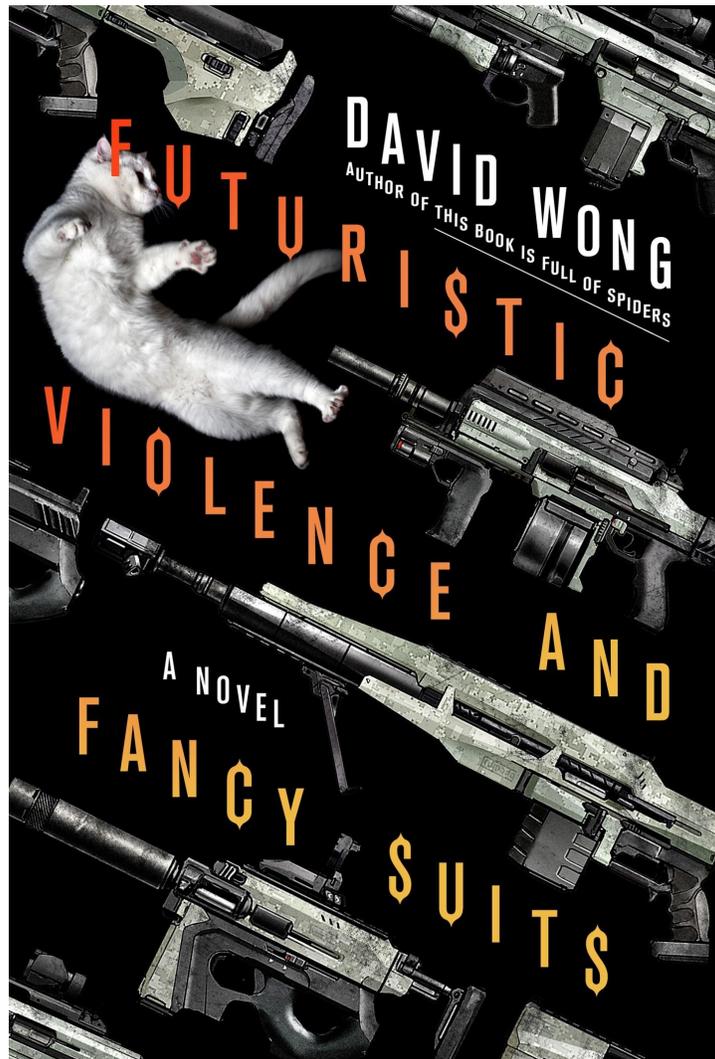


The near future, somewhere in rural Colorado . . .



If Zoey Ashe had known she was being stalked by a man who intended to kill her and then slowly eat her bones, she would have worried more about that and less about getting her cat off the roof.

Said cat was on said roof because it was terrified of the Santa Claus hologram in the front yard, a tacky Christmas decoration Zoey's mother had brought home from Walmart two weeks ago. Everybody else in the trailer park had them, so she apparently had felt pressured to demonstrate her Christmas spirit with this dead-eyed apparition that unenthusiastically

said "HO-HO-HO-MERRY CHRISTMAS" in a flat robotic voice to anyone who approached. Zoey thought it was a little unsettling herself, but every time the cat saw it blink to life, he would hiss and go streaking off to some high place where he thought the translucent bearded devil couldn't reach him. So that's why on the evening of December 16 Zoey was standing in the snow trying to coax the cat off of the roof while, just a block away, a man was waiting to abduct her and stream her slow mutilation to half a million viewers.

Chapter 1

For eight hours, Zoey's pursuer had been staking out the trailer where the twenty-two-year-old lived with her mother, waiting for the most dramatic moment to make his appearance. Catching Zoey in bed or the shower would be optimal, but he got the sense that this particular young woman had no rigid schedule for doing either of those things. All day he had been watching her through a dirty bay window that put their trailer's whole, sad living room on display. Zoey had begun her day promptly at one PM by waking up on the sofa and initiating a "morning" routine that involved going to the bathroom, returning to the sofa, and then staring blankly at the ceiling for an hour. Then she read for a bit, ate a bowl of cereal, and did something with her hair that involved wrapping part of it in tinfoil while a nature documentary about pack hunters played on the TV behind her. Now the sun had gone down and Zoey, still in her pajamas, was standing in her yard and yelling up at a cat that had jumped onto the roof. Her stalker had intended to send the news media a video of his entire pursuit of the girl, but he knew that this part would have to be edited way down.

He was out of patience. He resolved to move in for the kill and even switched on the tiny camera he kept pinned to his lapel, so his fans could watch it live. But then, at the last moment, he had second thoughts. Mainly about branding.

The man had called himself “The Jackal” for most of his short but prolific career, but had decided to switch to “The Hyena” after watching a pack of them tear apart a moose during the documentary that had played on Zoey’s television earlier. He thought it was more fitting—hyenas were wild, unpredictable predators and had the most powerful jaws in the animal kingdom (that last part was what had really sold him on it). But then again, the documentary seemed to show them only hunting in groups (where he was definitely a loner) and, unless he misunderstood, the female hyenas had penises, and even gave birth through them. That was a problem—when he became famous and the press started speculating on why he chose that moniker, he didn’t want pundits throwing around a bunch of wild theories about his genitals. But if he amended his manifesto to address the issue, or included photographic evidence that he had a normal penis, then that would just make *him* seem like the weirdo for bringing it up. Maybe “The Wolf” was a better name. Or “The Shark.”

As he sat in his rental car and wrestled with this decision, Zoey went inside the trailer, then returned dragging a kitchen chair through the door. She tried to use it as a step stool to reach the cat on the roof, at which point she immediately overbalanced and fell off, landing hard in the snow. She gathered herself, brushed snow off her butt, mounted the chair again, and searched in vain for a cat that, unbeknownst to her, had already jumped down the other side of the trailer. This went on for a very long time, before Zoey finally noticed the cat was not on the roof, but rather lying in the snow under the very chair she was standing on. Exasperated, the girl trudged back inside cradling the cat with one arm and dragging the chair with the other. The Shark (“The Piranha”?) decided he would wait for her to get settled again, then make his move.

Instead, Zoey reappeared at the door and headed for the old and busted Toyota Furia in her driveway. Her stalker wasn’t worried about losing her if she left—the advantage of self-driving cars for a man in The Piranha’s line of work was that their navigation systems were very easy to latch on to. He could just set his own to follow the same route and the car

would do the tailing for him—he could literally stalk the girl while relaxing and playing a game on his phone. He watched as Zoey scraped frost from the Toyota’s windshield with what appeared to be a spatula, and then pulled out of her driveway, leaving behind a dark rectangle in the snow as if the car had forgotten to take its shadow with it. The Piranha gave her a ten-second head start, and then told his rental car to follow. He tried to picture the headlines that would tick along the bottom of the news feeds next week, like, “The Piranha Claims His Sixth Victim.” Hmmmm, maybe “The Leopard” would be better. It needed to be some kind of biting animal, otherwise the surgery would have been a waste.

He rubbed the itchy line of stitches that ran from one temple to the other, looping under his jawbone like a chin strap. He’d had his entire lower jaw and upper teeth augmented with a motorized black market implant consisting of a graphene lattice frame and titanium chompers that could bite through metal. As soon as he had gotten home from the surgery, he had turned on his camera and announced his new powers to the world by biting through a hunk of copper pipe. He thought it made for an ominous demonstration of his new abilities, even if he’d had to quickly turn off the camera at that point because he had cut up his tongue pretty badly. No matter—the jaws worked, and his next test would be on Zoey Ashe’s fingers. Then he’d just chew his way up from there.

This, he thought, was what he had always been missing: a gimmick.

She made a left turn, then another. Circling the block. Did she suspect she was being followed? The Leopard would have to be careful—prey animals were weak, but alert and wary. The girl surely could sense the malevolent predator that lurked behind her in the darkness.

Chapter 2

Zoey Ashe had forgotten to tell the Toyota’s navigation to stop for food, so she had already missed the turn by the time she was able to convince it to deviate from its route by screaming repeatedly at the

windshield. The car reluctantly circled the block and pulled into a food distribution center that people in the future call “the Wendy’s drive-thru.” Her Toyota’s heater had stopped working weeks ago, which was bad news in a Colorado winter, so she needed something hot inside her. Zoey pulled up to the window and ordered a small container of a semisolid, protein-rich foodstuff that the people in her time call “chili,” hoping it would warm her up a couple of degrees (at least before the heat left her body a few minutes later in the form of several dozen hot farts). She then urged the lethargic compact car back onto the deserted streets, where the autopilot took over once more. The Toyota whined its way through the darkness, heading directly toward the Zombie Quarantine Zone, which was the name of the topless bar where Zoey’s mother worked.

The radio had stopped working years ago, and so Zoey made up for it by singing a hit pop song from her time called “Butt Show (and I Don’t Charge Admission)” while she plugged in the strand of Christmas lights she had tacked around the top of the car’s interior. She peeled the lid off her chili, watched steam waft into the frigid air, and decided that things really could be worse. Zoey always tried to appreciate the little things in life, like the fact that just a generation ago you couldn’t devote both hands to eating a bowl of fast-food chili while the car drove itself (how did people use to eat car chili? With a straw?). She had also recently upgraded her phone to one that displayed a little holographic image of the caller, but so far she had found this feature was only useful for terrifying her holophobic cat, which hardly justified the cost of the upgrade. However, a moment later that feature did allow her to see that the call that saved her life came from a man who was fond of wearing fancy suits.

When her phone rang, Zoey was only a few blocks away from the trashy, zombie-themed bar where she was supposed to pick up her mother at the end of her shift (that is, the point in the evening when the younger girls were rotated in for the lucrative nighttime crowd). When the phone’s hologram blinked to life it startled the crap out of her, as she had forgotten the phone was in her lap and for one terrified moment thought a tiny ghost

had emerged from her crotch. Zoey flinched, cursed, and splattered chili everywhere before she figured out that she was not in fact going to have to undergo an incredibly awkward and invasive exorcism. She groaned and tried to scoop hot chili off her pajama pants with her fingers, and panicked when she saw she had also gotten it all over her new phone. She licked chili off the screen and, in the process, accidentally swiped the “Answer” slider with her tongue.

The little hologram man floating above the phone looked puzzled and said, “Hello? Is this Zoey Ashe?”

“Hold on. I got chili all over my car.”

“I— Are you there? What’s that sound?”

“It’s the sound of me eating chili off my phone. Who’s this?”

“Zoey, my name is Will Blackwater. You are the— I’m sorry, are you still there?”

“Yes, I’m listening. Are you actually wearing that suit or do you just have your phone set to display you wearing it?”

“Please pay attention. You are the daughter of Arthur Livingston, correct?”

“No. I mean, yeah he is my biological father, but we have nothing to do with each other. Is he in jail again? Are you his lawyer? Is that why you’re all dressed up?”

“No. Listen to me, Zoey. A man is coming to abduct you. Right now. His car is one block behind you.”

“Wait. What? Who is this again?”

“I’m going to take control of your car. Don’t touch the wheel or the pedals, or do anything else to disengage the self-drive. Do you understand?”

“No, I *don’t* understand. How can you—”

“Please buckle your seat belt.”

Headlights loomed in her rearview mirror. Zoey, her hands shaking, tried to latch the seat belt as the Toyota abruptly lurched to the left, jumped the curb, flattened a row of shrubs, and plowed across a lawn.

“HEY! JESUS CHRIST!”

Zoey grabbed the dash and held on for dear life as her car smashed through two fences and a child’s swing set before it thumped over another curb and turned left onto a residential street.

The hologram man on her phone, Will, said, “I apologize for that, I’m not driving the car. My associate, Andre, has the controls and I’m afraid he’s had several drinks.”

From somewhere in the background she heard another voice in the phone say, “Hey, I drive better when I got a few in me.”

Zoey was thrown against the door as the Toyota went power sliding around a turn. She twisted around in her seat and saw the headlights of her pursuer streak through the yard they had just left, sweeping onto the road behind them. Zoey’s Toyota abruptly turned into a too-narrow alley, missing a brick wall and a dumpster by half an inch on either side. Her side-view mirror exploded when the car clipped the corner on the way out.

The man on the phone said, “I’m terribly sorry to tell you this, but your father was killed. It happened last week.”

“So? I didn’t even know him! I assumed he died years ago. Who are these people?!?”

“Hold on.”

The Toyota jumped off the road again and plunged into a grove of pine trees, branches raking the doors with a noise like frantic predators clawing to get in.

Over the phone, Zoey faintly heard Will say, “Cut the lights.”

The headlights blinked out, along with all of the dashboard lights and the navigation overlay on the windshield. Zoey was now hurtling through the darkness of the trees, completely blind.

She screamed.

The little hologram man on her phone, which was now located somewhere on the back floorboard, told her to calm down. The car emerged from the trees onto a lawn, fishtailed in the snow-covered grass, then shattered somebody’s solar panel array with an explosion of sparks.

Another hard left turn, and they were on a paved street once more. Exactly four seconds later, the tailing sedan was behind them again.

Will said, “Don’t let this question alarm you, but do you have any weapons in the vehicle?”

“No! Why would I— Wait, I have a spatula . . .”

“Well, we have no indication your pursuer is a pancake, so we’ll abandon that angle for the moment. Now I will need you to stay calm. We can’t outrun him in this vehicle. I’m going to have you get out.”

“How is that possibly going to help?”

“We need to pick a spot where he’ll be forced to follow on foot. Otherwise he could simply run you over with his car, obviously.”

“Obviously. Who is he again?”

“It’s a hired thug. You don’t know him.”

“Hired by *who*? What does he want?”

“I can explain later. I can assure you that knowing the fine details won’t enhance your survivability and it certainly will do nothing to ease your panic. Let me just say that this particular thug took the contract for a reason, which is that he likes when the targets are women. And he likes to take his time. He’s calling himself The Hyena, according to his feed.”

“Does he give birth through his penis?”

“What? Zoey, listen to me—our map shows a pond about two hundred yards ahead, but does not show us if it’s frozen over. Is that a safe bet this time of year, where you are?”

“It . . . I don’t know! I don’t go ice skating! I know the kiddie pool our neighbors left out in their yard is frozen, but—”

Zoey was thrown against the door again. Another hard right was taking her off the road once more, this time through a pasture. The car swerved to miss a single cow that was lazily grazing in its path. It mooed at her, probably telling Zoey she should turn her headlights on.

Will said, “It’s our only option. Hang on.”

“What’s our only option? What are you going to—”

Zoey was thrown forward against her seat belt as the Toyota slammed on its brakes, skidding across the rough carpet of frozen grass.

Will said, “Go! Get out onto the ice! It will support you but not his car, if he wants to follow he’ll have to get out on foot.”

“But then wha—”

“GO! NOW!”

Zoey grabbed the phone, threw open the door, and ran toward the frozen pond. Before her was a moonlit sheet of snow that Zoey thought was like the thin frosting on a cake made of filthy water and dead fish, the bitter wind having frozen the part of her brain that thought up metaphors. She didn’t even know she had made it to the ice until her sneakers slipped and sent her down to her knees, the surface below her crackling and popping a warning in response. As Zoey climbed to her feet, her shadow suddenly stretched across the ice—headlights looming behind her. She tried to move quickly but gingerly, but after three steps, she slipped again and this time fell hard on her butt.

She heard a car door close behind her. She risked a look back and saw only a silhouette backlit by the twin bluish shafts of headlights. Zoey pushed herself up, her hands swiping aside fresh snow to reveal black ice underneath, her stumbling path across the pond leaving a row of haphazard streaks like Chinese calligraphy. Two more steps—now the ice was making wheezing complaints like a squeaky door hinge each time she lowered her foot. She thought she could hear liquid water sloshing up ahead—she had no idea how thick the ice beneath her was, but knew that not far up, that thickness became “zero.”

She had stuffed her phone into her coat pocket at some point and, from inside, she heard Will say, “Are you still there?”

Zoey dug out the phone with numb fingers and whispered, “He’s coming. He’s coming and I can’t go any farther. What do I do?”

“Let me do all the talking. Just hold out your phone.”

Through the wind, Zoey could barely hear her pursuer say, “I’ve reached the edge of the pond.” Then after a dramatic pause, he declared, “She has nowhere left to run.”

Zoey asked Will, “Who is he talking to?”

“He’s streaming this live, he has a Blink camera pinned to his jacket. You don’t want to know how many people are watching. Let me talk to him.”

Zoey held her phone out toward the menacing shadow in the headlights. The foot-tall holographic ghost of Will Blackwater said, “Stay on the shore, Lawrence, the ice isn’t thick enough to support the weight of both of you. You’re a beefy guy and you’ll notice Zoey here is not what one would call ‘willowy.’”

The shadow took a few strides onto the pond and said, “Come back off the ice, sweetie. You’re going to come with me one way or the other, and you won’t like ‘the other.’”

Will’s hologram replied, “Talk to me, not to her. We both want Zoey for the same reason, with the minor difference that I do not want to also eat her flesh on a live video feed. Your advantage is that she is worth more to us than she is to you. Our advantage is financial. It appears this leads to easy compromise—we’re more than happy to compensate you for what you lose by forgoing the contract on Zoey here. No authorities will be notified. You know my word is good, Lawrence.”

“Call me by my true name.” He paused, as if thinking. “The . . . Bite . . . Master. And you left out several important points. First of all, there is the fact that I’m here in person, where you appear to still be in the city, six hundred miles away. Second, there is the fact that you and I both know the girl is worth much more than that contract. And third, as you mentioned, I have a *personal* use for her afterward, which means more to me than any financial reward.”

“I am actually aware of all of those factors. I am, however, still confident that an arrangement can be reached. Mr. Livingston had substantial resources, as you well know, and again we’re more than willing

to ameliorate whatever perceived losses you may incur by turning Zoey over to us. As for your . . . personal predilections, surely some dollar amount could be assigned to the loss of visceral pleasure. Perhaps, even, we could offer a substitute for Ms. Ashe here. We dare say we could produce a subject you would find even more satisfactory.”

The man laughed. A fake laugh, Zoey thought. For the camera.

“You are a piece of work, Will. But let me ask you—if you were to take a gazelle from the jaws of a lion, could you satisfy it by substituting a hundred and fifty pounds of Cat Chow? No, because as an apex predator, the lion doesn’t just want to eat. It wants *the prize it won in the hunt*. That is why you are to call me The Lion from now on.”

Will’s hologram, appearing completely unperturbed by this conversation with a serial killer, said, “I understand perfectly, and I see no reason we should permanently deprive you of your prize. We only need Ms. Ashe’s services for about forty-eight hours. And after all, is there no greater pleasure than that sweetened by delayed gratification?”

Zoey tried to process what Will had just offered the man, but the howling, frozen wind and the sound of ice clicking and wheezing under her made it difficult to think of anything but a sudden splash followed by endless darkness and paralyzing cold.

The silhouette in the headlights said, “If I was amenable to such an arrangement, I would of course need guarantees that my property would be returned to me at the agreed upon time. And I would need compensation immediately to make up for *delaying* my gratification.”

Will said, “I would suggest nothing less. How about a nice used Toyota Furia?”

Zoey’s driverless car came flying onto the ice, smashing into the man and throwing him onto the hood. A split second later, man and car went crashing through the ice, sinking into the frigid pond so close to Zoey that the splash threw freezing droplets onto her stunned face.

Will said, “RUN!”

Zoey did not need those instructions. She took off in the opposite direction of the car-sized hole in the ice, praying there was a solid path between her and the bank of snowy dead grass that marked the shore. She took a step, fell, crawled, stumbled to her feet, nearly fell again, then slid and skidded her way incrementally forward. She made frustratingly slow progress, like one of those nightmares where you run and run but the light at the end of the hall just stretches farther and farther away. She was about ten feet from the shore when she heard the ice below her shatter once and for all.

She was in freefall, the world gone beneath her feet. It happened in slow motion—first she felt the stabbing freeze of the ice water swallowing her feet, then her calves, then her knees. Then the bitter, frigid depths engulfed her knees, and then her . . . knees. This was when Zoey realized the water this close to shore was only knee-deep. She sloshed through the broken ice and climbed onto dry land, and only then turned back to see her poor Toyota gurgling as it pushed its nose deeper into the depths, taking the psychopath with it.

From the phone in her hand, Will said, “Are you all right?” Zoey faintly heard the other voice in the background, the man remotely operating the car, say, “I can’t believe that shit worked.”

Zoey said, “I’m hanging up. You offered to let that guy eat me to death.”

Will said, “That wasn’t a genuine offer, it was a delaying tactic. Half of negotiation is about dealing with people on their level. Speaking of which, we need to have a word.”

“I’m not *negotiating* with you. Go piss a centipede.”

“Right, overcoming resistance to negotiation is the other half of negotiation. Can you get somewhere where we can talk?”

“I’m freezing and I’m stranded. I have no idea where I even am.”

“Circle around the pond and take The Hyena’s car. He won’t be needing it.”

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Chapter 3

Zoey sat shivering in the serial killer's Changfeng sedan, a cheap rental that nonetheless had a wonderful working heater that was pure bliss against her soaked pajama pants. She had driven away from the pond and parked in the shadowy rear of a building downtown that was marked as a real estate office but by its shape had clearly once been a Pizza Hut. Zoey put her head in her hands and tried to gather herself. The hologram man in her phone was now sipping from a glass of scotch, while under him scrolled a notification that her mother had tried to call.

Zoey said to her phone, "All right. Who are you again?"

"Will Blackwater. I worked for your father."

"Right, and he's dead? Did I hear you say that?"

"Yes. In an accident. There was . . . an explosion."

"What, was it a meth lab or something?"

"No, nothing like that. Or maybe it was, no one is quite sure. I'm terribly sorry for your loss. He was . . . a great man."

"Mr. Blackwater, I only met that man like two times in my entire life. The first time I ever saw him was when I was eight. It was my birthday. He gave me a football, because somebody told him I was a tomboy. The last time I was sixteen, so it's been . . . six years at least. He was a total stranger to me. So why would him getting exploded to death cause people to come after me?"

"It's just a misunderstanding. But there is a contract out on you and you'll be in danger until we clear it up."

"A contract? As in, whoever kills me gets paid a bunch of money?"

"They actually need you alive."

"Oh, well, at least there's that."

“But the contract specifies that after you’ve served your purpose, they can have their way with you. It’s difficult to explain and also moot, as long as we’re both in agreement we don’t want you falling into their hands. Zoey, we you need to come to the city. Have you ever been to Tabula Rasa?”

The actual spelling of the city’s name was Tabula Ra\$a, with a dollar sign instead of an “S,” because that’s what happens when a bunch of rich douche bags build a brand-new city in the desert and reserve the right to name it themselves.

“I’ve never been, and I’m not going now. I’m going to the police. And then I’m going to bed.”

“That would be a mistake. We’ve already made plans for accommodations here, we already have a car on the way. It will be there in a few hours. We’ll give you a location and a limousine will—”

“Wait, a limo? How many drugs did Arthur Livingston have to sell to afford one of those?” She was never going to refer to the man as her “dad,” since the connection was genetic only and she would disavow even that if she could.

“Listen, Zoey, this must be done quickly, for everyone’s sake. There could be other bad guys en route right now.”

“I . . . I’ll think about it. I have to talk to my mom.”

“It’s dangerous to involve her. You shouldn’t even go back home.”

“I’d need to pack a bag. And I have to tell her *something*.”

“Tell her that your father unexpectedly passed and his estate has requested that you make an emergency trip to meet with his associates. Tell her you were so stunned by this news that you drove your car into a pond. Tell her that to compensate you for the inconvenience, the estate is prepared to pay you fifty thousand dollars. That last part is true, by the way.” He paused, to let that sink in, then added, “That should cover the damage to your car plus pay you the equivalent of a year’s salary in addition.”

Zoey had a solid line of reasoning in her brain that demonstrated with perfect clarity why she should refuse, but it was quickly obscured behind a chorus line of dancing dollar signs. Fifty thousand was actually way more than one year's salary—she worked at a coffee bar, after all. It was the kind of money that could get her and her mom both out of the trailer park, or to a nicer trailer park, anyway. It could get her back into school. She could get a degree in some lucrative field, like nanotechnology. Then she could open a quaint little nanotechnology boutique in Fort Drayton, next to the bait shop. Still, Arthur Livingston was a criminal, which meant this man who “worked” for him was also a criminal, regardless of what kind of fancy little suit he wore in his holograms. That meant the chase that had just occurred was really between two factions of bad guys—he had, after all, just told her not to go to the police.

She asked, “If I leave, how do I know more bad guys won't come after my mom while I'm gone?”

“If you leave, they'll have no reason to. The contract is on you, not her. But if you stay, then *I guarantee you that more of them will come*, which means that just by delaying, you're putting both you and your mother in danger. Making this trip is literally the only safe option.”

Zoey remembered the psycho's soft call—*come back off the ice, sweetie*—and shuddered.

She said, “All right, how do I know you're not just more bad guys trying to collect on this ‘contract’ yourselves?”

“Honestly? We don't need the money. And if we meant you harm, couldn't we have just driven your car into an abutment earlier?”

That made sense, she supposed. Still, she wasn't getting into a car with any of these people. Even if she decided to make the trip to Tabula Ra\$a—which on some level she knew would be incredibly stupid and reckless—she'd find her own way there.

Will said, “Are you still there?”

“Prove the money offer is real.”

“Hold on. All right, check your account. I just sent you five hundred dollars.”

Zoey logged into her bank account and found he wasn't lying—she now had a total of five hundred and seventeen dollars in her savings. Zoey sucked in a breath and thought, *we can get the refrigerator fixed.*

Will said, “The rest I can put into an escrow account, give me twenty minutes and I'll set it up . . . if you agree to make the trip.”

“I'll think about it. But don't bother with the car, if I go, I'll take the train.”

“Ms. Ashe, I would strongly, strongly advise you *not* to—”

She hung up.

It was seven PM; if she took the train out of Denver, she could be in Tabula Ra\$a by midnight. She pulled into traffic, not realizing that a tiny camera The Hyena kept on his dash had recorded her entire conversation, or that more than 1.5 million people were watching.

Chapter 4

Zoey didn't want to be paranoid, but there was something about the man in the loincloth made of charred doll heads that made her nervous.

He was at the opposite end of the train car, standing in the aisle muttering to himself, his only other item of clothing a pair of blacked-out welder's goggles that made him look like he had bug eyes. When he had boarded at Salt Lake City—the last stop before Tabula Ra\$a—Zoey had immediately assumed he was another crazy who had come for her, but then he had just silently taken a standing spot at the other end of the car and she felt bad for prejudging him. Still, Zoey studiously avoided looking in his direction; as any mass transit commuter can tell you, the only way to counter the dark powers of the mentally ill is to avoid eye contact. She gazed out of the window at the scrub brush blurring past at 250 miles an hour. She wondered if her head would go flying off if she stuck it out the

window. Her cat meowed a complaint from inside the plastic carrier on her lap.

Zoey's nerves were eating her alive. For the tenth time she pulled out her phone and logged into the escrow account, mostly just because she liked seeing the \$49,500.00 displayed on the screen. She dropped her phone back into her purse and nervously started scraping black polish off her thumbnail with her bottom teeth. It was her first time on the high-speed rail and for about five minutes she had been awed by the speed, and then she had quickly gotten bored and started to notice how much this particular car smelled like pee. She had bought her ticket at the gate and the only open seat was this one at the very rear of the car, next to the restroom. Whoever designed the train had put the seat about three inches too close to the restroom door, so it bumped her seat every time somebody went in or out. It had happened exactly nineteen times so far, and what was worse was that each person who did it would stop and look down at her like, *whose idea was it to put this weird girl in the way?*

Someone said, "What's your cat's name?"

Zoey gave a start, because for a moment she thought the male voice was the crazy homeless guy with the doll heads on his crotch. But it wasn't; it was the stranger in the seat next to her, a fancy young man in an old-fashioned suit who had spent the entire ride constantly checking his email via a pair of wired-up eyeglasses. She looked him over and got the sense that this kid had taken vacations that cost more than she made in a year.

Zoey forced what she hoped was a friendly smile and said, "Excuse me?"

"Your cat. What's his name?"

"Stench Machine."

"Really? That's mean." He grinned, flashing perfect teeth.

"Have you smelled him?"

"No, but still."

Zoey finger-petted Stench Machine through a slot in the crate. He was a Persian, white except for his face and chest, which were black fading

to brown. He looked like somebody had thrown a cup of coffee in his face and the fur around his mouth gave it a downturned expression that made it look like he wasn't at all happy about it. He wore a black leather collar encircled with silver spikes. It made him look like a punk rock cat, Zoey thought.

Jacob asked, "Does he answer to that name?"

"Cats don't answer to anything."

"My name is Jacob, by the way."

"Good to meet you." Zoey realized she was supposed to give him her name at that point, but even when she wasn't a target for abduction, she didn't go trusting train strangers that easily.

Jacob asked, "Is this your first trip to Tabula Rasa?"

"Yes, and I'm already a little freaked out. I grew up in Colorado, a tiny place called Fort Drayton. It's way out in the boonies. Just to give you an idea, at the entrance of the—" She almost said "trailer park" but caught herself in time. "—uh, subdivision where we live, there's this big statue of an elk, made of concrete. And the whole thing is chipped with bullet holes where over the years drunken hunters have shot it by mistake."

Jacob laughed, showing those perfect teeth. Zoey squashed the jealousy she always felt toward people whose parents had actually taken them to the dentist as a kid. She was missing a lower canine due to a skateboarding accident when she was eleven, and had a chipped incisor due to an encounter with a drunken stepdad. She suddenly wished she had more than just the one amusing anecdote about Fort Drayton to share with Jacob. She could tell him about that time the high school basketball team made it to the state finals and one of the players got diarrhea during the game . . .

Another person shuffled down the aisle toward the restroom, and they *also* glanced down at her, an act that was starting to seem intentional—Zoey swore everyone who passed was doing it. Did she still have chili stuck to her face? This time it was a black teenage girl with wired-up glasses like the ones Jacob was wearing, which meant for all

Zoey knew the girl had the built-in camera on and was broadcasting a feed, maybe one called *The Worst Hair Dye Jobs on Mass Transit Daily* (today's episode: "The Cat Girl in the Back Row with Cyan Bangs").

Jacob said, "Well, you're about to enter a whole new world out here. How much do you know about it?"

"I know it didn't exist twenty years ago, that it was just an empty patch of desert in Utah. Then a bunch of rich people started putting up skyscrapers and suddenly there's a city there. There's no government, right? That's all I know. Oh, and every picture I see of Tabula Rasa looks like the Blade Runner universe is holding a Mardi Gras parade."

Jacob laughed again. "Yeah I'd say you're in for a bit of culture shock. There is no place like it on earth. Your phone will never die, though, there's wireless power coils under everything. Charges the cars as they drive."

"Great, maybe I'll get cancer while I'm there."

Zoey glanced at Doll Head Man again, and thought she had caught him staring at her—it was hard to tell behind his bug-eye goggles. She watched as the man stuck a filterless cigarette between cracked lips. He then casually lifted his hand, touched the end of the cigarette with his finger, and lit it. *With his finger.*

Jacob said, "There's construction everywhere. After dark, it looks like the half-finished buildings are full of fireflies, all the crews in there working through the night, welding the metalwork—"

"Did you see that? What that man just did?"

Jacob glanced toward Doll Head Man. "Yeah, there's no smoking on these trains. You want to tell him or should I?"

"No, he . . . nevermind." Zoey decided the guy must have had a match hidden in his palm or something.

Jacob stared at the guy in amusement and asked, "Are those tiny heads glued to his crotch?"

"You know what the scariest part is about people like him? Everything he's doing makes perfect sense in his own mind."

“Ha! Though I guess that’s true of all of us.”

No one else had noticed the Doll Head guy doing his cigarette trick. Yet just in the time Zoey was looking in that direction, two other passengers had craned their heads around to look at *her*. She knew she wasn’t just being paranoid now—one at a time they would glance around their seat or raise up a bit to see over, peer back, then quickly turn around again when they saw she was meeting their gaze. The bathroom door bumped Zoey’s seat. The black girl shuffled past and she made a point to look down at Zoey *again*. She felt to see if there was something in her hair, but then remembered she was still wearing the knit cap she had pulled down over her ears during the bus ride to Denver. Were they making fun of the hat? Or maybe they were looking at Jacob? Was he a celebrity?

“Anyway,” Jacob said, “it’s amazing how fast they can build them now. You leave for vacation, and when you come back a week later there’s one less gap in the skyline, you have to stare at it for a minute to figure out what they added. They’re amazing to watch, the way they work. They never stop.”

“‘They’? What, like robots?”

“No, Mexicans. All of the crews are immigrants on work visas. Great workers though.”

“Oh . . . that’s kind of racist, isn’t it?”

“Is it? I mean, I guess some of them are probably bad workers. Anyway, it’s kind of mesmerizing to watch them go, they have these huge fabricators right there on the job site, like big 3D printers that just ride up the side of the building and stamp out whole sections of wall, ready to assemble.”

Zoey tried to figure out if Jacob was hitting on her or if he was just bored from the train ride. She imagined the scary doll guy coming back and pulling a weapon or something, and Jacob punching him out like one of those old-timey boxers.

Jacob continued, “One Friday on the way home from work, I made an offhand comment to my friend about how I wished we had a Falafel

Fusion joint in our neighborhood. Then, when I was on my way home from work Monday evening, there it was! They had built it over the weekend, almost like they had heard me say that. It went from vacant lot to open business in less than seventy-two hours. That's Tabula Rasa in a nutshell—you blink and the landscape changes around you. It's like an American Dubai, back when Dubai was Dubai."

Zoey mumbled, "Yeah, that's weird," and she knew Jacob picked up on the fact that she wasn't really paying attention. He fell silent.

Thinking desperately of something to fill the lull in the conversation, Zoey said, "Do you like your glasses? My ex-boyfriend couldn't live without his, but they always give me a headache when he let me put them on."

Occasionally Jacob's eyes would dart up and to the right and she knew he was refreshing an inbox that was only visible to him, otherwise she had no idea what he was actually seeing out of the glasses. They made games where you could bounce a little rubber ball off the faces of the people in the room (the ball was only visible to you, of course) or that would obscure everything with a fantasy world and leave you blind to your surroundings, which if you did it on the bus, was a good way to get your purse stolen. But either way, any time you talked to a person who was wearing the glasses, you never knew if they were actually seeing you.

Jacob said, "You get used to them. They leave kind of an afterimage when you take them off, and you find yourself constantly looking around for your notifications."

"My boyfriend downloaded an app that would superimpose a cartoon mustache on anyone he was talking to. He'd laugh and laugh. The glasses got broken when he got hit in the face with a football and I was kind of glad." She realized she was now talking about her ex-boyfriend a little too much, and in fact had forgotten to add the "ex" just then. She quickly added, "He was stupid. We broke up two months ago." That was pretty subtle, right?

Jacob said, “If you’re free over the weekend I’ll show you around the city. There’s tons to do.”

Huh. So he was probably another serial killer. Still, this was Thursday night, she wondered if she could lose twenty-five pounds or gain four inches in height by Saturday. Then she realized that, while she was thinking about it, she had neglected to actually answer his offer and had created an awkward moment by leaving him hanging.

Jacob, trying to cover for it, said, “So what brings you into the big city, Zoey?”

“My father—my *biological* father—died.” Wait—when had she told Jacob her name?

“Oh, I’m sorry. When’s the funeral?”

“I’m, uh, not sure. They said they needed me for some other stuff, legal paperwork or something. It’s pretty weird.”

“What happened? He couldn’t have been very old, you’re only—”

“Twenty-two. It was an accident. I don’t know anything yet. They said something blew up.”

“Oh, was it that warehouse explosion?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Unless there was more than one. You heard about it?”

“Everybody did, it was big news. So you’re Arthur Livingston’s daughter? I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Was he famous?”

“Around the city, yeah. Probably could have run for mayor, if the city had a mayor.”

“Well, good for him.”

Jacob picked up on her cold tone and went quiet, creating the second awkward silence in Zoey’s five-minute relationship with him. She pictured bringing him home to her trailer in Fort Drayton, this kid in his three-piece tweed suit with the silk tie and dainty gold pocket-watch chain dangling across his vest. She imagined him pulling up in a restored classic car that rolled in silently on battery power, then getting out with a walking

stick and striding to the door. Then Zoey would invite him to sit on a sofa that was covered in cigarette burns and frayed wounds inflicted by cat claws. At that point she pictured him either running for his life, or staying and offering to rescue her from the squalor. She didn't know which would be worse.

Zoey noticed a tiny pinprick of blue light at the corner of his glasses near the hinge, and said, "Oh, is that on? Were we live this whole time?"

The wired glasses all came with forward-facing video cameras that could be left on around the clock, broadcasting everything you did. If you didn't want to wear the glasses but still wanted to livestream your life to the world, you were in luck—you could get those tiny cameras in any accessory you could imagine—pocket watches, necklaces, earrings, tie clips, hats, little copper dragonflies that teenage girls clipped to their hair, whatever. You didn't need a viewfinder, the camera captured a panoramic view of everything in front of you, with software that automatically zoomed and focused on faces and other points of interest—you just turned it on and it recorded your life. The kids these days never left the house without a live feed running (and ever since she got out of high school, Zoey had thought of everyone under twenty as a "kid").

So who was watching their broadcasts? Nobody, or everybody—if they left the feed public, anyone could jump in and watch. The cumulative cloud of all of these millions of connected camera feeds was referred to as the Blink network, or just "Blink." As in, "Did you see the fight between Ayden and Madison at Isaac's party?" "No, but I saw the Blink." Occasionally you'd hear someone use it in past tense, saying they "Blunked" their whole vacation and that you should totally watch it. If you obstructed their feed they'd say you "Blanked" them, and they'd refer to their Blink followers as their "Blinkers," at which point Zoey usually felt the urge to stab them. The point being that the little blue light on Jacob's glasses meant a thousand people could have been listening in on their conversation this whole time. She tried to remember if she had said anything embarrassing.

Jacob put a hand to his glasses and said, “Oh, yeah, I’m so sorry. Jesus, I should have told you it was on. I don’t even think about it. Don’t worry, I don’t have any followers, and lately it’s just my mom and a couple of guys from Pakistan who want to see what America is like. The only people watching right now are an old couple who jumped in when I boarded, they’re planning a trip and wanted to see how clean the train was.”

“Oh. Did you tell them it smells like pee?”

“I did not, but I assume they heard you say it just now.”

He tapped his glasses and the little blue light blinked off. The light was mandated by law, so pervs couldn’t sneak them into locker rooms without everybody knowing they were part of a live broadcast. But Zoey didn’t think the light was near prominent enough, considering she hadn’t noticed it until just now. Her eyes drifted toward the window again. The scrub brush and occasional mountains had been replaced by a dirt field growing rows of wood frames that would eventually bloom into a housing development. Black ribbons of newly paved roads undulated between the rows in gentle curves, sometimes ending abruptly where they met an empty space that would probably be another development a year from now. Zoey noticed that as they got closer to the city, the houses became more finished and had less motion blur—the train was slowing down. She looked around for the Doll Head guy. He had moved a few rows closer; he had finished his cigarette and was now smashing the butt under a bare foot, grinding it into the carpet.

Eager to restart the conversation with Jacob, Zoey said, “So, what’s it’s like living in Tabula Rasa?”

He thought for a moment and said, “Overload.”

“What does that mean?”

“You’ll see. The population sign comes with an epilepsy warning. Oh, and you can fight a bear, if you want.”

“You can what a what?”

“You can pay twenty bucks and a guy will let you fight a bear. In the park, there’s a roped off area and you get five minutes to fight a grizzly bear.”

“How is that legal?”

He shrugged. “Everything’s legal when there’s nobody to enforce the law. Three months ago half the cops went to jail in this big bribery scandal. Most of the rest walked off the job. Paychecks were bouncing. It’s a huge mess. They’ve got such a backlog that nothing gets prosecuted.”

“Wait, really? Who do you call if a psychopath breaks into your—”

“Look.”

He was nodding toward her window. Zoey looked and thought, *overload.*

On the horizon was a cylindrical skyscraper with a gigantic serpent curling around it. The snake writhed and twisted and turned menacing red eyes toward the train. It opened its mouth and hissed. Below it appeared the words “COMING DECEMBER 23.” The building, Zoey realized, was wrapped in crystal-clear video screens from roof to foundation, every single window flashing one continuous animation—an ad for a movie. The huge, computer-animated snake snapped around and writhed off *onto the building next to it*, twisting its massive emerald body around letters five stories high that said “JADEN SMITH IN . . .” The serpent slithered along the skyline, and Zoey realized that every structure in downtown Tabula Ra\$a was synced to carry a continuous video along every inch of its surface, the snake sliding smoothly from one building to the next, the ad playing to the people on the arriving train. The serpent then crawled onto the front of the domed roof of the train station they were about to pull into, wrapping its body around red block letters that spelled “JADEN SMITH FIGHTS A GIANT SNAKE.”

Jacob said, “I like how literal they are with the titles now, you know exactly what you’re getting.”

The animated snake then *burst out of the ceiling of the station*, climbing into the night sky—Zoey gasped, startled for a moment before she

realized it was just a hologram set up on the roof of the building, positioned to give the illusion the snake had broken free of the ad. A couple of people on the train gasped and laughed and took pictures. Zoey noticed Jacob had a big stupid grin on his face. He had seen her jump. She elbowed him and told him to shut up, but she knew she was smiling too, and had to remind herself to keep her lips closed so as not to show off her substandard teeth. And then the train slipped between skyscrapers and suddenly downtown Tabula Ra\$a was puking gaudy colors all over her window.

Looming over them was a crystal canyon of towers in various stages of construction—they passed a hotel that blasted a Sony ad into the heavens, then a building that was just a darkened framework of girders topped with cranes that stuck out like a spiky haircut. Zoey looked down and saw that below the rail was a gleaming, blinking river of cars. Swimming in the slow current of cabs and fleet vehicles were the flamboyant, tricked-out rides of the kind of people who were (a) rich enough to drive and park in the city and (b) hadn't been rich long enough to develop any taste. There was a bright red motorcycle whose body had been molded in the shape of a dragon, the rider an Asian guy in a green suit with a six-inch-tall pompadour wig. Hulking in the next lane was a monster truck on tires as tall as a man, a jet of blue flames pouring out of completely unnecessary chrome pipes. Behind it was a Ferrari from the 2020s with an LED paint job flashing undulating colors that rippled across its body in beautiful psychedelic patterns. Behind it, a massive retrofitted 1960s Cadillac convertible, sporting a white leather interior and a huge black man in a white cowboy hat.

Just off the pavement on one side of the street was a deep trench where work crews in orange vests were laying some kind of underground cable. Their project was slicing right through a construction site where someone else was trying to dig out a foundation for yet another building, pallets of brick and bags of cement scattered like islands in the dirt, a flow

of tire tracks swirling around where forklifts and Bobcats had scurried to and fro.

And swarming over all of this: the people. With no finished sidewalks to speak of, pedestrians leaked out into the gridlocked traffic, shuffling between bumpers. There were drunk girls in tiny dresses and fake hair giggling and leaning on each other, packs of burly guys off to construction jobs, Japanese kids in sunglasses and glue-on sideburns, Indian families with double-digit packs of kids. Every fifth person wore one of those irritating blinking shirts, fabric that flashed brand logos, obscene sayings, or cartoon characters performing the same looping animation over and over. Flickering, pulsing torsos floating around taillights, everyone screaming for attention in a cloud of light and noise. Zoey had to remind herself that this is what the city was like at eleven PM, *on a Thursday*.

Zoey asked Jacob, “Do you *like* it here?”

He laughed. “That’s a complicated question. All I know is that now I can’t tolerate living anywhere else.”

The train was gently penetrating the station now, brakes whining against the rail. They passed a parking garage bearing glowing signs promoting all of the standard car rental franchises. Standing on each side of the entrance were men in black trench coats and ties, which Zoey thought brought a nice touch of class to a parking garage, until she noticed they were carrying machine guns.

Zoey said, “Tell me those guys are cops.”

Jacob leaned over to see out her window, casually pressing his body against hers, and said, “Private security. Those guys are probably Co-Op, you can tell by the trench coats. A bunch of the bigger companies pooled their money to fund their own security when it became clear the city’s police were worthless. It’s a good thing, you call the cops here, you get voice mail telling you to leave a message.”

“Oh, wow. So you get in trouble, you call those guys instead?”

“You probably can’t afford those particular guys, Co-Op is more for corporate customers. But yes, private security is who you call. There’s a big board online where you can post jobs and they bid on them. It gets kind of crazy, half of the guys are freelancers who either got their private security licenses by taking a five-day gun-safety class, or by paying forty bucks for a fake one. It’s a little bit Wild West out here. That’s what I was saying, somebody like you shouldn’t walk around alone.”

Jacob was still leaning against her and she smelled aftershave and hair gel. He let out a breath that Zoey felt on her neck and then settled back into his seat. He reached into an inside pocket and pulled out a sterling silver flask, and took a sip.

He held it out to Zoey and said, “It’s going to be cold out there, this’ll warm you up.”

As far as she knew, she had never in her life taken a drink from an unmarked container from a stranger. She didn’t like germs and she didn’t like getting slipped date rape drugs, but how often do you meet a rich, handsome stranger on a train? She took a drink and felt lava ooze down her throat. Whiskey. She coughed and they both laughed, and she felt like she was in some dumb movie. They were in the station now, a half-finished geodesic dome that Zoey thought when completed would be absolutely stunning, or the ugliest building in America—it was too early to tell. The finished parts were all glass arches with art deco flourishes, alternately futuristic and old-fashioned. The rest was a tangled mess of exposed steel skeleton and bundles of wiring that dangled like innards, as if the building had been in a knife fight.

Just off the platform, behind the hundreds of waiting travelers, was a row of fast-food and drink franchises Zoey had never seen before. She was a little ashamed of how excited they made her, but Fort Drayton only had five places to eat and one of them was a gas station. Tabula Ra\$a’s train station alone had twice that many. Just from her seat she spotted an AwesomeChanga franchise, where according to the ads you could get just about anything as long as it could be wrapped in a thick tortilla and deep

fried to a crisp. Next to it was a Waffle Burger, which is just what it sounds like, and then a Go-Juice bar serving a long line of exhausted passengers waiting to pay nine dollars for a mixed fountain drink containing four hundred milligrams of caffeine and twelve percent alcohol. Next to it was a From-the-Oven cookie stand with a clear glass oven under the counter where you could watch them bake chocolate chip cookies right in front of you. Then they'd pull them out and shove them into your hand, still warm, the chips melting all over the wax paper. Zoey decided after she got off the train she would stand over there and just smell that place for half an hour. At the end there was a beverage joint called Spiked Ice, selling sugary fruit smoothies that, according to their sign, were laced with "fuel shots" that sounded illegal as hell—Codeine, Lithium, Hash Oil, DXM, Modafinil. She half wondered how such a place could just operate in the open, cops or no cops, but mostly she just wondered how much the drinks cost and which one she would get. The line in front of it was the longest of all.

Stench Machine meowed and stuck a paw through a slot in the crate, getting restless. He had never been put in an enclosed space for this long and he was probably wondering where the stink was coming from. The train finally bumped to a stop and Zoey heard the passengers up by the door stand and start wrestling carry-on bags out of the overhead bins . . .

And easily half a dozen of the passengers glanced back at her as they did it.

And yes, they were looking at her, not Jacob. She had an urge to stand up and ask them what they were staring at, but decided she was being silly. She needed to find her hotel, and was about to ask Jacob for a ride. But right as she opened her mouth, a new voice said, "You know what's the difference between you and me?"

It was Doll Head Man, shouldering his way through the departing passengers. Looking right at her.

"You," he said, to Zoey. "With the blue streaks in your hair. Do you know what's the difference between you and me?"

He edged up until he was looming over them in the aisle. The rest of the passengers were shuffling away behind him, grateful to be on the other side of the crazy man's attention.

Jacob said, "Come on."

He made as if to stand and bring Zoey along with him, but Doll Head put a hand on Jacob's shoulder and pushed him firmly back into his seat. The man was not huge, but had a body like leather stretched over bundles of steel cable.

Jacob said, "Buddy, we don't want any trouble, just move along or we're gonna have to call the—"

"Shut up. I'm talking to her." He rested his hands on a pair of seat backs, arms and torso forming a bridge across the aisle. He squeezed the seat cushions and veins throbbed under his biceps. Zoey saw her own pale face reflected in the man's pitch-black goggles. "And I asked her a question. Do you know what's the difference between you and me?"

Exasperated, Zoey said, "I don't know. What?"

Doll Head Man smiled. "The difference," he whispered, "is that *I* would never have let a stranger intimidate me into answering such a question."

Jacob said, "Now you listen here—"

Doll Head Man, without looking at him, raised his right hand to Jacob's face. He snapped his fingers and there was a crackle and a piercing flash of bluish white light, like the man had just spawned a tiny lightning bolt from his fingertips. Stench Machine hissed and thrashed inside the crate.

Jacob recoiled and said, "What the—"

The man shushed him. "I am *talking to her*. There is a long, long line waiting to feed off this chubby little piglet. Please *wait your turn*."

Yep, her first instinct had been right. This psychopath was here to finish the job that had been left undone by the last psychopath, both presumably sent by someone who had an endless ready supply of them. And here she thought she was being open-minded by not judging him. It

hit Zoey all at once that she had just traded a gruesome death for fifty thousand dollars—not even enough for her mom to buy a nice car later, even if Livingston’s people followed through with payment, which they almost certainly wouldn’t.

Zoey peered around the man to see if there was a guard, or conductor, or burly passenger, or *anyone* paying any attention to what was happening in the back of the train. But no one in uniform appeared, and none of the shuffling passengers wanted any part of whatever was going on with the crazy naked hobo and the young couple he was tormenting. This man, Zoey realized, now had absolute power in this tiny corner of the world.

She was going to die on this train.

“Do you know what these are?” He gestured toward the doll heads. Zoey didn’t answer.

He said, “It is rude not to answer direct questions.”

“They look like doll heads that you’ve melted with a lighter or a blowtorch. Because you thought they would make you look scary.”

The man grinned. “They are souls. Each represents a soul I have taken. I am the Soul Collector. They will serve me in eternity.”

Before Zoey could even begin to formulate a reply, a bored but authoritative voice said, “You need to clear out the car, pal . . .”

Finally. All three of them looked up to where a balding man in a gray uniform was leaning in the sliding door. His eyes met Doll Head’s inhuman black goggles and all the color drained from his face.

“N-now we don’t want any trouble here. Whatever business you got with those folks, just clear out and take care of it elsewhere, all right? No need to hold up the train.”

Zoey glared at him. “*Are you kidding me?* Call the cops!”

Doll Head Man turned away from the uniform to face his hostages again.

He smiled and said, “I agree with the blue-haired piglet completely. Call the police. Call Co-Op. Call the black vests. Call the LoB. Tell them all

that the Soul Collector has Arthur Livingston's daughter. If anyone tries to enter this train, or if she does not give me what I want, I will add her to my collection."

Just Pre-Order the book already! Fuck! Here's the link!

<http://www.futuristicviolence.com>

Chapter 5

The platform was now crowded with onlookers recording the scene from dozens of tiny cameras, people probably watching their viewer counts skyrocket as word spread across Blink that someone was about to be lightnined to death by an escaped mental patient. No one made to intervene, they just watched in detached curiosity as if Zoey, Jacob, and Homeless Zeus were behind the glass at a zoo enclosure. Doll Head stalked up and down the aisle of the train car, glaring out of the windows at the crowd. Zoey realized he wasn't trying to scare the onlookers away, but was instead making sure all their cameras had a chance to get a clear shot of him in all of his menacing glory. At one point he stood in the open doorway, raised his hand, and with a crackle that made the whole crowd flinch, did that lightning trick with his fingers. The audience was impressed. Zoey wondered if she had lost her freaking mind.

Something else that was weird, which had almost gone unnoticed by Zoey due to the other, weirder things happening in her life at the moment, was that there were *a lot* of armed people in that crowd. Scattered among the gray-jumpsuited rail staff, white-shirted security guards, and hundreds of gawkers, Zoey could see half a dozen of the Co-Op guys in their black coats and ties, looking like Secret Service agents with their little machine guns pointed at the air. Then she counted at least five more men and women in black vests full of pockets, wearing amber wraparound shades and black backward baseball caps, clutching assault rifles with fingerless gloves. And then there were the armed loners—the odd man or woman who didn't seem to be part of any team. There was one

guy in a tank top with two pistols in shoulder holsters, beside him was a bald Japanese guy in a leather jacket with a katana on his back, then a woman with pink hair and a short double-barreled shotgun strapped to each thigh. They hadn't shown up in response to the developing hostage situation—they hadn't had time. They must have been waiting there, but why?

"I have to say," thundered Doll Head, striding up the aisle, "they were wise to hide you on the train. But I found you, as was my destiny. Now you have seen the power inside me. You know what I can do to you."

Zoey replied, "Okay, don't, uh, go into a psychotic rage here or anything, because I'm more than happy to cooperate. But right now *I have no idea what you're talking about*. Okay? I know there's some kind of contract. But here's the thing: I don't know who wants me, or what they want me for, or anything else. And I *don't want to know*."

Doll Head grinned. "You are truly Arthur Livingston's daughter. I should have expected nothing less."

"Did he owe you guys money? Is that what this is about? Did he screw you on a drug deal or something? Whatever it is, I don't care—if you want me to call the guy I talked to earlier and tell him to pay, I'll do it. But I *didn't know Arthur Livingston*. He tried to give me a car for my sixteenth birthday, I gave it back. His money was dirty, I wanted no part of it."

"Good. So you will open his vault for me."

"I would absolutely do that, if I knew where it was, or *what* it was, or how to get into it. But I swear, this is the first I'm hearing of it."

"I want you to know that I am not surprised, nor disappointed. In fact, I would have been disappointed in anything less. After all, you have no reason to respect me. Like all who have power, you only respect others who have it. You need me to demonstrate my power to you. So that you can respect me, and deal with me as an equal."

"No, no, you really don't—"

Doll Head reached out with his left hand and grabbed Jacob by the throat.

Jacob thrashed and tried to twist out of the man's grip. His perfect hair tumbled down into his eyes as he choked out the words "Hey! No! What are you— Let go!" Doll Head was not choking him. Just keeping him in place. "Zoey!" hissed Jacob, tendons straining in his neck, face turning red with panic and exertion. "Just do . . . what he says . . ."

Doll Head said, "Shhhhhhhh," and, continuing to pin Jacob to the seat with his left hand, reached out and laid the other hand gently on Jacob's forehead. He held his palm against Jacob's brow, pressing his thumb against one temple and his middle finger against the other, gripping his skull like a bowling ball.

"Zoey . . . tell him . . . how to . . ."

"Shhhhhhhh."

"Please."

"Shhhhhhhh. The only human destiny is to succumb to one stronger."

There was a pop, and a sizzle, and smoke. Jacob's body went rigid, his hands clenched and flew to his chest, his feet kicked the seat in front of him. One shoe flew off. There was a stink like steamed broccoli. Zoey's cat howled and hissed and tried to claw his way out of the crate. Doll Head withdrew his hand and Jacob slumped back, his eyes open but blank, his mouth hanging slack. A low gurgle escaped from deep in his throat, a line of drool ran from his mouth, a pool of urine spread across his lap. In Jacob's temple was a smoking hole left by the electrical current that had fried his brain.

Zoey screamed. "WHAT DID YOU DO? WHAT DID YOU DO?!?!"

In a theatrical voice, Doll Head Man said, "I have freed him from that weak husk. He has joined me, become part of something far more powerful. Only the limp vessel remains. I have added him to my collection."

It was chaos out on the platform. A TV camera crew was now covering the situation live, and Zoey heard the soft drumming of helicopters outside the station. A huge screen that ran along the rear wall

had flipped away from the local weather report and switched to live coverage of the scene. The headline that crawled along the bottom was not, as Zoey expected, “Crazy man holds up train” or “Hobo harnesses the power of lightning.” No, what it said was: "LIVINGSTON DAUGHTER HELD HOSTAGE"

Zoey clinched her teeth and wondered how many times she was going to have to pay for her mom having chosen a scumbag for a sperm donor. Jacob, his half-closed eyes twitching aimlessly around the cabin but seeing nothing, slumped over against her. Zoey pushed him off and screamed through her window at the people on the platform.

“HELP ME! HE’S GOING TO KILL ME!”

Once more, they just stared. Up until that point in her life, Zoey had lived every moment with the unspoken assumption there was always *somebody* she could call if things went to hell. Her mom, a teacher, the police, God. But now she was trapped in this giant steel tube—just her, and this man, and death. Maybe everyone feels like this at the end. The ice breaks under your feet and you realize that there had never been anything below you but cold and darkness. It was the point at which things could not get worse.

There was a stir in the crowd. People started to turn, to look back at the main entrance of the station. Then the crowd parted, slowly, as if a wild animal had wandered in and no one wanted to startle it with sudden movements. From the split in the crowd emerged first a huge black man, with a perfectly bald, polished head Zoey thought looked like a Whopper, the chocolate candy. She didn’t know if that was racist or not, but all of the progressive attitudes in the world wouldn’t change the fact that his head looked exactly like a Whopper. Behind him was a stunning but stern-looking Chinese woman, walking with the gait of someone whose skirt is too tight to be practical, but who is quite used to it. Behind her was a man in a cowboy hat with bushy eyebrows and a red nose who looked like he had popped out of a cartoon. Looming behind them was one more man she couldn’t see clearly. But the crowd knew who he was, who they all were,

and wanted no part of them. No one in the group was visibly armed, but not even the men with machine guns would make eye contact with them. Everyone just stood down.

Doll Head Man, aka The Soul Collector, reached out a hand and pressed it against Zoey's brow, digging finger and thumb into her temples.

He whispered, "I can take your treasure, or I can take your soul. I desire no outcome over the other. You choose. You have three seconds. One."

"No! Listen!"

"Two."

"PLEASE! I'LL TAKE YOU TO THE SAFE OR WHATEVER IT IS WE'LL FIGURE IT OUT I'LL DO WHATEVER YOU—"

"Stop. I'm here."

At the door stood a striking, pale man in an overcoat and fedora. He had cold blue eyes and sharp cheekbones. His suit jacket, vest, shirt, and tie were all shades of gray and silver—Zoey thought it made him look like a robot. There were no wrinkles, it was as if the suit was part of the skin he was born with. Zoey immediately thought that she could not imagine this man wearing anything else.

She had seen him once before, projected through her phone.

The Soul Collector turned to face the man, arms loose at his sides, blocking the aisle with his body, putting himself between the silver suit and his prey.

Will Blackwater glanced around the train car as if assessing the situation, then calmly said, "First thing's first—are you all right?"

Zoey was about to answer, when she realized Will was asking that of the Soul Collector, not her.

He smiled and said, "I wondered when you would arrive, Will."

Will stopped where he was and removed his hat. His hair was a black helmet that looked ready to withstand a hurricane.

"How are you doing, Brandon? Are you still taking your medication? You're not, are you?"

“I’m free of all that now. Thanks to Molech, I have become my destiny. I am the Soul Collector.”

“Yes, I can see that. The boy in the back there, is he dead?”

“His soul is with me now.”

Will nodded thoughtfully, as if doing some minor math in his head. “All right. That complicates things. I can get you out of here. But we have to go *now*. The girl looks unharmed. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“All right. That’s good. I’m sure you’ve noticed we’ve drawn quite a crowd here.”

The Soul Collector cast a scornful glance toward the platform. “I possess a power that can reduce all of them to ashes.”

“Well, I don’t want to get ashes all over my suit, so let’s go ahead and do this as cleanly as possible. We have a car outside and we can get you through this crowd without incident if we move *soon*.”

He looked past the Soul Collector and said to Zoey, “You’re coming with us. We’re taking you to your father’s estate. That’s where his vault is. Do I need to tell you that your best—and only—course of action is to comply?”

Zoey glanced at the brain-dead man slumped next to her, thin tendrils of smoke still drifting out of the burn holes in his temples, stinking like piss.

She said, “Please. Just . . . let me go. Whatever shady business Arthur Livingston was into, whatever money he had, the vault, I don’t care about *any of that*.”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re involved because your father involved you, and now you’re a hunk of meat in a kennel. If you don’t do what I say, things will get bad in ways you cannot comprehend.”

Will stood straight, placed his hat back on his black helmet of hair, straightened his sleeves and addressed them both.

“Now, the situation is this. You see what’s happening out on the platform. In the absence of an actual organized police department in this

city, what we have instead is a gaggle of grossly unqualified and often mentally unstable hired guns. Every single one of them knows Livingston's daughter is here, each of them thinks they can get a payday out of this. It's a lot of very stupid people, pumped up on adrenaline, who know their every move is being broadcast to a live audience. We have to make it clear to them, and to everyone who may be lying in wait between here and our destination, that we are now in charge of this situation. Now, I'm going to walk out that door first. Zoey, you'll be next. The Soul Collector will be right behind you. The moment we step out, we will be swarmed. Zoey is going to address the nearest camera and say the following. Listen carefully. Are you listening?"

Zoey nodded. Beside her, Jacob let out a guttural sound while his cloudy, unblinking eyes shifted lazily around the car. In a flash, a whole alternate future played in her head, one in which Zoey and Jacob arrive at the station without incident, the two of them shuffling off the train together . . .

He carries her bag for her. On the platform, she gives him her number. They agree to meet on Saturday night. The day comes and Jacob picks her up at her hotel. Her handsome stranger has a convertible and even though it's December they put the top down and cruise through the chill air, the fifty-story video screens flashing ads and brand logos overhead. They go to a fancy restaurant, maybe one at the top of a tall hotel that looks out over the new city, and there's a long line but of course Jacob can get right in because he knows people. They eat and drink and laugh. She sees the way he looks at her, Jacob knowing he can get someone thinner, and prettier, but he sees who she really is. He sees what's inside, and wants it. And afterward, they're waiting for the valet to bring the car around and the night air is cold and she's a little bit drunk and Jacob drapes his coat over her shoulders . . .

Zoey said, "I'm listening."

"You're going to say, 'My name is Zoey Ashe. I am Arthur Livingston's daughter, and I am being held hostage. I have—' "

“Held hostage by the Soul Collector,” said the Soul Collector.

“Right. ‘I am being held hostage by the Soul Collector. I have been told that if anyone tries to intervene, he will kill me. Please do not interfere with this process. All other bounties have been rescinded.’ Got it? It doesn’t have to be those exact words but the idea has to come across. Everything is under control, there is no money to be made if they interfere.”

Zoey nodded. She stuck a finger into the cat crate and scratched Stench Machine’s head. “Let’s get out of here.”

She stood, and realized Jacob’s silver flask had fallen into her lap. It was wrong to take it, she barely knew the guy. But she took it anyway, and stuffed it into her purse. Something to remember him by, if she lived through this. The moment Zoey stood, a buzz went through the crowd outside, everyone trying to muscle into position to get a shot of the hostage and captor emerging from the train. Will wrestled her carry-on from the overhead bin and stood by the door. Zoey followed as instructed, carrying Stench Machine’s crate by her side.

Zoey felt a hand on her back, and flinched. Even through her jacket she thought she could feel a buzz from the Soul Collector’s fingers, a jittery vibration like ants crawling between her shoulder blades. The door slid open and the noise hit her like a wall—reporters crowding around and screaming questions, gray uniforms trying to shove back the rubberneckers. All of the screens on the back wall were now tuned to the local news, and the local news was showing the three of them, creating a jarring House of Mirrors effect. Zoey watched their situation play out on the monitors a split second after it occurred in real time—the tall man in the overcoat and fedora, followed by all five feet two inches of Zoey, looking pale and frazzled with black and blue bangs dangling out of her wool cap. Behind her, the strapping savage in the loincloth. The crowd backed off at the sight of him.

No, that wasn’t right. They were backing away from *Will*.

The trio edged out onto the platform, into the massive unfinished building that Zoey had only glimpsed from inside the train. She saw another train on the next platform over, the line from Las Vegas. All roads lead to Tabula Ra\$, a place that didn't even exist when she was born. A TV news crew rushed up, and then another. She was famous. It sucked.

Behind them, the guys in black vests and sunglasses prowled into position. The Co-Op men in overcoats with their little machine guns edged toward the door, to block the path. Will glanced back at Zoey and nodded. There were cameras all around now—hell, even the random onlookers were essentially walking cameras—so Zoey didn't look at any particular one.

“Um, can everyone be quiet? I'm supposed to say something.”

She gave the commotion a moment to die down. She glanced back at the train car and saw paramedics rushing inside to tend to Jacob. She wondered if his family was here in the crowd, or if they even lived in town.

“Okay, um, listen. I am being held hostage, by—” She couldn't bring herself to say his stupid name. “The scary-looking man behind me. He has told me that if anyone tries to interfere, he will kill me.”

A stir went through the crowd. Gasps. What the hell did they think was going on here? Zoey looked back at the TV screens again and saw that the cameras had zoomed in on the Soul Collector's face. He was baring his yellow teeth, inscrutable eyes behind the bug-eye goggles, TV monitors along the back wall reflecting back his own face in their pure black lenses. He was soaking up the attention. Zoey realized she was watching the greatest moment of this man's life. She bit her lip so hard it bled.

Zoey cleared her throat and continued, “His name is the Soul Collector. He has magic powers.”

Zoey turned to face the man and said, “Show them.” She held up her thumb and forefinger. “Show them the trick with the lightning. So they know you're serious.”

The Soul Collector thought this was a fantastic idea. He bared his teeth again and raised the hand, letting all cameras focus in. Zoey, feeling

like now would be the perfect time for some liquid courage, unscrewed the cap on Jacob's flask and tipped the rest of its contents into her mouth. The Soul Collector leered at her, held his hand in front of her face, fingers spread, and let the piercing arc of blue electricity leap from thumb to forefinger.

Zoey spat half a flask of whiskey at him, the mist flying through the arc and igniting into a fireball. She had aimed at his face, but the ball of fire instead descended and engulfed his crotch. The Soul Collector shrieked like a man whose nuts were on fire, and fell hard on his ass. Zoey grabbed Stench Machine's crate and sprinted through the crowd.

To read the next chapter, solve the next clue in the Alternate Reality Game, links included below. We will be giving away the first 11 chapters of *Futuristic Violence And Fancy Suits* leading up to the released of the book on **October 6th!**

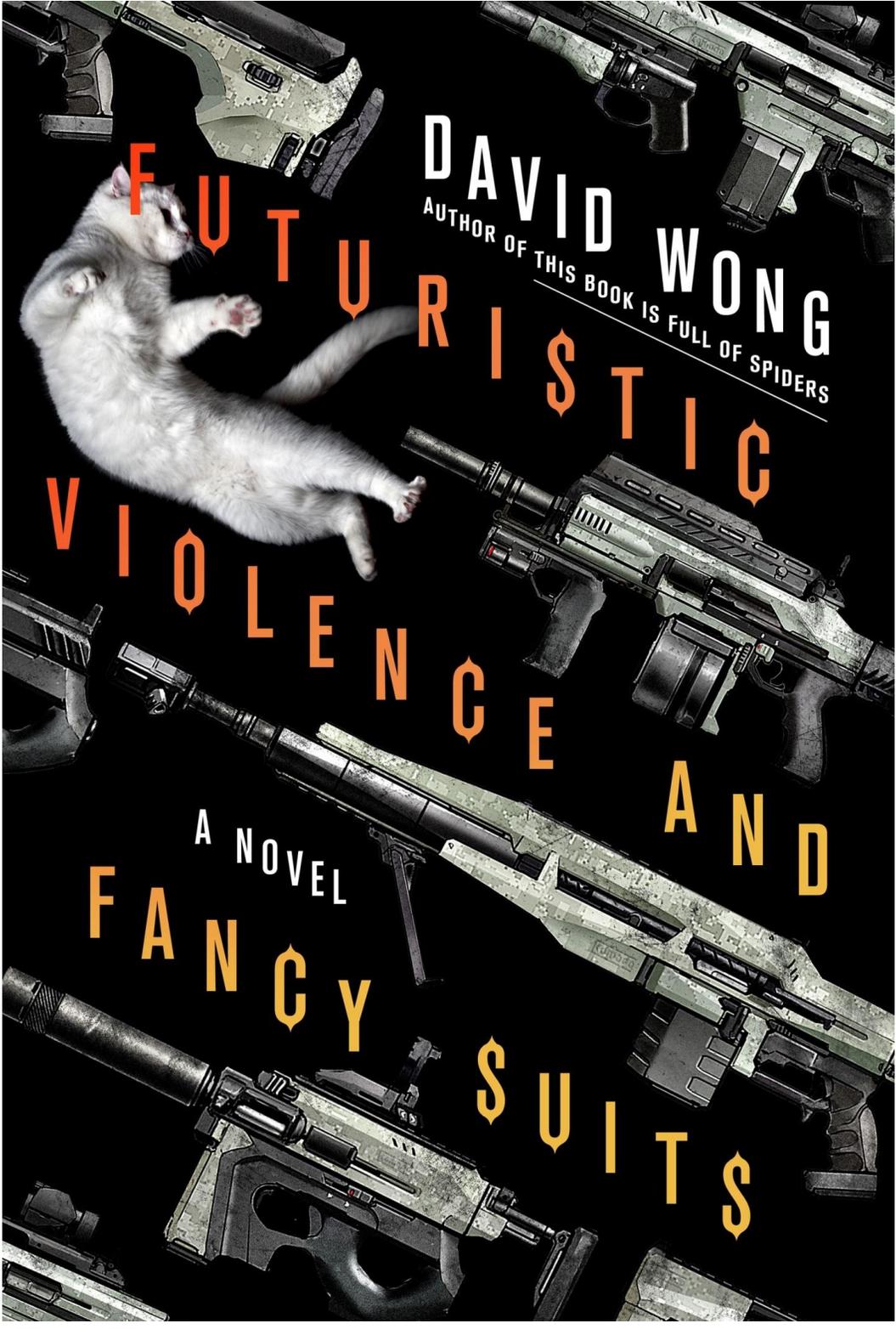
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