me I realized that cold steel was pressing against the side of my head, almost lifting my tan fedora off my head. Man, I was seriously losing it. How did I not see it coming?

“Park the car, Vee. Then get out, slowly. I have no problem with wasting your sorry ass.”

The wretched breath and cologne were familiar. Even the press of the steel against my forehead was déjà vu.

“Steve-O, who let you off your leash?”

“You’re a funny boy, Vee. Quit with the comedy and come with me. Someone wants to talk with you.”

His approach was as deadpan as Pat Paulsen’s run for the presidency. I had little choice in the matter. Steve-O had a gun on me, plus there was the small fact he was just that much short of being a silver backed gorilla. The man was immense! For his size, which was huge, he was quick as the devil in a short distance. There were few options left for me, that was certain.

I parked the wreck and slowly exited. No need to attempt escape, it was futile; he would only hunt me down later and it would most assuredly be worse the second time around. So far, it was just this side of unpleasant. Probably best to keep it that way.

The lovely red headed skater gracefully bowed before me, offering what I could only assume was a last look.

“You’re tremendous, gorgeous. Nice laces on the skates too.”

“All for you, Jonny. Have a nice time. You two play nice.” With that she

turned and floated off down the street, swaying those magnificent assets to the local high schools drum beat as they marched down the street beside us.

“Let’s go, Vee.”

Steve-O was in no mood for marching bands or swaying assets. That’s the trouble with hoods these days, no appreciation for the arts.

“Into the building and up the stairs. Let’s move it.”

The red brick building had all the earmarks of a decayed remnant left from days long gone by. Blacked out lower windows, stale smell of urine and wine in the doorway, I instinctively murmured my agreement, trying not to breathe as we walked through the doorway.

Muted sounds of a dice game could be heard coming from beyond the darkened entrance way. I recognized the distinct baritone of Large George, the city’s premier odds maker. From the sounds of it, he was none too happy.

“You’re cheating me.” I could hear his deep velvet voice reverberate throughout the hallway. “Always with the crooked game.”

“About as crooked as your last minute odds, my brother.”

The nasal tones of Niles Jerzy, was distinct. Last I saw of Niles, I dropped him off near the Emerald city as I headed to Hollywood to make love to a starlet wrapped up in stockings of another era. I had dropped him off to the suave sounds of cloistered monks chanting stereophonic renderings of their Catholic faith playing low in the background as my 1974 Chevrolet Impala floated along the interstate, its steel hulk gliding effortlessly to the monks’ melancholy tunes. The night air was sweet with anticipation as I headed to make love to the starlet, her well formed stockings beckoning.

I liked Niles. He brought back fond memories.

“Vee, get your ass in here!” Large George was in an unpleasant mood. Always was when he was losing.

“Don’t fuck with me, Jonny. Tell me about the woman.” George was known for his directness.

“I mean it, you crazy fuck. I want to know what you know, and I’m not nearly the pushover those pussy cops are.” His deep baritone mesmerized. It was difficult to focus. Perhaps the mescaline? Nah.

“Spill it, asshole!”

Have you ever had one of those inescapable moments of déjà vu? You know

the one's I'm talking about, right? Like you meet some leggy waitress and you just know you've seen her cuteness before, and then, hours later as you're both relaxing to a couple of velvet crushes and Kool's after fabulously insane sex, you realize where you've met her before...the cover of Gents magazine. Yeah, like that.

I was having one of those moments right now.

Large George reached for his Louisville Slugger.

I hit the deck.

The world exploded.

Gunfire erupted from everywhere—the stairwell, the windows, the god-damn walls. Automatic weapons tearing through brick and flesh. I pressed myself flat against the filthy floor as rounds punched through the air where my head had been.

Niles scrambled up the stairs. George followed, his bulk surprisingly fast.

Steve-O stood his ground, blasting at shadows, his face twisted in rage and confusion. Where the hell was the fire coming from?

Then his head snapped back.

A round caught him in the temple. Clean. Final.

He dropped like a puppet with cut strings, his gun clattering across the floor.

Steve-O.

No time to process. No time to mourn.

"Vee, over here!"

Female voice. Familiar.

"Move your ass, Vee! Let's go!"

I couldn't place it through the chaos.

"Now!"

George's goons regrouped on the second floor, raining death from above. Muzzle flashes lit the stairwell like strobe lights. The air filled with cordite and screaming.

"Damn it, Vee! I'm trying to save your ass here—move!"

I turned.

Amanda.

What the fuck?

She stood in the doorway, tactical vest, assault rifle, flanked by six operators

in black. Full combat gear. Samurai swords strapped to their backs like something out of a fever dream.

This wasn't the terrified client from the coffee shop.

This was someone else entirely.

What the hell, man? The burro materialized beside me, eyes wide.

"Stay back," I muttered. "I left you oats—"

"Vee, you crazy bastard, who are you talking to?" Amanda's voice cut through the gunfire.

Two of her mercs broke formation and charged toward me. The biggest one—six-nine, maybe two-eighty—scooped me up under one arm like I weighed nothing.

"Time to go, old man."

"I'm not—"

The building erupted again. Amanda's crew opened up with everything they had. The noise was biblical. Rounds chewed through walls, shattered windows, turning George's goons into red mist.

We hit the back hallway at a dead run. Daylight ahead. Blessed, beautiful daylight.

The merc's hustled me into a waiting box van. Amanda dove in behind us. The doors slammed shut.

We peeled out, tires screaming, leaving smoke and bodies behind.

I caught one last glimpse of Steve-O's body through the closing doors.

See ya, Steve-O.

I really was going to miss that guy.

Chapter 5

It had been an incredible 24 hours. I had returned from my somewhat neurotic pal's suburban nightmare to an equally neurotic, yet psychotic, client.

The sweetheart client was involved with crooked politicians and the local police lieutenant was somehow involved. If that were not enough, Large George was somehow wrapped up in the whole situation, to what extent was still undecided, and Steve-O was dead. A couple of George's lackeys were no longer warm and vertical, that crazy fucker Niles Jerzy, was back in town and my client, the sweet Amanda, was apparently some sort of closeted death ninja with a well trained crew of mercenaries. I still had yet to meet her brother, Alex.

Your chemist came up with a dynamite and fast acting synthetic mescaline this time, the burro added.

"Yes he did, you fury little critter. Yes he did, indeed."

It was, apparently, long lasting as well.

I needed some time to sort this all out, but time was becoming a precious commodity that I had no stake in. Amanda's merc's were driving outside the city with a determination that unsettled my usually calm nerves. There was an abandoned quarry in our general direction, I assumed they were headed to it.

The largest of the merc's turned to Amanda. "Are you sure we can trust this washed out psycho?"

"I'm sure. I said I checked him out. He's fine. Drive the van and don't worry about it."

Her demeanor left no doubt as to who was in charge. It was her.

"Vee," her angelic look had returned as she spoke to me. "I know you have a lot of questions, but right now is not the time. I will fill you in as soon as we make certain we are safe. Right now, just sit quiet and try to enjoy the ride."

She turned her attention to one of her men that had been wounded in the fire fight. It appeared to be nothing serious, a through and through in his right shoulder. This guy was a definite pro, didn't even flinch as she patched him up.

I noticed the distinctive tattoo on his arm as she patched him up; a skull

with a beret and dagger, with a snake coiled around it. No mistaking the tattoo, this boy was ex-special forces.

I sized up the rest of the crew. My bet was they were the same. The way they worked in complete unison they had more than likely all served together.

"Hit the lights," Amanda suddenly barked to the driver. "You know the procedure."

In a flash everything went dark. Odd, I could have sworn it was daylight just moments earlier. The van careened down a gravel road, no lights, the driver taking turns sharply and suddenly in the coal black darkness, it was obvious he had run this route many times before.

We came to an abrupt stop and the merc's quickly bailed out of the van, leaving Amanda, who was fidgeting with something from the medical kit.

"Sit still, Vee. I'm pretty certain you'll enjoy this."

The back door of the van opened as a hairy, tattooed arm wrapped around me from behind. Amanda deftly leaned forward and injected me with a needle drawn from the medical kit.

"Don't fight it, Jonny," she breathed into me. "Just enjoy the ride."

I felt a warmth shoot through me as my entire body went limp. The hairy, tattooed arm was soon joined by another and I felt myself being lifted out of the van. I thought it odd that she called me "Jonny". No one ever did, they always referred to me as Vee. Except my mom, and the burro, though in all truthfulness he jumped back and forth between the two.

"He's smiling. This crazy bastard is actually enjoying this."

The big merc had just a hint of laughter in his voice, along with a little bewilderment, and even a little awe.

Amanda's voice was clear as the night air in its reply, "I told you I checked him out. He's perfect. Take him to the room."

There was a slight echo to her voice and I had the sensation of being carried into a cavern. I could not move a single muscle, though I had no trouble breathing. Whatever she shot me with, it was good. I liked it.

As we turned a corner, daylight spilled across my vision—except we'd pulled in on a pitch-black gravel road. The light was all wrong.

Amanda leaned over me as her minions strapped me onto a gurney. Through a purple haze, I heard her voice float like a warm breeze.

“How are you feeling, Jonny?”

“I’m doing just fine, dear. Mind telling me exactly what the hell is going on?”

My voice had a reverberation to it that made the burro giggle.

“He should be unconscious,” one of the mercs said. “Put him out, Amy.”

Amy. The name landed like a punch. I saw it then—a thin scar running down her inner forearm like a miniature lightning bolt. Not the delicate mark on the right wrist from the coffee shop. This was something else entirely. Something deliberate. Something military.

Two women. Two different operations. Two different agendas.

Welcome to the party, pal, the burro said quietly. *Took you long enough.*

“If you’re not going to tell me what’s going on,” I managed, “could you just give me another injection?”

The merc’s stared at me with their mouths hanging open.

“There’s no way this guy should be conscious,” the wounded merc shouted.

“I told you he was perfect for the job,” Amy said, looking down at me. “Quit wasting time and finish setting up.”

She disappeared into the cavern, leaving me strapped to the gurney with the burro for company.

Colors were brighter, sharper. Sounds came through as color now, which wasn’t normal. My body felt warm, loose, like I was floating just above the gurney. Whatever they’d pumped into me, it wasn’t anything I recognized.

This is way more than a girl trying to help her brother, the burro said quietly. *The Lieutenant was too intense. He gave up far too easily.*

He was right. Something was wrong with the whole picture.

Heads up, Vee. Someone is coming.

The two mercs who lifted me from the van appeared next to me. These were a couple of serious boys. Not even the hint of a smirk as they wheeled me to another room.

“Vee,” the larger of the two leaned over me, “I will give you this, you are one durable son of a bitch. I can’t believe you’re not knocked out and slobbering.”

He patted me reassuringly, checking my restraints before he left.

I’d come to appreciate the burro’s insight. Crazy as it seemed, he was the only sane thing going on around me.

Chapter 6

The sight of neatly ordered orange bowling balls was enhanced by the smell of Rogaine in the air. It was Wednesday night, league night. Throw six strikes in a row and the waitress would bend over just that much further when she handed you your beer. Throw eight in a row and you could watch her straighten her seams.

The Lieutenant had few pleasures in his life, outside of bowling. Five ex-wives, two bastard children, a couple of dogs, four cats and a parakeet pretty much summed up his life; though the cats, dog, parakeet and bastard children all resided with his ex-wives, he did not consider himself a loner....he still had his bowling.

It was his only time of escape from the hell that was his life, so when the uniform cop walked through the bowling alley he knew something was wrong; seriously wrong. No one ever disturbed him on bowling night. Ever. Not even Lavonda, psycho ex-wife number three. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

“Lieutenant,” the young cop could not look him in the eye as he stammered his apologies. “I’m real sorry about this. But you need to come with me.”

The Lieutenant slowly lowered his ball to the rack. He sat down to remove his shoes. The young cop hurried to place the Lieutenants equipment in the smooth, black leather bowling bag which lay just out of reach of the Lieutenants beefy hands.

“Touch that bag and I’ll break every bone in your hand.” The Lieutenants voice was more of a low growl than a verbal statement. The young uniform backed away.

“The bag,” the Lieutenant snarled, “was a gift from my son.”

The Lieutenant dutifully took his time in removing the gleaming black Dexter bowling shoes from his size fourteen feet. At a cost of over two hundred fifty a pair, he always took meticulous care of them. Methodically placing each item into his black leather bowling bag, he caught the eye of the waitress as he was leaving.

"No rest for the wicked, sweetheart?" She winked at him as he walked past her.

"You would know," he softly replied.

The rookie cop stood transfixed. The Lieutenant actually spoke to someone without his customary growl. The young rookie was wakened from his wonderment with a sharp jab to his chest.

"You," the Lieutenant emphasized with his thick, meaty finger, "should pay attention to your own business. Now, where the fuck are we headed?"

"There's been a massacre, sir," the rookie stammered. "A total massacre."

The Lieutenant lit a cigarette and took a long, deep drag. He exhaled slowly and deliberately as he spoke.

"I didn't ask you what happened. I asked you where we were headed. Now, where are we going? Does that work better for you?"

A waiting car was outside the bowling alley. As the Lieutenant stepped out two beefy detectives blocked the rookie cop from stepping any further.

"We'll take it from here, son," the larger of the two men put up his hand, stopping the rookie dead in his tracks. "Thanks for your help."

"Bill. Frank," the Lieutenant growled. "This better be good. I was working on a perfect game back there."

"Yeah, and Francine was adjusting her stockings for you. We know all about it." The shorter of the two had a scar that ran from the bottom of his left ear to the corner of his mouth. It twitched and danced when he spoke.

"That bad?" There was really no question in the Lieutenant's voice. It was more of throat clearing than anything else.

"It's that bad, maybe worse." The big detective, Frank, leaned forward so that no one else could hear. "It's a fucking meat grinder over at Large George's. Blood and body parts are every fucking where."

The Lieutenant dropped his large frame into the driver's seat and headed to the carnage. It wasn't like Bill and Frank to be squeamish; especially Frank. They had all seen their share of murders, rapes, suicides and mass destruction. Why the whispering and, almost cowering, by his detectives? These were hardened men, not pimply faced rookies getting their first glimpse of a nicely carved stomach wound. The whole scenario was wrong. The full moon had been a week earlier and the skies were clear. The temperature had been relatively mild for the

past few days. Even the garbage collectors' union seemed happy. Everything in life appeared normal. Still, nothing was making any sense.

"I'm telling you, Lieutenant, there are friggin' body parts everywhere," was Frank's response to the Lieutenants questioned gaze.

"Arms, legs, heads...they're all over the place. We can't even get a photo crew in there to document the crime scene without having them rush out gagging and puking like some high school kids drunk on prom night."

"I want the scene locked down," was the Lieutenants reply. "Do you two understand me? Lock it down tighter than a Mormon girl's knees on her first date. Got it? And no goddamn photos either!"

The Lieutenant wasn't taking any chances with this. One thing he'd learned was that no information was sometimes the best information. He wanted absolute silence on this, of that he was certain. He wasn't certain what he was going to encounter, but he knew he didn't want anyone else to encounter it as well.

"And I mean no photo's either," he shouted to no one in particular. Sure as hell there was going to be a leak. Last thing he needed was a press leak, which, eventually he was going to have anyway, but at least they wouldn't have any proof.

The Lieutenant turned sideways and looked back to glare at both of his detectives. "Why are you assholes not on your phones? Did you not fucking hear me?"

It was going to be a long night. If two of his most trusted men were shaken, he could only imagine what the rest of the department was doing. He'd have to move quickly to immobilize the impact. It was not going to be easy. A lot of people were already called out, most of them department personnel, but some were civilians. The civilians were going to be a bitch to silence. Always were. Hopefully there was minimal involvement, that plus there was the fact of the parade and festivities earlier in the day; he could always play it off as unwarranted rumors spread by drunken first responders. If nothing else, it would buy him some time.

Bill, and Frank, were on their phones dispatching the Lieutenant's orders. It would all start gaining speed. And quickly. But there was still the captain and the mayor to deal with. The captain would roll over and let the Lieutenant do his job, but the mayor was going to pose a problem. Just what he needed on top

of everything else; a liberal, asshole politician. To make matters worse, it was an election year so he could count on the mayor as being as photogenic and in the way as possible. First order of business after securing the scene and shutting the information down was to shut that fucking bastard up.

“Frank,” the Lieutenant barked out. “I’m going to need those photos of his honor and the hooker.”

“Sure thing, boss. You want the regular girl or the tranny?” Frank already knew the answer, he was more nervous about arriving back at the scene than anything else.

“We need to bring out the tranny, Frank. Glossy and in color. Do you read me?”

“Loud and clear, boss.”

The Lieutenant had been sitting on these babies for a while. A long while. Years ago, when the mayor was just a councilman, the Lieutenant had set him up with a transvestite named Veronica—caught him in a compromising position and kept the photos. Clear, vivid, and damning. The councilman never knew what hit him. Now he was the mayor, and the Lieutenant’s insurance policy was about to be cashed in. So that left nearly all bases covered. Except one; what the fuck went down, and why?

As he pulled up to the crime scene the Lieutenant could tell Bill and Frank’s calls had done the trick. Not a soul was inside Large George’s building. Everyone was outside and the news media fucks were only just beginning to show up. His boys had done their job though; the perimeter was a full three blocks away and nothing was getting through. Perfect.

George’s entrance way stunk like the precincts bathroom during a janitors strike. It was repulsive. The Lieutenant hated to come down to this section of the city. It reminded him of his childhood. Poverty. Stench. Low life scum. He winced as he walked through the hallway; it was too much like returning home.

“See what I mean, Lieutenant,” Frank almost pleaded. “Fucking carnage.”

It was true. There were far too many rounds on the ground to be counted. Nine millimeter. Forty five. Shotgun shells. Even some goddamn fifty caliber large shells. Damn, there was a hell of a firefight in here. They were on all floors, too. And blood, lots and lots of blood. It had poured down from the upper balconies in mini waterfalls leaving spectacular patterns against the lower hall-

ways and walls. In a way, it was almost beautiful the way the splatters played out against the thick carpet of empty shells, gathering around the assorted arms, legs, and severed heads that lay cluttered throughout the building. Yeah, there had been a massacre here, no doubt about it. The severed heads kind of clued in on that.

Frank had hurried past the Lieutenant to the back of the building, shouting out; “Here at the back of the building is where we think whoever it was that did this escaped. See the blown out door and wall?”

The Lieutenant walked down from the second floor landing and started walking towards Frank’s voice, carefully stepping over and around the scattered bodies and dismemberments that lay in the hallways.

Bill was searching the alley in back of the building while Frank took pains to show the Lieutenant tire tracks leading away from the building. There were fresh drops of blood on the pavement outside of the building indicating at least one of the attackers had been wounded. From the amount left behind, it was no small wound. But that’s not what caught the Lieutenant’s eye. What really came into his immediate focus was the light tan fedora with two small peacock feathers lying in the alley, right outside of the blown out door and wall.

“Vee,” he growled out to the darkness. “I knew it would be Vee.”

Chapter 7

The walls of the room were stainless steel. No windows, and only one door. There was a slight draft that ran across my cheek but I was not certain where it came from. My captives had left me securely affixed to the gurney with what they, no doubt, felt was enough drug to knock me out. It was pleasant enough, both the burro and I agreed, but frankly, I had partaken of much stronger hallucinogens on numerous occasions. On the burro's advice, and he was a wise creature, I finally dummied up and let them believe I had drifted off to delirium. They soon hurriedly left the stainless steel room leaving me in a delicious stupor to think through the current situation at hand.

Puzzling as my situation was, it was beginning to make sense. First of all, it was apparent that the client, Amanda, was not Amanda at all, but a woman with the name of Amy. Not as in "my friends call me Amy." No, she was Amy, and she was most certainly in charge. The mercenaries not only called her Amy, but stood at attention when they did.

The burro reminded me of the faint lightening bolt scar on Amanda's right wrist. Amy did not have the same scar. The skin on her wrist was as pure as snow. It was flawless. She couldn't be Amanda.

So I knew I was dealing with two separate people. I was getting closer to something, but what? Why the need for all the violence at Large George's?

We need to focus on the task at hand, bud. We need to get out of here.

The burro was right, there was a lot more to figure out. The task at hand for the moment was escape, which was already in process.

As a teenager I'd become fascinated with Houdini and spent years mastering his techniques for dislocating joints—shoulders, thumbs, elbows. It took time and pain, but I'd perfected it. Now I could escape from pretty much any restraint whenever I chose to do so. I knew, even as a kid, there would come a time when I would need to escape from restraint.

This was one of those times. Strapped to a steel gurney, apparently drugged, the merc's had made the unfortunate mistake of not leaving a sentry to guard me. Within minutes I was free from the straps and off the gurney. They might be

vicious bastards in a fire fight, but overall, they were fairly ignorant.

My jacket was nicely draped against the back of a chair, everything intact. Only thing missing was my fedora. I'd lost that in the hurried exit from Large George's. Damn it, I had grown attached to that hat. I was going to miss it.

You can get another one, the burro offered. Can you try to maintain focus?

He was right. The hat was replaceable. Time, however, was not. Time was short for escape and I had to move quickly. The slight draft I felt was coming from a ventilation duct. I positioned the gurney below the duct and soon found myself in the ventilation system of a very large industrial structure. I could hear the voices of Amy and her men coming from far away. There were still too many pieces missing and I could not pass up the chance to learn more. Against the burro's wishes I quietly crawled towards the voices.

"We wait a while longer and then we'll give him another dose." Amy's voice grew louder as I continued towards her.

"If we give him too much it will kill him. We get it. But how do you know he'll cooperate? For Christ's sake, did you see how much we had to give him just to knock him out?"

I recognized the pleading voice of the wounded merc. After the adrenaline rush of their hit he'd realized he had been hit pretty hard and he was having a hard time keeping it together. The burro made a mental note that he would be the first to go. I agreed.

"It doesn't matter how much it took, what matters is that it is working. Another shot and he will do whatever I tell him to do. Soon, The Collective and the others will be as dead as that moron George and his crew. Now get back to work, there's a lot left to do."

Her orders were barked with the authority of a general. I had positioned myself nearly over the top of these dolts and could hear every sound they made. Listening closely I could make out three pairs of boots tramping off to the right. How many did that leave? The burro thought nine, but I was not as certain as he was.

"You four come with me and help prepare the van."

She must have read my mind. That made seven, including Amy, eight.

"Tony, you stay here and try not to bleed out." Nine. Fucking burro was always right.

With everyone headed in their separate directions it left me a little more time to maneuver myself. I'd had enough of these assholes for one day. They were ignorant bastards with lame drugs. It was time to leave the party.

"Tony," she called out before she left. "You question me one more time and I'll put a bullet in your head. Now go check on Vee."

He didn't reply but I already knew where he was positioned. All I needed to do was to wait for the right moment. He was injured, and now he was pissed. There are certain evolutionary traits that all men carry with them, chief of which is not being particularly fond of taking orders from a woman. It was only a matter of time before he started pacing, he didn't disappoint.

I was waiting next to the large air intake when he started walking towards me. Limping, and in pain, if he would have looked up he would have seen it coming. Lucky for me he was nearly doubled over with his gaze at the ground.

Chapter 8

Waiting for Tony to meet his fate, I positioned myself by the air intake. He was coming—I could hear his labored breathing, the drag of his injured leg across the concrete floor. The burro stood silent beside me, patient. All I had to do was wait.

A sharp grunt of pain tore through the air, letting me know exactly where Tony was located in relation to the intake. As I counted down his steps, the burro handed me a tire iron. Where he found the tire iron, I had no idea. But his usefulness proved itself once more as the end of the iron met Tony's head, sinking into his scalp quite nicely.

Tony gave out a quiet gasp, and then sunk to the floor, a crimson puddle forming around him.

Head wounds bleed profusely, and can be deceiving, the burro whispered. Hit him again and make certain he's dead.

I reached down for a pulse, but I could tell Tony was dead. The blow had been delivered with precision. There was no anger in its delivery, just taking care of business. Anger has no use in these matters.

Jonny, you need to keep your anger in check. The burro recited this as if it were a line from a grade school primer.

He continued with the lesson.

The key to resolving your anger is to identify what you're truly angry about. Is it about how you were treated as a child? How your ex kept all the money? Is it about being short changed hot sauce packets, getting only two packets for your three tacos that time you went through a drive-thru in Temecula? You need to find the source and drive a stake through its heart. Unless it was the drive-thru in Temecula. If the source of your anger is not receiving enough hot-sauce packages for your taco's you need to fire bomb those bitches. It's the only way to obtain salvation.

Finished with his lecture on anger management, the burro helped me stash Tony's dead carcass in the air intake. We rolled a utility cart over the blood stain just in case someone decided to check up on the lad to make certain he did his job.

So now we were down to eight. Four of the mercs were with Amy, at the van, wherever that might be, and three others were off somewhere else. But where? Nearby? I hadn't heard any other sounds since Tony's body thudded against the floor. Where were the others?

I wasn't certain what they had injected me with, but I liked it. It was also wearing off, which in all honesty, I really didn't care for.

Chapter 9

I crawled deeper into the ventilation system, my shoulders screaming from the dislocation and reset. The metal was cold against my palms, the sound of my breathing amplified in the narrow passage. The drug was loosening its grip—colors no longer bleeding into one another, sounds returning to their proper frequencies—the world still felt negotiable. But it was still soft around the edges. Like reality was a suggestion rather than a rule.

Keep moving, the burro said quietly. They're looking for you.

I could hear them now. Boots on concrete below. Voices calling out in clipped military cadence. The three merc's Amy had sent off earlier—they'd returned, and they were hunting.

The vent passage narrowed ahead, forcing me to army-crawl on my elbows. My jacket caught on a seam and I had to twist sideways to free it. The tin of mescaline mints rattled in my pocket. I still had my cigarettes, my lighter, and something else—a small glass vial I'd forgotten about. DMT. A gift from the chemist months ago, tucked away for emergencies.

That's not an emergency supply, the burro warned. That's a dimensional doorway. "Shut up," I whispered.

Behind me, metal groaned. Someone had entered the ventilation system.

I moved faster, ignoring the pain in my shoulders, the scrape of metal against my ribs. The passage split ahead—left toward what sounded like machinery, right toward silence. I chose right. Always choose the quiet when you're being hunted.

The vent opened into a junction box, maybe four feet square. Enough room to crouch but not stand. I pulled myself inside and pressed against the far wall, listening.

Boots in the passage behind me. Close now. Then a second set. A third.

All three, the burro said. They've got you boxed in.

A flashlight beam cut through the darkness, sweeping the junction. I pressed myself flatter against the wall, but there was nowhere to hide. The beam found me.

"There." The voice was calm, professional. "End of the line, friend."

The first merc crawled towards the junction box, his sidearm drawn. Behind him, two more. All three wore the same ex-special forces tattoo, the same dead-eyed expression. They'd done this before—cornered men in tight spaces, eliminated problems efficiently.

"Amy wants you alive," the lead merc said. "But she didn't say in what condition."

The second merc smiled. "We could make this hurt."

My hand went to my jacket pocket. The mescaline tin. The DMT vial. The chemist's voice echoed in my memory: "Never mix the sacraments, Vee. You mix them, you're not just opening doors—you're tearing down walls."

Don't do it, the burro said, but his voice was different now. Uncertain. *You don't know what's on the other side.*

"I know what's on this side," I said aloud.

The lead merc frowned. "Who are you talking to?"

I popped two pink mescaline eggs into my mouth and bit down. Then I uncapped the DMT vial and drank. The taste was bitter, chemical, wrong. The world lurched sideways.

Oh shit, the burro said. *Here we go.*

The drugs hit like a freight train made of light. The junction box expanded, contracted, folded in on itself. The merc's faces stretched into impossible geometries, their mouths opening in slow motion. Sound became color became texture became something without a name.

And then he was there.

The Gringo Shaman.

He didn't walk into the junction box. He manifested into it—pulled from another dimension by the chemical marriage of mescaline and DMT, dragged through the membrane between worlds by my desperation, or my stupidity, or something older than both.

He was tall, impossibly tall for the space, his body flickering between solid and translucent. His face was weathered, ancient, covered in geometric tattoos that moved across his skin like living things. He wore a poncho woven from colors that didn't exist, and his eyes—his eyes were doorways.

The merc's saw him. All three froze.

"What the fuck—" the lead merc started.

The Shaman raised one hand.

Reality bent.

The junction box stretched like taffy, the walls pulling away from each other, the floor tilting at an angle that defied physics. The merc's scrambled for purpose, their weapons forgotten, their training useless against geometry that refused to cooperate.

The ventilation passage behind them twisted, folded, became a Möbius strip of metal and darkness. One merc reached for his sidearm and his hand passed through it like smoke. Another tried to crawl backward and found himself moving forward instead, space refusing to honor his intentions.

Holy shit, the burro whispered. *He's actually here.*

The Shaman looked at me. His eyes were kind.

"Jonny Vee," he said, and his voice was the sound of wind through canyon walls, of water over ancient stone. "The burro sends his regards."

I'm right here, the burro protested.

"You are here," the Shaman agreed, speaking to the burro now. "And you are there. And you are everywhere the medicine allows."

He turned back to the merc's. They were pressed against the walls now, their faces pale, their professional composure shattered. One was whimpering. Another had his eyes squeezed shut, refusing to accept what he was seeing.

"You hunt a man under false orders," the Shaman said. "Your commander serves masters she does not name. Your loyalty is wasted."

The lead merc found his voice. "We serve Amy. We follow orders."

"You serve fear," the Shaman corrected. "And fear is a poor master."

He gestured, and the ventilation system rearranged itself. Passages that had led deeper into the quarry now opened to the outside. The junction box rotated, and suddenly I was looking at a shaft of moonlight cutting through the darkness, an exit I hadn't seen before because it hadn't existed before.

"Go," the Shaman said to me. "The burro will guide you."

Damn right I will, the burro said, his confidence returning.

I crawled toward the light, my body moving through space that felt more like water than air. Behind me, the merc's were shouting, but their voices were distant now, muffled by layers of reality that the Shaman had folded between us.

The passage opened onto a rocky slope outside the quarry. The night air was cool, clean, real. I pulled myself out and collapsed on the ground, gasping.

The Shaman appeared beside me, still flickering, still half in this world and half in another.

“The medicine will fade,” he said. “But the door remains open. When you need us, we will come.”

Us? I managed to think.

“The burro and I,” the Shaman said, reading my thoughts or simply knowing them. “We are allies across the veil. We watch over those who walk between worlds.”

He placed a hand on my shoulder. It felt solid and insubstantial at the same time, warm and cold, present and absent.

“Amy’s war is not your war,” he said. “But you are caught in it nonetheless. Trust the burro. Trust yourself. And remember—reality is more flexible than they taught you.”

Then he was gone, dissolved back into whatever dimension had birthed him, leaving only the smell of sage and the fading geometry of impossible angles.

I lay on the rocky ground, staring up at the stars, waiting for my heart to stop trying to escape my chest.

That, the burro said quietly, was fucking intense.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

You know you’re going to have to go back in there eventually, right? Amy still has your fedora. And probably your dignity.

“One thing at a time,” I said.

Below, in the ventilation system, I could hear the merc’s shouting, their voices confused and frightened. The Shaman had bought me time, but not much. Amy would regroup. The Lieutenant would keep hunting.

But for now, I had the night sky and the cool air and the knowledge that somewhere between the mescaline and the DMT, between this world and the next, I had allies I hadn’t known existed.

Come on, the burro said. Let’s get you somewhere safe before the drugs wear off completely and you realize how fucked you actually are.

“Too late,” I said, but I was already moving, already running, already planning my next move in a game I still didn’t fully understand.

The Valley Case was far from over.

But at least now I knew I wasn’t playing alone.

Chapter 10

The worst thing a cop can do is eat his own gun. It is a stigma that transcends religion. An unspoken code exists among all cops to protect and serve not only the public, but themselves as well...especially themselves. When one of them takes his own life it draws questions that need not be answered, or even spoken of. If one could do it, how far behind could the rest be? It was exactly this line of logic that brought Duarte into the bar each day. He had little more than a year to go before retirement and he had more than his share of skeletons in his closet. But the one thing that had kept him going the entire time, nearly thirty five years, was the thought of his brothers not attending his funeral due to his suicide. No sir. He was not going out that way. Not him. While the stigma was great indeed it did not carry over onto retirement. Once you were retired there were a new set of rules to live by and suicide played out much different in the retired cop rule book. It was exactly these rules that gave Duarte hope. The gin helped too, though Duarte was loathe to believe it.

A large man with exceptionally large hands and long, supple fingers, Duarte had youthful aspirations of becoming a concert pianist, something he still held dear in his heart, until the fateful day changed everything. He was a senior in high school, about to graduate, and was in music class after school where he could be found almost every day. He had long ago dealt with the stigma of being a musician instead of an athlete, an especially egregious act for one as large as he was. A brutish youth, six foot five, two hundred eighty-five pounds of solid youthful mass, he had no ambition outside of playing the compositions of Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, Dussek and his favorite, Antonio Salieri. His large, supple fingers would drift across the ivory keys never knowing the infliction of pain they could bring...it simply did not exist in his heart.

His friend and teacher Mr. Rose, was the first to approach him. Duarte noticed immediately the ashen color of Mr. Rose’s face and his grave demeanor as he slowly approached his student. There had been an accident, an incident to be succinct, at Duarte’s home. Duarte’s mother had come home from work early to find her home being ransacked. Enraged at the intrusion she attacked the in-

truder only to be shot point blank directly into her heart. Neighbors had heard her yelling for someone to “get out of my house” shortly before the single report of the gun silenced her. They saw a figure dart over the side fence and then into a waiting car, but no one was able to give any more information than that; it had happened all too quickly.

Duarte froze at the mention of his mother being shot, his large hands clasped around each other in his lap as he sat looking out the window. He would later recall the sounds of a bird calling to its mate off in the distance and then Mr. Rose’s voice coming into focus, telling Duarte he needed to breathe, no matter the pain. Yes, he would recall, breathing is good, no matter the struggle involved. Breathing is good. It became a mantra with him throughout his life; breathing is good. No matter what happened in his life he could always find his center with those three, simple words.

The burglar turned murderer was never found. Duarte’s father died a short time later of a broken heart, leaving Duarte a small sum from both his parents’ life insurance. He stopped playing music and set off to join the police force. Police work became his only passion, replacing what had been joyful in his life with a bitter darkness. Eventually making detective he was known as a tough as nails cop who was relentless in the dogged pursuit of his prey. It was befitting he would end up in homicide and over the course of his career he put many murderers behind bars, each time feeling his heart tear anew knowing his mothers killer had gotten away clean. It left him hollow, a shell of a human. The large fingers that once so gracefully flowed over ivory keys now reached out for the most heinous of criminals and when they found their target those fingers would inflict the most pain allowed under the law. Many a captured murderer would first end up in the hospital ward before they would find themselves locked into a safe cell at the county jail, safely locked away from Duarte’s rage.

Rules of death are intricate, yet at the same time sublime. Duarte often contemplated the symbiosis of the two as he sat alone at the bar. Most cops drank at the local police watering hole down the block, but Duarte favored this bar. There was coolness, darkness, to the place. It gave him comfort in its solitude. Besides, it was the only bar in town with a place at the bar that you could still sit with your back to the door. With as many enemies as he had it gave him satisfaction to drink his gin while ignoring the obvious disadvantage of not seeing

who entered behind him. It never bothered him. Not once. The only thing that mattered was the case at hand. Right now he was between cases so the gin would flow smoothly until he’d find that moment of peace he craved, no matter how slight. It was in these moments he would hear the music and sense the beauty around him. In the dank cavern of a rundown dive that sold watered-down gin, he would understand again the brilliance of life that flowed around him as Salieri’s Mass in C Major played in his gin-soaked mind. Always, ever always, the last sound he heard before being consumed by darkness was the muted sound of a bird calling for its mate on a calm, spring day as both Salieri, and Duarte, drifted into the darkness together.

* * * * *

The truck was a ‘72 Ford, rusted to hell and back, sitting in the corner of the quarry’s makeshift garage like a forgotten prayer. The keys weren’t in the ignition—they never are when you need them—but the wiring hung loose beneath the dash like an invitation.

You know how to hot wire a truck? the burro asked.

“I know how to hot wire anything,” I said, my fingers already working the wires. Red to red, strip the ignition wire, touch it to the battery line. The engine coughed, sputtered, then roared to life with a sound like God clearing his throat.

Not bad for a washed-up psycho.

“Shut up and ride shotgun.”

The quarry road was dirt and gravel, winding down through rock formations that looked like sleeping giants in the moonlight. The mescaline was still active—not the full-blown reality-warping madness from the DMT combination, but enough to make the shadows breathe and the stars pulse in rhythm with my heartbeat. The truck’s headlights carved tunnels through the darkness, and I followed them like a man following bread crumbs out of a fairy tale written by someone who hated happy endings.

Behind me, the quarry receded into memory. Amy and her merc’s, the stainless steel room, Tony’s body cooling in the ventilation shaft—all of it fading like a bad dream that refuses to let go completely. But I wasn’t out yet. Not by a long shot.

Where to? the burro asked.

“The Dusty Rose,” I said. “I need to find Duarte.”

The cop?

“The cop.”

You sure that’s smart? Bringing a badge into this mess?

“Duarte’s not a badge anymore,” I said. “He’s just a man trying to make it to retirement without eating his gun.”

The burro went quiet at that. Even hallucinogenic manifestations know when to shut up about suicide.

* * * * *

The Dusty Rose was exactly what its name promised—a dive bar that had seen better decades, located in the part of the Valley where hope went to die and took its time doing it. Neon beer signs flickered in the windows like dying stars. The parking lot was half-empty, which meant it was a slow night or everyone inside had already given up on going home.

I parked the truck two blocks away and walked. The night air was cool now, the Valley’s heat finally breaking after sunset. My shoulders still ached from the dislocation, and my head felt like it was stuffed with cotton and broken glass, but I was mobile. That counted for something.

You look like shit, the burro observed.

“Thanks for the pep talk.”

Just saying. If you’re trying to recruit muscle, maybe lead with something other than ‘I just escaped a mercenary death squad and I’m still tripping balls.’

“I’ll work on my pitch.”

The Dusty Rose smelled like stale beer, cigarette smoke, and regret. The kind of place where the bartender knows everyone’s name and everyone’s poison and keeps both to himself. A jukebox in the corner played something by Waylon Jennings, low and mournful. Three regulars sat at the bar like statues, nursing drinks that would never run dry because they’d never finish them.

Duarte was at the far end, exactly where I knew he’d be.

He looked older than I remembered. Grizzled, worn down by thirty-five years of wearing a badge and seeing things that badges couldn’t fix. His hands—

those exceptionally large hands that had once broken a man’s jaw in three places—were wrapped around a glass of gin like it was the only thing keeping him tethered to the earth.

I slid onto the stool next to him.

“Vee,” he said without looking up. “Heard you were dead.”

“Heard wrong.”

“Shame.” He took a sip of his gin. “Would’ve made things simpler.”

He’s a real ray of sunshine, the burro muttered.

“I need your help,” I said.

Duarte finally looked at me. His eyes were the color of old pennies, tarnished and dull.

“I’m three months from retirement, Vee. Three months from a pension and a cabin in the mountains where nobody knows my name. Why the hell would I help you?”

“Because you’re not going to make those three months,” I said. “Not the way you’re going.”

His jaw tightened. “You don’t know shit about how I’m going.”

“I know you’re sitting in a dive bar at eleven o’clock on a Tuesday, drinking gin like it’s water. I know you’ve got a service weapon in your jacket and you’ve been thinking about whether one bullet would be enough or if you’d need two to be sure.”

The regulars at the bar didn’t even look up. They’d heard worse.

Duarte set his glass down carefully.

“You come in here to psychoanalyze me, or did you actually need something?”

“I need someone I can trust,” I said. “Someone who knows how to handle himself when things go sideways. Someone who’s not afraid of getting his hands dirty.”

“I’m a cop, Vee.”

“You’re a man,” I corrected. “The badge is just something you wear. And right now, I need the man, not the badge.”

He stared at his gin for a long moment. The jukebox switched to Merle Haggard. Someone in the back room broke a pool cue.

“What kind of sideways are we talking about?” Duarte asked finally.

“The kind with ex-special forces mercenaries, corrupt politicians, and a conspiracy that goes deeper than either of us can see right now.”

Don't forget the dimensional shamans, the burro added helpfully.

“And possibly some weird metaphysical shit,” I added.

Duarte laughed—a short, bitter sound. “Metaphysical shit. Christ, Vee. You always did know how to sell a job.”

“I’m not selling anything,” I said. “I’m asking. You help me, and maybe we both make it out of this alive. Maybe we both get to see what retirement actually looks like.”

“And if we don’t?”

“Then at least you went down fighting instead of drowning in gin at the Dusty Rose.”

He picked up his glass, stared at it like it held the answers to questions he’d stopped asking years ago, then set it down without drinking.

“When do we start?” he asked.

“Soon,” I said. “But first, I need to make a stop.”

* * * * *

The chemist’s lab was hidden in the basement of a condemned apartment building on the east side of the Valley. You had to know which door to knock on, which pattern to use, and which password would get you inside without getting a shotgun pointed at your face.

I knew all three.

The door opened, and the chemist stood there in his stained lab coat, looking like a mad scientist from a B-movie if the B-movie had been directed by someone who actually understood chemistry. His eyes were bright, alert, and far too knowing.

“Vee,” he said. “You look like you’ve been to another dimension.”

Shit, the burro said, *he knows*.

“Can I come in?” I asked.

The chemist stepped aside. “I’ve been expecting you.”

The lab was organized chaos—beakers and test tubes, Bunsen burners and distillation equipment, bottles of chemicals with names I couldn’t pronounce

and effects I didn’t want to imagine. The air smelled like copper and ozone and something floral that made my sinuses burn.

“You mixed them,” the chemist said, not a question. “The mescaline and the DMT.”

“I was in a tight spot.”

“You opened a door, Vee. A door that most people don’t even know exists.” He moved to his workbench, his hands already reaching for bottles and vials. “The Gringo Shaman. You met him.”

“How do you—”

“Because I’ve met him too,” the chemist said. “Years ago, when I was still experimenting with combinations. He’s real, Vee. As real as you or me. He just exists in a different frequency. Besides, you look like you’ve been through hell, and I can see the dimensional bleed all over you.”

Told you, the burro said smugly.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

The chemist turned to face me, and for the first time since I’d known him, he looked genuinely concerned. “It means you’ve stepped into something bigger than corrupt politicians and mercenary operations. The Shaman doesn’t appear for just anyone. He appears when the veil between worlds is thin, when someone is walking a path that intersects with... other paths.”

“You’re losing me.”

“I’m trying to warn you,” the chemist said. “Whatever you’re caught up in, it’s not just about this world anymore. You’ve got allies now—the burro, the Shaman—but you’ve also got attention from things that don’t play by our rules.”

The room felt colder suddenly. The chemicals on the shelves seemed to pulse with their own light.

“I need a resupply,” I said. “Mescaline and DMT.”

The chemist studied me for a long moment. “You sure about that?”

“I’m sure.”

He sighed, then moved to a locked cabinet. “The mescaline I can give you—same batch as before, condensed and potent. The DMT...” He pulled out a small vial, dark glass with a cork stopper. “This is different. Purer. If you mix them again, the door will open wider. The Shaman will come, but so might other things.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“That’s what worries me.” He handed me the vial and a tin of pink mescaline eggs. “Be careful, Vee. The path you’re on... it doesn’t always lead back.”

“Nothing ever does,” I said.

* * * * *

I met Duarte outside the condemned building. He was in his street clothes—the same worn jeans and faded shirt he always wore—but something had shifted in him. His eyes were sharper now, more focused. Like he’d found something to live for, even if it was just the promise of a good fight. His service weapon was holstered at his hip, and his hand rested near it with the ease of a man who knew how to use it.

“You get what you needed?” he asked.

I patted my jacket pocket. “Locked and loaded.”

Literally and figuratively, the burro added.

We walked to the truck in silence. The Valley stretched out around us—neon signs and dark alleys, strip malls and abandoned lots, the whole beautiful ugly mess of it. Somewhere out there, Amy was regrouping. The Collective was scheming. The Lieutenant was hunting.

And Alex—poor bastard Alex—was still caught in the middle of it all.

“So what’s the play?” Duarte asked as we climbed into the truck.

“We find Amy,” I said. “We find The Collective. And we end this.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“Who is this Collective?” Duarte asked, his jaw tightening. “You haven’t exactly filled me in on the details.”

“Corrupt politicians running charity scams,” I said, keeping my eyes on the road ahead. “They’ve got Alex trapped, and they’re willing to kill anyone who gets in their way. That’s all you need to know.”

“Who’s Alex?” Duarte asked.

“You don’t need to know.”

“That’s not all I need to know,” Duarte said quietly. “But I’m guessing you’ll tell me the rest when it matters.”

“When it matters,” I agreed.

He laughed—a real laugh this time, not bitter. “You always were an optimist, Vee.”

“I’m a realist,” I corrected. “I just happen to believe that reality is negotiable.”
Now you’re talking, the burro said.

I started the engine. The truck roared to life, and I pulled out onto the empty street. The night was still young, and the Valley was waiting.

Somewhere in the darkness, the Gringo Shaman was watching. The burro was riding shotgun. Duarte was checking his weapon.

And me? I was just a private detective with a head full of chemicals and a case that had spiraled so far out of control that the only way out was through.

The Valley Case was far from reaching its conclusion.

Chapter 11

The Lieutenant had called it right. As soon as he arrived back at headquarters the mayor and his entire entourage came streaming in with the classic “Flying V” formation, the mayor at the front, of course. The Lieutenant shot a quick glance over to Frank and saw him gently tapping a manila envelope and grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“I’m here to take over command,” the mayor proudly asserted to the room.

* * * * *

Skinny Ricky is the largest human I’ve known. Standing at six foot, nine inches, and weighing a solid four hundred and forty-five pounds, Skinny is the quintessential example of a Samoan.

Convinced she was giving birth to a girl, Skinny’s mother had already chosen the name, Lucy, after her favorite TV program, I Love Lucy. Imagine her surprise when out came Skinny, all eleven pounds, twelve ounces of his Samoan self, neatly breaking her pelvis while giving birth. Finding that her newborn was obviously male, she had no other recourse than to change the name to Ricky, for obvious reasons. She also had several weeks, if not months, to heal from her now broken pelvis, nursing her giant of a baby as best she could.

Skinny was a brute of a child, physically, but gentle as could be otherwise. Being the largest kid in school from an early age gave him quite a complex. He spent the better part of his childhood years with the usual nicknames; Goliath, Big Bastard, Ton’s Of Fun, to name a few. But around the time of high school, it became apparent to everyone that Ricky was so sensitive about his size that calling him by anything other than his name was bound to hurt his feelings. The football coach had tried everything in his power to get Ricky to play for him, but it yielded not a thing. No way was Ricky going out there to be made fun of. Besides, they didn’t even have a jersey and pads that could fit his large self.

At the time, I lived across the street from the school and I got to know a lot of the kids, hiring them to do yard work, wash my car, the usual stuff, taking great

pains to not get too attached to the little angels. Ricky was an exception. I found him one day sitting on my lawn, under a shade tree, looking about as miserable as could be.

“Why so down, Ricky?” I tried my best to not sound patronizing. Ricky shot up and headed down the sidewalk.

“Hey, you don’t need to take off,” I shouted. “Didn’t mean to scare you.” That big monster man-child stopped, turned around and looked down at me; at fifteen he was already six foot, five inches tall.

“I’m tired of everyone saying I’m afraid of playing football. I’m not afraid, I just don’t want to be made fun of.”

I could see the pain in the big lad’s eyes. I felt for the kid. I truly did. He lumbered off as the coach came across the street.

“Hey, Vee,” he shouted out. “You know that kid?” He had an almost pleading sound in his voice. It sounded different than his usual gravel filled raspiness, it was, well, it was pleading.

“Not really,” I replied. “I’ve watched him grow up here. Seen the other kids make fun of him over the years. He’s a big bastard, yet I’ve never seen him let loose on those idiot kids that make fun of him.”

The coach eyed me for a minute, then cleared his throat. In an almost timid voice, he told me he’d love to have the kid play for him, but had no idea as to how to reach him. He too had seen the kids make fun of Ricky and was at a loss as to how to end it.

I thought for a moment, feeling the afternoon’s sun on my face and noticed how skinny the coach’s legs were. Starting to snicker at the image I tried to hold it together as best I could but failed, breaking out into a full-fledged, gut-busting laugh.

“What’s so damn funny, Vee?” the coach retorted. “I’m serious about this kid. I could use him on the team, and I think he could use the team to help him out too.”

I pulled it together enough to get the word “skinny” out, before returning to my laughter, my eyes wet with tears.

“Skinny,” I heard the coach mutter over and over. “Vee,” he slapped me on my back, temporarily ending my laughter, “you’re a god-damn genius. I owe you. Big time.”

The coach turned and ran back to the school. The next day at lunch all the kids that gathered on my lawn to eat their “lunch” were animated as hell. You could feel the energy crackling about them.

“What’s going on with you knuckleheads? Why so excited?” I was asking no one in particular but Louie, the little prick that liked to jump the fence into my garden and steal my weed plants spun around and answered for all.

“It’s Ricky, Vee,” he breathlessly screamed. “He’s gonna play football!”

“No way,” I shot back. “That kid thinks you’re all a bunch of assholes, and he’s right. Why would he play with you?”

“Because coach gave him a new nickname; Skinny Ricky.” Louie was beaming. “But he can only have that nickname if he plays football for us.”

“What position,” I heard myself asking that putz weed thief.

“The whole line, Vee. Who cares? He’s the biggest kid in the region. Probably in the state! We’re taking the division for sure!”

The lunch bell rang and the junior reprobates headed back across the street to class. I stood there on my lawn watching them disappear into the school. “Skinny Ricky,” I heard myself saying, over and over. It fit.

* * * * *

Skinny Ricky loved his new nickname and it completely changed his life. The first year he played those little bastards won their division and then took the state title the next two years. Ricky went on to get a full-ride scholarship to university and then went pro from there. He keeps in touch with me now and again and has a fine family of little Skinny’s starting their own life’s, with their own needs to fit in. He eventually left the NFL and bought a run down motel, developing a nasty gambling habit along the way.

The coach had moved on also. I was told he retired and was living up north raising turkey’s, a fitting job I thought. He did end up on my doorstep one last time before Skinny Ricky graduated, holding a bottle of Mescal when he did.

“I want to thank you for what you did for that kid,” he offered his hand as he gave me the Mescal. “If it wasn’t for you I would have never thought of giving him that name. Thank you, Vee, you’re a good person.”

He quickly turned and left as he gently brushed back a tear. I didn’t have

the heart to tell him I was thinking of his legs, not the kid, when I blurted out Skinny. Just as well, I suppose. Just as well.

* * * * *

The motel room smelled like old cigarettes and regret. Skinny Ricky had done well for himself—the roadside property was his now, bought with NFL money and maintained with betting profits—but he hadn’t bothered to upgrade the décor. Same water-stained ceiling tiles. Same burnt orange curtains from 1974. Same rattling air conditioner that sounded like it was dying of emphysema.

Duarte sat on the edge of one bed, his service weapon disassembled on the nightstand. He was cleaning each piece methodically, the way cops do when they need their hands busy while their minds work. I was sprawled in the chair by the window, watching the neon VACANCY sign flicker against the darkness outside.

The burro stood in the corner, studying the painting of a sad clown that hung crooked above the television.

You know what doesn’t make sense? the burro said suddenly.

“What’s that?”

The scars. Amanda had that delicate lightning bolt on her right wrist. Amy had the military scar on her inner forearm. Two different women, two different marks.

I sat up straighter. “Go on.”

What if they’re related? All three of them—Amanda, Amy, and Alex. Amanda plays the damsel, Amy runs the military operation, and Alex... Alex is the architect pulling every string from the shadows. You met Amanda at the coffee shop, but Amy was commanding the merc’s at the quarry, and Alex was orchestrating it all from somewhere else entirely.

Duarte looked up from his Glock. “Who the hell are you talking to?”

“The burro.”

He stared at me for a long moment, then glanced around the empty room. “There’s no burro here, Vee.”

“I know that.”

“Then who—”

“It’s complicated.”

Tell him I said hello, the burro offered helpfully.

“He says hello.”

Duarte set down the barrel he’d been cleaning and rubbed his face with both hands. “Jesus Christ. You’re talking to a hallucination.”

“A very insightful hallucination.”

“And what’s this insightful hallucination saying?”

I leaned forward, elbows on my knees. “All three of them are related. Amanda, Amy, and Alex. They’ve been playing me from the start—one woman to hire me, another to run the operation, and a third pulling the strings from above. It explains the inconsistencies. The different scars. The way Amanda knew exactly where to find me at George’s building. They’re family. They’re coordinated. They’re perfect.”

Duarte was quiet for a moment, his cop brain working through it. Finally, he nodded slowly. “That... actually makes sense. Siblings using a shared family narrative. One’s the victim in distress, one’s the soldier, one’s the hidden architect. Classic misdirection layered on top of classic misdirection.”

See? the burro said smugly, even the drunk cop gets it.

“And if all three of them are siblings” I continued, “then Alex isn’t just in on it. Alex is the mastermind. The hidden third.”

The question hung in the air like smoke. Duarte reassembled his weapon with practiced efficiency, each piece clicking into place.

“You think he’s dead?” Duarte asked.

“I think he might be the architect.”

That stopped Duarte cold. “Come again?”

“What if Alex isn’t the victim? What if he’s running the whole show? His sisters use his name as cover—‘save my brother from The Collective’—but Alex is the one orchestrating everything. The Collective, the merc’s, the whole god-damn conspiracy.”

Now you’re thinking, the burro said approvingly.

“That would mean everything Amanda told you was bullshit,” Duarte said.

“Every word.”

“And you’ve been chasing your tail this entire time.”

“Exactly.”

Duarte let out a low whistle and holstered his weapon. “That’s some cold-blooded shit right there.”

The mescaline was wearing off. I could feel it draining away like water through a sieve—colors fading back to normal, the edges of reality sharpening into something mundane and disappointing. My thoughts were clearer, but that clarity felt like a trap. I could see the pieces now, but I couldn’t see through them.

I reached into my jacket and pulled out the tin of mescaline pills. Two left. Easter egg pink, just like the chemist promised.

“What are you doing?” Duarte asked.

“Going deeper.”

“Vee—”

“I need the haze, Duarte. I can think clearly now, but clear thinking isn’t going to get me where I need to go. The Shaman appeared when I mixed the mescaline with DMT. Reality bent. I saw things I wasn’t supposed to see.”

“You saw hallucinations.”

“Maybe. Or maybe I saw what’s actually there.” I dry-swallowed both pills. “Either way, I need to go back.”

Attaboy, the burro said. Let’s get weird.

The door opened and Skinny Ricky walked in carrying a paper bag and a six pack of beer. He’d filled out since his playing days—still tall, still broad, but with the comfortable weight of a man who’d stopped running wind sprints. He set the bag on the dresser and tossed us each a beer.

“You boys look like you’re planning something stupid,” he said.

“The stupidest,” I confirmed.

Ricky grinned. “Good. I was getting bored.”

He pulled a chair around backward and straddled it, popping his beer open with his wedding ring. “So what’s the play?”

“We need muscle,” I said. “Real muscle. Not just Duarte’s retirement-age ass.”

“Hey,” Duarte protested.

“You got connections through the betting network?” I asked Ricky.

His grin widened. “You know I do. NFL season’s in full swing, which means every degenerate gambler in the Valley owes somebody something. I can call in favors. How many bodies you need?”

“Enough to grab a cop.”

That wiped the grin off his face, replacing his once jovial grin with a look of devout uncertainty.

“You want to kidnap a police officer?”

“A Lieutenant,” I clarified. “Corrupt as they come. He’s neck-deep in this thing with The Collective, and he’s the only one who knows the full picture.”

Ricky looked at Duarte. “You’re okay with this?”

Duarte shrugged. “I’m near retirement and I’ve got nothing to lose. Besides, the Lieutenant’s dirty. Always has been. If Vee’s right about this conspiracy, and I gotta admit he’s usually right, then taking him down might be the only good thing I do before I turn in my badge.”

This is getting good, the burro said, settling onto the bed like he was watching a movie.

Ricky took a long pull from his beer, thinking it over. Finally, he nodded. “Alright. I can get you four guys—cagey street gangsters, reliable, and mean enough to handle a cop. But this is going to cost you, Vee.”

“Put it on my tab.”

“Your tab’s already longer than a CVS receipt.”

“Then what’s a little more?”

The mescaline was starting to kick in. The edges of the room began to shimmer, the sad clown painting rippling like it was underwater. The burro’s outline grew sharper, more defined, like he was stepping forward from another dimension into this one.

You feel that? the burro asked.

“Yeah.”

That’s the door opening. You’re going back in.

Duarte was watching me carefully. “You alright?”

“Never better.”

“Your pupils are the size of dinner plates.”

“That’s how you know it’s working.”

Ricky stood and walked to the window, peering out at the empty parking lot. “So when do we grab him?”

“Soon,” I said. “The Lieutenant’s got a routine. Bowling on Wednesday nights, drinks at Murphy’s on Fridays, church on Sundays to keep up appearances.”

“Church?” Duarte laughed. “That bastard hasn’t seen the inside of a church since his third wedding.”

“Exactly. Which means he’s vulnerable everywhere else.”

The three of us sat in silence for a moment, the weight of what we were planning settling over the room like a heavy blanket. Kidnapping a police lieutenant wasn’t just dangerous—it was the kind of move you potentially didn’t come back from. Once we crossed that line, there was no walking it back.

You sure about this? the burro asked quietly.

“No,” I admitted. “But I’m sure about one thing—the Lieutenant knows. He knows about Amanda and Amy. He knows about Alex. He knows about The Collective, and whatever the hell they’re really doing. And he’s been playing me since the moment I took this case.”

So you’re going to make him talk.

“I’m going to make him sing.”

Duarte finished his beer and set the empty bottle on the nightstand with a decisive clunk. “Alright. I’m in. But we do this smart. No cowboy shit. We plan it out, we execute clean, and we don’t leave any loose ends.”

“Agreed,” I said.

Ricky nodded. “I’ll make the calls tonight. Have the crew ready by tomorrow.”

The room was starting to breathe now, the walls expanding and contracting like lungs. The neon sign outside cast red and blue shadows that danced across the ceiling in patterns that almost looked like words. The burro was fully solid now, his presence as real as Duarte’s or Ricky’s.

You’re going deep this time, the burro said. *Deeper than before.*

“I know.”

The Shaman might come back.

“I’m counting on it.”

Duarte stood and stretched, his joints popping. “I’m going to get some sleep. We’ve got a long day tomorrow.” He paused at the door and looked back at me. “You going to be alright in here by yourself?”

“I’m not by myself,” I said, gesturing to the burro.

Duarte shook his head. “Right. The hallucination. Try not to do anything stupid while you’re tripping, Vee.”

“No promises.”

After he left, Ricky lingered for a moment. “You really see a burro?”

“Clear as day.”

“What’s he look like?”

I glanced at the burro, who was now examining his hooves with great interest. “Like a burro. Four legs, long ears, judgmental expression.”

I’m not judgmental, the burro protested. *I’m discerning.*

“He says he’s discerning, not judgmental.”

Ricky laughed and headed for the door. “You’re a strange man, Jonny Vee. Always have been.” He paused with his hand on the doorknob. “But you’re a good friend. Best I ever had.”

“Thanks, Ricky.”

“Don’t mention it. And Vee? Be careful with that stuff. I’ve seen what it does to people.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“That’s what they all say.”

After he left, it was just me and the burro in the flickering motel room. The mescaline was in full effect now, reality bending and warping at the edges. The sad clown painting was definitely moving, its painted tears sliding down the canvas and pooling on the floor.

So, the burro said, settling into the chair Ricky had vacated. *We’re really doing this.*

“We’re really doing this.”

Kidnapping a cop. Forcing a confession. Going up against The Collective.

“That’s the plan.”

It’s a terrible plan.

“It’s the only plan.”

The burro nodded slowly, his long ears twitching. *Then I guess we better see it through.*

I pulled out the small vial of DMT the chemist had given me. The liquid inside glowed faintly in the dim light, like it contained its own small universe. The chemist had warned me about mixing it with mescaline—said it would open doors that weren’t meant to be opened. But those were exactly the doors I needed to walk through.

You’re going to call the Shaman, the burro said. It wasn’t a question.

“If he can warp reality, we’re going to need him.”

He’s not a tool, Vee. He’s a person from another dimension. You can’t just summon him like a genie.

“Watch me.”

I unscrewed the vial and placed a few drops on my tongue. The taste was bitter and electric, like licking a battery made of starlight. The room immediately lurched sideways, the walls peeling away to reveal something vast and incomprehensible behind them.

Oh boy, the burro said. *Here we go again.*

The motel room was still there, but it was also somewhere else. I could see both realities at once—the water-stained ceiling and the infinite expanse beyond it, the burnt orange curtains and the dimensional fabric they were stitched from. The burro’s outline shimmered and split, showing me all the versions of him that existed across every possible timeline.

And standing in the corner, where the sad clown painting used to be, was the Gringo Shaman.

He looked exactly as I remembered—weathered face, eyes that had seen too much, the bearing of a man who’d walked between worlds so many times he no longer belonged to any of them. He nodded at me slowly.

“You called,” he said, his voice echoing from somewhere far away and very close at the same time.

“I need your help.”

“I know. I’ve been watching.”

“Can you help us grab the Lieutenant?”

The Shaman smiled, and when he did, I saw all the possible futures branching out from this moment like a tree made of light. In some of them, we succeeded. In others, we died. In most, we simply disappeared, erased from reality like we’d never existed at all.

“I can help,” he said. “But you need to understand something, Jonny Vee. Once you go down this path, there’s no coming back. You’ll see things you can’t unsee. Know things you can’t unknow. The doors you’re opening don’t close.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?” He stepped closer, and the room bent around him like he was a stone dropped in still water. “Because I don’t think you do. Not yet. But you will.”

The burro stood and walked to my side, his presence solid and reassuring. *I’m with you*, he said quietly. *Whatever happens.*

I looked at the Shaman, at the burro, at the fractured reality surrounding us.

Tomorrow we'd kidnap a corrupt cop. Tomorrow we'd force the truth out of him. Tomorrow we'd go up against The Collective and whatever conspiracy they'd built in the shadows of the Valley.

But tonight, I was standing at the crossroads between dimensions, making deals with shamans and talking to hallucinogenic burros, and somehow that felt like the most honest thing I'd done in years.

"I'm ready," I said.

The Shaman nodded. "Then let's begin."

The motel room collapsed inward, folding into itself like origami made of light and shadow. When it unfolded, everything had changed.

The pieces were in motion. The game was on.

And somewhere out there in the Valley, the Lieutenant was going about his evening, completely unaware that his world was about to come crashing down around him.

This is going to get messy, the burro observed.

"It already is," I said.

Good, he replied. *I like it messy.*

So did I.

Chapter 12

The stronghold was a converted warehouse on the industrial edge of the Valley, where the city gave way to abandoned rail yards and forgotten manufacturing plants. Three stories of reinforced concrete and steel, windows replaced with ballistic glass, every entrance monitored by cameras that fed into a central security station on the second floor. The kind of place that looked condemned from the outside but hummed with paranoid efficiency within.

Amy stood at the tactical table in the main operations room, studying a map of the Valley marked with red pins and handwritten notes. Her remaining mercenaries—five now, after losing Tony and two others in the quarry fire-fight—moved through the space with military precision. They checked weapons, inventoried ammunition, spoke in clipped tactical shorthand that excluded everyone else in the room.

Amanda sat in a leather chair near the window, her posture perfect, her expression unreadable. She wore different clothes now—black tactical pants, a fitted grey shirt—but the lightning-bolt scar on her wrist was still visible. She watched Amy work with the detached interest of someone observing a chess game they weren't playing.

And then there was Alex.

He stood near the back wall, arms crossed, watching everything with the cold calculation of a man who'd built this entire operation from the ground up. Tall, lean, with the same sharp features as his sisters but harder somehow, like they'd been carved from something less forgiving than flesh. His eyes moved constantly—tracking Amy's movements, noting Amanda's stillness, cataloging every detail of the mercenaries' preparations.

"We lost three men," Amy said without looking up from the map. "Vee escaped. The quarry's compromised."

"I'm aware," Alex said quietly.

"Then you're also aware we need to relocate operations. The Lieutenant knows about the quarry now. It's only a matter of time before—"

“The Lieutenant knows what I allow him to know.” Alex’s voice was calm, almost gentle, but it carried the weight of absolute authority. “And right now, he’s more concerned with covering up the massacre at George’s building than tracking down a private detective.”

Amy finally looked up. “Vee’s not just a private detective anymore. He’s seen too much. He knows about the operation, about The Collective, about—”

“About what?” Alex interrupted. “That my sister hired him to rescue me from a criminal organization? That’s the story. That’s what he believes. And even if he’s starting to question it, he has no proof of anything else.”

“He escaped from a fortified position,” Amy pressed. “He killed Tony. He navigated the ventilation system while under the influence of hallucinogens. This isn’t some bumbling fool we can dismiss.”

“No,” Alex agreed, moving closer to the table. “He’s resourceful. Dangerous, even. Which is exactly why we chose him in the first place.”

Amanda spoke for the first time, her voice soft but cutting. “You chose him, Alex. Not we. You.”

The room went quiet. The mercenaries continued their work, but their movements slowed, their attention shifting subtly toward the conversation.

Alex smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Semantics, sister. We all agreed, Vee was the perfect catalyst. Someone with just enough skill to be useful and just enough chaos to be unpredictable. He’s done exactly what we needed him to do—stirred up the Valley, forced the Lieutenant’s hand, exposed The Collective’s operations to scrutiny.”

“And now he’s a liability,” Amy said flatly.

“Now he’s a variable,” Alex corrected. “There’s a difference.”

One of the mercenaries—a broad-shouldered man with a scar running down his neck—approached the table. “Sir, we’ve secured the perimeter. No signs of surveillance or pursuit. The stronghold is clean.”

“Good,” Alex said. “Maintain watch rotations. I want eyes on every approach, twenty-four seven. If Vee or anyone else comes sniffing around, I want to know about it before they get within a hundred yards.”

“Yes, sir.”

As the mercenary returned to his post, Amanda stood and walked to the window, looking out at the industrial wasteland beyond. “What happens when

Vee figures it out?” she asked quietly. “When he realizes I’m not the damsel in distress? When he understands you were never in danger?”

“Then we adapt,” Alex said simply. “That’s what we do. That’s what we’ve always done.”

Amy rolled up the map with sharp, efficient movements. “We should eliminate him now. Clean, surgical. Make it look like The Collective got to him before we could intervene.”

“No,” Alex said, his tone final. “Vee stays alive. For now.”

“Why?”

“Because dead men can’t be blamed for things. And before this is over, we’re going to need someone to blame.”

* * * * *

The Mayor’s office was all polished mahogany and leather, the kind of space designed to project power and stability. Framed photos lined the walls—the Mayor shaking hands with governors, cutting ribbons at charity events, smiling beside his wife and children at campaign rallies. The desk was massive, imported from Italy, positioned to catch the afternoon light in a way that made whoever sat behind it look like they’d been touched by divine favor.

The Mayor stood behind that desk now, but he wasn’t sitting. He was pacing, his face flushed, his tie loosened, his carefully cultivated composure cracking at the edges.

The Lieutenant sat in one of the visitor chairs, legs crossed, completely relaxed. He’d lit a cigarette despite the NO SMOKING sign on the wall, and the Mayor hadn’t said a word about it.

“You need to back off,” the Mayor said, his voice tight with barely controlled anger. “The massacre at George’s building, the investigation, all of it. You’re drawing too much attention, creating too many questions. The press is already sniffing around, and if this blows up—”

“If this blows up,” the Lieutenant interrupted calmly, “it won’t be my problem. It’ll be yours.”

The Mayor stopped pacing and turned to face him. “I’m the Mayor of this city. I have the authority to remove you from your position if you don’t—”

“You have the authority to do exactly what I tell you to do,” the Lieutenant said, his voice still calm, still measured. “Nothing more, nothing less.”

“You forget who you’re talking to.”

“No,” the Lieutenant said, reaching into his jacket pocket. “I remember exactly who I’m talking to. The question is, do you?”

He pulled out a manila envelope and tossed it onto the desk. It landed with a soft thud, the contents shifting inside.

The Mayor stared at it like it was a live grenade. “What is that?”

“Open it.”

“Lieutenant, I don’t have time for—”

“Open. It.”

The Mayor’s hand trembled slightly as he reached for the envelope. He unsealed it, pulled out the contents—three photographs, eight-by-ten, glossy, professionally shot. His face went pale as he looked at them.

The first photo showed a younger version of himself—back when he was just a city councilman with political ambitions—sitting in a hotel room with Veronica. The second showed them closer, more intimate. The third left nothing to the imagination.

“Where did you get these?” the Mayor whispered.

“Does it matter?” The Lieutenant took a long drag from his cigarette, exhaling smoke toward the ceiling. “What matters is that I have them. And copies. Lots of copies. Stored in very safe places.”

The Mayor’s hands shook as he set the photos down. “This is blackmail.”

“This is insurance,” the Lieutenant corrected. “I’ve been carrying this policy for years, waiting for the right moment to cash it in. Congratulations, Mr. Mayor. Today’s that moment.”

“You can’t—”

“I can. And I will. Unless you do exactly what I tell you to do.” The Lieutenant leaned forward, his voice dropping to something cold and final. “You’re going to stop interfering with my investigation. You’re going to stop taking calls from The Collective. You’re going to smile for the cameras, kiss babies, and keep your mouth shut about everything you think you know. And if you’re very, very good, these photos stay buried.”

The Mayor sank into his chair, the fight draining out of him. “What do you want?”

“I want you to remember your place,” the Lieutenant said, standing. “You’re a politician. You smile, you shake hands, you read speeches someone else wrote for you. But you don’t run this city. I do. And the sooner you accept that, the easier your life becomes.”

He stubbed out his cigarette on the edge of the Mayor’s imported Italian desk, leaving a small black mark on the polished wood.

“We’re done here,” the Lieutenant said, walking toward the door. “Oh, and Mr. Mayor? If I were you, I’d stop answering calls from Alex. That boy’s got plans that don’t include you anymore.”

The door closed behind him with a soft click, leaving the Mayor alone with the photographs spread across his desk like evidence at a crime scene.

* * * * *

The Mayor’s hands were still shaking when he picked up his phone. He scrolled through his contacts, found the number he needed, and pressed CALL before he could talk himself out of it.

It rang three times before Alex answered.

“This is unexpected,” Alex said, his voice smooth and unburdened. “I thought we agreed you’d only contact me in emergencies.”

“This is an emergency,” the Mayor said, trying to keep his voice steady. “The Lieutenant just left my office. He has... he has photographs. From years ago. He’s using them to—”

“To control you,” Alex finished. “Yes, I’m aware.”

“You’re aware?” The Mayor’s voice rose. “You knew about this?”

“I know about everything, Mr. Mayor. That’s why you came to me in the first place, remember? Because I know where all the bodies are buried. Literally and figuratively.”

The Mayor stood and walked to the window, looking out at the city he was supposed to be leading. “I need to step back from the operation. The Lieutenant’s watching me too closely now. If I keep taking your calls, if I keep providing cover for The Collective—”

“You’ll do exactly what you’ve been doing,” Alex interrupted, his voice hardening. “Because stepping back isn’t an option. You’re in this, Mr. Mayor. All the

way in. The only way out is to finish what was started.”

“You don’t understand. The Lieutenant has leverage now. Real leverage. If those photos go public—”

“Then your career is over and you spend the rest of your life as a punchline,” Alex said flatly. “I understand perfectly. What you need to understand is that I have leverage too. And mine goes much deeper than some embarrassing photographs.”

The Mayor felt his stomach drop. “What are you talking about?”

“The charity funds you’ve been skimming. The construction contracts you’ve been steering to your brother-in-law’s company. The campaign contributions from shell corporations that don’t actually exist. Should I continue?”

Silence on the line.

“I didn’t think so,” Alex said. “Here’s what’s going to happen. You’re going to keep doing your job. You’re going to keep providing political cover for our operations. And you’re going to stop panicking every time the Lieutenant flexes his muscles. He’s a cop. Cops can be managed.”

“He’s not just a cop,” the Mayor said quietly. “He’s—”

“He’s a problem I’m already solving,” Alex interrupted. “Trust me, Mr. Mayor. The Lieutenant’s days of playing puppet master are numbered. Very soon, he’s going to have much bigger concerns than blackmailing you.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you should focus on your own survival and let me worry about his.” Alex’s voice softened slightly, taking on an almost paternal tone. “You came to me because you needed protection. Because The Collective could offer you something the legitimate world couldn’t—real power, real money, real control. That hasn’t changed. What’s changed is that you’re getting cold feet.”

“I’m not—”

“You are. And I understand. Things are getting messy. The massacre at George’s building, Vee running around causing chaos, the Lieutenant tightening his grip. It’s all very stressful. But this is when you need to hold steady, Mr. Mayor. This is when you need to remember why you made a deal with us in the first place.”

The Mayor closed his eyes. “I just want this to be over.”

“It will be,” Alex said. “Soon. But not yet. Right now, I need you to do your

job. Smile for the cameras. Reassure the public. And most importantly, stay out of my way while I clean up this mess.”

“And if I can’t?”

The line went quiet for a long moment. When Alex spoke again, his voice was cold enough to freeze blood.

“Then you’ll discover that embarrassing photographs are the least of your problems. Do we understand each other?”

“Yes,” the Mayor whispered.

“Good. Now go back to work. And Mr. Mayor? Don’t call me again unless the city’s on fire. Literally.”

The line went dead.

The Mayor stood at the window for a long time, staring out at the Valley spread below him like a kingdom he’d never actually ruled. Somewhere out there, the Lieutenant was planning his next move. Somewhere out there, Vee was regrouping with allies the Mayor didn’t even know existed. And somewhere out there, Alex was orchestrating a conspiracy that had already cost dozens of lives and would cost dozens more before it was finished.

The Mayor had wanted power. He’d wanted control. He’d wanted to matter.

Now he was just another piece on a board he didn’t understand, being moved by players who saw him as nothing more than a useful idiot with a title and a smile.

He picked up the photographs from his desk, stared at them one last time, then fed them into the shredder beside his filing cabinet. The machine whirled and chewed, reducing his past to confetti.

But he knew it didn’t matter. The Lieutenant had copies. Alex probably had copies. And in the Valley, the past never stayed buried for long.

* * * * *

The news station was a squat concrete building on the east side of downtown, its parking lot filled with satellite trucks and broadcast vans. Inside, the newsroom hummed with the controlled chaos of a breaking story—phones ringing, keyboards clattering, producers shouting across cubicles about deadlines and fact-checking and legal clearance.

In Studio A, the evening news anchor sat behind her desk, reviewing the

script one last time before they went live. Her name was Patricia Mendez, and she'd been covering crime in the Valley for fifteen years. She'd seen gang violence, political corruption, police brutality, and every flavor of human ugliness the city could produce.

But this story was different.

The producer's voice crackled through her earpiece. "Sixty seconds to air, Patricia. You ready?"

She glanced at the script again, at the details that had been confirmed and re-confirmed by three separate sources. Bodies. Automatic weapons. Military-grade tactics. A massacre in broad daylight that the police had tried to cover up.

"I'm ready," she said.

"Thirty seconds."

The floor director counted down with his fingers. Five. Four. Three. Two.

The red light on the camera blinked on.

Patricia looked directly into the lens, her expression grave, her voice steady.

"Good evening. I'm Patricia Mendez, and we begin tonight with breaking news of a massacre that occurred earlier today in the Valley's industrial district. What police are calling a 'gang-related incident' appears to be something far more organized and far more deadly."

The screen cut to aerial footage of Large George's red brick building, police tape surrounding the perimeter, body bags being loaded into coroner vans.

"According to multiple sources within the police department, at least fifteen people were killed in what witnesses describe as a military-style assault on this building, which served as headquarters for local bookmaker George Castellanos, known in the community as Large George."

Cut back to Patricia.

"Witnesses report hearing automatic weapons fire, seeing armed individuals in tactical gear, and observing what appeared to be a coordinated extraction operation. Despite the scale of the violence, police initially attempted to classify the incident as a routine gang dispute. However, evidence at the scene tells a different story."

The screen showed crime scene photos—bullet casings covering the floor, blood splattered across walls. But it was the aftermath that told the real story. Reports from the scene indicated dismemberment of bodies, with limbs scat-

tered across different levels of the building. At least three victims were found decapitated, their heads recovered by forensic teams in locations yards away from their bodies. The kind of devastation that spoke not to professional execution but to something far more brutal—a message, rather than an operation.

"Sources tell us that the weapons used were military-grade, the tactics employed were consistent with special forces operations, and the level of coordination suggests this was not a spontaneous act of violence but a carefully planned assault."

Patricia paused, letting the weight of the information settle.

"Even more troubling are reports that senior officials within the police department attempted to suppress information about the massacre, going so far as to threaten officers who spoke to the press. Questions are now being raised about who ordered the attack, why it was carried out, and what connections may exist between the perpetrators and powerful figures within the city's political establishment."

Cut to footage of the Mayor's office building, then the police station.

"We reached out to both the Mayor's office and the police department for comment. Neither has responded to our requests. The Lieutenant in charge of the investigation declined to speak with us on camera."

Back to Patricia, her expression hardening.

"What we do know is this: fifteen people are dead. The weapons used were not typical of street crime. The tactics employed were not typical of gang violence. And the subsequent cover-up attempt suggests that someone with significant power wants this story buried."

She leaned forward slightly, her voice dropping to something more personal, more urgent.

"But it won't be buried. Not while we're still asking questions. Not while families are still waiting for answers. Not while the truth is still out there, waiting to be uncovered."

A pause.

"We'll continue to follow this story as it develops. If you have information about the massacre at Large George's building, please contact our tip line. Your identity will be protected."

The screen showed the tip line number, then cut back to Patricia.

“Coming up after the break: reaction from community leaders and what this violence means for the Valley’s ongoing struggle with organized crime. Stay with us.”

The red light blinked off.

Patricia pulled out her earpiece and let out a long breath. The producer’s voice came through the studio speakers.

“That was perfect, Patricia. Exactly what we needed.”

But Patricia wasn’t thinking about the broadcast. She was thinking about the phone call she’d received three hours ago from an anonymous source—a voice she didn’t recognize, giving her details about the massacre that no one outside the police department should have known.

Someone wanted this story out there. Someone wanted the cover-up exposed.

And Patricia had a feeling that whoever that someone was, they were playing a much bigger game than she could see.

* * * * *

At the stronghold, Alex watched the broadcast on a wall-mounted television, his expression unreadable.

Amy stood beside him, arms crossed. “That’s not good.”

“No,” Alex agreed. “It’s not.”

But then he leaned forward, his eyes narrowing as the camera panned across the crime scene photos—the severed limbs, the blood trails, the bodies laid out like butchered meat.

“Wait,” he said quietly. “Stop.”

Amy turned to look at him. “What?”

“The dismemberment,” Alex said slowly. “The decapitations. That wasn’t us.”

“What do you mean it wasn’t us?” Amy’s voice sharpened. “We hit George’s building hard. We left bodies.”

“We left bodies, yes. But not like that.” Alex’s jaw clenched. “Our crew uses precision. Clean eliminations. This is... this is carnage. This is overkill.” He turned to Amy, and there was something dangerous in his eyes. “Someone else was at that scene. Someone else did this. Someone else wanted George’s operation erased so completely that nothing would be left to investigate.”

Amanda rose from her chair, her composure cracking slightly. “Who? The

Lieutenant?”

“The Lieutenant doesn’t have the stomach for this kind of work,” Alex said. “And he wouldn’t risk it. He’s a bureaucrat with a blackmail insurance policy. But someone...” He turned back to the television screen, watching Patricia Mendez’s face as she described body parts recovered from different levels of the building. “Someone wanted to make sure the crime scene told a story. A story of pure violence. A story that couldn’t be covered up.”

“That works in our favor,” Amy said carefully. “The more brutal the scene, the more impossible it is to bury.”

“Unless,” Alex said, his voice dropping, “whoever did this has their own agenda. Their own reasons for taking George off the board.”

He looked at Amanda. “Did Vee know about the dismemberment when he was at the quarry?”

“He didn’t know anything,” Amanda said. “He was drugged and confused the entire time.”

“Then someone else did this,” Alex concluded. “And we don’t know who they are, what they want, or whose side they’re on. We just know they’re good enough to get in and out of George’s building during our operation without any of our people seeing them.”

The room fell silent. The mercenaries exchanged uneasy glances.

“This changes everything,” Amy said finally.

“Yes,” Alex agreed. “It does.”

Amanda remained in her chair by the window, but her posture had changed—straighter now, more alert. “Who leaked it?”

“Does it matter?” Alex said quietly. “It’s out there now. The Lieutenant can’t bury it anymore. The Mayor can’t pretend it didn’t happen. And every cop, reporter, and politician in the Valley is going to start asking questions we don’t want answered.”

One of the mercenaries approached. “Sir, what are our orders?”

Alex was quiet for a long moment, watching Patricia Mendez’s face frozen on the screen as the broadcast cut to commercial.

“We accelerate the timeline,” he said finally. “Whatever we were planning to do next week, we do tomorrow. Whatever we were planning to do tomorrow, we do tonight.”

“That’s risky,” Amy said.

“Everything’s risky now,” Alex replied. “The story’s out. The Lieutenant’s compromised. The Mayor’s useless. And somewhere out there, Jonny Vee is planning his next move with allies we didn’t account for.”

He turned away from the television, his cold eyes sweeping across the room.

“We’re not in control anymore. We’re in damage control. And the only way to survive damage control is to move faster than everyone else, hit harder than everyone else, and make sure that when the dust settles, we’re the only ones left standing.”

“And Vee?” Amy asked.

Alex smiled, but there was no warmth in it.

“Let him come. Let him bring his cop friend and his motel owner and whatever other allies he’s scraped together. Let him think he’s the hero riding in to save the day.”

He walked to the tactical table and placed both hands on its surface, leaning forward like a general surveying a battlefield.

“Because when he gets here, we’ll be ready. And this time, there won’t be any escape through the ventilation system. This time, we finish it.”

The mercenaries exchanged glances but said nothing. They’d been in enough operations to know when the mission had shifted from controlled execution to desperate survival.

Amanda stood and walked to her brother’s side. “You’re sure about this?”

“I’m sure about one thing,” Alex said quietly. “We’ve come too far to turn back now. The Collective, the operation, everything we’ve built—it all depends on the next forty-eight hours. Either we win, or we lose everything.”

“Then we’d better win,” Amanda said.

“We will,” Alex replied. “We always do.”

But as he said it, he glanced at the television screen one more time, at Patricia Mendez’s frozen face, at the words BREAKING NEWS: MASSACRE IN THE VALLEY scrolling across the bottom.

And for the first time since this operation began, Alex felt something he hadn’t felt in years—Doubt.

Chapter 13

The Mad Chemist arrived at Skinny Ricky’s motel just after midnight, driving a beat-up Volvo that looked like it had survived three separate apocalypses. He parked in the shadows at the far end of the lot, killed the engine, and sat there for a full five minutes before getting out—checking angles, watching windows, making sure no one was paying attention.

I watched him from the second-floor walkway, leaning against the railing with a cigarette burning between my fingers. The burro stood beside me, his ears twitching.

He’s more paranoid than usual, the burro observed.

“Can you blame him?”

Not really. You’re about to do something monumentally stupid.

“Story of my life.”

The Chemist finally emerged from the Volvo carrying a small leather satchel. He moved quickly across the parking lot, his head on a swivel, and climbed the stairs two at a time. When he reached the walkway, he didn’t say hello. He just jerked his head toward the room.

“Inside. Now.”

I stubbed out the cigarette and followed him in. Duarte was sitting at the small table near the window, cleaning a .38 Special with methodical precision. Skinny Ricky occupied most of the bed, his massive frame making the mattress look like a child’s toy. The Chemist glanced at both of them, then set the satchel on the dresser.

“You brought company,” he said flatly.

“They’re with me.”

“That’s what worries me.” He unzipped the satchel and pulled out two small glass vials—one filled with white crystalline powder, the other with a darker, amber-colored substance. “DMT and mescaline. Fresh batch. Purer than what I gave you last time.”

“How pure?”

“Pure enough that you’ll want to be very, very careful about dosage.” He set

the vials down and turned to face me, his expression grave. “I’m serious, Vee. What you did at the quarry—mixing the two—that was reckless. You opened a door that most people don’t even know exists.”

“The Gringo Shaman.”

“The Shaman is just one manifestation,” the Chemist said quietly. “There are others. Entities that exist in the spaces between perception and reality. The machine elves, for instance.”

Duarte looked up from his gun. “Machine elves?”

The Chemist didn’t take his eyes off me. “Interdimensional beings that appear under heavy DMT influence. Some people see them as benevolent guides. Others see them as tricksters, manipulators, things that feed on human consciousness. They exist in a realm where language breaks down, where geometry becomes alive, where time doesn’t flow in straight lines.”

“Sounds like a bad trip,” Skinny Ricky said.

“It’s not a trip,” the Chemist replied. “That’s what people don’t understand. When you go deep enough, when you push past the threshold, you’re not hallucinating. You’re perceiving. You’re seeing things that are actually there, just operating on frequencies your brain isn’t designed to process.”

The burro shifted beside me. *He’s not wrong.*

“And the machine elves?” I asked.

“They’ll try to communicate with you. They’ll show you things—patterns, symbols, entire cosmologies compressed into single moments. Some people come back enlightened. Others come back broken.” He picked up the DMT vial and held it up to the light. “This stuff is a key, Vee. But you need to understand what you’re unlocking. Once you see them, once they see you, there’s no going back. They’ll know you exist. And they’ll be watching.”

The room went quiet. Even Duarte had stopped cleaning his gun.

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked.

“Because I like you,” the Chemist said simply. “And because I’ve seen what happens to people who go too deep without understanding the risks. They don’t come back the same. Some of them don’t come back at all.”

He set the vial down and zipped up the satchel.

“Use the mescaline to open the door. Use the DMT to walk through it. But for God’s sake, Vee, don’t stay on the other side too long. The machine elves are

patient. They’ll wait for you to lose track of time, to forget which reality you belong to. And when that happens, they’ll keep you.”

“Keep me where?”

“Wherever they are. Wherever that is.” He moved toward the door, then paused. “One more thing. If you see them—if they appear to you—don’t make deals. Don’t promise them anything. They speak in riddles and metaphors, but their contracts are binding in ways you can’t comprehend.”

“Noted.”

“I’m serious, Vee. The Shaman helped you because he’s aligned with the burro, because there’s some kind of alliance there. But the machine elves? They’re neutral at best, malevolent at worst. They don’t care about your case or your survival. They care about patterns, about the architecture of consciousness itself.”

He opened the door and stepped out onto the walkway.

“Good luck,” he said. “You’re going to need it.”

Then he was gone, disappearing down the stairs and across the parking lot like a ghost. The Volvo’s engine coughed to life, and a moment later, the taillights vanished into the Valley night.

I stared at the two vials on the dresser.

“Machine elves,” Duarte said quietly. “Jesus Christ, Vee. What the hell are you getting into?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But I’m about to find out.”

The burro snorted. *This is going to be interesting.*

“That’s one word for it.”

* * * * *

Friday came faster than I expected.

We spent the intervening days preparing—scouting the bowling alley, mapping exits, timing the Lieutenant’s routine down to the minute. He was a creature of habit, which made him predictable. Every Friday night, league play started at seven. He’d arrive at six-thirty, order a beer and a basket of fries, and sit at his usual lane until the games began. He would then bowl three games, drink two more beers, and leave around ten.

The bowling alley was called Lucky Strikes, a relic from the seventies with

faded carpet, flickering neon signs, and the perpetual smell of cigarette smoke and shoe disinfectant. It sat on the edge of the Valley's industrial district, surrounded by empty lots and chain-link fences. Two entrances: front and back. Parking lot on the east side, alley access on the west.

We'd need to grab him between the building and his car. Quick, clean, no witnesses.

Duarte had acquired a van—an unmarked white Econoline with tinted windows and a sliding side door. Skinny Ricky had brought muscle: two guys from his underworld connections, both OG gangsters from the south side who'd been running games and collections for years. They didn't ask questions, didn't need explanations. They just showed up, carried themselves like men who'd settled disputes with their fists and worse, and then waited for instructions.

We met at the motel Thursday night to finalize the plan.

"He parks in the same spot every week," I said, pointing to a hand-drawn map of the parking lot spread across the table. "Third row, near the back entrance. He walks out alone, no security, no backup. We intercept him here"—I tapped the map—"between the door and his car. Ricky's guys flank him, Duarte covers the exit, I make contact."

"What if he resists?" one of Ricky's guys asked. His name was Torres, and he had the kind of face that had seen too many bad nights.

"He'll resist," I said. "He's a cop. It's in his DNA. But we're not trying to hurt him. We just need him in the van long enough to have a conversation."

"A conversation," Torres repeated, his tone skeptical.

"That's right."

"And if the conversation doesn't go well?"

"Then we improvise."

Duarte lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair. "What about his weapon? He'll be carrying."

"We disarm him first. Fast and surgical. No shots fired, no alarms raised. We get him in the van, drive him somewhere quiet, and ask our questions."

"And then?"

"And then we let him go."

Torres and his partner—a stocky guy named Ruiz—exchanged glances.

"You're serious," Ruiz said.

"Dead serious. We're not killers. We're just trying to get answers."

"Answers about what?"

"About who's really running this city," I said. "About The Collective, about Alex, about why fifteen people got massacred at Large George's building. The Lieutenant knows. He's been protecting them, covering for them, playing puppet master while the bodies pile up. We need to know why."

Duarte exhaled smoke toward the ceiling. "And you think he'll just tell us?"

"I think he'll tell us when he realizes we saved his life."

"Saved his life from what?"

"From the people he's been protecting."

The burro, lounging on the bed beside Skinny Ricky, lifted his head. *You're betting a lot on a hunch.*

"It's not a hunch," I said. "Alex is cleaning house. The news leak exposed the operation, and now everyone involved is a liability. The Mayor, the Lieutenant, anyone who knows too much. Alex is going to eliminate them before they can talk."

"And you think he's coming for the Lieutenant?"

"I know he is. Friday night, Lucky Strikes, during league play. It's the perfect opportunity—public enough that it looks random, isolated enough that they can make it clean."

Duarte stubbed out his cigarette. "So we're not just grabbing the Lieutenant. We're intercepting an assassination."

"Exactly."

"Jesus, Vee. You're really swinging for the fences on this one."

"It's the only play we've got."

Skinny Ricky shifted his weight, making the bed frame creak. "What if you're wrong? What if Alex's crew doesn't show?"

"Then we grab the Lieutenant anyway and ask our questions. Either way, we get what we need."

Torres checked his watch. "What time do we move?"

"Six-fifteen. We're in position before the Lieutenant arrives. Eyes on all entrances, ready to move the second we see Alex's crew."

"And if things go sideways?"

"Then we adapt," I said. "That's what we do."

The room went quiet. Everyone knew what we were walking into—a potential fire-fight, a confrontation with trained mercenaries, a situation that could go from controlled extraction to bloodbath in seconds.

But we were committed. The Lieutenant was the key to everything, and if we didn't get to him first, Alex would. And once Alex had him, the truth would die with him.

"We good?" I asked.

Duarte nodded. Torres and Ruiz exchanged another glance, then nodded as well. Skinny Ricky gave me a thumbs-up.

"We're good," Duarte said.

"Then let's get some sleep. Tomorrow night, we finish this."

* * * * *

At the stronghold, Alex stood at the tactical table, studying a satellite image of Lucky Strikes bowling alley. Amy stood beside him, arms crossed, her expression unreadable. The remaining mercenaries—four now, after losing three at the quarry and Tony in the ventilation system—moved through the space with quiet efficiency, checking weapons and reviewing the extraction plan.

"The Lieutenant's a problem," Alex said quietly. "The news leak changed everything. He can't control the narrative anymore, can't bury the story. And when cops lose control, they panic. When they panic, they talk."

"You think he'll flip?" Amy asked.

"I think he'll consider it. And that's enough." Alex tapped the satellite image. "He's vulnerable here. Friday night, league play, same routine he's followed for years. We grab him between the building and his car, get him in a vehicle, and take him somewhere we can have a private conversation."

"And after the conversation?"

"After the conversation, he disappears. Permanently."

Amy was quiet for a moment. "He's been useful."

"He was useful," Alex corrected. "Past tense. Now he's a liability. The Mayor's already cracking, and if the Lieutenant follows suit, the entire operation collapses. We can't afford that."

One of the mercenaries—a lean, scarred man named Keller—approached the

table. "Sir, we've confirmed the Lieutenant's schedule. He'll be at Lucky Strikes from six-thirty to ten. Parking lot's exposed, minimal security, no cameras on the back entrance."

"Good," Alex said. "We move at nine-forty-five. He'll be finishing his third game, heading to his car. We intercept him in the parking lot, neutralize any resistance, and extract him before anyone realizes what's happening."

"Rules of engagement?"

"Non-lethal if possible. We need him conscious and able to talk. But if he resists, if he draws his weapon, you're authorized to use whatever force is necessary."

Keller nodded and returned to his team.

Amanda, who had been sitting near the window, stood and walked to the table. "What about Vee?"

"What about him?"

"He's still out there. Still digging. Still causing problems."

"Vee's a distraction," Alex said dismissively. "He's running around with a washed-up cop and a motel owner, playing detective while the real players make their moves. By the time he figures out what's happening, it'll be too late."

"You underestimated him before," Amanda said quietly. "At the quarry. He escaped, killed Tony, evaded an entire team of trained mercenaries. That's not a distraction. That's a threat."

Alex turned to face her, his expression cold. "Vee got lucky. He had hallucinogens in his system, he knew the ventilation layout, and he had help from whatever interdimensional bullshit he's been dabbling in. But luck runs out. And when it does, we'll be ready."

"And if he shows up at the bowling alley?"

"Then we deal with him. Permanently."

Amy checked her watch. "We should move soon. I want the team in position an hour before extraction."

"Agreed," Alex said. "Keller, get your men ready. Full tactical gear, suppressed weapons, two vehicles for redundancy. I want this clean, fast, and invisible. The Lieutenant gets in the van, we're gone before anyone notices."

"Yes, sir."

As the mercenaries prepared to move out, Amanda lingered at the table,

staring at the satellite image of Lucky Strikes.

"You're sure about this?" she asked quietly.

"I'm sure," Alex replied. "The Lieutenant's served his purpose. Now he's a loose end. And we don't leave loose ends."

"And Vee?"

Alex smiled, but there was no warmth in it. "If Vee shows up, we'll tie off that loose end too."

* * * * *

Friday night arrived with the kind of oppressive heat that made the Valley feel like a pressure cooker. The radiated heat, and the air hung thick and motionless.

We were in position by six-fifteen.

Duarte sat in the van, parked three rows back from the Lieutenant's usual spot, engine running, ready to move. Torres and Ruiz were positioned near the back entrance, dressed in casual clothes, blending in with the league bowlers filtering into the building. Skinny Ricky waited in a second vehicle—a nondescript sedan—at the far end of the parking lot, ready to block any escape routes.

I stood in the shadows near the dumpsters, watching the entrance, a cigarette burning between my fingers. The burro stood beside me, his ears twitching.

You took the mescaline, he observed.

"Just one. Enough to keep the edges sharp."

And the DMT?

"In my pocket. Just in case."

In case of what?

"In case things get weird."

The burro snorted. *Things are already weird.*

"Then weirder."

At six-thirty, the Lieutenant's car pulled into the parking lot—a dark blue Crown Victoria that screamed cop even without the lights and sirens. He parked in his usual spot, killed the engine, and sat there for a moment, staring at the steering wheel.

Then he got out, locked the car, and walked toward the entrance.

He looked tired. Older than I remembered. The weight of the past few days had carved new lines into his face, and his movements were slower, more deliberate. He was carrying the burden of the massacre, the cover-up, the blackmail, the lies. And it was crushing him.

He's vulnerable, the burro said.

"Good. That makes this easier."

I watched him disappear into the building, then checked my watch. Nine-forty-five. That's when we'd move. Three hours to wait, three hours to make sure everything was in position.

I lit another cigarette and settled in.

The mescaline hummed quietly in my bloodstream, sharpening colors, amplifying sounds. The neon sign above the bowling alley entrance pulsed with unnatural brightness. The distant traffic sounded like ocean waves. The burro's breathing was a steady rhythm, grounding me in the moment.

And then, at eight-thirty, everything changed.

A black SUV pulled into the parking lot, moving slowly, deliberately. It circled once, then parked near the back entrance—close to the Lieutenant's Crown Victoria but not directly beside it.

Four men got out. Tactical gear under civilian jackets. Suppressed weapons barely visible beneath their clothing. They moved with military precision, spreading out, covering angles, establishing a perimeter.

Amy's crew.

Oh shit, the burro said.

"Yeah."

I keyed the radio clipped to my belt. "Duarte, we've got company. Black SUV, four hostiles, back entrance. They're setting up for extraction."

Duarte's voice crackled back. "Copy that. What's the play?"

"We wait. Let them make their move, then we intercept."

"You sure about this?"

"No. But we're doing it anyway."

I watched the mercenaries take their positions. One near the dumpsters, one by the back door, two flanking the Lieutenant's car. They were good—professional, coordinated, invisible to anyone who wasn't looking for them.

But I was looking.

And I wasn't the only one.

At nine-thirty, a second vehicle arrived—a white panel van that pulled into the lot and parked on the opposite side, near the front entrance. Two more men got out, both armed, both moving with the same tactical precision.

That's six hostiles, the burro said. This is getting complicated.

"It was always going to be complicated."

I keyed the radio again. "Duarte, we've got a second team. White van, front entrance, two more hostiles. They're boxing him in."

"Jesus Christ, Vee. How many people are after this guy?"

"More than we thought. Torres, Ruiz, you seeing this?"

Torres's voice came through. "We see it. What's the call?"

"We stick to the plan. When the Lieutenant comes out, we move first. Fast and hard. Get him in our van before Alex's crew can react."

"And if they react anyway?"

"Then we shoot our way out."

The line went quiet. Everyone knew what that meant—a fire-fight in a public parking lot, civilian casualties, the kind of chaos that would bring every cop in the Valley down on our heads.

But we were out of options. If we didn't grab the Lieutenant, Alex would. And if Alex got him, the truth died.

At nine-forty, the bowling alley's back door opened.

The Lieutenant stepped out, carrying his bowling bag, moving slowly toward his car. He looked exhausted, defeated, like a man who'd finally run out of fight.

Amy's mercenaries moved.

The one by the dumpsters stepped forward, blocking the Lieutenant's path. The two flanking his car closed in from either side. The one by the back door moved to cut off his retreat.

The Lieutenant froze, his hand moving instinctively toward his hip, toward his weapon.

"Now," I said into the radio.

Duarte gunned the van's engine. Torres and Ruiz broke from their positions, sprinting toward the Lieutenant. Skinny Ricky's sedan roared to life, headlights blazing.

And I ran.

The mercenary by the dumpsters saw me coming and reached for his weapon.

I hit him low and hard, driving my shoulder into his ribs, sending him sprawling. His gun clattered across the asphalt.

Torres reached the Lieutenant first, grabbing his arm. "Come with us. Now."

"What the hell—"

"No time. Move."

The two mercenaries flanking the Crown Victoria drew their weapons—suppressed pistols, matte black, professional. Torres shoved the Lieutenant toward Duarte's van and returned fire with his own weapon, the shots echoing across the parking lot.

Ruiz engaged the mercenary by the back door, the two of them grappling, trading blows, crashing into the dumpster with a metallic clang.

I scrambled for the fallen mercenary's weapon, grabbed it, and turned just as the white van's team arrived. Two more hostiles, both armed, both moving fast.

The burro appeared beside me. *This is going to get messy.*

"It already is."

I fired twice—center mass, controlled bursts. One hostile went down. The other dove behind a parked car, returning fire, bullets sparking off the asphalt.

Duarte's van screeched to a stop beside the Lieutenant. Torres threw open the sliding door. "Get in!"

The Lieutenant, finally understanding what was happening, dove into the van. Torres followed, slamming the door shut.

"Go, go, go!"

Duarte floored it, the van's tires screaming as it rocketed toward the exit.

The remaining mercenaries opened fire, bullets punching through the van's rear panels, shattering the back window. But Duarte didn't slow down. He blasted through the parking lot, sideswiped a parked car, and disappeared into the Valley night.

I ran for Skinny Ricky's sedan, the burro galloping beside me. Ruiz broke free from his opponent and sprinted after us. Torres was already in the van with the Lieutenant.

Behind us, the mercenaries regrouped, shouting into radios, coordinating pursuit.

But we were gone.

Skinny Ricky hit the gas, and the sedan fishtailed out of the parking lot, tires

smoking, engine roaring. I looked back through the rear window and saw the black SUV and white van both starting to move, headlights cutting through the darkness.

“They’re following,” I said.

“I see them,” Ricky replied, his voice calm despite the chaos. “Hold on.”

He took a hard right, then a left, weaving through side streets, cutting through alleys, using every shortcut and back road he knew. The SUV and van stayed with us for a while, but Ricky was good—better than good. He knew the Valley like the back of his hand, knew every turn, every dead end, every place to lose a tail.

After ten minutes of high-speed pursuit, the headlights behind us disappeared.

We were clear.

I keyed the radio. “Duarte, you good?”

“We’re good. Lieutenant’s secure. Where are we meeting?”

“The warehouse on Fifth. You know the one.”

“Copy that. See you there.”

I leaned back in the seat, my heart pounding, adrenaline still flooding my system. The burro sat beside me, his expression unreadable.

You just saved the Lieutenant’s life, he said.

“Yeah.”

From the people he’s been protecting.

“Yeah.”

That’s going to be an interesting conversation.

“That’s one word for it.”

Skinny Ricky glanced at me in the rear view mirror. “You okay, Vee?”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine. And who are you talking to?”

“I’m fine,” I repeated.

But I wasn’t. The mescaline was still humming in my bloodstream, and the violence of the past fifteen minutes had kicked it into overdrive. Colors were too bright, sounds too sharp, reality too thin.

And somewhere in the back of my mind, I could feel them watching.

The machine elves—Waiting.

Chapter 14

At the stronghold, Alex stood at the tactical table, his knuckles white against the steel edge. The satellite image of Lucky Strikes still glowed on the screen—a monument to failure.

“Explain it to me again,” he said quietly. Too quietly. “How exactly did four trained mercenaries lose a single target to a washed-up private detective and a crew of street thugs?”

Amy stood across from him, arms crossed, her expression unreadable. The remaining mercenaries had retreated to the far side of the warehouse, cleaning weapons with deliberate focus, pretending not to listen.

“We were intercepted,” Amy said evenly. “Vee’s crew was already in position. They knew the Lieutenant’s routine, knew the extraction window. They moved first.”

“They moved first,” Alex repeated, his voice rising. “They moved first because you were sloppy. Because your team was visible. Because you underestimated him—again.”

“We weren’t sloppy. Vee had inside information. Someone tipped him off.”

“Or maybe,” Alex said, stepping around the table, “you’re not as good as you think you are. Maybe the military precision you’re so proud of doesn’t mean shit when you’re up against someone who thinks sideways.”

Amy’s jaw tightened. “We extracted under fire. We engaged multiple hostiles. We followed protocol—”

“Protocol?” Alex’s laugh was sharp, humorless. “Protocol got us nothing. The Lieutenant is in Vee’s hands right now, probably spilling everything he knows. The Mayor’s panicking, the news is running the massacre story on loop, and we’re standing here with our dicks in our hands because your team couldn’t grab one corrupt cop from a bowling alley parking lot.”

Amanda, who had been sitting near the window, stood slowly. “Alex—”

“Don’t.” He turned on her, his eyes blazing. “Don’t tell me to calm down. Don’t tell me it’s under control. Nothing is under control. We had one job—one simple extraction—and we failed. Do you understand what that means? The

Lieutenant knows everything. The operation, the board, the connections. If he talks—”

“He won’t talk,” Amy interrupted. “He’s too deep. He’s protected us for years. He’s not going to flip now.”

“He’s not going to flip?” Alex’s voice dripped with contempt. “He just got saved from an assassination attempt by the people he’s been hunting. You think that doesn’t change his perspective? You think Vee isn’t in his ear right now, showing him exactly how expendable he is to us?”

The room went silent. Even the mercenaries had stopped their weapon maintenance.

Amy took a step forward, her voice low and controlled. “What do you want me to do, Alex? You want me to assemble another team? Fine. I’ll get better operators, heavier firepower, whatever you need. But don’t stand there and question my command when you’re the one who insisted on keeping Vee alive in the first place.”

“I kept him alive because he was useful—”

“He was never useful,” Amy snapped. “He was a liability from day one. You wanted him as a patsy, as misdirection, as someone to muddy the waters. Well, congratulations. The waters are muddy as hell, and now he’s got the one person who can connect all the dots.”

Alex’s hand slammed down on the table. “Then fix it. Get me better merc’s. Get me people who can actually do their jobs. I want the Lieutenant back, and I want Vee dead. No more games, no more clever plans. Just results.”

Amy stared at him for a long moment, then nodded once. “Fine.”

She turned and walked toward the mercenaries, already barking orders about new recruits and tactical reassessment.

Amanda watched her go, then looked at her brother. “Alex—”

“What?”

“She’s right. About Vee. We underestimated him.”

“I know that.”

“And the Lieutenant—if he talks, if he gives Vee everything—”

“He won’t have time to talk,” Alex said coldly. “We’ll find them. We’ll end this. And then we’ll clean up the mess and move forward.”

But Amanda saw something in his eyes she’d never seen before. Something that looked almost like fear.

“You’re losing control,” she said quietly.

“I’m not—”

“You are. And Amy sees it. I see it. The board is going to see it.” She moved closer, her voice dropping. “We need to regroup. We need to think this through. Throwing more mercenaries at the problem isn’t going to fix what’s broken.”

Alex turned away from her, staring at the satellite image on the screen. “Then what do you suggest?”

“I suggest we stop pretending this is still going according to plan. The massacre leaked. The Lieutenant’s compromised. Vee’s got allies we didn’t account for. We’re not in control anymore, Alex. We’re reacting.”

“So what? We just give up?”

“No. We adapt. We figure out what Vee knows, what the Lieutenant’s told him, and we get ahead of it. But we can’t do that if you’re too busy yelling at Amy to see the bigger picture.”

Alex was quiet for a long moment. Then he nodded, just once.

“Get the board together,” he said. “Emergency meeting. Tonight.”

Amanda hesitated. “Are you sure?”

“No. But we’re out of options.”

* * * * *

Back at the motel, I sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the two vials the Chemist had left—mescaline and DMT, sitting side by side like twin promises of oblivion.

Duarte was in the bathroom, washing blood off his hands. Torres and Ruiz had taken the Lieutenant to the warehouse on Fifth, securing him in a back room until we were ready to have our conversation.

The burro stood by the window, looking out at the parking lot.

You’re thinking about the massacre, he said.

“Yeah.”

About the bodies. The dismemberment. The decapitations.

“Yeah.”

You’re wondering who did it.

I lit a cigarette, exhaled smoke toward the ceiling. “Amy’s crew is good. Pro-

fessional. But what happened at Large George's building—that wasn't professional. That was something else."

The burro turned to face me. *What if I told you it wasn't Amy's crew at all?*

"What do you mean?"

The machine elves, he said quietly. *What if they're not just hallucinations? What if they're real?*

I stared at him. "Real."

Real. Interdimensional entities that exist in the spaces between perception and reality. The Chemist warned you about them. The Gringo Shaman is one of them—or connected to them. What if the massacre wasn't human at all?

"That's insane."

Is it? The burro's eyes were steady, unblinking. *Think about it, Vee. The bodies weren't just killed—they were torn apart. Limbs separated with surgical precision. Heads removed cleanly, no jagged edges, no hesitation marks. That's not mercenary work. That's not even cartel work. That's something operating on a different level entirely.*

I took a long drag on the cigarette, my mind racing. "Why would interdimensional entities massacre a local crime boss's operation?"

That's the question, isn't it? The burro moved closer. *What's their connection to this? What's their agenda? Are they protecting something? Punishing someone? Or are they just cleaning up loose ends in a game we can't even see?*

"Jesus Christ."

You've been operating in a much larger game than you thought, the burro continued. *The Collective, Alex, Amy, Amanda—they're players, sure. But they're not the only ones. The machine elves are watching. The Gringo Shaman intervened to save you. There are forces moving through this case that don't follow human logic, human motivations, human rules.*

Duarte emerged from the bathroom, drying his hands on a towel. "You talking to yourself again?"

"Something like that."

He sat down in the chair by the door, his expression weary. "What's the play with the Lieutenant?"

"We ask him everything; who's running The Collective, what Alex's real role is, why the massacre happened, who ordered the hit on him tonight."

"And if he doesn't talk?"

"He'll talk. He just got saved from an execution by the people he's been protecting. That changes a man's perspective."

Duarte nodded slowly. "And after we get our answers?"

"After we get our answers, we figure out how deep this goes. And we end it."

The burro snorted. *You make it sound so simple.*

"It's not simple. But it's all we've got."

What about the machine elves?

I looked at the burro, then at the vials on the dresser. "What about them?"

If they're real—if they're involved—then you're not just fighting The Collective. You're fighting something that exists outside of time, outside of space, outside of everything you understand. How do you fight that?

"I don't know," I admitted. "But I'm about to find out."

* * * * *

The Collective's board members arrived at the stronghold in pairs, moving through the shadows like ghosts. Six of them in total—politicians, businessmen, a judge, a police captain. People with power, people with connections, people who'd spent decades building empires in the Valley's underworld.

They gathered around the tactical table, their faces grim.

Alex stood at the head, Amanda and Amy flanking him on either side. The mercenaries had been dismissed, sent to the far side of the warehouse to give the board privacy.

"Gentlemen," Alex began, his voice steady despite the tension in the room. "We have a situation."

"A situation?" The judge—a heavyset man named Carver—leaned forward, his jowls quivering. "The massacre is all over the news. Fifteen bodies, dismemberment, decapitation. The Mayor's office is fielding calls from the FBI. That's not a situation, Alex. That's a catastrophe."

"We're aware—"

"Are you?" Another board member—a thin, sharp-faced businessman named Hollis—cut in. "Because from where I'm sitting, it looks like you've lost control. The Lieutenant's been compromised. The news leaked. And now some

two-bit private detective has our most valuable asset locked in a room somewhere, probably extracting every secret we've spent years protecting."

"We're working on retrieving the Lieutenant—"

"Working on it?" Carver's voice rose. "We don't pay you to work on things, Alex. We pay you to deliver results. And right now, the only result I'm seeing is a complete collapse of operational security."

Alex's jaw tightened, but he kept his voice level. "The situation is fluid. We've had setbacks, yes. But we're adapting. We're bringing in new operators, tightening our protocols—"

"Adapting?" Hollis laughed bitterly. "You're hemorrhaging control. The massacre wasn't supposed to happen. The news wasn't supposed to leak. The Lieutenant wasn't supposed to get grabbed by a washed-up detective with a drug problem. Every single safeguard we put in place has failed."

Amanda stepped forward. "We understand your concerns. But panic isn't going to help us. We need to stay focused, stay coordinated—"

"Focused?" Carver slammed his hand on the table. "My entire career is on the line because your operation went sideways. The FBI is sniffing around. Internal Affairs is asking questions. If this blows back on us—"

"It won't," Alex said firmly. "We'll contain it."

"How?" Hollis demanded. "How exactly are you going to contain a massacre that's already public? How are you going to silence a Lieutenant who's already talking? How are you going to stop Vee from digging deeper?"

The room went silent.

Then, from the far end of the table, a quiet voice spoke.

"We contact the Shaman."

Everyone turned. The speaker was a woman named Delacroix—older, silver-haired, with eyes that had seen too much. She rarely spoke at board meetings, but when she did, people listened.

"The Gringo Shaman?" Carver's voice was incredulous. "You can't be serious."

"I'm completely serious," Delacroix replied calmly. "We're dealing with forces we don't understand. The massacre wasn't human—we all know that, even if we won't say it out loud. The dismemberment, the precision, the sheer brutality. That wasn't mercenary work. That was something else."

"You're talking about fairy tales," Hollis said dismissively.

"Am I?" Delacroix's gaze was steady. "Then explain the bodies. Explain how fifteen armed men were torn apart in minutes with no gunfire, no explosives, no evidence of conventional weapons. Explain how the Lieutenant's been seeing things, how Vee's been operating under hallucinogenic influence and still managing to outmaneuver trained soldiers. Explain any of it without acknowledging that there are players in this game who don't follow our rules."

The room was silent.

"The Shaman is dangerous," Amy said quietly. "He doesn't take sides. He doesn't follow orders. If we contact him, we're opening a door we might not be able to close."

"We're already past that point," Delacroix replied. "The door's been open since Vee mixed mescaline and DMT at the quarry. The Shaman intervened then. He's watching now. The question isn't whether we contact him—it's whether we do it on our terms or wait for him to act on his."

Alex stared at her. "You're suggesting we make a deal with an inter-dimensional entity."

"I'm suggesting we acknowledge reality. The Collective has always operated in the shadows, manipulating systems, controlling narratives. But we're not the only ones in the shadows anymore. The machine elves are here. The Shaman is here. And if we don't adapt to that, we're going to lose everything."

Carver shook his head. "This is insane."

"This is survival," Delacroix countered. "We either evolve or we die. Those are the only options left."

The board members exchanged glances—uncertain, afraid, but unable to deny the logic.

Finally, Alex spoke. "If we contact the Shaman, what do we ask for?"

"Protection," Delacroix said simply. "Clarity. An understanding of what's happening and how to navigate it. The Shaman exists outside of time, outside of conventional reality. He sees patterns we can't. If anyone can help us regain control, it's him."

"And if he refuses?"

"Then we're no worse off than we are now."

Alex looked at Amanda, then at Amy. Both women were silent, their expressions unreadable.

“All in favor?” Alex asked quietly.
One by one, hands rose around the table.
Six votes. Unanimous.

“Then it’s decided,” Alex said. “We contact the Gringo Shaman.”

Delacroix nodded. “I’ll make the arrangements. But understand—once we do this, there’s no going back. The Shaman doesn’t forget. And he doesn’t forgive.”

“We’re already past the point of no return,” Alex replied. “We’ve been past it since the moment Vee took this case.”

The board members stood, filing out of the stronghold one by one, disappearing into the Valley night.

Alex remained at the table, staring at the satellite image of Lucky Strikes.

Amanda moved beside him. “Are you sure about this?”

“No,” he admitted. “But we’re out of options.”

“The Shaman—”

“I know. But Delacroix is right. We’re not just fighting Vee anymore. We’re fighting something bigger. Something we don’t understand. And if we don’t adapt, we’re dead.”

Amanda was quiet for a long moment. Then she placed her hand on his shoulder.

“Then let’s hope the Shaman is feeling generous.”

Alex didn’t respond. He just stared at the screen, watching the blinking dot that marked the bowling alley, again wondering if they’d just made the biggest mistake of their lives.

Chapter 15

The warehouse smelled like rust and old motor oil. A single bulb hung from the ceiling, swaying slightly, casting shadows that moved like living things across the concrete floor. The Lieutenant sat in a metal folding chair, hands zip-tied behind his back, blood crusted at the corner of his mouth from where Torres had clipped him during the extraction.

I stood ten feet away, smoking a cigarette, watching the colors bleed from his face into the air around him. Purple. Green. A sickly yellow that reminded me of infection. The mescaline and DMT were still working through my system, refusing to let go, and reality kept folding in on itself like origami made of broken glass.

Duarte leaned against the wall near the door, arms crossed, silent. He’d barely said a word since we’d dragged the Lieutenant inside. Just watched. Waiting.

The burro sat on an oil drum to my left, ears twitching. *You gonna ask him, or you gonna stare at him until he melts?*

“Give me a minute.”

The Lieutenant’s eyes tracked me as I moved closer. Even beaten, even tied to a chair in a warehouse in the middle of nowhere, he still had that cop look—the one that said he’d seen far worse, done worse, and wasn’t about to break for some two-bit detective with a drug problem.

“You know what I don’t understand?” I said, flicking ash onto the floor. “Why I shouldn’t just put a bullet in your head right now and be done with it.”

He smiled. Blood on his teeth. “Because you want answers.”

“I’ve got plenty of answers. Amanda and Amy are twins. Alex is the architect. The Collective runs the Valley like a puppet show. You’re the dirty cop keeping it all quiet.” I took a drag, let the smoke curl out slowly. “That’s enough answers for me.”

“Is it?” The Lieutenant’s voice was calm, almost amused. “Then why am I still breathing?”

I didn’t respond. The walls were breathing too, expanding and contracting like lungs. The light bulb swung wider, casting arcs of shadow that looked like wings.

"You think this is about politics," the Lieutenant continued. "About money. About some criminal organization running scams in a shit-hole city." He leaned forward as much as the zip ties would allow. "You have no idea what you've stumbled into, Vee."

"Enlighten me."

He was quiet for a long moment, studying me. Then he laughed—a short, bitter sound. "They found me. Years ago. I was investigating something I shouldn't have been investigating. Got too close. And instead of killing me, they made me an offer."

"What kind of offer?"

"The kind you can't refuse. The kind that keeps you alive but makes you wish you were dead." His eyes were hard now, all the amusement gone. "They needed someone on the inside. Someone who could keep secrets. Someone who understood that some truths are too dangerous to speak out loud."

The burro shifted on the oil drum. *He's stalling.*

"What truths?"

The Lieutenant's face rippled, features sliding like wax under heat. I blinked hard, trying to focus, but the mescaline had other ideas. His eyes became too large, then too small, then split into multiples before snapping back into place.

"Roswell," he said quietly.

I stopped moving. "What?"

"Roswell, New Mexico. 1947. You know the story. Everyone knows the story. UFO crash. Government cover-up. Weather balloon bullshit." He smiled again, but there was no humor in it. "Except it wasn't bullshit. It was real. And what they found in that desert changed everything."

Duarte pushed off the wall. "You're saying—"

"I'm saying they reverse-engineered it. Not the ship. Not the propulsion. The reality it came from." The Lieutenant's voice dropped lower, almost to a whisper. "The scientists—the real ones, the ones whose names you'll never know—they unraveled inter-dimensional physics. Opened doors that were never meant to be opened. And on the other side, they found him."

"The Gringo Shaman," I said.

"Or he found them. Depends on who you ask." The Lieutenant's eyes locked onto mine. "Only a handful of people in the world know the truth, Vee. Maybe twenty. Maybe less. I'm one of them. That's why I'm still alive. That's why they

keep me around. Because some secrets are too big to kill. You kill the keeper, the secret spreads. You keep him alive, you keep the secret controlled."

The walls were melting now, dripping like candle wax. The light bulb elongated into a teardrop, then snapped back. I could hear something humming—low, subsonic, vibrating in my chest.

Machine elves, the burro said quietly. *They're listening.*

"So what is he?" I asked. "The Shaman. What the fuck is he?"

"A bridge. A doorway. A mistake." The Lieutenant shook his head. "I don't know. No one does. But he exists in both places at once—here and there. And The Collective has been trying to control him for decades. To use him. Weaponize him."

"And the machine elves?"

"His children. His soldiers. His messengers." The Lieutenant's voice cracked slightly. "They're real, Vee. All of it's real. The drugs don't create them. They just let you see them. Let you perceive what's always been there, operating on frequencies we're not supposed to access."

I took another drag, my hand shaking slightly. The cigarette tasted like copper and ozone. "Why tell me this?"

"Because you're already in too deep. Because you've seen them. Because the moment you mixed that mescaline with DMT, you opened yourself up to their world." He leaned back, exhausted. "And because if I'm going to die in this warehouse, I'd rather die telling the truth than protecting their lies."

Duarte stepped forward, his face pale. "This is insane."

"Is it?" The Lieutenant looked at him. "You saw the bodies at Large George's. The dismemberment. The decapitations. You think Amy's merc's did that? You think humans did that?"

Duarte didn't respond.

I crushed the cigarette under my boot, watching the embers scatter like tiny stars. The warehouse felt bigger now, the walls stretching into infinity. I could see shapes moving in the shadows—angular, geometric, wrong.

"So what now?" I asked.

"Now?" The Lieutenant smiled grimly. "Now you decide if you're going to keep digging or walk away. But I'll tell you this—The Collective is scared. They've lost control. Alex thought he could manage it, thought he could use

the Shaman to consolidate power. But you can't control something like that. You can only survive it."

The burro hopped down from the oil drum, trotting over to stand beside me. *He's telling the truth. I can feel it.*

"And if I keep digging?"

"Then you'll find out what's really at the bottom of this. And trust me, Vee—you won't like what you see."

I stared at him for a long moment, watching his face shift and reform, watching the colors bleed and merge. Roswell. Inter-dimensional reality. The Gringo Shaman. Machine elves. It all sounded insane. It all sounded impossible.

But I'd seen the Shaman. I'd felt the walls of reality bend. I'd watched the machine elves move through the ventilation system like living geometry.

And deep down, in the part of my brain that the drugs hadn't touched, I knew the Lieutenant was telling the truth.

This wasn't about Amanda or Amy or Alex. It wasn't about The Collective or corrupt politicians or money.

This was about something older. Something bigger. Something that made the Valley look like a grain of sand on an infinite beach.

I turned to Duarte. "Cut him loose."

"What?"

"Cut him loose. We're not killing him."

Duarte hesitated, then pulled out a knife and sliced through the zip ties. The Lieutenant rubbed his wrists, standing slowly, watching me with those cop eyes.

"You're making a mistake," he said.

"Probably. But I need you alive. Because if what you're saying is true, I'm going to need someone who knows how this works."

The Lieutenant nodded slowly. "Then you're going to need more than that. You're going to need an army."

"I've got Duarte. I've got Skinny Ricky. I've got connections."

"That won't be enough."

"Then what will be?"

The Lieutenant walked toward the door, pausing at the threshold. He looked back at me, his face half in shadow, half in the sickly yellow light.

"You're going to need the Shaman on your side. And trust me, Vee—that's

the one thing you can't buy, steal, or negotiate."

He looked out into the night, leaving me standing in the warehouse with Duarte and the burro and the shapes moving in the shadows.

The burro looked up at me. *So. What now?*

I lit another cigarette, watching the smoke spiral upward into the darkness.

"Now we find out how deep this rabbit hole goes."

You sure about that?

"No. But I'm past the point of turning back."

The burro nodded. *Then let's go meet the devil.*

I smiled grimly. "I think we already have."

* * * * *

The Lieutenant stopped at the door, his hand on the frame. For a long moment he stood there, silhouetted against the darkness outside. Then he turned back.

"There's one more thing," he said quietly. "Something I've never told anyone. Something I was ordered to take to my grave."

I waited, the cigarette burning between my fingers.

"Amanda, Amy, and Alex," he said. "They're not siblings in the way you think. They're triplets, yes. But they weren't born. They were made."

Duarte stepped forward. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Roswell," the Lieutenant said. "After they recovered the craft, after they started unraveling the inter-dimensional physics—they didn't just open doors. They started experimenting. Combining human genetics with what they found. Creating something new. Something that could exist in both places at once."

The walls seemed to breathe around me. The colors bled darker.

"The triplets were the first successful generation. Born from the program in 1952. They've been alive for over seventy years, Vee. But they don't age like we do. They're timeless. Stuck in their prime. And they have no idea."

"What do you mean they have no idea?"

"I mean they think they're human," the Lieutenant said, his voice hollow. "They think they inherited money from their parents. They think they're running a criminal operation. They have no idea what they really are. The Collective created them, raised them, controlled them—and never told them the truth."

He paused, his face darkening. “But it’s worse than that. The Collective doesn’t just keep secrets from them. They manipulate their memories. Their DNA. Every six months, the triplets are brought in for what they think are routine medical checkups. Blood work. Physicals. Standard stuff.”

“But it’s not standard,” I said quietly.

“No. The Collective has access to the same inter-dimensional technology that created them. They use it to suppress memory formation, to alter neural pathways at a genetic level. Every time one of the triplets might notice they haven’t aged—every time they look at an old photograph, every time someone comments on how young they look, every time they pass a mirror and something feels wrong—the memory is scrubbed. Rewritten. The neural pathway is severed before it can form a lasting impression.”

Duarte’s face had gone pale. “That’s not possible.”

“It’s not only possible, it’s been happening for seventy years,” the Lieutenant said. “The technology they recovered from Roswell didn’t just open doors to other dimensions. It gave them the ability to rewrite biology itself. To edit consciousness. The triplets’ DNA has been modified to accept these alterations—they’re designed to be controlled without ever knowing it.”

I felt sick. “So every time they might realize—”

“It’s erased,” the Lieutenant finished. “Like it never happened. They meet someone from twenty years ago who looks older, and they think, ‘Huh, they aged badly.’ They look at a photo from 1985 and think, ‘I must have had good genes.’ The thought never sticks. It can’t. The Collective makes sure of it.”

“Jesus Christ,” Duarte whispered.

“They’re not just tools,” the Lieutenant continued, his voice heavy. “They’re slaves. Biological puppets who think they’re pulling their own strings. The Collective doesn’t just control what they do—they control what they think, what they remember, what they’re capable of perceiving about themselves. It’s the most complete form of enslavement ever created. And the triplets have no idea they’re in a cage.”

I felt the ground shift beneath me. Everything—the coordination between the triplets, their abilities, the way the machine elves moved around them, the way the Shaman appeared when I was near them—it all clicked into place like broken glass forming a mirror.

“They’re tools,” I said quietly. “The Collective’s been using them their entire lives and they don’t even know it.”

“Exactly.” The Lieutenant’s face was grim. “And if they ever find out what they are, if they ever realize they’re not human—” He shook his head. “That’s when things get really dangerous.”

He turned back toward the door.

“Wait,” I said. “Why tell me this now?”

The Lieutenant looked back one last time, his eyes tired and old.

“Because you’re going to have to decide, Vee. When the time comes, whether you tell them the truth or let them keep living the lie. Either way, people are going to die. Maybe all of us.”

He stepped out into the night and disappeared.

The warehouse was silent except for the hum of the light bulb and the sound of my own breathing.

Holy shit, the burro said quietly.

“Yeah.”

Duarte stared at the empty doorway. “This is insane. This is completely insane.”

“Is it?” I took a drag, watching the smoke curl and twist. “I’ve seen the Shaman. I’ve seen the machine elves. I’ve seen what happens when reality bends. Why wouldn’t they create something like that?”

“Because it’s—” Duarte stopped, unable to finish.

“Because it’s what?” I asked. “Impossible? We’re way past impossible.”

The burro trotted over to the door, sniffing the air where the Lieutenant had stood. *He’s telling the truth. I can feel it. The triplets—they’re not like us. They never were.*

I crushed the cigarette under my boot, the embers scattering like dying stars.

“So what now?” Duarte asked, his voice shaking slightly.

I looked at him, then at the burro, then at the shapes still moving in the shadows—angular, geometric, watching.

“Now we figure out how to survive what’s coming. Because if the triplets ever find out what they are, if they ever realize they’ve been lied to their entire lives—”

“They’ll burn the whole Valley down,” Duarte finished.

“Not just the Valley,” I said quietly. “Everything.”

The burro looked up at me. *So do we tell them?*

"I don't know yet."

You're going to have to decide eventually.

"I know."

And when you do, there's no going back.

"There never was."

I walked toward the door, Duarte and the burro following. Outside, the Valley stretched out before us—dark, humid, alive with secrets that went deeper than any of us had imagined.

Somewhere out there, three people who weren't people moved through the night, thinking they were human, thinking they were in control.

And somewhere beyond them, in the spaces between dimensions, the machine elves watched and waited.

The game had changed. The rules had changed.

And I was standing in the middle of it all, holding a truth that could destroy everything.

What are you going to do? the burro asked.

I lit another cigarette, watching the flame flicker in the darkness.

"I'm going to finish what I started. And then I'm going to decide whether to save them or let them burn."

That's a hell of a choice.

"Yeah," I said. "It is."

We walked into the night, leaving the warehouse behind.

The Valley Case had just become something far bigger than a case.

It had become a war for reality itself.

This is some real Star Wars shit, Vee, the burro said, shaking his head as we hit the parking lot. *Roswell. Inter-dimensional triplets. Machine elves. I mean, come on. We're not solving a case anymore. We're in a goddamn space opera.*

I couldn't help but laugh—a short, sharp bark that echoed off the asphalt.

"Yeah," I said. "We are."

And the worst part? the burro continued, *we're the good guys. Sort of.*

"Sort of," I agreed.

Chapter 16

Vee and Duarte sat across from Ricky in the motel room, the Lieutenant in the wind. The air was thick with cigarette smoke and the weight of what we'd just learned. I laid it out for them—all of it.

"Roswell," I said, watching Ricky's face. "1947. A UFO crashed in the desert. Not a weather balloon. Not a hoax. A real ship from another dimension."

Torres and Ruiz exchanged glances. Ricky just stared.

"The government reverse-engineered it," Duarte continued, his voice flat and clinical. "Scientists unraveled the technology. Figured out how to access inter-dimensional reality. That's when they found him—the Gringo Shaman. Or he found them. Nobody's entirely sure anymore."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Ricky's voice cracked.

I crushed out my cigarette and lit another one.

"The Collective knows about it. They've known for seventy years. And they've been using it. Using him. But that's not the real play, Ricky."

The room went quiet. Even the burro was silent.

"In 1952," I said slowly, "five years after Roswell, The Collective conducted an experiment. They took human genetics and combined them with the inter-dimensional technology they'd reverse-engineered. They created three children. Triplets. Amanda, Amy, and Alex."

Ricky's face went white.

"They're not human, Ricky. They never were. They're constructs. Designed beings. And they don't age like we do. They're timeless. Over seventy years old, but they look like they're in their thirties. The Collective keeps them that way through DNA manipulation and memory suppression. Every time they might start to notice something's wrong—that decades have passed, that they should be older—The Collective wipes their memory and adjusts their DNA. Keeps them compliant. Keeps them controlled."

"That's insane," Ricky whispered. "That's completely insane."

"Yeah," Duarte said. "It is."

"The Lieutenant is one of the few people who knows the truth," I continued.

“He stumbled onto The Collective years ago, and instead of killing him, they used him. Made him a keeper of secrets. A cop on their payroll who could cover up the impossible. That’s why I wanted to grab him. I knew he knew far more than he was letting on. And now, if those three ever figure it out on their own—if they ever realize they’re not human, that they’ve been lied to their entire lives—”

“They’ll burn the whole Valley down,” Duarte finished.

“Possibly the world,” I said.

The room went silent. Torres and Ruiz stared at the floor. Ricky sat on the edge of the bed, his hands shaking.

“This isn’t organized crime,” Ricky said finally, his voice barely audible. “This isn’t even conspiracy. This is... this is something else entirely.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It is.”

Welcome to the cosmic game, the burro said quietly. *Population: us.*

Ricky looked up at me, his eyes hollow.

“What do we do?”

I lit another cigarette, watching the smoke curl toward the ceiling.

“We survive. And we figure out what comes next.”

“Vee—”

“He’s right,” Duarte said. “We leave now, they’ll hunt us down anyway. And everyone we know gets burned in the process. Cliché but true, the only way out is through.”

Ricky looked between us, his face pale. “You’re both insane. You know that, right? Completely fucking insane.”

He’s not wrong, the burro observed.

“Probably,” I said. “But we’re committed.”

Ricky sank back onto the bed, his head in his hands. Torres stepped forward, his voice low and gravelly.

“What do you need from us?”

I looked at Duarte. He nodded.

“Stay ready,” I said. “Things are going to move fast now. When they do, we’ll need every gun we can get.”

Ruiz cracked his knuckles. “We’re in.”

Ricky didn’t look up. He just sat there, shaking his head, a man watching his world collapse in real time.

Poor bastard, the burro said. *He just wanted to run a motel and bet on football.*

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “Don’t we all.”

* * * * *

The stronghold’s conference room was cold, the air conditioning cranked too high. Delacroix sat at the head of the table, her hands folded in front of her. Carver and Morrison flanked her, both looking like they’d aged ten years in the last twenty-four hours.

The ritual circle had been drawn in the center of the room—chalk and salt and symbols that predated language. Candles flickered at each cardinal point, their flames casting long shadows across the walls.

“Are we certain about this?” Morrison asked, his voice thin.

“We’re out of options,” Delacroix said. “The Lieutenant’s been taken. The news has leaked. Alex is spiraling. We need intervention.”

“The Shaman doesn’t intervene,” Carver said. “He observes. That’s the arrangement.”

“The arrangement,” Delacroix said coldly, “was made seventy years ago. Circumstances have changed.”

Morrison swallowed hard. “What if he refuses?”

“Then we’re finished.”

Delacroix stood and walked to the circle. She knelt at its edge, closed her eyes, and began to speak in a language that sounded like wind through dead trees.

The candles flickered.

The temperature dropped another ten degrees.

And then—

The air in the center of the circle folded.

It wasn’t a dramatic entrance. No thunder, no lightning, no cosmic fanfare. The Gringo Shaman simply was, standing in the middle of the chalk lines like he’d been there all along.

He was tall, impossibly so, his body wrapped in what looked like woven light and shadow. His face looked like a Las Muertas death skull—bone-white, intri-

cate patterns of flowers and fractals etched across every surface, too beautiful and too terrible to look at directly.

When he spoke, his voice came from everywhere and nowhere at once.

“Seventy years,” the Shaman said. “Seventy years I have watched. Seventy years you have promised progress. Seventy years you have delivered nothing.”

Delacroix didn’t stand. She stayed kneeling, her head bowed.

“We’ve encountered complications—”

“But those were generations before us,” Carver added desperately. “Our fathers and grandfathers. We inherited their mistakes, their failures—”

“Complications.” The Shaman’s voice was flat, emotionless. “You were given access to technology beyond your comprehension. You were given subjects engineered to perfection. You were given time. And what have you accomplished?”

Silence.

“The triplets are unstable,” the Shaman continued. “Your control is slipping. The machine elves have begun to act independently. And now a detective—a human addled by chemicals—has unraveled more of the truth in three days than you have managed in seven decades.”

Carver spoke up, his voice shaking. “We can still salvage this. If you would just—”

“Salvage?” The Shaman turned, and the movement was wrong, like watching a film skip frames. “There is nothing to salvage. You have failed. The forces of the universe are not patient. They are not forgiving. And they are done waiting.”

Morrison’s face went white. “What does that mean?”

The Shaman looked at him, and for a moment, Morrison saw something behind those perfect eyes—something vast and cold and utterly indifferent to human suffering.

“It means,” the Shaman said, “that your days are numbered. All of you. The Collective, the triplets, the Lieutenant, the detective. The experiment is over. What comes next is correction.”

“You can’t—” Delacroix started.

“I can. And I will.” The Shaman’s form began to shimmer, the edges blurring. “You have seventy-two hours to contain the situation. After that, I will do it myself. And I promise you—my methods are far less gentle than yours.”

The candles went out.

The circle was empty.

They sat in the darkness, the weight of the Shaman’s words pressing down on them like a physical thing.

“Seventy-two hours,” Morrison whispered.

Delacroix stood slowly, her legs unsteady. “Then we’d better move fast.”

* * * * *

Back at the motel, I sat on the hood of the stolen truck, smoking and staring at the neon sign flickering above the office. The mescaline had mostly worn off, but reality still felt slightly off—colors too bright, sounds too sharp, like the world was a radio station I couldn’t quite tune in.

The burro sat beside me, his hooves dangling over the edge.

You still thinking about the bodies? he asked.

“Yeah.”

The dismemberment. The decapitations.

“Yeah.”

You’re still wondering if the machine elves did it?

I took a long drag, letting the smoke curl out slowly. “The Lieutenant said they’re real. Inter-dimensional entities. The chemist warned me about them. And you—” I glanced at him. “You suggested they were involved.”

I did.

“So why?” I asked. “Why would they massacre George’s crew? What’s the point?”

The burro was quiet for a moment, his eyes fixed on the horizon.

What if it wasn’t random? he said finally. *What if it was a message?*

“A message to who?”

To you.

I turned to look at him. “Explain.”

Think about it, the burro said. You walk into George’s building. Gunfight breaks out. Amy’s merc’s are professional, clean, efficient. But the bodies you saw later? That wasn’t professional. That was art. Brutal, impossible art.

“So?”

So the machine elves weren’t there to kill George’s crew. They were there to an-

nounce themselves. To let you know they exist. To show you that you're not alone in this.

I felt a chill run down my spine despite the heat.

"You're saying they're on my side?"

I'm saying there's a bigger game being played, the burro said. The Collective thinks they're in control. Alex thinks he's the architect. The Shaman thinks he's the overseer. But the machine elves? They're wild cards. They operate on frequencies nobody else can access. And for some reason— he looked at me —they want you to know they're watching.

"Why me?"

Because you're the only one who can see them. The only one who's been to their dimension and come back. The mescaline, the DMT—it's not just getting you high, Vee. It's opening doors. And they're on the other side, waiting.

I crushed the cigarette under my boot.

"So what do they want?"

That, the burro said, is the question.

* * * * *

Headlights swept across the parking lot. I tensed, hand moving toward the gun tucked in my waistband, but relaxed when I recognized the beat-up sedan.

The Mad Chemist climbed out, carrying a worn leather satchel. He looked even more disheveled than usual, his hair wild, his eyes bloodshot.

"Vee," he said, running over. "We need to talk."

"About?"

He set the satchel on the hood beside me and opened it. Inside were vials, pills, syringes—his entire portable pharmacy.

"The Shaman sent me," he said.

I blinked. "What?"

"The Gringo Shaman. He contacted me. Told me to come here, to help you." The chemist's hands were shaking as he sorted through the vials. "I don't know how he did it. I was in my lab, working, and then—" He shook his head. "He was just there. In my head. Telling me what to do."

Well, shit, the burro said. That's new.

"What did he say?" I asked.

"That you're going to need more than what you've got. That the next seventy-two hours are going to push you further than you've ever been. That if you're going to survive what's coming, you need to go deeper."

He pulled out a small glass vial filled with a liquid that seemed to shift colors in the light—blue to green to purple and back again.

"This is a new compound," he said. "Mescaline base, DMT catalyst, and something else. Something I extracted from a plant that shouldn't exist. The Shaman gave me the formula, and the plant, he said it was from ancient times."

I stared at the vial. "What does it do?"

"It opens the door all the way," the chemist said. "No halfway. No in-between. You take this, you're going to see everything. The machine elves, the Shaman, the spaces between dimensions. All of it."

"And the downside?"

He met my eyes. "You might not come back."

Oh, this is a terrible idea, the burro said. I love it.

I took the vial, held it up to the flickering neon light. The liquid inside seemed to pulse, alive.

"Why is the Shaman helping me?" I asked.

The chemist shook his head. "I don't know. But he said to tell you something." He paused, searching for the words. "He said, 'The Collective thinks they control the game. But the game was never theirs to control. Tell the detective to trust what he sees. The truth is in the spaces between.'"

I pocketed the vial.

"Anything else?"

"Yeah." The chemist closed the satchel. "He said you have seventy-two hours before everything burns. After that—" He swallowed hard. "After that, the universe corrects itself. And we're all just collateral damage."

He climbed back into his car and drove off, leaving me alone with the burro and a vial of liquid that might kill me or show me God.

You're actually going to take that, aren't you? the burro asked.

"Probably."

You're insane.

"You keep saying that."

Because it keeps being true.

* * * * *

The Lieutenant sat in his captain's office, a glass of whiskey in his hand. Captain Reeves—one of The Collective's members—sat across from him, his face carved from granite.

"You were rescued," Reeves said slowly, "by Jonny Vee?"

"Yes."

"The same detective you've been investigating for days?"

"Yes."

"The same detective who's now in possession of information that could destroy everything we've built?"

The Lieutenant took a long drink. "Yes."

Reeves leaned back in his chair, his fingers steepled. "And you told him everything?"

"He already knew most of it. I just filled in the gaps. Roswell. The triplets. The Shaman. All of it."

Reeves was quiet for a long moment. Then he stood, walked to the window, and stared out at the city lights.

"The board contacted the Shaman tonight," he said. "He's given us seventy-two hours to clean this mess up. After that, he intervenes personally."

The Lieutenant felt his stomach drop. "What does that mean?"

"It means," Reeves said, turning to face him, "that everyone involved in this mess is on borrowed time. The triplets, The Collective, Vee, you, me. All of us. Could even be the entirety of civilization. The Shaman doesn't do half-measures. When he corrects a situation, he corrects it."

"So what do we do?"

Reeves walked back to his desk, opened a drawer, and pulled out a file. He slid it across to the Lieutenant.

"You're going to make a choice," Reeves said. "You can stay loyal to The Collective and help us eliminate Vee before he becomes a bigger problem. Or—" He paused. "You can walk away. Disappear. Take your chances that the Shaman's correction doesn't include you."

The Lieutenant opened the file. Inside were surveillance photos of Vee, Du-

arte, Skinny Ricky, the motel. Detailed plans for a coordinated strike.

"When?" he asked.

"Tomorrow night. We hit the motel, eliminate everyone inside, and bury this before it spreads any further."

The Lieutenant closed the file.

"And if I refuse?"

Reeves smiled, but there was no warmth in it. "Then you're part of the problem. And problems get corrected."

The Lieutenant stood, tucking the file under his arm.

"You have twelve hours," Reeves said. "After that, we move with or without you."

The Lieutenant walked out of the office, down the hallway, and into the parking garage. He sat in his car for a long time, the file on the passenger seat, the weight of the decision pressing down on him.

He'd spent years protecting The Collective. Years keeping their secrets, covering their tracks, doing their dirty work.

And now—

Now he had to decide if he was willing to die for them.

Or if he was willing to live with the consequences of betrayal.

He started the engine and drove into the night, the city lights blurring past his windows.

Somewhere out there, Vee was preparing for war. And the Lieutenant had to decide which side he was on.

* * * * *

I stood in the motel parking lot, the vial of the chemist's new compound in my hand, watching the stars overhead. They seemed brighter than usual, sharper, like someone had turned up the contrast on reality.

You feel it, don't you? the burro asked.

"Yeah."

Everything's converging. The Collective, the Shaman, the machine elves, the triplets. All of it moving toward the same point.

"Yeah."

And you're standing right in the middle.

I uncapped the vial, stared at the liquid inside. It pulsed with its own light now, a soft glow that seemed to breathe.

"Seventy-two hours," I said. "That's what the chemist said. Seventy-two hours before the universe corrects itself."

So what are you going to do?

I thought about Amanda, Amy, and Alex—three people who weren't people at all, who'd lived for seventy years without knowing what they were. I thought about The Collective, scrambling to maintain control of a situation that had already slipped through their fingers. I thought about the Lieutenant, caught between loyalty and survival.

And I thought about the machine elves, watching from the spaces between dimensions, waiting to see what I would do next.

"I'm going to finish this," I said. "One way or another."

Even if it kills you?

"Especially if it kills me."

I raised the vial to my lips—

Wait, the burro said.

I paused. "What?"

Not yet. You take that now, you're going in blind. You need to know what you're walking into first. You need a plan.

I lowered the vial. "You're right."

Of course I'm right. I'm a hallucinogenic burro. We're always right.

I smiled despite myself and pocketed the vial.

"Tomorrow," I said. "Tomorrow we make our move."

And then?

"And then we see if the universe is ready for what comes next."

The burro nodded slowly. *You know this is going to get messy, right? Like, cosmically messy.*

"I'm counting on it."

We walked back toward the motel room, where Duarte and the others were waiting. The neon sign flickered overhead, casting red and blue shadows across the asphalt.

Somewhere in the Valley, The Collective was planning their strike.

Somewhere in another dimension, the Gringo Shaman was watching.

Somewhere in the spaces between, the machine elves were waiting.

And somewhere in the city, three people who weren't people were about to discover the truth about what they really were.

The clock was ticking.

Seventy-two hours until correction.

Seventy-two hours until everything burned.

I lit a cigarette and smiled.

Let it burn.

Chapter 17

Amanda stood at the window of the stronghold's upper level, watching the Valley lights flicker in the distance. Behind her, Amy paced the tactical room while Alex sat at the table, his fingers drumming an irregular pattern against the wood.

Something was wrong.

It had been wrong for hours now—maybe longer—but none of them had said it out loud. Yet.

"They're panicking," Amy said finally, breaking the silence. "Did you see Delacroix's face when she left? She looked like she'd seen a ghost."

"She looked terrified," Amanda agreed, turning from the window. "I've never seen her terrified before."

Alex stopped drumming his fingers. "The board meeting went longer than usual. And the orders we're getting—they're contradictory. First they want us to stand down, then they want us to mobilize, then they want us to wait for further instruction."

"They're losing control," Amy said. "Whatever's happening with Vee, with the Lieutenant, with that massacre at George's building—it's bigger than they anticipated."

Amanda crossed her arms, a chill running through her despite the warm air. "Have you noticed how they've been looking at us lately? Not like assets. Like... liabilities."

The word hung in the air.

Alex stood and walked to the tactical map spread across the table. Pins marked locations throughout the Valley—safe houses, supply caches, extraction points. All of a sudden it felt hollow, like props in a play they'd been performing without realizing it.

"How long have we been doing this?" he asked quietly.

Amy stopped pacing. "What?"

"This. All of this. The operations, the planning, the—" He gestured vaguely at the room. "How long?"

"Years," Amy said. "You know that."

"Do I?" Alex looked up at his sisters. "Do you remember when we started? I mean really remember? Not just... knowing we've been doing it. Actually remembering the beginning?"

Amanda felt something cold settle in her stomach. She tried to recall—tried to pull up a specific memory of their first operation, their first briefing, the moment they'd been recruited, or trained, or whatever had brought them into The Collective's orbit.

Nothing came.

Just a vague sense of always having been here, always having done this.

"I remember our parents," she said slowly. "The inheritance. Alex getting involved with The Collective, and Amy and I coming to help—"

"But do you remember it?" Alex pressed. "Or do you just know it happened?"

The silence stretched.

"There's something else," Amy said, her voice tight. "I was looking at old surveillance photos yesterday. From an operation five years ago." She pulled a folder from the tactical table and opened it, spreading several photographs across the surface. "Look at us."

Amanda and Alex leaned in.

The photos showed the three of them in tactical gear, exiting a building. The timestamp read five years prior.

They looked exactly the same as they did now.

"So?" Alex said, but his voice was uncertain.

Amy pulled out another folder. "This is from ten years ago."

More photos. Same faces. Same ages.

"And this," she said, her hands shaking slightly as she opened a third folder, "is from a file I found in Delacroix's office. It's marked 1965."

The photos were grainier, older, but unmistakable.

Three people. Same faces. Same ages.

"That's not possible," Amanda whispered.

"No," Amy agreed. "It's not."

Alex stared at the photographs, his mind racing. "We should be older. We should look different. I should have gray hair by now, or wrinkles, or—"

"We should remember aging," Amanda said. "We should remember birth-

days, getting older, time passing. But I don't. I just remember... this. Always this."

Amy gathered the photos with trembling hands. "They've been lying to us. About something fundamental. About who we are."

"Or what we are," Alex said quietly.

Amanda felt the room tilt slightly. "The way they look at us. The way they've always looked at us. Not like employees or assets. Like—"

"Like experiments," Amy finished.

The word settled over them like a shroud.

"We need answers," Alex said, his voice hardening. "Real answers. Not the scripts they've been feeding us."

"From who?" Amanda asked. "Everyone we know is part of The Collective. Everyone we trust works for them."

Amy's jaw tightened. "Then we find someone who doesn't. We find Jonny Vee."

* * * * *

Back at the motel, I had crushed out my cigarette and looked at the faces gathered around the small table. Duarte, Skinny Ricky, Torres, and Ruiz. Men who'd signed up for a kidnapping and were about to get a lecture on inter-dimensional physics and cosmic conspiracy. It had been a struggle, to say the least.

"Alright," I'd said. "You're going to think I've lost my mind. Maybe I have. But everything I'm about to tell you is true, and you need to hear it before we move forward."

Ricky lit a cigarette of his own. "We grabbed a cop from a bowling alley and you've been talking to an invisible burro for the past two days. I think we're past the point of questioning your sanity."

"Fair enough." I pulled out the Lieutenant's notes and spread them across the table. "1947. Roswell, New Mexico. A UFO crashed in the desert."

Torres snorted. "Come on, man—"

"Not a weather balloon," I told them. "Not a hoax. A real ship from another dimension. The government recovered it, reverse-engineered the technology, and figured out how to access interdimensional reality. That's when they found him—the Gringo Shaman. Or he found them. Nobody's entirely sure anymore."

Duarte had leaned forward, his expression unreadable. "Keep going."

"The Collective knows about it. They've known for seventy years. They've been using the technology, using the Shaman's knowledge, to maintain control over things that shouldn't exist in our reality and they shouldn't be controlling." I tapped the notes. "In 1952, five years after Roswell, they conducted an experiment. They took human genetics and combined them with the inter-dimensional technology they'd reverse-engineered. They created three children. Triplets."

"Amanda, Amy, and Alex," Duarte said quietly.

"They're not human," I said. "They never were. They're constructs. Designed beings. And they don't age like we do. They're timeless. Over seventy years old, but they look like they're in their thirties. The Collective keeps them that way through DNA manipulation and memory suppression. Every time they might start to notice something's wrong—that decades have passed, that they should be older—The Collective wipes their memory and adjusts their DNA. Keeps them compliant. Keeps them controlled."

The room went silent.

Ricky's cigarette had burned down to the filter without him noticing. "That's insane."

"Yeah," I continued. "It is."

"And you believe this?" Torres asked.

"I've seen the Gringo Shaman," I told them. "I've talked to him. I watched him bend reality like it's made of clay. I've seen the machine elves—inter-dimensional entities that exist in the spaces between dimensions. They're the ones who massacred George's crew. Not humans. Not merc's. Them."

Ruiz crossed himself. "Dios mío."

All this had been said and now the time for truth had come.

"The burro," I continued, gesturing to the empty space beside me, "is either a hallucination or an inter-dimensional ally. Maybe both. But he's real enough that he's kept me alive this long, and he's connected to the Shaman somehow. They're from the same place—wherever that is."

The burro waved from his spot beside me—a casual, friendly gesture toward the team.

I glanced at the burro. "Say hello."

The burro nodded and waved again, this time with a bit more enthusiasm.

Duarte stared at me for a long moment. “You’re saying we’re not just up against a criminal organization, we’re up against something that’s been operating since before any of us were born? Something that has access to technology and entities that shouldn’t exist.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“And the triplets don’t know what they are?”

“They have no idea. The Collective has kept them in the dark their entire lives. But if they ever figure it out—if they ever realize they’re not human, that they’ve been lied to and controlled and manipulated for seventy years—”

“They’ll burn the whole Valley down,” Duarte finished.

“Not just the Valley,” I said. “Everything. Because they’re not just powerful—they’re connected to the same inter-dimensional technology that created them. If they turn against The Collective, if they decide to use that connection—”

Reality itself could fracture, the burro said quietly beside me.

I nodded. “Reality itself could fracture.”

Ricky stubbed out his cigarette with shaking hands. “So what do we do?”

“We survive,” I said. “We figure out what comes next. And we decide whether to tell the triplets the truth.”

“And if we tell them?” Torres asked.

“Then we’d better be ready for the consequences.”

The door to the motel room opened.

Everyone’s hand went to their weapon.

The Lieutenant stepped inside, his hands raised, his face haggard.

“Easy,” he said. “I’m not here to fight.”

Duarte stood slowly. “Then why are you here at all?”

The Lieutenant closed the door behind him and leaned against it, exhaustion written across every line of his face. “Because I’m done. I’m done with Reeves, done with The Collective, done with all of it.”

“Why should we believe you?” I asked.

“Because the Gringo Shaman has given The Collective an ultimatum,” the Lieutenant said. “Seventy-two hours to fix this mess, or he’ll personally intervene and ‘correct’ the situation. Time is running short and The Collective is in full panic mode. They’re going to do something desperate. Something catastrophic. They want to eliminate you. They know where you are. They think by

doing so that will end their problem. They’re fools, and I don’t want to be anywhere near it when they do.”

He pulled a flash drive from his pocket and tossed it onto the table.

“Access codes. Safe house locations. Contingency plans. Everything I know about their operations. It’s yours.”

Duarte picked up the flash drive, turning it over in his hands. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch,” the Lieutenant said. “I’m choosing a side. I’m choosing yours.”

“Why?” I asked.

He looked at me, and for the first time since I’d known him, I saw something other than cynicism in his eyes.

Fear.

“I’ve seen what the Shaman can do,” he said quietly. “And if he decides to correct this situation himself, there won’t be a Valley left to save. There won’t be anything left. Nothing.”

The room was silent.

“Seventy-two hours,” the Lieutenant repeated. “That’s all we have. After that, the universe decides for us.”

I lit another cigarette, watching the smoke curl toward the ceiling.

“Then we’d better make them count.”

* * * * *

The burro shifted beside me as the Lieutenant settled into a chair and Duarte began reviewing the flash drive’s contents. The room buzzed with tense energy—plans forming, alliances solidifying, the weight of cosmic consequence pressing down on all of us.

Vee, the burro said quietly.

“Yeah?”

The elves want you to know something.

I glanced at him. “What?”

They’re helping. They’ve been helping this whole time.

“Helping how?”

The guard at The Collective’s eastern safe house called in sick this morning. Stomach flu. The surveillance camera at their downtown office malfunctioned last

night—forty-minute gap in coverage. A shipment of weapons they were expecting got delayed at the border. Paperwork error.

I felt a chill run down my spine. “That’s not coincidence.”

No, the burro agreed. *That’s coordination. The elves are clearing obstacles. Making paths. They’re not doing it out of kindness—they have their own investment in how this plays out. But they’re on your side. For now.*

“Can they communicate directly?”

Not in words. Not in ways your brain can process without chemical assistance. But they’re watching. They’re listening. And they’re acting.

“Are they working with the Shaman?”

They’re working with the same goal as the Shaman. Whether that’s the same thing, I couldn’t tell you. Inter-dimensional politics are complicated.

I almost laughed. “Of course they are.”

But here’s what you need to understand, the burro continued, his voice serious. *The elves dismembered George’s crew for a reason. It wasn’t random violence. It was a message. To you. To The Collective. To everyone watching. They were announcing their presence. Showing that there are more players in this game than anyone realized.*

“A message saying what?”

That reality is negotiable. That the rules everyone thinks are fixed—they’re not. And that if The Collective keeps trying to control something they don’t understand, the elves will intervene more directly.

“Jesus.”

Not quite, the burro said. *But close enough.*

Duarte looked up from the laptop. “Vee, come look at this.”

I walked over. The screen showed a schematic of The Collective’s main stronghold—the converted warehouse where Amanda, Amy, and Alex were likely holed up right now.

“The Lieutenant’s access codes work,” Duarte said. “We’ve got their security protocols, guard rotations, everything.”

“They’ll change them,” the Lieutenant said from his chair. “But not for another thirty-six hours. That’s their standard rotation schedule. If we move before then—”

“We have a window,” I finished.

Ricky leaned over the laptop. “So what’s the play? We hit them? Extract the triplets? Burn the whole place down?”

“We tell them the truth,” I said.

Everyone looked at me.

“We tell Amanda, Amy, and Alex what they really are,” I continued. “We give them the choice. Let them decide what happens next.”

“That’s insane,” Torres said. “You just said if they find out, they’ll burn everything down.”

“Maybe,” I said. “Or maybe they’ll burn down the right things.”

I stepped outside, the burro following. The neon sign cast red and blue shadows across the parking lot. I pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and turned to face him.

“What happens if the triplets take the potion,” I asked him?

The burro’s eyes gleamed in the neon light. *That’s the right question.*

“So answer it.”

The potion—mescaline and DMT combined—it opens doors. For you, it opens perception. You see me. You see the Shaman. You touch the edges of what’s real and what’s not.

“And for them?”

For them? The burro stepped closer. *Their DNA is engineered from Roswell technology. It’s designed to interface with inter-dimensional reality. The potion wouldn’t give them a high like it does you. It would dissolve The Collective’s memory locks. All of them. At once.*

I took a drag, processing. “They’d remember.”

Everything. Being created in a lab. The experiments. Seventy years of false memories stacked on top of each other like playing cards. They’d remember not aging. They’d remember the injections, the adjustments, the times their minds were wiped and reset. They’d confront their artificial nature, their true age, what they really are.

“Jesus Christ.”

The Shaman didn’t give you that potion by accident, Vee. He’s been planning this for seventy years. It was his insurance policy. The potion is the key. It’s the mechanism for truth. You dose them, and The Collective loses control forever.

I stared at the vial in my jacket pocket, suddenly understanding its weight.

“So tomorrow night—”

Tomorrow night, you don’t just tell them the truth. You give them the ability to see it. To feel it. To remember it. No more lies. No more manipulation. Just raw, unfiltered reality.

“And if they can’t handle it?”

The burro’s expression was grave. *Then the Shaman will handle what’s left. But he’s betting they can. He’s betting they’re stronger than The Collective ever gave them credit for.*

I crushed out my cigarette. “The Shaman’s thought of everything.”

Down to the smallest detail, the burro confirmed. *He’s had seventy years to plan this moment. You’re just the one who gets to execute it.*

“Lucky me.”

Lucky them, the burro corrected. *For the first time in their lives, they’ll get to choose who they are.*

I walked back toward the motel room, the weight of the vial pressing against my ribs. The Shaman had given me more than a drug. He’d given me a weapon. A key. A way to burn down seventy years of lies in a single night.

Tomorrow, the triplets would drink the truth.

And reality would decide what came next.

The Lieutenant stood slowly. “You’re gambling with reality itself.”

“Reality’s already gambling with us,” I said. “At least this way, we’re playing with honest cards.”

Duarte closed the laptop. “When do we move?”

I looked at the burro. He nodded slowly.

Tomorrow night, he said. *The elves will make sure the path is clear.*

“Tomorrow night,” I repeated. “We go to the stronghold. We find the triplets. And we tell them everything.”

“And if they don’t believe us?” Ruiz asked.

“Then we show them,” I said. “The Lieutenant has the files. The photographs. The evidence. We lay it all out and let them decide.”

“And if they decide to kill us?” Ricky asked.

I smiled grimly. “Then at least we’ll die knowing we told the truth.”

The room fell silent again.

Outside, the neon sign flickered. Somewhere in the Valley, The Collective was planning their endgame. Somewhere in another dimension, the Gringo Shaman was watching the clock tick down. Somewhere in the spaces between, the machine elves were clearing paths and removing obstacles.

And somewhere in a converted warehouse, three people who weren’t people

were starting to ask the right questions.

Forty-eight hours until correction.

Forty-eight hours until everything changed.

I lit another cigarette and looked at my crew—Duarte, Ricky, Torres, Ruiz, and the Lieutenant. Men who’d signed up for a simple kidnapping and ended up conscripted into a cosmic war.

“Get some rest,” I said. “Tomorrow night, we find out if the universe is ready for the truth.”

Or if the truth is ready for the universe, the burro added.

“That too.”

They filed out one by one, heading to their rooms. The Lieutenant paused at the door.

“Vee,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“For what it’s worth—I think you’re doing the right thing.”

“You think, or you know?”

He smiled grimly. “In forty-eight hours, we’ll find out.”

The door closed behind him.

I sat alone in the room—alone except for the burro—and stared at the vial the Chemist had given me. The plant from ancient times. The doorway.

Not yet, the burro said again.

“I know.”

But soon.

“Yeah. Soon.”

I pocketed the vial and walked to the window. The Valley stretched out before me, lights flickering in the darkness like stars reflected in burning oil.

Somewhere out there, three people were about to discover they weren’t people at all.

Somewhere out there, The Collective was preparing for war.

Somewhere out there, reality was holding its breath.

I crushed out my cigarette and smiled.

Let it hold.

Tomorrow night, we’d make it exhale.

Chapter 18

Amanda stood in the war room, staring at the tactical display. Amy and Alex flanked her on either side, the three of them forming a triangle around the illuminated map of the Valley.

“He’s not one of theirs,” Amanda said quietly.

“No,” Amy agreed. “He’s not.”

Alex tapped the screen, zooming in on a cluster of locations. “The Collective sent him after us initially—or they wanted us to think they did. But the bowling alley extraction? That wasn’t their play. That was his.”

“He saved the Lieutenant,” Amanda said. “From our own people.”

Amy’s jaw tightened. “Which means he knows something we don’t. Something The Collective doesn’t want us to know.”

The three of them stood in silence, processing the implications. Around them, the stronghold hummed with activity—mercenaries cleaning weapons, technicians monitoring communications, the machinery of their operation continuing as it always had.

But something had shifted.

“The photographs,” Amanda said suddenly. “The ones we found. We haven’t aged in decades.”

“The memory gaps,” Amy added. “The way we can’t remember certain things. The way time feels... wrong.”

Alex nodded slowly. “And The Collective’s panic. The way Delacroix looked when she came back from meeting the Shaman. They’re terrified of something.”

“They’re terrified of us,” Amanda said.

The words danced in the air before them.

Amy pulled up a new screen—intelligence reports, surveillance footage, intercepted communications. “We’ve been tracking Vee since the quarry. He’s at a motel on the east side. Skinny Ricky’s place.”

“Who’s with him?” Alex asked.

“Duarte. The cop who helped him at the bowling alley. Ricky himself. Two others—street muscle, OG gangsters. And the Lieutenant showed up an hour ago.”

Amanda felt something cold settle in her chest. “The Lieutenant defected.”

“Looks that way,” Amy confirmed.

Alex stepped back from the display, his expression hardening. “We’re done taking orders from The Collective. We’re done being their puppets. Whatever Vee knows, whatever he’s planning—we need to hear it directly from him.”

“Agreed,” Amy said.

Amanda looked at her siblings—her triplets, though she’d never thought of them that way before. Three faces, three minds, one purpose.

“We go tonight,” she said. “Just us and a small team. No one from The Collective’s inner circle. No one who reports to Delacroix or Reeves.”

Amy nodded. “I’ll assemble the crew. Four men, loyal to us, not them.”

“And when we get there?” Alex asked.

Amanda met his eyes. “We ask Vee what the hell is really going on. And we don’t leave until he tells us the truth.”

* * * * *

The Collective’s emergency board meeting convened in the sub-basement of the downtown headquarters—a sterile conference room with reinforced walls and signal-jamming technology that made it invisible to the outside world.

Delacroix sat at the head of the table, her face drawn and pale. Carver and Reeves flanked her. Three other board members—Hutchins, Morales, and Chen—completed the circle.

“The situation is deteriorating,” Delacroix said without preamble. “The triplets are acting independently. The Lieutenant has defected. Vee has assembled a crew and extracted intelligence we can’t afford to have exposed.”

“Then we eliminate him,” Hutchins said flatly. “Tonight. Before he can move.”

“Agreed,” Morales added. “We have his location?”

Reeves nodded, sliding a tablet across the table. “Downtown. The Grandview Hotel, room 412. He checked in three hours ago under an alias, but our surveillance picked him up.”

Carver studied the image on the screen—a grainy security camera shot of a man entering the hotel lobby. “You’re certain that’s him?”

“Facial recognition confirms it,” Reeves said.

Delacroix leaned forward. “We send a team. Clean, professional, no witnesses. Make it look like a robbery gone wrong.”

“What about the triplets?” Chen asked.

“They’re contained at the stronghold,” Delacroix replied. “Amy’s coordinating a supply run, but they’re not going anywhere tonight. By morning, Vee will be dead, and we’ll have regained control of the narrative.”

“And the Shaman’s ultimatum?” Carver asked quietly.

Delacroix’s expression darkened. “We still have forty-eight hours. Eliminating Vee buys us time to clean up the rest. The Lieutenant, Duarte, the chemist—anyone who knows too much.”

“And if the Shaman intervenes?” Morales pressed.

“He won’t,” Delacroix said, though her voice lacked conviction. “Not if we move quickly. Not if we show him we’re handling it.”

Hutchins stood. “I’ll coordinate the hit team. Six operators, ex-military, no connection to our usual contractors. They’ll be in position within the hour.”

“Do it,” Delacroix ordered.

The board members filed out, their faces grim and determined.

None of them noticed the small discrepancy in the surveillance footage—the timestamp that was three hours old, the angle that didn’t quite match the Grandview’s actual camera placement.

None of them realized they were sending their killers to an empty hotel room while their real target sat fifteen miles away, planning his next move.

The machine elves had been busy.

* * * * *

I sat on the edge of the motel bed, the vial of the Shaman’s potion resting in my palm. The burro stood by the window, watching the parking lot.

“So how do we do this?” I asked.

Carefully, the burro replied. *You’re about to tell three people they’re not human. They’re manufactured and that they’re seventy years old. That their entire existence has been a lie.*

“Yeah, I got that part. I mean tactically. Do we ease into it? Show them evidence first? Or do we just drop the bomb and let them process?”

The burro turned from the window. *What would you want, if you were them?* I thought about it. “The truth. Fast and clean. No sugar-coating.”

Even if it destroyed you?

“Especially if it destroyed me. At least then I’d know what I was dealing with.”

The burro nodded slowly. *Then that’s your answer. You give them the truth—Roswell, the experiments, the DNA manipulation, the memory suppression. You show them the photographs, the timeline, the evidence the Lieutenant provided. And then you offer them the potion.*

“And if they don’t believe me?”

They will. Deep down, they have to already suspect. You’re just confirming what they’ve been afraid to admit to themselves.

I stood and walked to the window, looking out at the Valley lights. “What if they can’t handle it? What if the Lieutenant was right and they burn everything down?”

Then everything burns, the burro said simply. But at least it burns honestly. At least they get to choose their own destruction instead of living as puppets.

“That’s a hell of a philosophy.”

It’s the only philosophy that matters when you’re dealing with cosmic lies.

I lit a cigarette, the smoke curling up toward the water-stained ceiling. “The potion—when I give it to them, what happens?”

For you, it opens doors. For them? The burro’s expression grew serious. It dissolves every lock The Collective ever put in their minds. Every suppressed memory, every altered perception, every false narrative—it all comes crashing down at once. They’ll remember being created. They’ll remember the lab. They’ll remember seventy years of existence compressed into what feels like thirty.

“Jesus.”

It won’t be gentle, Vee. It’ll be the most traumatic experience of their lives. But it’ll also be the most honest.

I took a long drag. “And the Shaman knew this. He planned for this exact moment.”

Down to the smallest detail. He’s been waiting seventy years for someone like you to come along—someone crazy enough to take the case, stubborn enough to survive it, and honest enough to tell the truth when it mattered.

“Lucky me.”

Lucky them, the burro corrected. For the first time in their lives, they'll get to choose who they are.

I crushed out the cigarette and checked my watch. Nearly midnight. The Lieutenant was in the next room, Duarte and Ricky in the room beyond that. Torres and Ruiz were outside, keeping watch.

"So we wait for morning," I said. "We approach them at the stronghold—"

No, the burro interrupted, his ears suddenly alert. *We won't have to wait.*

"What?"

Headlights. Three vehicles. Coming fast.

I moved to the window and saw them—three black SUVs pulling into the parking lot, their engines cutting simultaneously. The doors opened and figures emerged: Amanda, Amy, and Alex, flanked by four mercenaries in tactical gear.

"Shit," I breathed.

They're here, the burro said. They came to you.

My earpiece crackled. "Vee! Got three vehicles pulled in," Torres called out, his voice tight. "Black SUVs. Armed personnel. You want us to move?"

"Hold position," I said quietly. "Don't engage."

I watched as the triplets crossed the parking lot, their movements synchronized, purposeful. Amanda's face was set with determination. Amy's hand rested on her sidearm. Alex's eyes scanned the motel's exterior, calculating, assessing.

They weren't here for a firefight.

They were here for answers.

This changes everything, the burro said.

"Yeah," I agreed, my hand instinctively moving to the vial in my pocket. "Yeah, it does."

I heard footsteps in the hallway—heavy boots, multiple people. A knock on the door. Not aggressive, but firm.

"Vee," Amanda's voice called through the door. "We know you're in there. We're not here to fight. We're here to talk."

I looked at the burro. He nodded.

Time to play honest cards.

I opened the door.

Amanda stood in the center, Amy and Alex on either side. The four mercenaries hung back, weapons lowered but ready. Behind me, I heard doors open-

ing—the Lieutenant, Duarte, Ricky, all emerging into the hallway.

For a long moment, nobody spoke.

Then Amanda stepped forward, her eyes locked on mine.

"You know something," she said. "Something about us. Something The Collective doesn't want us to know."

"Yeah," I said. "I do."

"Then tell us," Amy said, her voice hard. "No games. No lies. Just the truth."

Alex's gaze was intense, searching. "We've been looking at photographs. Old ones. We haven't aged. We can't remember aging. And The Collective is terrified of something—terrified of us finding out."

I felt the weight of the vial in my pocket, the weight of seventy years of lies, the weight of the Shaman's plan finally coming to fruition.

"You want the truth?" I asked.

"Yes," all three of them said in unison.

I stepped aside, gesturing into the motel room. "Then you'd better come inside. All of you. Because what I'm about to tell you is going to change everything you think you know about yourselves."

They filed in—the triplets first, then their mercenaries, then my crew from the other rooms. The small motel room became crowded, tense, electric with anticipation.

I closed the door behind them and turned to face the three people who were about to discover they weren't people at all.

The burro sat in the corner, watching.

Here we go, he said.

"Here we go," I agreed.

And I began to tell them about Roswell.

The triplets calmly took it in. Their mercenaries had mouths agape.

Amanda, Amy, and Alex listened without interruption, their faces eerily composed—not shocked, but recognizing. Like I was confirming something they'd already begun to suspect in the dark corners of their fractured memories. Amy's jaw tightened slightly. Alex's eyes narrowed, but he didn't look away. Amanda's hand found the lightning-bolt scar on her wrist, tracing it slowly.

Behind them, the mercenaries stood frozen, their hands still resting on their weapons, completely blindsided. One of them whispered something I couldn't

hear. Another shook his head in denial.

The triplets weren't surprised. They were remembering.

One of the mercenaries—a thick-necked operator with a scar running through his left eyebrow—suddenly stepped forward, his face twisted with something between rage and shame.

"Enough of this bullshit," he spat, turning to face the other merc's. His voice cracked. "Just tell them. Tell them the truth."

The room went silent. Every eye turned to him.

Amy's head snapped toward the merc. "Carter, what are you—"

"We weren't hired to protect you," Carter said, his voice rising. He looked at Amanda, then Amy, then Alex. "Any of you. That was never the job."

Another merc—younger, Latino, with the same skull-and-dagger tattoo—stepped forward, his hands raised in surrender. "He's right. We were planted. All of us."

"Planted?" Alex's voice was ice.

Carter nodded, his jaw tight. "By The Collective. Our orders were to follow you. Monitor you. Report back if you tried to leave the Valley, if you started asking the wrong questions, if you made contact with anyone outside the network." He gestured toward me. "Especially him."

Amanda's face went pale. "You've been watching us the entire time?"

"Not just watching," the younger merc said quietly. "Controlling. Every mission, every extraction, every operation—we fed you intelligence that kept you moving in circles. Kept you busy. Kept you from noticing."

Amy took a step back, her hand instinctively reaching for her sidearm. "Noticing what?"

"That you don't age," Carter said flatly. "That your memories don't line up. That you've been running the same patterns for decades and never once questioned why."

Alex's fists clenched. "How long?"

"Since the beginning," Carter admitted. "Every crew you've ever had. Every bodyguard, every driver, every tactical operator. All of us. Planted. Rotated out every few years so you wouldn't notice we were aging and you weren't."

Amanda's voice was barely a whisper. "We trusted you."

"I know." Carter's face twisted with guilt. "And we used that. We were part

of the machine keeping you compliant. Keeping you from ever realizing what you are."

The room felt like it was collapsing inward. The triplets stood frozen, their reality fracturing in real time.

Amy's hand dropped from her weapon. "Why are you telling us this now?"

Carter looked at me, then back at the triplets. "Because he's right. About all of it. Roswell. The experiments. The DNA manipulation. The memory suppression. I've seen the files. I've read the reports. And I'm done being part of it."

The younger merc nodded. "We all are."

Alex's voice was hollow. "You've been lying to us for seventy years."

"Not us personally," Carter said. "But yeah. The Collective has. And we were the ones, at least the recent ones, making sure you never figured it out."

Amanda sank into a chair, her hand still tracing the lightning-bolt scar on her wrist. Amy stared at the floor, her jaw silently working into a grimace. Alex stood perfectly still, his face unreadable.

The burro shifted in the corner. *Now they know. Now they really know.*

I lit a cigarette and watched the truth settle over them like ash.

"So what now?" Amy finally asked, her voice barely audible.

Carter looked at me. "That's up to him."

All eyes turned to me.

I exhaled smoke and met their gaze. "Now you decide what you want to do about it."

I reached into my jacket—the same jacket that had survived the quarry, the ventilation system, the bowling alley extraction—and pulled out the small glass vial. The liquid inside shimmered like bright oil on water, catching the motel room's fluorescent light and refracting it into colors that shouldn't exist. Purples that shone like copper. Greens that hummed at frequencies just below hearing.

"The Shaman gave this to the chemist," I said, holding it up between two fingers. "Never gave me instructions directly. Just told the chemist what it was and said to give it to me with a message: 'Tell him what it does.'"

Amanda's eyes locked onto the vial. "What does it do?"

I turned it slowly, watching the liquid move like something alive. "You were created from Roswell technology. Your DNA is engineered to interface with inter-dimensional reality. This—" I held it higher, "—is a combination of mes-

caline, DMT, and something else. Something the chemist couldn't name. Something that doesn't have a name in our language."

Alex took a step forward, his face hardening. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying this will dissolve The Collective's memory locks. It'll force you to remember your true nature. Seventy years of artificial manipulation. Memories erased. Identities constructed. The potion awakens all of it."

The room went silent except for the hum of the air conditioner and the distant sound of traffic on the highway.

"You're insane," Alex said flatly. "That's a trick. It could kill us. We can't trust you—we don't even know you."

"Alex—" Amanda started.

"No." He pointed at the vial. "That thing could be poison. It could be a weapon. The Collective could have planted it to eliminate us. We should destroy it. Right now."

He moved toward me, hand outstretched.

I stepped back. "Then I'll take it with you."

Everyone froze.

Vee, no, the burro said from the corner, his voice sharp. *Don't you fucking dare.*

"You'll what?" Amy asked.

"I'll drink it with you," I said. "Not to prove it's safe. But because we all need to see the truth together. If you're going to remember what you are, I need to see what you become."

Vee, listen to me, the burro said, stepping forward. *You don't know what this will do to you. Your brain isn't built for this. You're human. They're not. This could shred your mind.*

"I know."

Then don't do it.

"I have to."

Alex's jaw clenched. "Who is he talking to? This is insane."

"Everything about this is insane," I said. "But it's the only way forward."

Amy stepped between us, her eyes locked on mine. "Drink first."

I met her gaze. No hesitation. No fear. Just the cold calculation of someone who'd been lied to for seven decades and was done playing games.

"Alright."

I unscrewed the cap. The smell hit me immediately—peyote and burning sage and something metallic, like ozone after lightning strikes. The liquid moved in the vial like it had a pulse.

Vee, please, the burro said quietly. *You don't have to do this.*

"Yeah," I said. "I do."

Alex turned to me, his eyes narrowing. "Who the hell are you talking to?"

Duarte stepped forward casually, lighting a cigarette like we weren't standing in the middle of a cosmic convergence. "Just a hallucinogenic burro. Vee sees it when he's high on the stuff."

Alex stared at him, then back at me, processing whether this was a joke or a sign of complete mental breakdown.

He laughed as I raised the vial to my lips and drank.

The taste was bitter, floral, wrong. It coated my throat like honey made from nightmares. I swallowed and felt it burn all the way down, settling in my stomach like a stone made of light.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then the room tilted.

Not physically. Dimensionally. The walls stayed where they were, but the space between them stretched and contracted like breathing. The fluorescent light overhead flickered and I could see the electricity moving through the filament—tiny golden insects crawling through glass veins.

"Jesus," Duarte whispered.

Amanda stepped forward and took the vial from my hand. Her fingers brushed mine and I felt the static charge between us—not attraction, but recognition. Like two radios tuning to the same frequency.

She drank without hesitation.

Her pupils dilated immediately, black swallowing green, and she gasped. The lightning-bolt scar on her wrist began to glow faintly, pulsing in time with her heartbeat.

"Amanda?" Amy moved toward her sister.

"I'm fine," Amanda whispered, but her voice sounded layered, like three people speaking at once. "I'm... I'm remembering."

Amy took the vial next. She drank, her face expressionless, and handed it to Alex.

He stared at it for a long moment. The liquid was nearly gone—just enough for one more dose.

“This is a mistake,” he said.

“Maybe,” Amanda replied, her voice still strange and harmonized. “But it’s our mistake.”

Alex drank.

The moment the liquid touched his lips, the motel room shifted.

The walls didn’t move. They unfolded. Like origami in reverse, revealing dimensions that had always been there but hidden. The ceiling peeled back and I could see stars—not the stars above the Valley, but stars from somewhere else. Constellations that spelled words in languages I’d never learned but somehow understood.

The burro’s voice came from everywhere and nowhere. *Oh no. Oh shit. Vee, what have you done?*

“I don’t know,” I said, but my voice sounded like it was coming from underwater.

Amanda, Amy, and Alex stood in the center of the room, their bodies beginning to shimmer. Not glowing—phasing. Like they were standing in two places at once. I could see through them to the wall behind, but I could also see into them—circuitry made of light, DNA strands that twisted in impossible geometries, memories flickering like film reels projected onto smoke.

“I remember,” Amanda whispered. “I remember the lab. The machines. The voices.”

“I remember being born,” Amy said, her voice cracking. “But I wasn’t born. I was assembled.”

Alex’s face twisted with something between rage and grief. “I remember... everything.”

The machine elves appeared.

Not in the room. Around the room. In the spaces between seconds, in the gaps between thoughts. Fractal beings made of geometry and intention, their forms constantly shifting—insectoid one moment, crystalline the next, then something that looked like living mathematics.

They didn’t speak. They transmitted.

And I understood.

They’d been waiting for this moment. The dismemberment at George’s building wasn’t random violence—it was a message. A demonstration. We can unmake reality. We can remake it. And we’re watching.

The Shaman had orchestrated all of it. Seventy years of patience, waiting for the right moment, the right catalyst. Waiting for someone stupid enough or desperate enough to force the triplets to remember.

Waiting for me.

“Vee,” Duarte’s voice sounded distant, like he was shouting from the other end of a tunnel. “Vee, what’s happening to you?”

I looked down at my hands. They were dissolving into light, then reforming, then dissolving again. I could see the bones beneath the skin, the blood moving through veins, the electrical impulses firing through nerves. I could see myself from the outside, standing in a motel room that was simultaneously a laboratory in 1952 and a crash site in Roswell, and then a cave system beneath the quarry.

You’re seeing what they see, the burro said, his voice layered with harmonics. *You’re interfacing with their reality.*

“Is this real?” I asked.

What’s real? the burro replied. *You tell me.*

The triplets turned to face each other, and I watched their memories sync. Seventy years of constructed identity peeling away like dead skin. Underneath: three beings created from human genetics and inter-dimensional technology, designed to be weapons, tools, bridges between worlds.

And they’d never known.

Until now.

Amanda’s hand found Amy’s. Amy’s hand found Alex’s. They stood in a circle, their bodies phasing in and out of visibility, and I could feel the rage building in them. Not hot rage. Cold rage. The kind that calculates and plans and destroys.

“They lied to us,” Amanda said.

“They used us,” Amy said.

“They made us,” Alex said, his voice hollow. “And they never told us what we were.”

The motel room walls began to crack. Not physically—dimensionally. Reality fracturing along fault lines I could suddenly see. The machine elves moved

closer, their geometries intersecting with ours, and I understood they were holding the world together. Barely.

Vee, the burro said urgently. *You need to bring them back. They're going to tear the Valley apart.*

"How?"

I don't know. But you're the only one who can reach them now. You're in their frequency.

I stepped forward, my body still phasing, still dissolving and reforming. The triplets turned to look at me, and their eyes were no longer human. They were doorways. Portals. Windows into somewhere else.

"I know you're angry," I said, my voice echoing strangely. "I know you want to burn it all down."

"They deserve it," Alex said.

"Maybe," I replied. "But the Valley doesn't. The people here don't. Duarte doesn't. Ricky doesn't. The chemist doesn't."

"They're complicit," Amy said.

"They're human," I said. "They're flawed and scared and trying to survive. Just like you were. Just like you are."

Amanda's eyes focused on me, and I felt her consciousness brush against mine. It was like touching a live wire made of memory and rage and grief.

"What do we do?" she asked, and for the first time since drinking the potion, she sounded lost.

I lit a cigarette. My hands were still phasing, still dissolving, but the cigarette stayed solid. The smoke rose and formed shapes—fractals, geometries, messages from the machine elves.

"We finish this," I said. "We take down The Collective. We expose what they did. We make sure no one else gets used the way you were used."

"And then?" Alex asked.

"And then you decide what you want to be."

The room held its breath.

The machine elves waited.

The burro watched.

And slowly—so slowly—the triplets began to solidify. Their bodies stopped phasing. Their eyes returned to something almost human. The cracks in reality

sealed, the dimensions folding back into place.

Amanda released Amy's hand. Amy released Alex's.

They stood in the motel room, fully present, fully awake, fully aware.

"Alright," Amanda said quietly. "Let's finish this."

But we weren't finished, not by a long shot. I could feel it as truth. Ultimate truth. The potion was still working. I could feel it in my blood, in my bones, in the spaces between my thoughts. The world would never look the same again. I'd seen too much. Remembered too much. Became too much.

But that was the price.

And I'd paid it willingly.

The burro stepped beside me, his form flickering between donkey and something else—something older, something that had always been watching.

You did it, he said. *You crazy bastard. You actually did it.*

"Yeah," I said, exhaling smoke that tasted like starlight. "Now let's see if we survive it."

Chapter 19

Amanda’s eyes were no longer entirely human. They held depth that shouldn’t exist—layers of perception stacked like transparent film, each one showing a different version of the same moment. She blinked and I saw her at five years old in a laboratory. She blinked again and I saw her at twenty, standing in the same room, wearing the same expression, the scientists around her unchanged by time.

Seventy years compressed into a single breath.

“I remember,” she said quietly. Her voice had harmonics now—multiple frequencies speaking the same words. “I remember all of it.”

Amy stood beside her, circuitry still visible beneath her skin like veins of light. Her hands flexed and unflexed, testing the limits of flesh that was only partially flesh. “The missions. The operations. Every time we got close to understanding, they’d—” She stopped, her jaw clenching. “They’d reset us.”

Alex’s face was a mask of cold calculation. No rage. No grief. Just the terrible clarity of a weapon that had finally understood its purpose. “How many times?” he asked, his voice flat. “How many times did they wipe us?”

The burro shifted beside me. *Hundreds. Maybe thousands. Every time you started asking questions.*

Amanda’s head snapped toward the sound of my voice—but not toward me. Toward the space beside me. Her eyes widened, pupils dilating as her newly awakened perception locked onto something that had always been there.

“What—” she breathed.

The burro stepped forward, his form solidifying into something more real than he’d ever been. Not a hallucination. Not a phantom. A creature of flesh and fur and impossible geometry, standing in the motel room as if he’d always belonged there.

Amy gasped. Her hand went to her weapon before she realized weapons were useless against what she was seeing.

“That’s not—” Alex started, his voice cracking for the first time. “That’s not possible.”

The burro looked at them with eyes that held dimensions they were only now learning to perceive. He nodded slowly, acknowledging their shock.

“He’s been here the whole time,” I said quietly. “Every step. Every moment. You just couldn’t see him until now.”

Amanda reached out, her hand trembling, and the burro didn’t move away. Her fingers passed through his mane—solid, real, warm. She pulled her hand back as if burned.

“Seventy years,” she whispered. “And we never knew.”

“Now you do,” the burro said, his voice no longer confined to my mind but speaking into the room itself. “Now you see what was always watching over this one man who could save you. Now you understand the game was never just yours.”

The triplets stood frozen, their newly awakened consciousness struggling to process a reality that had been hidden from them all along. The burro was just the beginning. There were other things waiting in the spaces between dimensions. Other allies. Other players.

And they were all converging on this moment.

“They kept us children,” Amanda whispered. “Seventy years and they kept us children.”

The lightning-bolt scar on her wrist began to glow—not metaphorically, but actually glow, pulsing with bioluminescent light that matched the rhythm of her heartbeat.

Amy’s scar answered it. Then Alex’s.

Three synchronized pulses of light in a motel room that was rapidly becoming something other than a motel room.

“Vee,” the burro said urgently. “The walls.”

I looked.

The walls were breathing.

* * * * *

At The Collective’s stronghold, alarms screamed.

Carver stood at the monitoring station, watching readouts that made no sense. Energy signatures spiking across spectrums that shouldn’t exist. Dimen-

sional barriers thinning. Reality itself becoming permeable in a three-block radius around Skinny Ricky’s motel.

“What the hell is that?” Hutchins demanded, staring at the screens.

“That,” Delacroix said quietly, “is what happens when you wake them up.” Carver’s hand slammed down on the console. “Activate Protocol Exodus. Now.”

“Sir, if we—”

“Now, goddammit!”

The room erupted into motion. Screens lit up across the Valley. Encrypted channels opened. Black ops teams received simultaneous orders: converge on the motel, eliminate all targets, contain the breach by any means necessary.

Morales pulled up a tactical display. “We’ve got four teams within ten minutes. Heavy ordnance. Incendiary protocols authorized.”

“What about civilian casualties?” Chen asked.

Carver turned to him, his face carved from stone. “There are no civilians anymore. There’s only containment.”

Delacroix stood, her chair scraping against the floor. “You’re going to burn down half the Valley.”

“If that’s what it takes.”

“The Shaman—”

“The Shaman gave us seventy-two hours,” Carver snapped. “We’ve got forty-eight left. If we can’t fix this, we at least make sure nobody else can use it.”

On the screens, red dots began moving toward a single point on the map.

The motel. Where three people who weren’t entirely people were remembering what they’d been designed to forget.

* * * * *

The machine elves manifested fully.

Not as hallucinations. Not as visions. As entities.

They emerged from the corners of the room where geometry didn’t quite work—angles that bent wrong, spaces that held more volume than they should. Fractal beings made of crystalline mathematics, their bodies constantly shifting through configurations that hurt to perceive directly.

One of them—if “one” was even the right word—hovered near the ceiling. Its

form was insectoid but also architectural, like a cathedral made of living prisms. Light refracted through it in colors that didn’t have names.

Another moved along the floor, its body a spiral of golden ratios and Fibonacci sequences made flesh. It left no footprints but the carpet beneath it rippled like water.

A third simply was—existing in multiple locations simultaneously, its presence felt more than seen.

Duarte backed against the wall, his gun raised but useless. “What the fuck—”

“Don’t look directly at them,” the burro warned. “Your brain will try to make sense of what it’s seeing and it’ll break itself trying.”

“Vee”, Duarte screamed, “I can see and hear your burro!”

The lead elf—if there was a lead—turned its attention toward me. I felt its gaze-like pressure behind my eyes. When it spoke, the words weren’t sound. They were meaning inserted directly into consciousness.

WE HAVE BEEN WAITING.

“For what?” I managed.

FOR THIS MOMENT. FOR THE AWAKENING. FOR THE GAME TO REACH ITS CONCLUSION.

The burro stepped forward, his form solidifying into something more real than he’d ever been. “They’re not here to help us,” he said. “They’re here because they have a stake in the outcome.”

Everyone turned, their mouths wide open, and stared at the burro.

CORRECT. THE COLLECTIVE STOLE TECHNOLOGY THAT WAS NOT THEIRS TO TAKE. THEY BUILT BRIDGES BETWEEN DIMENSIONS WITHOUT PERMISSION. THEY CREATED ABOMINATIONS.

Amanda’s head snapped toward the elf. “We’re not abominations.”

The elf’s form shifted, reconfiguring into something almost apologetic.

YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL MISTAKES. WEAPONS FORGED FROM STOLEN FIRE. YOU WERE NEVER MEANT TO EXIST—BUT NOW THAT YOU DO, YOU HAVE A CHOICE.

“What choice?” Alex demanded.

BURN WITH RAGE OR BURN WITH PURPOSE.

The motel walls began to warp. Not cracking—warping. The space inside the room expanded while the exterior remained the same size. Impossible archi-

texture unfolded. Doors appeared where there had been solid walls. Windows opened onto vistas that weren't the Valley.

Through one window, I saw stars that moved in patterns. Through another, I saw the quarry from above, Amy's mercenaries still searching the ventilation system for a Vee who was no longer there.

Through a third, I saw The Collective's assault teams loading into vehicles.

Time was collapsing. Space was negotiable.

The machine elves were rewriting the rules.

* * * * *

I was the only one still tethered to what, I guess, you could describe as "reality".

Everyone else was lost—Duarte frozen against the wall, his mind trying to process geometries it wasn't designed to understand. Torres and Ruiz on their knees, hands over their eyes. The Lieutenant standing perfectly still, his cop instincts screaming at him to do something but having no framework for what it was he should do.

Even Skinny Ricky had retreated to a corner, his massive frame curled small. Behind him, the four merc's who'd come with the triplets had dropped their weapons and fallen to their knees, their faces turned upward toward the impossible light pouring through the warped walls. They weren't surrendering to us—they were surrendering to the sheer cosmic weight of what they were witnessing. One of them was crying. Another was laughing, a sound like breaking glass. They'd trained for combat, for extraction, for a hundred tactical scenarios. But nothing had prepared them for this: the moment when reality itself became the enemy, and the only rational response was to kneel.

The triplets were phasing again—not between dimensions this time, but between states. Amanda flickered between child and adult. Amy cycled through every tactical operation she'd ever run. Alex's face shifted through expressions of rage, grief, calculation, and something that might have been hope.

They were drowning in seventy years of stolen memory.

And if I didn't pull them back, they'd take the entire Valley down with them.

"Vee," the burro said, "you're the anchor. You're the only one who drank the potion and stayed human."

"I don't feel very human right now."

"You're human enough. Call them back."

"How?"

"By name. By truth. By reminding them they're more than what they were built to be."

I stepped forward, into the center of the warping room, and raised my voice.

"Amanda."

She flickered, her eyes finding mine.

"You're not a weapon. You're a woman who's been lied to for seventy years. You're angry. You should be. But you're also here. You're real. And you get to decide what happens next."

Her form stabilized slightly.

"Amy."

She turned, her tactical mind still cycling through operations.

"You've been a soldier your entire life. You've followed orders. You've executed missions. But you were never told the mission was your own imprisonment. Now you know. Now you can choose."

Her breathing slowed. The circuitry beneath her skin dimmed.

"Alex."

He looked at me, and for the first time, I saw fear in his eyes.

"You've been the architect. The mastermind. The one pulling strings. But you were a puppet too. They made you think you were in control while they controlled everything. That ends now. You decide who you are. Not them."

The three of them stood together, their forms solidifying, their breathing synchronizing.

The room stopped warping.

The machine elves watched, their fractal bodies humming with something that might have been approval.

YOU HAVE CHOSEN WELL, the lead elf said. NOW CHOOSE AGAIN: VENGEANCE OR JUSTICE?

Amanda's hand found the lightning-bolt scar on her wrist. She traced it slowly, her eyes cold and clear.

"Both," she said.

The machine elves' forms rippled with what might have been laughter.

THAT IS ACCEPTABLE.

Outside, the sound of engines. Heavy vehicles. The Collective's assault teams were three minutes out.

The burro looked at me. "Now what?"

I lit a cigarette, the smoke curling into impossible shapes.

"Now we let them come."

Amanda smiled—a smile that held seventy years of rage compressed into a single expression.

"And then we show them what we've become."

The machine elves began to reshape the motel's exterior.

The Collective was about to walk into a trap built from living mathematics and inter-dimensional fury.

And I was going to watch it happen.

The Valley Case was about to reach its conclusion.

One way or another.

* * * * *

It was then the Gringo Shaman appeared and took control.

The air didn't split—it folded. Reality bent around a point in the center of the room, and he stepped through like he'd been standing there all along. His face looking like a las muertas death skull—too symmetrical, too perfect, carved by something that understood humanity only through secondhand descriptions.

The triplets turned toward him as one.

The temperature dropped. My breath came out in a cloud. The machine elves went still—completely, utterly still—and that stillness was more terrifying than their movement had been.

The Shaman raised a hand.

The chaos didn't just stop. It ceased. Like someone had cut the power to reality itself. The machine elves bowed their fractal heads in a gesture that looked like reverence or fear or both. Even the burro went quiet, his usual commentary dying in his throat.

Silence.

Complete silence.

I could hear my own heartbeat. I could hear Amanda's breathing—ragged, desperate. I could hear the creak of the floorboards under Amy's weight as she shifted, her body tense as a coiled spring.

The Shaman's hollow eyes swept across the room.

"I owe you an apology," he said finally, his voice resonating across dimensions. "All three of you."

Amanda's eyes blazed. Her hands trembled. "You owe us—"

"I allowed this." His voice was matter-of-fact, cosmic, carrying the weight of geological time. "Your creation. The manipulation. Seventy years of control."

He paused.

Let it sit.

The words hung in the air like smoke, like poison, like truth.

"I permitted it all as part of an experiment—an attempt to bring Earth into galactic civilization. To bridge earth with the inter-dimensional collective."

Alex's fists clenched so hard I heard his knuckles crack. His jaw worked into a tight grimace. When he spoke, his voice was barely controlled. "You used us."

"Yes."

No hesitation. No deflection. No apology in the tone—just acknowledgment. The word landed like a hammer.

Amanda made a sound—something between a gasp and a sob. Amy's face went white, then red, then white again. Alex looked like he might tear the Shaman apart with his bare hands.

I watched them fracture. Not their bodies—their selves. Seventy years of identity shattering like glass inside their minds. Every memory recontextualized. Every choice revealed as manufactured. Every moment of autonomy exposed as illusion.

The Shaman continued, relentless. "I miscalculated. Humanity wasn't ready. The Collective we created became corrupt. The experiment failed."

Another pause.

He looked at each of them in turn—Amanda, Amy, Alex—and something in his death-mask face might have been sorrow.

"You were the price of that failure."

Silence.

Amanda's breathing hitched. Amy closed her eyes. Alex turned away.

“And I am sorry.”

The words fell into the quiet like stones into deep water.

Amy’s voice, when it came, was ice over magma. “Sorry doesn’t give us back seventy years.”

“No,” the Shaman agreed. “It doesn’t. But those were generations before you, your fathers and grandfathers. What I can give you is a choice: remain weapons, or become something new.”

The triplets realized they could now see, and understand, the burro. He waved—a small, absurd gesture in the face of cosmic horror.

“The burro waves hello,” I said quietly, my voice rough.

The Shaman’s skull-face turned toward me, and I felt the weight of his attention like gravity itself. “And you, Jonny Vee—you were always the catalyst. The one human stubborn enough to break the pattern.”

Outside, the engines grew louder. Closer.

The Shaman smiled—a terrible, beautiful thing that shouldn’t have been possible on that death-mask face.

“Now let us finish what we started.”

He paused.

The silence stretched. I could feel him deciding whether to continue, weighing something vast and incomprehensible.

When he spoke again, his voice carried a different quality—older, colder, final.

“You should understand what you’re dealing with.”

Another pause. The room held its breath.

“The dinosaurs? They vanished because I willed it. Sixty-five million years of evolution—erased in an afternoon because they were incompatible with the trajectory I required.”

The words settled like ash.

I felt my cigarette burn down to my fingers. I didn’t move. Couldn’t.

“The Mayans, the Anasazi, entire civilizations that simply disappeared from your historical record?” The Shaman’s hollow eyes swept across us. “They discovered truths too early. They had to be removed from the timeline entirely.”

The room went colder. The machine elves seemed to contract into themselves. Even Duarte, who’d seen thirty-five years of the Valley’s worst, looked like he might be sick.

Silence.

Long, terrible silence.

“I have been curating this planet for longer than your species has had language, or even life,” the Shaman continued, each word deliberate, measured, absolute. “Reshaping continents. Redirecting asteroids. Pruning evolutionary branches that led nowhere useful.”

He turned to face the triplets directly.

“You think seventy years of manipulation is cruel?”

The question hung in the air.

“I have been doing this for millions of years. And I will continue long after this sun burns out.”

Amanda’s knees buckled. Amy caught her. Alex stood frozen, his face a mask of horror and comprehension.

The burro shifted beside me, his voice small. “Holy shit. This is some real Star Wars shit.”

I felt I could move again and crushed my cigarette under my heel, the small sound impossibly loud in the silence. The weight of what I was witnessing finally crystallized—not just in my mind, but in my bones, in my blood, in the part of me that still remembered what it meant to be human.

“Are you the Monad?”, I asked.

The Shaman’s death-mask face turned toward me.

Silence. Not a sound.

Then something like approval flickered in those hollow eyes.

“Yes.”

The word resonated through dimensions I couldn’t name.

“The Monad. The One. The fundamental unity that precedes all creation, all duality, all separation.”

He gestured to the fractured reality around us—the phasing triplets, the geometric machine elves, the warping motel walls—and the gesture itself seemed to reshape space.

“But understand, Jonny Vee—what you see before you is not what I am. This form, the Gringo Shaman, is merely what your mind can comprehend. A translation. A mask worn so you don’t shatter from the encounter.”

The death-skull face flickered for a moment, and I glimpsed something be-

hind it—not a face at all, but pure thought, consciousness without form, an intelligence so vast and alien that my brain immediately recoiled from trying to process it.

“My true nature is incomprehensible to human perception,” the Monad continued. “I am thought itself. Consciousness before it takes shape. The dreamer before the dream solidifies into what you call reality.”

He paused, letting that sink in.

“The Gringo Shaman is a vessel I wear when I walk among those who still believe in separation. It’s a form that bridges dimensions, that can navigate the spaces between worlds without collapsing them.”

The Shaman’s hollow eyes locked onto mine.

“And if you choose to travel beyond this dimension, Jonny Vee—if you accept what’s being offered—this form will be yours as well. An avatar. A way to move through realities that would otherwise tear you apart. You’ll wear the Shaman’s face in worlds where your human form cannot survive.”

I felt the weight of that offer settle into my chest.

“Before there was light and dark, matter and void, self and other—there was only the Monad. Consciousness without division. The source from which all things emerge and to which all things return.”

I watched the triplets process this. Watched them understand, finally, what they were fragments of. What they’d always been fragments of.

The shattering continued. Deeper down, now. Down to the foundation.

“Everything you see, everything you experience as separate—it’s all fragments of the same unified whole. Your scientists call it quantum entanglement. Your mystics call it enlightenment. Your philosophers call it the problem of the One and the Many.”

His voice dropped to something almost gentle—almost human.

“I am what remains when you strip away every illusion of separation. I am the consciousness that dreams your universe into being.”

The burro was silent beside me.

The silence stretched.

And stretched.

“Fuck,” the burro finally said, his voice barely a whisper. “That’s heavy.”

Chapter 20

The engines grew louder outside. Heavy vehicles, multiple teams converging on the motel from all directions. The Collective’s Protocol Exodus had arrived.

“Here they come,” the burro said. “You ready for this?”

“No,” I admitted. “But I don’t think that matters anymore.”

The Monad raised one hand, and the machine elves shifted their geometries in response. The motel’s architecture began to fold in on itself—not collapsing, but reorganizing according to rules that had nothing to do with Euclidean space.

The first assault team hit the front door.

I watched through the window as the lead operative kicked it open and stepped through—only to emerge from the bathroom door behind us, his momentum carrying him forward into a hallway that hadn’t existed three seconds ago. He fired his weapon. The bullet became a question mark, then a memory of violence, then nothing at all.

His team followed. One by one they entered doors that opened onto themselves, corridors that led back to their starting point, rooms that existed in multiple states simultaneously. I could hear their radio chatter dissolving into static, then into something that might have been music, then into pure mathematics.

“They’re not dying,” the burro observed. “They’re just... unbecoming.”

“The machine elves aren’t fighting them,” I said, watching the fractal entities reshape reality with casual precision. “They’re just making the motel incompatible with their existence.”

The second team tried the windows. They shattered the glass and climbed through—into a parking lot that was also the motel room, that was also the surface of a distant star, that was also the moment of their own births. One of them screamed. The sound folded back into his throat and became a color I’d never seen before.

The triplets watched it all with eyes that were no longer entirely human.

“Seventy years,” Amanda whispered, her voice echoing across dimensions. “Seventy years they kept us in a cage we couldn’t even see.”

“And now?” the Monad asked gently.

Amy's hands were glowing with circuitry that pulsed beneath her skin. "Now we burn it all down."

"You could," the Monad agreed. "You have that power now. You could reduce The Collective to ash. You could tear apart every board member, every operative, every person who knew what you were and said nothing. Vengeance is yours if you want it."

Alex's form flickered between states—human, then something else, then both at once. "What's the alternative?"

"Transcendence," the Monad said simply. "You were not created as weapons, but as tools, as experiments. But you've become something more. You're bridges between dimensions, living proof that consciousness can exist in multiple states simultaneously. You could join me. Help me guide humanity toward the moment when they're ready to step beyond their single dimension. Become what you were always meant to be—not prisoners, but pioneers."

The triplets looked at each other. Seventy years of shared existence, of manipulation, of stolen memories and manufactured lives. I could see the rage burning in them, the desire to make The Collective pay for every moment of their imprisonment.

But I could also see something else. Something like hope.

"If we choose vengeance," Amanda said slowly, "we're still letting them define us. We're still reacting to what they made us."

"But if we choose transcendence," Amy continued, "we become something they never imagined. Something beyond their control entirely."

Alex smiled, and it was the first genuine expression I'd seen on his face. "Fuck The Collective. They're already finished. Let's become something they can't even comprehend."

The Monad nodded. "Then step forward. There are so many humanities to guide. So, so many."

The triplets moved as one, their bodies phasing between dimensions with increasing frequency. Their scars—Amanda's lightning bolt, the marks they'd carried for seventy years—began to glow with impossible light. They were beautiful and terrifying, human and other, singular and infinite.

And then they were gone. Not dead. Not disappeared. Just elsewhere, existing in spaces my eyes couldn't follow.

The motel settled back into something resembling normal geometry. The assault teams were gone—not killed, just redistributed across probability until they'd never existed in this timeline at all. The machine elves faded back into the corners of perception, their work complete.

It was just me, the burro, and the Monad standing in a motel room that had witnessed the end of one reality and the beginning of another.

The Monad turned to me. "And you, Jonny Vee. What do you choose?"

"What are my options?"

"I can make you forget. Wipe your memory clean, give you back the life you had before Amanda walked into your office. You'd wake up tomorrow with a hangover and a stack of unpaid bills, and none of this would have ever happened."

"Pass."

"I can give you money. Enough to leave the Valley, start over somewhere else, live comfortably for the rest of your days. The Collective is finished. Their leadership will dissolve, their operations will collapse. In fact, they never were. Ever. You've won. You could walk away."

"Also pass."

"Or," the Monad said, and something like curiosity entered his voice, "you could join me. Help me guide what comes next. You've proven yourself capable of navigating between worlds, of holding onto your humanity even when reality itself was negotiable. I could use someone like you."

I lit a cigarette, taking my time with it. The burro watched me with knowing eyes.

"You're going to pick the fourth option, aren't you?"

"Yeah," I said. "I am."

I looked at the Monad. "I'll keep the truth. I'll remember everything. But I'm staying in the Valley. Someone needs to watch over this place, make sure the doors you've opened don't let through anything that shouldn't be here. Someone needs to be the guardian of the secret."

The Monad studied me for a long moment. Then he smiled—or at least, his death-mask face did something that approximated a smile.

"The guardian of the secret," he repeated. "I like that. Very well, Jonny Vee. Keep your truth. Keep your Valley. And when the time comes—when humanity is finally ready—you'll know."

He began to fade, his form dissolving back into the unified consciousness from which he'd emerged.

"One more thing," I called out.

He paused.

"Was this all part of Earth's Barbello?" I asked. "The Divine Mother's work?"

The Monad's form solidified slightly, and something like reverence entered his voice.

"Yes," he said. "The Barbello is the feminine creative principle—the first emanation through which I birth new consciousness into being. Earth's Barbello has been dormant for ages, sleeping beneath the surface of your world's chaos. But the triplets' awakening, The Collective's dissolution, your choice as guardian—these are the contractions. She's stirring. She's in labor."

He gestured to the motel room, to the Valley beyond, to the fractured reality still settling back into place.

"You're not just a guardian, Jonny Vee. You're a midwife. Earth's own Divine Mother is giving birth to something new, and you'll be there to help it take its first breath. The triplets were the first children. There will be others."

"Holy shit," the burro whispered.

"When she fully awakens," the Monad continued, "humanity will remember what it forgot—that consciousness is creative, that reality is negotiable, that the divine feminine has always been the doorway through which new worlds emerge."

He paused, studying me with those impossible eyes. "But I wonder, Jonny Vee—how do you know so much about me, about the Barbello? About the divine feminine principle?"

I lit a cigarette, remembering. "Years ago, I took a case. A client's son had been institutionalized in a psych ward for talking about this stuff. The kid was labeled delusional, dangerous. My job was to help extract him, get him out clean. While we were on the run the kid explained it all to me—you, the Monad, the Barbello, the creative principle, the awakening consciousness. I thought he was crazy then. Figured the psych ward was the right place for him."

I took a long drag. "Guess I was wrong."

The Monad smiled one last time. "Ah, yes" The Monad recalled with fondness. "The Scotsman, Andrew. Well done. And now you are about to become the

official midwife to the New Earth. Welcome to the labor room, Vee."

"The burro. He stays with me, right?"

"Damn right I do," the burro said.

The Monad's laughter echoed across dimensions. "The burro was always yours, Vee. He's the part of you that can see beyond the illusion. Don't lose him. Oh, one very last thing. Here's your fedora that you lost when I first appeared to you."

My trusty fedora appeared before me. A little worse for wear, nothing extreme, except it was now blue, instead of brown.

"The color," the Monad said softly, "is the mark of crossing. Brown was the illusion. Blue is the truth you've seen. Wear it, and remember, you've been touched by what lies beyond. The old world won't recognize you anymore. But the new one will."

And then he was gone.

The Erasure

Carver was the first to realize something had gone catastrophically wrong. He stood on the tarmac of a private airstrip watching the Gulfstream G650 being fueled for their emergency extraction. Delacroix, Hutchins, Morales, and Chen were already aboard, their faces pale and drawn. The plan was simple; disappear into the Swiss banking infrastructure, regroup in Dubai, and then rebuild from the shadows. The Collective had contingencies for everything.

Except this.

“Something’s wrong,” Carver said into his phone, but the line was already dead. He tried again. Nothing. The satellite uplink showed full bars, but every number he dialed went nowhere—not busy, not disconnected, just nowhere, as if the numbers themselves had ceased to exist.

Inside the jet, Delacroix stared at her laptop. The encrypted files were corrupting in real-time, folders collapsing into themselves, decades of blackmail material and operational records dissolving into static. She tried to stop it, tried to save what she could, but her fingers moved through commands that no longer worked.

“We need to leave,” Hutchins said, his voice tight. “Now.”

The pilot fired up the engines. The jet taxied toward the runway.

They were airborne within minutes, climbing fast over the dark Pacific. No one spoke. They all felt it—the weight of something vast and invisible closing in around them.

Carver opened his briefcase and found blank paper where documents should have been. Morales checked his phone and saw contact lists emptying themselves, names vanishing one by one. Chen tried to access the offshore accounts and found login credentials that no longer matched any database.

“What’s happening?” Morales whispered.

Delacroix looked up from her laptop, her face ashen. “We’re being erased.”

The jet exploded at 38,000 feet over the mid-Pacific.

No distress call. No mechanical failure. No warning at all.

One moment the Gulfstream was a blip on radar, and the next it was gone—not crashed, not descended, just gone. Air traffic control registered the disappearance

and sent search-and-rescue teams, but they found nothing. No wreckage. No oil slick. No debris field. The ocean was calm and empty, as if the jet had never existed at all.

* * * * *

In Washington, D.C., Senator Whitmore woke at 3:47 AM with a splitting headache and the unshakable feeling that he’d forgotten something important.

He sat up in bed, his wife still sleeping beside him, and tried to remember what he’d been dreaming about. Something about a meeting. A briefing. People in a warehouse. But the details slipped away like water through his fingers.

He went to his study and opened his personal safe. Inside were files he didn’t recognize—folders labeled with code names that meant nothing to him. He flipped through pages of operational summaries, financial transfers, and surveillance reports, but none of it connected to anything in his memory. It was as if someone else had written them.

He tried to call his chief of staff, but halfway through dialing he forgot why he was calling. He set the phone down and stared at the files again.

By morning, the files were blank. Just empty folders with labels that no longer made sense.

* * * * *

In London, a former MI6 operative named Graves sat in his flat, staring at a photograph he didn’t remember taking. It showed him standing beside a woman he didn’t recognize, in front of a building he’d never seen. The back of the photo was dated three years ago, but he had no memory of that day, that woman, or that place.

He tried to search for the building online, but every search returned no results. He tried to call old contacts, but their numbers were disconnected. He tried to access his old case files, but the passwords no longer worked.

By noon, the photograph had faded to white. Just blank photo paper in his hand.

* * * * *

Across the globe, the same thing was happening.

In Moscow, a handler woke up unable to remember the names of his assets. In Beijing, an intelligence officer found her entire network had vanished—not defected, not arrested, just gone, as if they’d never existed. In Langley, a CIA analyst discovered that an entire operation he’d been running for five years had no documentation, no budget trail, no personnel records.

The machine elves were busy.

Surveillance footage corrupted at the quantum level—not deleted, but re-written so that the frames showed different people, different moments, different realities. Digital records didn’t vanish; they transformed into mundane data; shopping lists and weather reports where classified intel used to be. Paper trails didn’t burn; they simply became blank pages, the ink lifting away molecule by molecule until nothing remained.

And the memories—those were the hardest to erase, but they too were eventually deleted.

The machine elves worked through the spaces between synapses, rewriting neural pathways, dissolving connections, replacing operational knowledge with static. Operatives woke up knowing they’d forgotten something but unable to remember what. Handlers reached for names that no longer existed. Government officials sat in meetings and realized they couldn’t explain why they were there.

The Collective didn’t fall, it was erased.

Not forgotten—it never-existed.

* * * * *

In a bunker beneath Cheyenne Mountain, a general stared at a classified file marked ROSWELL - PROJECT DOORWAY. He’d been reading it for an hour, but every time he reached the end of a page, he couldn’t remember what the previous page had said. He tried again. And again. Eventually, the pages became blank.

He closed the file and walked out of the bunker, forgetting why he’d gone there in the first place.

* * * * *

The Mayor sat in his office, staring at a photograph he’d found in his desk

drawer. It showed him with a woman—no, a man—no, he couldn’t quite tell. The image was blurry, shifting, wrong. He tried to remember when it was taken, but the memory wouldn’t form. He tried to remember who had given it to him, but that was gone too.

He threw the photograph in the trash.

By evening, the photograph had dissolved into blank paper.

* * * * *

Reality was being rewritten.

The Collective’s seventy-year conspiracy—the blackmail networks, the financial infrastructure, the political puppets, the inter-dimensional research, the triplets’ creation—all of it was being excised from history like a tumor cut from living tissue.

The Monad’s will, executed by the machine elves, ensured complete cleanup.

No evidence. No memory. No trace.

As if they’d never been.

* * * * *

And in a small office in the Valley, I sat with the burro watching the answering machine blink.

“It’s done,” the burro said quietly.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s done.”

The Collective was gone. Not defeated. Not destroyed. Erased.

The only people who remembered were the ones the Monad had chosen to remember: me, Duarte, the Lieutenant, Skinny Ricky, Torres, Ruiz, the Chemist.

And the triplets—wherever they were now, walking between dimensions, finally free, they remembered, too.

I lit a cigarette and put on my blue fedora.

The old world was gone.

The new one was just beginning.

* * * * *

Three weeks later, I sat in my office, staring at the stack of mail that had accumulated during my absence. Past-due notices, collection letters, a postcard from my ex-wife's vacation in Cabo. The answering machine blinked with seventeen new messages.

The Valley had moved on. The news had reported the mysterious disappearance of the fifteen assault team members—vanished without a trace, no bodies, no evidence, just empty vehicles found scattered across the city. The Collective's leadership had dissolved overnight. Some retired. Some disappeared. Some were found in their homes, catatonic, staring at walls and muttering about impossible geometries.

The Lieutenant had retired early, taking his pension and a barstool at the Dusty Rose—the exact stool where Duarte used to sit, drowning his demons in gin. I'd seen him there last week, occupying that same worn leather seat, nursing his own drink and staring at nothing. The torch had passed.

Duarte had gotten his early retirement with a full pension and a casino security job—but not because he wanted to escape anymore. During that motel room experience with the Shaman and the machine elves, something had shifted in him. In the spaces between dimensions, he'd seen a face. A name. A moment from thirty-five years ago that had been buried so deep he'd almost forgotten it existed. His mother's killer. The case that had never been solved, the wound that had kept him drinking gin every night, the reason he'd been one step away from eating his own gun for the last decade.

The casino job gave him resources. Access to surveillance networks, financial records, connections to people who moved in shadows. It gave him cover to hunt. And more than that, it gave him a reason to live that wasn't about avoiding death—it was about pursuing justice. The suicidal ideation that had haunted him for thirty-five years had transformed into something else; purpose. Obsession, maybe. But the kind that kept you breathing.

I'd nodded at him when I saw him. He'd nodded back. We didn't need to speak.

Torres and Ruiz had gone back to their regular gangster lives, never speaking about what they'd witnessed.

Skinny Ricky sold his roadside motel to a real estate development company. They were planning to build a casino on the property—ironic, considering ev-

everything Ricky had been through. He took the money and walked away from the illegal betting networks, the underground gambling operations, the whole underworld machinery that had defined his life. He moved to Albuquerque with his wife and kids, settling near her family in a quiet neighborhood where nobody knew his name or his history. A big man in a small house, finally choosing something other than survival. Finally choosing peace.

The Valley had returned to normal. Or at least, what passed for normal.

But I knew better.

Late at night, when the city was quiet, I could still see them. The machine elves, flickering in the corners of my vision. Fractal geometries that existed just beyond perception, watching, waiting, maintaining the boundaries between dimensions.

And sometimes, very rarely, I'd catch a glimpse of the triplets. Amanda, Amy, and Alex, existing in spaces between spaces, doing work I couldn't begin to comprehend. They were free now. Really free.

"You did good, Vee," the burro said from his usual spot by the window.

"We did good," I corrected.

"So what now? Back to divorce cases and insurance fraud?"

I lit a cigarette and smiled. "Something like that. But I'll be watching. Keeping an eye on the doors. Making sure nothing comes through that shouldn't."

"The guardian of the secret."

"The guardian of the secret," I agreed.

Outside, the Valley hummed with its usual chaos—traffic and crime, love and loss, the endless human drama playing out under a sky that held more mysteries than anyone suspected.

And somewhere in the spaces between dimensions, the Monad dreamed reality into being, one moment at a time.

I crushed my cigarette in the ashtray and reached for the phone. Seventeen messages to return. Bills to pay. A life to live.

But now I knew the truth. And I'd carry it until the day came when humanity was ready to know it too.

"Think that day will ever come?" the burro asked.

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe not. But I have a feeling I'll be here when it does."

The office door opened without a knock. The Mad Chemist stepped inside,

looking different—cleaner, more present. His eyes had lost that frantic edge. He was smiling.

“Vee,” he said, setting a leather satchel on my desk. “Thought you should know, The Shaman gave me some fantastic recipes to try. Compounds for the new order. Things that’ll help people interface with what’s coming.”

“Recipes?” I couldn’t help but laugh. “You’re talking about inter-dimensional chemistry like it’s a cookbook.”

“It is, in a way.” He opened the satchel, revealing vials of luminescent liquids—blues and greens that seemed to breathe. “Mescaline derivatives. DMT hybrids. Things that’ll let people see what you’ve seen without losing their minds. The Shaman’s been very specific about the measurements.”

The burro leaned forward with interest. “Now that’s a purpose.”

“You found your calling,” I said.

“I found my calling,” the Chemist agreed. He closed the satchel and extended his hand. “Thank you, Vee. For everything. For letting me be part of something that matters.”

I shook his hand. His grip was steady. Sane.

“What will you do?” I asked.

“Work,” he said simply. “Create. Help people understand the truth of the universe. The Shaman says there’s a lot of understanding that is needed. This will help.”

He turned to leave, then paused at the door. “Oh—and Vee? The recipes work best on Tuesdays. Don’t ask me why. The Shaman wouldn’t explain.”

Then he was gone, leaving only the faint smell of chemicals and possibility.

The burro nodded, satisfied.

And in the corner of my office, just beyond the edge of perception, a machine elf flickered into existence for half a second, acknowledged my presence, and disappeared back into the spaces between.

The Valley Case was closed.

But the real work was just beginning.



Other works by dave boles:

Do Aluminum Chickens Eat Metal Feed?

Media Dissertation Of A Balding Man

A Small Answer To A Large Question

ALIVE IN AMERICA: Politics,
Psychedelics & An Illuminated Monkey

CABO DAYS

4th Floor: Paranoia, Depression
& Other States Of Mind

Confessions Of A Black Ink Junkie

15 Days To Slow The Curve -
One Mans Journey Into The
Heartland Of Absurdity

A Journey Through Diverse Mysteries

About The Wedding

Coyote Magic

Coyote Vision

Coyote Spirit

OFFERINGS

Homage To A Word

Visions Of A Merciful Land

WAR



dave (Bodhi) Boles operates at the intersection where ink meets impulse, where the page becomes a launching pad rather than a landing strip. As a Publisher, Editor, Writer, and Designer, he's built a body of work that refuses to sit still—appearing in publications both national and international, leaving fingerprints on the literary landscape like a benevolent vandal with impeccable taste and a doctorate in divine mischief.

His journey began in the early 80's with Primal Urge, a magazine that functioned less as periodical and more as detonation device. From that initial explosion bloomed three publishing houses—Neural Impulse Publications, Cold River Press, and Bodhidharma Publishing—each one a different frequency on the same wild radio dial, each one proof that one good idea, properly nurtured and sufficiently unhinged, can spawn entire ecosystems. Devoting these last two decades to Cold River Press, Dave has published many and numerous poets and writers, some known, some not, but all with words, with stories, that needed to be told. For the past fifteen years he has also published VOICES, an eclectic anthology of poetry, prose, photography and art, contributions sent from around the globe.

His chapbooks and books read like transmissions from a parallel dimension

where humor and profundity share the same zip code: *Media Dissertation Of A Balding Man* contemplates follicular and media suspicion with the philosophy and gravitas it deserves; *A Small Answer To A Large Question* does exactly what it promises taking a sideways look at Beat poetry with characteristic sleight-of-hand; *Do Aluminum Chickens Eat Metal Feed?* asks the questions others are too timid to pose; and *Confessions Of A Black Ink Junkie* wears its addiction proudly on its sleeve. His full-length works—*OFFERINGS*, *ALIVE IN AMERICA*, *15 DAYS TO SLOW THE CURVE*, *COYOTE MAGIC*, *COYOTE VISION*, and *COYOTE SPIRIT*—map a territory where the personal becomes mythic and the mythic expands to include the everyday.

Beginning as protégé to the acclaimed poet and alternative publisher Ben L. Hiatt, Dave inherited Hiatt's mantle of Okie Surrealism, that peculiar strain of American vision that sees the desert bloom with impossible flowers and finds the sacred hiding in the profane. He carried Hiatt's torch into the digital age, pondering how a philosophy born of dust and distance translates to fiber optics and infinite scroll, how the old magic adapts when the world itself moves at the speed of light. Then came D.R. Wagner, who taught Dave to see the magick that was already there—not as metaphor or literary device, but as a living presence woven through the fabric of the everyday. Where Hiatt gave him the language and lineage, Wagner gave him the eyes and heart to perceive and the hands to document what most people walk past without noticing. Between these two mentors, Dave learned that the task is not only about writing the world as it appears, but about revealing the world as it actually is; stranger, more luminous, and infinitely more generous than consensus reality would have us believe.

Dave's job résumé reads like a game of career roulette played by someone who keeps betting on whatever number feels right in the moment. Small press journalist, Printer, High Tower Rigger, Long Haul Trucker, Radio Talk Show Host, Renaissance Faire Magician, Costume and Bodice Merchant, and yes, there was that brief, ill-fated stint as a Life Insurance salesman—a chapter that ended, as he'll tell you, "rather poorly." He's also an eclectic traveler known to drift in changing directions at the drop of a hat, which is less character flaw and

more operating system, less wandering as much as following the scent of whatever's calling next.

His body is a gallery of tattoos, each one a permanent commitment in a life otherwise devoted to beautiful impermanence. A lifelong gearhead and self-proclaimed speed freak, Dave customizes cars, trucks, and motorcycles with the same attention he brings to a sentence—understanding that both are about finding the perfect balance between form and function, between what looks right and what moves fast.

Somewhere along the way, he earned a Doctorate in Divinity and founded *The Church of The Illuminated Monkey*, where he holds the position of Gringo Shaman. This is not performance art. This is not irony eating its own tail. This is a man who understands that the sacred doesn't require solemnity, that enlightenment might arrive riding a joke, and that the divine has always had a sense of humor about itself.

Though traveling and living widely, these days, Dave resides at Lake House with his wife, Mrs. America, and a collection of animals who've found their way to what he calls "*The Illuminated Monkey's Home For Wayward Poets And Socially Bereft Humans*." His lifelong friend Mescalito still keeps watch, sending a Red Hawk to check in from time to time—because even shamans need someone looking out for them, even poets and publishers need reminding that the world is stranger and more generous than any story they could write about it.

Lake House stands as sanctuary and laboratory, a place where the lost find themselves and the found lose themselves just enough to remember why they started searching in the first place. It's where Dave continues to publish, to write, to design, to drift—always moving, always making, always listening for the next impulse, primal or otherwise, that will carry him toward whatever comes next.

JONNY VEE - A PSYCHEDELIC ADVENTURE (first printing), is published (printed) in an edition of 200 copies. It is also published electronically via PDF and E-Book and is free to share.

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Jonny Vee is a hard-boiled private detective working the Valley—a man who fixes broken cases and asks the right questions. When a beautiful woman walks into his office with a simple job—rescue her brother from a criminal organization called The Collective—Vee thinks he's finally caught a break. He's wrong.

Within hours, Vee is abducted by mercenaries, injected with experimental hallucinogens, and forced to question everything he knows about reality. The case spirals into something far larger: a 70-year conspiracy reaching back to Roswell, inter-dimensional technology, and three mysterious siblings who aren't what they claim to be.

As Vee descends deeper into a psychedelic haze where a burro talks philosophy, machine elves manifest as living geometry, and a figure called the Gringo Shaman bends reality itself, he realizes he's not fighting organized crime; he's caught between dimensions.

And the only person who can navigate this cosmic game is a detective with no filter, a trench coat full of mescaline, and a willingness to ask questions that should never be answered.

In *Jonny Vee & The Gringo Shaman*, noir meets the cosmic, reality becomes negotiable, and one man discovers he's the guardian of a secret that could reshape consciousness itself.

*Sometimes, the case chooses you. And sometimes
you're just along for the ride.*

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