

Prologue

Death in degrees

Jackie Milburn didn't do fear.

The late-night walk to her car had never provoked an accelerated heart rate. Tonight, however, a bone-deep foreboding arose from vestiges of instinctual awareness, all merging to question her mission's strategy. If she failed, millions would suffer and life as anyone knew it, would end.

Indistinct shadows granted a cozy ambience where she often lurked, but dingy light filtering through overhead branches mocked her bravado. Shadow limbs shook with laughter as Fate's sense of humor conspired with nature to saturate creation's mindset with malice.

Regardless of destiny's intentions, she squared her shoulders while scanning the deserted parking lot, alert to any threat. A sense of relief had washed through her after depositing the damning evidence in the USPS blue box. The evil shits would never expect an investigative reporter to mail the sophisticated mechanisms across country. Precautions taken with the dispatch ensured no one could trace the recipient. *Always have a backup plan.*

This was the biggest scoop of her career and would spotlight one of Delaware's billion-dollar companies as a collection of hi-tech, sociopathic thugs.

It wouldn't take CSV Pharmaceuticals long to discover crucial evidence missing and ferret out their traitor. As corporations went, they were as paranoid as any. She prayed Dr. Sorenson made it out of the country alive, and not as shark chum. Paranoia had compelled her to refuse him the number to her newest burner phone. Intuition saw the last one tossed in the Willamette River after tapping out a quick message to her old college roommate. Jackie survived by instincts and prayed they would serve her well—one more time.

Making the last stop to pick up her go-bag would supply the necessary items to disappear until her story broke. The finishing touches included copies of lab reports and communication between the Delaware scientists and a company on the West Coast, ClickChip.

Various colored and styled wigs, plain lens glasses, makeup, and diverse fashion ensembles would allow her to blend with any crowd, but wouldn't prevent CCTVs and facial recognition programs from pinpointing her location. Planning ahead, she had a well-stocked safe house outside city limits.

Trembling fingers failed to punch the unlock button on her key fob. Instead, her headlights cut a swath through the misty ground cover, a beacon to any waiting goon. *Shit.* The subsequent knocking of heart against ribs rivaled the best hammer drill while sweat coated her palms and face despite her warmed exhalations sending puffed smoke signals in the frosty air.

A slow, deep breath reclaimed her sense of calm and allowed the subtle scent from emerging camellia blossoms drifting on the night's currents to settle her spirit. *There. This is who I am.* For visual affirmation of her feelings, she glanced at her reflection in the driver's side window.

The sudden thrust of a phantom arm emerging from the dark pinned her against a hard chest. The steely limb angled and applied pressure to tilt her head back as if she were a rag doll.

"Oomph." Collision forced air from her lungs while shock produced a gasp that inhaled a sickly sweet odor from the cloth rammed over her mouth and nose.

"Wanna play?" Malice drew out each syllable in a parody of innocent sport.

Momentary panic barred all reason. Instinctive reaction initiated clawing at the viselike grip. Subsequent kicking and twisting of her body yielded no compromise in her position.

In her periphery, she caught sight of a malevolent smile and glinting dark eyes under a black fedora. *The boogeyman does exist.*

Lethargy and disorientation. Another breath or pass out from hypoxia. No more pain. All her muscles relaxed against her will. The invading blackness closed in from the margins.
NO! An enraged cry died in her throat.