



SILENT SIN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KENNEDY
LAYNE

SILENT SIN

TOUCH OF EVIL - BOOK TEN

KENNEDY LAYNE

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Dedication

Jeffrey & Cole — I love you both to the moon and back!

ABOUT THE BOOK

Fear lurks right around the corner in the next pulse-pounding thriller by USA Today Bestselling Author Kennedy Layne...

In the heart of Washington, D.C., a sinister plot unfolds as the life of one of Brooklyn Sloane's trusted team members hangs in the balance. What at first appears to be a random attack turns into so much more when evidence is retrieved at the scene that suggests a carefully orchestrated plan to eliminate the people closest to her.

With Brook's team fractured and not trusting anyone outside her inner circle, she falls back to her core strength—profiling. Each stroke of her pen unravels a bone-chilling revelation, one that takes the form of her own flesh and blood. Jacob Matthew Walsh, a serial killer serving multiple life sentences and Brook's brother, has finally made his move to tear her life apart. He has somehow coordinated the assault from his prison cell, but the puppet on his strings doesn't want to be controlled anymore.

Brook will stop at nothing to catch her brother's so-called disciple. She has always attempted to put herself in the minds of killers when she's hunting them, but she'll need to go one step farther this time. Will she be able to unravel the twisted web of revenge that binds her, or will the deadly silence swallow her whole?

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CHAPTER ONE

Brooklyn Sloane

May 2014

Monday — 12:00 pm

THE CLOCK TOWER STOOD tall and resolute in its duty as the university's iconic landmark. Its aged brick façade had borne witness to generations of students who had passed beneath its shadow. As expected, the large black hands had reached their destination and triggered the loud chimes, resembling that of a heartbeat counting down to the end of the school year.

"The passage of time is a finicky thing, isn't it?"

Brooklyn Sloane made sure to conceal her reaction to the man's question. The male subject had been monitoring her from a distance for the past ten minutes. He'd waited until she'd been alone to approach her. Such conduct, along with the folder in his hand, told her that his reasoning was personal rather than professional.

"Yes," Brook replied cautiously as she leaned back in her chair. The cluster of wrought-iron tables was inside a small courtyard outside the university's

cafeteria. The private area provided tranquility that one couldn't find inside the numerous buildings on campus. It appeared as if she wasn't going to attain the solitude needed to finish her lecture notes. "I'm sorry to say that you've wasted your time, Agent..."

"Harden. Supervisory Special Agent Matthew Harden." He was a wise enough man not to offer his hand. Instead, he glanced down at the chair opposite her. Only when she nodded her consent did he pull the seat out from under the table and make himself comfortable. "I'd apologize for my first name, but my mother might take offense."

"Why don't I save us both precious minutes of our day, Agent Harden." Brook casually placed her pen on top of the tablet of paper. She ensured that her tone held no animosity for the interruption. "I haven't heard from my brother since he murdered Cara Jordan. If we're being factual, I didn't actually see or hear from him on that particular day, either. Everything you need to know regarding Jacob Matthew Walsh can be read in his case file."

Brook reached for her travel mug, which was currently full of freshly brewed coffee from the cafeteria. She always used her noon hour to go over her lecture notes for her two o'clock class. Agent Harden could have been informed of her daily routine by almost anyone on campus. She had her own personal reasons for keeping to a strict schedule, but there were times that such a routine worked against her.

"I'm sorry that you've wasted your time, Agent Harden."

"There's that word again...time. In an investigation, we chase those precious few minutes like a shadow. It's elusive. Always shifting. And just when you think you've got it, it slips through your fingers like little grains of sand. I keep an hourglass on my desk just to remind me of how valuable each second of the day can be during an active case." Agent Harden took his focus off the clock tower to meet her gaze. "I'm not here about your brother, Miss Sloane."

Agent Harden's reason for seeking her out might not have to do with Jacob, but the federal agent hadn't been surprised to hear her brother's name, either.

Harden knew about her past, even with the change to her surname.

The local police who had been working on an investigation into the murders of two young women on campus had done their homework. She'd expected nothing less, and she'd even anticipated questions regarding her brother, but an arrest in the campus murders had already been made. There

should have been no reason for the police to go digging into her past after the fact.

“I’m sure that the very essences of the cases that you investigate are often obscured by the passage of time.” Brook allowed herself to sip her coffee now that Agent Harden had all but confirmed his visit wasn’t personal. “What is it that I can do for you, Agent Harden?”

Brook was done presuming anything about the man’s visit. She wasn’t comfortable with having captured the attention of the FBI. If she could go back to the start of the school year, she never would have chosen an active killer as the subject of a mock profile. It was too late to rectify the oversight, but she wouldn’t make that mistake again.

“I’m friends with Detective Tunney,” Agent Harden revealed as he rested his hand on top of the manila folder. “He brought to my attention a profile that you drafted for one of your lectures. I read it over, and you somehow managed to profile the killer so well that an arrest was made in the murders of Josie Gaston and Kari Wisocky. A profile, I might add, that rivals one crafted by a federal criminal profiler.”

Brook merely nodded at the compliment, still unsure of the direction Agent Harden was taking the conversation. While he’d asserted that his interest in her wasn’t regarding her brother, she wasn’t the trusting type.

Agent Harden wanted something from her, or he would never have sought her out.

“Have you eaten?”

The question came out of nowhere.

Brook blinked a few times before realizing that Agent Harden had purposefully wanted to throw her off balance, and she didn’t appreciate the deception.

“It’s a genuine offer,” Agent Harden said with a broad smile as he raised one hand to prevent her from bringing their discussion to a close. “Seriously. I didn’t have time to eat breakfast before catching a flight out of D.C. Besides, I’d much rather cover the details of a job offer over a meal than have my stomach interrupt us on a continual basis.”

Job offer?

Needing a moment to ground herself, Brook nodded her agreement. She monitored Agent Harden’s departure from the table to the double glass doors of the building. He’d left behind the manila folder, but she wouldn’t take the bait. He was testing her. She couldn’t even be sure that he’d meant what he’d

said about a job offer.

Brook set her travel mug on the table as she reflected on Agent Harden's rather nonchalant proposition. She could only assume that he was hoping she would apply to the academy, but she had no interest in being a federal agent. It was difficult for her to understand how he thought such an achievement could be obtained, because it wasn't like she would pass a background check.

After all, she was the sister of a serial killer.

Brooklyn Walsh might have changed her name to Brooklyn Sloane at the age of eighteen, but it had been all but impossible to leave that person behind in all the bloodshed. Jacob had given his word that she would never get to be the normal one, and he'd done everything in his power to keep that promise.

"I hope a grilled cheese sandwich is okay," Agent Harden replied with a smile as he set a tray containing two plates on the table. She hadn't realized so much time had passed by since he'd entered the building. Unfortunately, she still hadn't wrapped her head around his proposal. "I haven't had one of these in ages."

Brook had little appetite at the moment, but that didn't stop her from taking the plate and placing it in front of her. A shadow slowly began to envelop the table. Normally, the trees provided a canopy of solace and shade, but the lack of sun simply reminded her of his earlier comparison. She took her time unwrapping the napkin from the silverware, giving him the opening to initiate the next phase of the conversation.

"You aren't going to take the bait, are you?" Agent Harden had waited to speak until after he'd taken a bite of his sandwich. He then wiped the corners of his mouth before getting to the point of his visit. "I want you to come work for me as a consultant. In D.C., of course."

"You and I both know that I would never pass the background check."

"You would if only a handful of people had access to it, but that's here nor there." Agent Harden took another bite of his sandwich, even closing his eyes as he enjoyed the taste of the warm melted cheese. "Not as good as my wife's grilled cheese sandwich, but damn close."

"Agent Harden, I have not been in contact with my brother." Brook couldn't fathom any other reason that a federal agent would pay her a visit other than Jacob. She had no time for games, but Agent Harden didn't seem to understand or want to accept her role—more like lack of role—in her brother's life. "I can't help you with your investigation."

"If your brother was the reason for this visit, you most certainly would be

able to contribute to the investigation. You're his sister, Miss Sloane. You're also the target of his obsession," Agent Harden said as he leaned back in his chair. He'd already polished off half his sandwich. "I'm not a betting man, but I would wager that you've profiled him better than anyone in our behavioral analysis unit. Hell, you spent ten minutes profiling me before I joined you at this table. Am I wrong?"

Brook wasn't getting the sense that Agent Harden was trying to play her. She still couldn't get a solid read on him, and that frustrated her. He hadn't come right out and accused her of hunting Jacob, yet she got the sense that he wasn't obtuse to the reality of her situation.

Jacob had brutally murdered two of her best friends. He'd not only taken the lives of Sally Pearson and Cara Jordan—two young women who had their entire lives ahead of them—but he'd stolen Brook's childhood. She would never get back those precious memories of family.

Trust had become nonexistent.

Every waking thought she had was about bringing Jacob's reign of terror to an end. Her brother's promise about her not being the normal one had not fallen on deaf ears, but for a very different reason.

Normal had never been an option.

She'd known it then, and she knew it now.

Only Brook had made herself a promise, and one that she intended to keep—she would never be a bystander in her own life.

"Why a job offer?" Brook asked, not willing to remain silent any longer. "Why not just ask me for the profile that I drafted on Jacob?"

"I don't want your brother's profile. I want you." Agent Harden let his gaze scan the campus before reaching for the other half of his sandwich. A large group of students had spread blankets on the grass to study, but they were far enough away not to be a hindrance. "Your talents are wasted here, Miss Sloane. You would be a great asset to the Bureau. Your personal experience can help attain justice for others. The same justice that has escaped you."

"And you are basing this off of one profile?" Brook asked skeptically, still reserving judgment on the reasons behind such a job offer. "I find that hard to believe, Agent Harden."

Without a word, the federal agent pushed the manila folder across the table with his left hand. She wasn't sure what was inside, and she was hesitant to find out.

"Tell me what you take away from that photograph."

Brook came very close to denying Agent Harden's request, but something stopped her. She wouldn't be opposed to a quid pro quo. Such a meaningful position might afford her the ability to make connections that someone in academics couldn't, even someone who taught psychology and criminal justice courses.

She shifted her plate to the left, picking up the folder before leaning back in her chair. Using her thumb, she pulled back the top layer and was greeted by a single crime scene photo.

True to his word, the photograph had nothing to do with her brother.

Brook lifted her gaze and accepted that she was being given another test, but only because she was about to flip the script. She needed Agent Harden to understand that she would never stop looking for her brother.

"I will use whatever and whoever is at my disposal to locate him."

Brook didn't need to clarify her statement.

Both of them understood that she'd been referring to Jacob. Agent Harden wasn't dense, and it was more than likely that he expected nothing less. Technically, he would win either way, not that she believed she was the be-all and end-all of profilers. She wasn't even in that field, and she certainly had no idea how the inner workings of the Bureau were carried out on a day-to-day basis.

Agent Harden continued to enjoy his sandwich, purposefully denying her a response. Given that he could have called a halt to their discussion right then and there, she willingly dropped her gaze to the body of a young woman in what looked to be her bedroom. From the discoloration around the victim's neck, she had been strangled by someone using their bare hands. The victim couldn't have been more than sixteen years old, which was confirmed by the posters on the walls. Brook meticulously analyzed the photograph before giving her opinion on the suspect.

"The manner in which the victim was strangled indicates a crime of passion. Spontaneous, not planned. The killer didn't use an impersonal method like a firearm. He employed a more intimate approach, suggesting a strong emotional connection to the victim. The suspect—"

"Unsub."

"Unsub," Brook reiterated with a slight nod, conceding to the verbiage used inside the Bureau. She utilized a lot of terms employed by law enforcement within her lectures, so she was well aware that "unsub" stood for unknown subject. "The unsub had no intention of killing the victim, and the

broken picture frame points to a confrontation between the two. It's rather difficult to see in this photo, but I'm guessing that the two people smiling at the camera were of the victim and her boyfriend. It's possible that the unsub was in a fit of jealousy, anger, or even rage that escalated to violence when the victim spurned the unsub's advances."

Brook searched for any sign that the unsub hadn't been invited into the victim's bedroom, but she couldn't find any evidence to support that theory.

"The unsub had a close relationship with the victim, which allowed him easy access to her personal space. He experienced immediate remorse for the consequences of his anger. You can see it in the way he placed the victim's hands over her stomach and the gentle gesture of brushing her hair away from her face." Brook traced the tinted blemishes on the young girl's neck. It was then that Brook noticed the smudge on the pale pink bedspread. "The unsub is a Caucasian male between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, though I would err on the younger side of that range. He's impulsive and exhibits a high level of emotional instability. He is familiar with the victim's daily routine, so family members and friends will likely be acquainted with the unsub. You'll find that he resides in the area and works a labor job, perhaps at the garage of a local mechanic. An interview with the victim's family would be able to give you a list of names of someone who fits that description."

Brook tucked the photograph back into place before closing the manila folder.

"Any one of your profilers at the BAU would have been able to give you the same perspective, so this doesn't prove anything," Brook pointed out as she slid the folder across the table. She made no move to bring her plate closer, but she did reach for her pen. Holding it in her fingers gave her a sense of calm that she wouldn't turn away right now. "Again, I'm wondering why you would make me such an offer."

"What can you tell me about the male student sitting alone at the table to your left," Agent Harden asked in a somewhat laidback manner as he polished off the last bite of his grilled cheese sandwich. Brook found it interesting that he had waited until the main course was gone before opening the small bag of potato chips that had accompanied his lunch. "What's your read on him?"

Brook switched her attention from Agent Harden to one of the university's students. She didn't know the male subject personally. He had never taken

one of her classes, but she had seen him around campus.

“He sits at the same table every day for fifteen minutes,” Brook admitted, not wanting Agent Harden to think that she had any special insight. She got the sense that he thought her ability to read people was a gift, but it had really been about survival. “The textbook he takes out of his backpack is different each time, which tells me that he doesn’t care what book is in his hands. He wants to come across as if he’s reading, but he’s really hoping that the young blonde woman sitting on the blanket in the grass will take notice of him.”

“Anything else?”

“His right hand gives him trouble, and if you look close enough, you’ll see a surgical scar on his wrist,” Brook pointed out as she took her gaze off the young student. She didn’t want him to notice their interest. “Since I’ve seen him walk around campus, I also know that he favors his right leg. I’m assuming some type of accident, which is one of the reasons he has yet to work up his courage to approach the young woman. His clothes suggest that he comes from money, but he lacks confidence. His parents ignore him, I doubt he has many friends, and he has isolated himself because he feels responsible for whatever happened to cause said accident. Again, I’ve said nothing that any other profiler in your agency wouldn’t have put on paper for you. I’m a teacher. I’m not an officer of the law.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Ms. Sloane. You are the sister of a serial killer who has learned to read the living and the dead.” Agent Harden folded the empty bag of chips and slipped it underneath his plate. He then reached for the bottle of water that he’d purchased with his lunch. “Such a talent can’t be taught to someone who has had a typical childhood. You might not want to take credit for Detective Tunney’s arrest, but your profile is the sole reason that he broadened his suspect list to include the delivery drivers to the campus.”

Agent Harden took a drink of his water before replacing the cap. He then reached into the interior pocket of his suit jacket and pulled out a business card. Sliding it across the table, he tapped it with his finger to stress his point.

“You have a talent, Miss Sloane. We can help one another. I won’t question what you do on your own time, as long as it’s legal.” Agent Harden gestured toward his business card. “I’ll be in town for the night. My flight departs a little after nine o’clock tomorrow morning for South Carolina. An active serial killer is targeting young men near Charleston, and two of my agents are assisting the Columbia field office in the investigation.”

Brook ignored the carrot that Agent Harden was dangling on a string. She would stick to the facts of the job offer, and nothing more. A light sheen of perspiration had broken out on her forehead, but she chalked it up to the afternoon sun. She refused to admit that such a drastic change in her life could cause a physical reaction.

“Let me clarify what you are offering, Agent Harden,” Brook said as she kept ahold of her pen. “You want me to work for the FBI as a criminal profiler under a consulting contract. My background and relationship with Jacob Matthew Walsh will remain private, except for a handful of people. In turn, what I do on my own time will not be subject to review. As long as my actions are within the confines of the law, of course.”

Agent Harden tilted his head in acknowledgment before holding out his hand. She realized that he wanted her pen, which she handed over in curiosity. He took back his business card, flipping it over so that he could scribble something on the back. He then clicked the pen so that it retracted in its case before pushing both items until they were directly in front of her.

Brook had seen the salary figure that Agent Harden had written down in ink, but it wasn't the amount of money that he was offering her that had her chest tightening in anticipation. She had spent years profiling her brother, attempting to determine his behavior while hoping something in her profile would lead her to him.

Agent Harden was offering her everything she had ever wanted on a silver platter.

“I hope to hear from you soon, Miss Sloane.”

Brook remained seated as Agent Harden stood from the table. He picked up his tray, purposefully leaving her plate behind. As he walked away, all she could focus on at the moment was his business card.

The opportunity that Agent Harden had presented her with was far more than a mere career change or an incremental step up from her role as a college teacher. It was a pivotal shift, a transition into a world where her innate talents could be honed, sharpened, and amplified by the Bureau's training. It was the gateway to something infinitely more profound than just becoming a profiler.

Brook had always carried within her the undeniable fear that the same darkness that had devoured her brother could reside within her, too. This was her chance to prove otherwise, to balance the scales of good and evil...even if it meant confronting the darkest corners of her own soul.

CHAPTER TWO

Brooklyn Sloane

February 2024

Thursday — 6:11 pm

WASHINGTON, D.C. HAD FOUND itself caught in the icy chill of winter's grasp. The city's skyline had been transformed into a muted canvas of the season's frigid beauty, while those who had braved the cold were bundled in layers of warmth for protection. The sidewalks glistened with a thin layer of messy snow as thick flakes continued to descend from the darkened sky above.

Brooklyn Sloane gazed out her office window on the fourteenth floor, grateful that the team had canceled their usual Thursday night get-together at the local pub. The forecast called for temperatures in the teens and at least five inches of snow by morning. Besides, she was expecting a call from an old family friend regarding an event that had taken place back in 1996.

"I brewed you a fresh carafe of coffee, Brook. It's in the kitchen when you need a refill."

“Thank you, Arden,” Brook replied as she turned away from the floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked downtown. “You didn’t have to do that, but I appreciate the gesture.”

Arden Hinnish was a sixty-seven-year-old retired private investigator. Despite his insistence that he wasn’t ready to leave the industry, everyone knew it was just a way for him to stay busy after the loss of his wife. He still held onto traditional methods of solving cases, providing a refreshing break from the constant influx of new technology.

“Is there anything else you need before I head out for the evening?”

“Not a thing, Arden.” Brook closed the distance to her desk, where a small electric heater kept the area warm. Others had said time and again that her office was like that of a sauna, but she preferred to work in comfort. “Be careful on the drive home.”

“Oh, I took the bus today,” Arden replied as he smoothed down the sides of his salt-and-pepper mustache. “I had a feeling that the stormfront would arrive earlier than expected, and I didn’t want to be caught driving in that mess. It’s best to let the professionals handle the stress of such a feat.”

Arden was referring to the bus drivers. She had noticed that he’d been taking the bus lately, and she didn’t believe that his reasoning had anything to do with the weather. He had been squinting at his computer screen lately. He would realize soon that his vision had slipped due to age. He certainly wouldn’t appreciate the news coming from her, and seeing as she admired his sense of pride, she wouldn’t be the one to dent it.

“Goodnight, Arden.”

Brook monitored him closely as he walked across the marble tile of the reception area to his desk. He began his nightly routine, from forwarding the main line to an answering service to shutting down his desktop computer.

Arden was a creature of habit, much like her, but for very different reasons.

Brook couldn’t prevent her gaze from drifting to the black metal sign hanging on the wall behind Arden. S&E Investigations, Inc., the private consulting firm that she jointly owned with a silent partner, wasn’t much different than working with the FBI. Her familial relationship with a serial killer had been bound to interfere with her previous consulting agreement, but she had no regrets for the decisions that she had made to reach this point in her life.

The Bureau had undeniably refined the abilities that she’d had to learn to survive as Jacob Matthew Walsh’s sister. The federal agency had also

accomplished to instill in her other ways that benefited her pursuit of justice. She had voluntarily entered the academy to understand the physical aspects of the job, and she had come away with so much more.

It took Arden approximately eight minutes to go through his end-of-day routine. Brook figured she might as well take advantage of the fresh coffee that he'd brewed for her, so she reached for her coffee mug.

There was one word printed on the front—BOSS.

It was a nickname given to her by Bobby "Bit" Nowacki.

Considering that Bit was usually one of the last team members to leave for the evening, she had been surprised to see him head out right after their afternoon meeting. He had mentioned meeting the young woman who he had been dating recently, and he was taking advantage of the downtime that the firm had between cases. As the firm's tech expert, it was rare that he was able to claim some personal time.

Brook exited her office, which not only had floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city, but also floor-to-ceiling windows overseeing the large receptionist area and that of the lobby near the elevator banks.

The space that she had chosen might have seemed odd to others, but she preferred the ability to see the sparse foot traffic. It was the reason that she had chosen such modern décor. Considering that S&E Investigations, Inc. shared the fourteenth floor with a hedge fund group, it wasn't like they were a hubbub of activity, sans their own employees. There were really no major distractions in exchange for a modicum sense of security. Such safeguards came in the way of the biometric scanner needed to enter their offices.

It didn't take Brook long to replenish her coffee from the carafe that Arden had set in the middle of the kitchen counter. The perfect amount of cinnamon that he'd added to the rich beverage made it so that she didn't have to add cream or sugar. As she strolled down the hallway to return to her office, she was struck by how quiet it was so early in the evening. Whether the team was working on cold cases at the request of clients or investigating an active case due to their consulting agreement with the FBI, they didn't conform to regular office hours.

Theo Neville had dinner plans with a woman whom he'd met jogging in one of the city's parks, and Sylvie Deering had been needed at home. Her father had been in hospice for the past couple of months, and he had round-the-clock care by a team of professionals. Brook couldn't stop her gaze from seeking out a framed photograph as she strolled past the office next to hers.

Her silent business partner, Graham Elliott, had been a former Commanding General of Marine Forces Special Operations. He was rarely in the offices given the defense contracts that he had taken upon retiring from the military.

Retirement wasn't suited for someone like Graham.

He also happened to be much more than a business associate. He had placed the photograph of the two of them on his desk with the expectation that they would not need to come right out and announce such a change in their relationship to the team. Bit, of course, was the only one who had needed verbal verification.

The faint ringtone of her phone could be heard coming from her office. She should have carried her cell with her to the kitchen, but she hadn't expected the scheduled call for another forty-five minutes. By the time she crossed the threshold and made it to her desk, all without spilling a drop of her coffee, the call had been sent to voicemail. Not bothering to wait for the message, Brook exchanged her mug for her phone. She pressed the caller's name to initiate another call.

"This is Sylvie Deering. Please leave me a message, and I'll get back to you as soon as—"

Brook ended the connection before trying once more. When the second call went straight to voicemail once more, she left her own message.

"Sylvie, sorry about that. I was in the kitchen. We seem to be missing one another, so I'll just wait for you to call me back."

Brook settled in her chair, taking the time to shift her space heater closer to her desk so that the warm air would be directed toward her legs. She then kicked off her high heels before concentrating on her computer screen. She planned to spend the rest of the evening going over the missing persons file of a young girl by the name of Stella Bennett. She had been missing since 1996, and Brook was confident that Stella had been Jacob's first victim.

"Have you heard from Bit since he left the office following our afternoon meeting?"

Brook's gaze was drawn to Arden, who stood with a frown in her doorway.

"No, but I hadn't expected to since he had plans with Zoey this evening," Brook replied as she reached for her coffee. "Is there a problem?"

"Zoey just called the main line looking for him," Arden revealed as he shifted his weight from one leg to another in concern. "Bit was supposed to meet her at six o'clock, and she was just checking to see if he'd left the office

since he wasn't answering his cell phone. I assured her that he left a couple of hours ago, only he isn't answering calls from me, either."

"It's only twenty minutes after six," Brook said after glancing at the time on her computer screen. "I'm sure that Bit is just running late."

Arden nodded somewhat warily. He didn't seem content with Brook's response. He retraced his steps to his desk, though she doubted that he would leave the office until he had alleviated his concern. He had become somewhat of a caretaker to the team since he had joined the firm. It had taken her some time to get used to such close monitoring of her daily routine. The others, not so much.

Brook struggled to concentrate on the statements taken at the time of Stella Bennett's disappearance. There hadn't been much to go on back then, and the police had always suspected Stella's uncle as being the one behind the girl's disappearance. After reading every paragraph, Brook glanced to the right of the screen.

Arden was still sitting at his desk.

She had seen him pick up the phone several times, presumably trying to reach Bit. Sighing in resignation, she picked up her own phone and attempted to reach him herself.

The fifth ring sent her call to voicemail.

A red notification had appeared at the bottom of the display to inform her that Sylvie's message had finally been recorded, but Brook opted to try Bit once more. She could count on one hand the times that she'd heard his recorded message.

"Can't answer. I'm still looking for my missing sock. Leave a message."

Bit had changed his greeting from the last time she'd left a message, which was months ago. Knowing that any sign of apprehension from her would only amplify Arden's concern, she casually slipped both feet back into her high heels.

Bit had the ability to monitor everyone's cell phones on one of his numerous computers. She wasn't the most tech-savvy when it came to his software applications, but she could have Theo walk her through the steps.

Brook pushed her chair back after accessing her phone's speed dial list. She pressed Theo's name. He and Bit had walked out of the office at the same time earlier this afternoon. Theo could have information that would explain why Bit wasn't answering her call.

She wasn't an optimistic person by nature, but she was holding out hope

that the FBI hadn't decided to act on old information. Bit's tendency to blur legal lines had him on the wrong side of the law in previous years. She had managed to rectify the situation, but the past tended to rear its ugly head now and again.

By the time that Brook had made it to the hallway, her call had been sent to Theo's voicemail. Now was the time to worry.

"Arden, keep trying to reach Bit," Brook directed as she exited her office. Never, in all her time leading the team, had she not been able to reach one of her colleagues. Graham was currently on the West Coast, and his flight was due in tomorrow morning. "Theo and Sylvie aren't answering my calls, either."

While Brook had been talking to Arden, she'd attempted to reach out to Sylvie once more to no avail. Given that they were all between cases so that they could concentrate on proving Jacob was responsible for Stella Bennett's disappearance in 1996, they had more than deserved a night to themselves.

Still, Brook couldn't stop the sickening fear that lurched in her stomach as she quickly made her way to Bit's office. He had set up a security measure for when he wasn't on-site, just in case the biometric scanner failed its function.

Brook entered the correct code and waited for the activation light. Once it had switched from red to green, she shoved it open with more force than necessary. She was going to be angry with herself for allowing her past experiences to influence how she handled a potentially innocent scenario. On the other hand, she couldn't help but mull over the latest developments in everyone's personal lives.

Sylvie's day-to-day routine had been turned upside down with her father entering hospice and choosing to live out the remaining days of his life in her one-bedroom apartment.

Theo was having dinner with someone the team had never met. All any of them knew about the woman was that she liked to jog the same route as Theo every morning.

Bit had been out with Zoey a handful of times, but it hadn't escaped anyone's notice on how she came across so perfect for someone as unique as Bit. He was extremely intelligent, a creature of habit, and yet oddly unique.

Brook rolled Bit's chair out from underneath the long table that housed several monitors and laptops. She set her phone down on the hard surface and made sure Sylvie's voicemail was on speakerphone while attempting to

figure out which computer held the application needed to locate the phones of each team member.

The distinctive sound that came from Brook's phone resembled that of when someone mistakenly pressed a button while busy doing something else...muffled. A loud noise soon followed, almost as if Sylvie had dropped her phone onto a hardwood floor. Brook replayed the message, hoping to pick something else up that she'd missed the first time around, but she had no such luck.

Brook's frustration began to mount the longer it took her to locate the appropriate application. Right when she had discovered the icon, her phone rang loudly enough to echo around the room.

Relief flooded her system at the name on the display.

"Theo," Brook greeted as she sat back in the chair. "Thanks for calling back. Arden has been having trouble reaching Bit, and then Zoey called to say that Bit didn't show up for their six o'clock date. Sylvie and I have been playing phone tag, though I think she might have called me by mistake. Let's just say that our imaginations were working overtime tonight."

"Bit dropped his phone in the toilet right before we left the office," Theo replied with a smile in his voice. "He was going to stop by the phone place before meeting up with Zoey. He's probably running late."

"That's good to know," Brook said, doing her best to keep a lid on her distress. She hadn't had to use her counting method to cope with everyday issues in a very long time, but she resorted to using it now. Once she'd gotten her heart rate under control, she brought their phone conversation to an end. The last thing she needed was for him to hold this over her head. "I won't keep you, Theo. Enjoy your night."

"That's the plan," Theo replied, though the previous humor in his tone had vanished. The two of them had gotten very close over the years. Brook had stopped having true friends many years ago, but that had changed since she'd assembled this team. Having Jacob behind bars was probably the main driving force, but she tended to do her best not to psychoanalyze herself. "Brook, do I need to—"

"You don't need to come back to the office," Brook stated firmly as she monitored the blinking dots on the screen. The application had finally loaded, and everyone's dot had appeared, sans Bit. Hopefully, he would soon have a new phone and be able to enjoy his rare evening out. Sylvie was at her apartment, and Theo was at a restaurant not far from the office building. "I let

my imagination get the best of me, that's all."

A chime forced her gaze from the screen to her phone.

The number on the display indicated the caller was local.

"Theo, I have another call coming in," Brook said as she reached for her cell phone. "Go. Enjoy your evening."

Brook pressed the red and green circles that overlapped to end her call with Theo while switching over to the other caller at the same time. Before she could extend a greeting, another blinking dot came online over a shopping center not too far from Bit's apartment. Brook emitted a sigh of relief as she closed out the application.

"Sloane."

"Brooklyn Sloane?"

"Yes." Brook stood from Bit's chair and made her way to the door. "What can I do for you, Mr..."

"Detective Beeson, ma'am," a man replied with a heavy tone. "I regret to inform you that Sylvie Deering was attacked in her apartment this evening. She is being transported to the hospital with multiple stab wounds to the abdomen. I'm afraid it doesn't look good. We got your name and number from..."

Brook continued to half listen to the detective's briefing on what had occurred this evening while leaning against the door that she had just shut and made sure was secure. Swallowing had become difficult, and it was as if she had been forced back to those vulnerable times when she had discovered Sally bleeding out in a cornfield and Cara lying dead on the floor of their college dorm room.

There was one slight difference between her past and her present, though.

Brook wasn't the same person who feared retribution from her brother, and the detective hadn't mentioned Jacob's gruesome signature—slashing his victims' faces until they were unrecognizable to only then slash their throats deep enough for them to bleed out.

"Brook, I just spoke with Bit," Arden said with relief as he stood at the end of the hall with a half-smile on his face. He had even rested his hand across his chest. "Can you believe that he dropped his—"

Arden broke off his sentence as he recognized from her body language that something very bad had occurred in the last few minutes. He lowered his hand and began to rub the clasp of the watch that he wore every single day. The accessory had once been a present from his wife, whom he had lost to

ovarian cancer years ago. Unfortunately, the soothing gesture wasn't going to make this situation disappear.

"Detective Beeson, I'm leaving for the hospital now," Brook managed to say before she dropped her hand without ever disconnecting their call. She had given herself as much time as she could afford to collect her emotions. It was now time to take action. "Arden, you'll need to get Bit back on the phone. Call Theo, as well. Have them meet us at the hospital."

By the time Brook had finished giving Arden directives, she had already passed him in the hallway. She stopped before entering her office. He was still waiting to hear what had taken place, and now she needed to verbalize it.

"Sylvie was attacked in her apartment, Arden." Brook despised the aftertaste that lingered after her statement. "She was stabbed several times in the abdomen. I'm sure she'll be in surgery by the time we arrive at the hospital, so prepare everyone. It's going to be a long night."

CHAPTER THREE

Brooklyn Sloane

February 2024

Thursday — 10:14 pm

THE HOSPITAL'S HALLWAY STRETCHED out like a sterile ribbon, its polished linoleum floor reflecting the fluorescent lighting from overhead. Soft echoes of hushed conversations were continually interrupted by the irritating squeaks of shoes as the soles navigated the shiny surface. Along the walls, framed artwork that was intended to offer a semblance of comfort showcased fields of wildflowers. The colorful paintings only served as a reminder that life rarely adhered to predetermined plans.

“Sylvie is still in surgery,” Brook said softly as she leaned a shoulder against the doorway of the waiting room. “The last update we received was that the surgeon was still reconnecting the part of her intestines that were nicked by the blade.”

Leveraging their FBI consultant status, Brook had managed to convince the nursing staff to move the team to a more secluded area of the hospital. The

room they were given was basked in golden hues cast by elegant table lamps, which was a welcome departure from the harsh glare of the standard fluorescent tubes suspended from the ceilings. Despite the lingering discomfort of the chairs, the persistently bitter taste of the coffee, and the prevailing unease fueled by the unknown, the private waiting room gave the team the ability to work in private.

“I should be there in around six hours.” Graham paused after his statement, and Brook closed her eyes briefly to guard against the barrage of emotions that made an effort to wash over her. Hearing his voice only served as a reminder that she wasn’t alone anymore, and that was a difficult adjustment to make. “Have you eaten?”

“Arden managed to have someone bring us four meals from the cafeteria.” Brook didn’t need to divulge that she hadn’t touched her tray. Graham knew her well enough that she couldn’t stomach food during situations like this one. His question was merely his way of displaying affection. “The police are searching for one of the aides hired through an agency that Sylvie chose to help take care of her father. According to Nigel, the woman’s name is Erin Smith. She wasn’t with hospice, though. The company she worked for is a home health agency designed to help caregivers when they can’t be home for either work or to simply run an errand.”

It didn’t need to be said aloud how odd it was that Sylvie had been attacked, yet her father had been left alone and unharmed in the bedroom. The paramedics had found Nigel on the floor attempting to reach Sylvie, only the ailing man hadn’t had the strength to crawl such a distance. It had been his cries for help that the neighbor had overheard in the hallway that had finally gotten attention.

“What do you know about this Erin Smith?”

“Nothing much, other than Smith would sit with Nigel when Sylvie couldn’t be home.” Brook focused on Bit, who had make-shifted one of the side tables into a desk. He motioned for Theo and Arden to look at the screen of his laptop. “While someone from hospice stops in every afternoon, they aren’t there twenty-four-seven.”

“I take it that Bit is doing what he can to locate Erin Smith?”

“Yes, and as soon as we get word that Sylvie is out of surgery and stable, we’ll join the police in their search.” The second that Theo glanced in Brook’s direction, she was confident that Bit had discovered some information that would lead to the capture of Sylvie’s attacker. Had Erin

Smith wanted money? Revenge? Had she suffered a psychotic break? A drug habit? Unfortunately, no one would have any answers until Smith was in custody. “Hold on a second. Bit might have found something.”

Brook entered the room and held her cell phone away from her ear. She was wearing the same black pantsuit that she’d put on this morning. The hospital’s security guard had stopped her and Arden at the sliding glass doors when he’d caught sight of her holster. The wind had been whipping the snow around fiercely, and a gust had separated the fronts of both her dress coat and suit jacket. Once she’d shown him her credentials, he’d stepped aside.

“Erin Smith’s photograph doesn’t fit the description that Nigel gave to the officer,” Theo replied with an edge to his tone. “I’ll reach out to Detective Beeson.”

Brook found it hard to believe that the detective wouldn’t already be privy to such information. He would have contacted Erin Smith’s employers immediately upon leaving the crime scene, which Brook nor the team had visited in person yet. The last time she spoke with Beeson was an hour and a half ago. The home health agency had sent someone else to watch over Nigel until more information could be had about the situation.

Bit had angled his laptop so that Brook could study a picture of Erin Smith. She was middle-aged, overweight according to the BMI scale, and kept her brown hair chin length. Nigel had described Erin Smith as being in her mid-twenties, taller than average, and with ashen blonde hair that fell past her shoulders.

“Bit, good work,” Brook murmured as she thought through their options.

No one was going to leave the hospital until they knew for certain that Sylvie was going to pull through. Bit was extremely close to Sylvie. As a matter of fact, his love for her was more than evident. Why they had chosen to remain friends instead of something more was between them.

“Would you please make sure that the aide sent over checks out?” Brook instructed Bit, wondering what else—or who else—might have slipped through the cracks. “Also, find out everything you can about the real Erin Smith—relationship status, financials, online presence. You know the drill. There must be a reason behind why no one would notice her missing for the past couple of months.”

“Do you think this has to do with Little T’s father?” Bit’s voice had cracked when he had said Sylvie’s nickname that he’d given her due to her love of tea. He adjusted his grey-knitted hat as he attempted to control his

emotions. “Someone out for revenge?”

Nigel Hubert Deering had been convicted of tax evasion and money laundering years ago. He was responsible for destroying a lot of lives, having almost done the same to his daughter. Sylvie’s security clearance had been revoked by the FBI back then, which was one of the reasons that she decided to switch to the private sector. S&E Investigations was lucky to have her.

Could the woman who had posed as Erin Smith done so out of revenge? It was a good possibility, but why not take out the man responsible? Why go after Sylvie? There were too many unanswered questions for them to start making assumptions.

“I don’t know, but we should err on the side of caution.” Brook stepped away before Bit could ask her anything else, but she’d learned long ago to rely on her instincts. They needed to consider all scenarios. Bit nodded his agreement before rubbing his bloodshot eyes. Arden reached over and patted him on the back to display his support. “I’ll be right back.”

Brook lifted the phone to her ear the moment she exited the private lounge. Theo was already in the hallway, presumably speaking with Detective Beeson. From the way that Theo was rubbing his forehead, he wasn’t pleased with the other side of the conversation.

A nurse walked by and couldn’t help but stare at Theo’s black eye patch. He’d lost his right eye during an altercation with a suspect, and the injury was the reason he was no longer a field agent with the Bureau.

The FBI’s loss was S&E Investigations’ gain, much like Sylvie’s situation.

“Graham, I need to go. The woman who stabbed Sylvie isn’t the Erin Smith who worked at the home health agency. There is something more going on here, and I’m afraid that the attack wasn’t random.” Brook could hear Theo raise his voice, and it wouldn’t be long before the detective cut off all communication. Theo wasn’t usually one to let his emotions consume him, but this investigation was personal. “Call me when your flight lands?”

“Brooklyn?” The way Graham spoke her name caused her to take a moment. “Be safe.”

“You, too,” Brook whispered back, grateful for the reset. Once the two of them had disconnected, she closed the distance to where Theo was physically closing his left hand into a fist to prevent himself from saying something that he would regret at a later date. For now, Detective Beeson was an asset to the case. “Theo, we need him for now.”

Theo nodded his understanding as he allowed the detective to finish

whatever it was that he was saying on the other end of the line.

“Detective Beeson, I appreciate your stance on this, but may I remind you that Sylvie Deering is a consultant for the FBI? You said yourself that you found out an hour ago that Erin Smith—who has been Nigel Deering’s aide for the past seven weeks—is not the same woman employed by the agency. Why haven’t you issued a BOLO for the real employee? For all we know, her body was thrown in a dumpster in some random alleyway.”

Brook motioned that Theo should lean down enough so that she could hear Detective Beeson’s reply. Had they not been in a hospital setting, she would have asked that he put the detective on speakerphone.

“...standing outside the woman’s house now. I don’t know how you work investigations, Mr. Neville, but we take our time and make sure things get done right. I find it odd that Ms. Smith’s family and friends wouldn’t have reported her missing these past two months.” The slamming of a car door could be heard, and it suddenly became difficult to hear Beeson over the winter wind hitting his phone just right. “Once I have more information, I’ll reach out to you and your team.”

Brook motioned that Theo should end the call.

“Nigel Deering was convicted of security fraud, money laundering, tax evasion, and a slew of other charges,” Brook reminded him as the two of them shifted closer to the wall to make room for hospital staff to walk by with ease. “Nigel destroyed many families, Theo. It’s possible someone wanted retribution. We need a sketch artist to speak with either Nigel or Sylvie’s neighbors as soon as possible. Once we have a sketch, Bit can then have something to compare to the family members of those impacted by Nigel’s crimes. I do not doubt that the same thought has crossed Detective Beeson’s mind, but he’ll have many irons in the fire. He’ll need to locate the real Erin Smith before he can start searching for the woman who assumed a false identity.”

“Why leave Nigel Deering alive?”

“The man’s going to be dead within weeks,” Brook reminded him. If they were dealing with someone who had lost everything due to Nigel’s crimes, then it would be in their best interest to think like that individual. “Nigel took everything away from them, so they tried to take what mattered most to him. I’m theorizing, of course.”

Theo inhaled deeply with frustration as he slipped his phone into the right pocket of his khaki pants. He always dressed in style, and tonight was no

exception. Two days ago, he had dragged Sylvie along to purchase the dark green sweater to impress his dinner date, not that Sylvie had put up much of a fight. She'd come back to the office with a few garments herself.

"Makes sense," Theo muttered as he crossed his arms and leaned up against the wall. "You want me to go over to Sylvie's apartment building."

"All we're doing here is wasting time." Brook recognized how cold she came across about the situation, but Theo understood the ramifications of sitting on the sidelines. "Bit can work anywhere, and Arden hasn't been in the field for years. They can stay here while the two of us work the case."

There was no point in camouflaging the reason why.

"Theo, I'm going stir-crazy here. Beeson doesn't know Sylvie, so there's a good chance that he'll miss something of importance."

Theo nodded his agreement, but the taut muscle in his jawline told of his displeasure. She wouldn't force him to choose.

"Sylvie wouldn't want us standing here pacing the floor, but I'll understand if you want to stay here."

"No. You're right," Theo acknowledged reluctantly as he focused on the nurse who had been giving them updates. She had come around the nurses' station, but it was clear that she didn't have any more news to give them when she walked into another room. "I know you're right, but I don't have to like it."

"I'd rather you head over to Sylvie's apartment building," Brook said, having already thought over what needed to happen for them to take the path of least resistance. "I'll call in a favor and have a sketch artist to you in under an hour."

"And jurisdiction? Beeson sounds like a seasoned detective. He isn't going to take this lying down."

"With our firm's status as FBI consultants, it shouldn't be a problem. The favor that I'm going to call in is just to speed things along in case it takes time for my request to go through the proper chain of command."

Theo was absolutely right about Detective Beeson having an issue with their involvement, but she'd given the detective a few hours to apprehend Sylvie's attacker. If this had been an open and shut case, an arrest would have already been made. Now that Brook and the others were aware of the lengths the unsub had taken to gain access to Sylvie and Nigel, such behavior changed the dynamics of the case.

"Once I finish with my phone calls, I'll drive over to Erin Smith's

residence. I'll speak with Detective Beeson, and I will explain the special circumstances of the investigation."

Brook turned to enter the lounge area, but Theo's touch on her arm prevented her from crossing the threshold. She peered over her shoulder to find hesitation in his expression.

"Erin Smith has been missing for seven weeks. I'm not saying that I don't see the logic in assuming Nigel Deering is the focal point of the investigation, but such course of action is extreme, isn't it? Killing an innocent woman to gain access to a criminal doesn't make sense."

Theo didn't need Brook to respond to his question. He already had the answer, which was why it was vital to cover the groundwork before laying out an initial blueprint.

"We play it safe until we have proof to the contrary," Brook stated vaguely before advancing into the makeshift waiting room.

There were a lot of scenarios that had run through her mind as to why someone would want to target Sylvie. Numerous enemies had been made in their line of work. Brook wouldn't deny that Jacob had crossed her mind, but he was currently still being held in a federal prison with no outside communication.

"Bit and Arden, there has been a change of plans."

Brook spent time going into detail about what necessary steps were about to be taken to have full control of the investigation. Bit and Arden understood their roles, and Theo had eventually left the hospital to drive to Sylvie's apartment.

Typically, in situations like the one that occurred this evening, the occupants of the space would be requested to leave for the night while forensics processed the scene. The special circumstances involving Nigel Deering and the conditions of his compassionate release had Detective Beeson posting an officer at the apartment while another aide had been brought in to care for Sylvie's father in her absence.

The legality of the compassionate release required Brook to make another phone call to prevent any change in Nigel Deering's situation. While she had come straight to the hospital, she was well aware that Nigel had mere weeks before he succumbed to pancreatic cancer. Unfortunately, the stipulations had been made very clear, and those involved with said agreement were not comfortable with the inmate remaining at his daughter's apartment without her physical presence. It had taken close to thirty minutes before Brook had

been able to reach a compromise satisfactory for all participating parties.

Brook had made it very clear that she would not have Sylvie wake up to discover that her father had been sent back to die behind bars, regardless of the personal struggle she dealt with daily over his care. Those who lost money hadn't been the only ones who had suffered due to the man's crimes.

Thankfully, the favor that Brook had requested had finally come through, and a sketch artist had given his word that he would meet Theo at Sylvie's apartment building. The phone calls to authorize S&E Investigation, Inc. to take over the investigation, however, had taken longer than anticipated even with Brook expecting pushback. Once those hurdles had been cleared, she had then been able to submit warrants for specific security cameras that would provide Bit the ability to access the footage of the foot traffic in the hours, days, and weeks preceding the attack.

"Arden, I need a favor." Brook's phone had maybe six percent left of the battery charge, but she wasn't concerned that she would be out of contact with the team. She had an external battery in her purse that she could use for the remainder of the night. "It's one that you're not going to like, but I'm going to ask it of you anyway,"

Brook had originally planned to call Detective Beeson to explain the change in jurisdiction, but she decided it would be best if she made such an announcement in person. He had yet to reach out to her with what he and his officers had discovered at Erin Smith's residence, anyway. She wasn't even confident that he was still at the residential location, but she would still have a car take her over there so that she could canvas the scene herself.

Afterward, Brook would join Theo at Sylvie's apartment.

"What is it that you need me to do, Brook?"

"There were some concessions that I had to make to ensure that Nigel Deering could remain at Sylvie's place while she's recuperating here at the hospital."

Brook had noticed the lack of color in Bit's already pale face, and she had carefully chosen her words so that he wouldn't veer his attention away from the tasks he needed to complete. No one wanted to be reminded that the nurse had stated several times that Sylvie's condition was critical.

"The BOP agreed not to move Nigel back to federal prison, but only if someone under the employment of S&E Investigations remains at the apartment. Our status as FBI consultants was sufficient enough for the powers-to-be to grant such an exception. I'll arrange for the home health

agency to provide twenty-four-seven care. Bit will run background checks on those chosen to rotate shifts, just as he did with the aide currently on site. I know this is a lot to ask of you, but would you be able to pack a bag and stay at Sylvie's place for the time being?"

Brook didn't have time to explain the inner workings of the Bureau of Prisons. All she needed was for Arden to agree to stay in Sylvie's apartment until she returned home. Either that, or until such time as Nigel Deering succumbed to his illness. The third option was not one that Brook would allow herself to entertain at the moment.

"Little T might still be dealing with some unresolved issues when it comes to her father, but she still wanted him to pass away in comfort, Gumshoe."

"It's settled then," Arden replied quietly as he gracefully stood from his seat next to Bit. "I'll head home to pack a bag."

"I've already arranged for two cars to meet us out front," Brook said as she reached for her coat that she'd laid aside earlier. "We've officially been granted jurisdiction over the investigation. Just in case the unsub hasn't finished whatever she set out to do, an agent will be staying with you for the foreseeable future. Another agent is already on the way here to relieve the officer assigned to guard Sylvie. Bit, please make sure to double-check the agent's credentials."

"Got it, Boss."

"Brook, you have more important things to focus on than phone calls," Arden said in disapproval as he walked over to a chair where he'd tossed his jacket earlier. "I could have taken the bus. If you had needed a vehicle, I would have ordered one for you."

"Arden?" Brook waited for him to finish putting on his jacket and give her his undivided attention. "What you are about to do for Sylvie is just as...if not more...significant than what the rest of us are doing. Understand?"

Arden's eyes misted as he feigned concentration on his scarf, which he had looped over his right shoulder. Once he had secured the zipper in place, he then proceeded to give his undivided attention to his gloves.

"Bit, you should have the warrants that we spoke of earlier within the next half hour. Pour over the security footage and see if you can't get a decent photo for your facial recognition program. The faster we figure out who took over Erin Smith's life for the past two months, the quicker we can apprehend the unsub."

Local police forces worked at a slower pace, though that didn't mean their

efforts weren't rewarded in the end. Brook had spent most of her life learning patience, but she had also become skilled in how to spend her time more efficiently.

"I'm going to join Detective Beeson at Erin Smith's residence." Brook picked up her purse, not bothering to take out her gloves. She needed to connect her phone to the external battery, anyway. She would do so when she was settled in the car. "I was hoping that Sylvie would be out of surgery by now. I know that I don't need to tell you this, Bit, but please let us know the minute you hear anything."

Brook hadn't expected Bit to stand from his chair and sidestep the small square table to reach her, nor had she expected him to hug her. While only nine years separated them in age, there were times when she viewed him as so much younger. She hesitated only briefly before wrapping her arms around him in kind.

Bit wasn't a stranger to these waiting rooms. His sister was currently in remission from a very rare form of blood cancer, but she had fought long and hard for such success.

Still, the fear of losing someone wasn't something one ever forgot with time.

"We can't lose her," Bit whispered against Brook's shoulder. She held him even tighter. "We can't lose her, Boss."

Brook couldn't bring herself to lie to him, even though most people would have given him platitudes with the intention of injecting a sliver of hope into the situation. There were times for optimism, but there was also a vital need to be realistic. One needed the ability to maintain enough strength to face the harsh truths. Every second that Sylvie remained in surgery was one second that leaned in favor of a horrific outcome.

Brook shoved aside her desire to remain behind at the hospital. Her time would be better spent hunting the unsub who had hurt Sylvie.

"Call your sister," Brook murmured after clearing her throat. She pulled away, keeping ahold of his arms so that he would heed her directive. "Call your sister so that you have someone here with you. Arden will stay with Sylvie's father while Theo and I work the investigation."

Brook had spoken long enough to give Bit time to rein in his emotions. He nodded vigorously before stepping back and settling in behind his makeshift desk. Once again, she had to force herself to turn toward Arden for fear that she would take the seat next to Bit.

“Let’s go, Arden,” Brook directed under her breath, doing her best to keep her frustration concealed from them both. “The cars should be waiting for us out front.”

The two of them walked in silence down the hallway and past the nurses’ station. The straps of Brook’s purse were secure over her shoulder, but she’d kept ahold of her phone. A quick glance at the red numbers in the top right-hand corner of the display told her that she now had four percent left of the battery.

“Don’t worry about packing too much,” Brook advised Arden as they came to a stop in front of the elevator. He reached out and pressed the down arrow. “We’ll all take turns staying at the apartment.”

Once Brook finished squaring things away with Detective Beeson, she would put in a request to access Nigel Deering’s court transcripts and any related documents. She didn’t like crafting a profile backward, but she hadn’t been given a choice.

Nigel Deering had ruined a lot of lives with his previous decisions, and there had been a public uproar regarding his compassionate release over the last couple of months. It made sense that someone would want him to experience a loss as significant before his death.

“Do you think Bit will call his sister?” Arden asked as they waited for a male subject to exit the elevator before they stepped inside. She paused to study the man’s body language before pressing the button that would take them to the lobby. She would relax a little easier once she had been notified that a federal agent had replaced the officer standing outside the door to Sylvie’s operating room. “I don’t think he should be alone if...”

“Bit will call his sister,” Brook replied confidently as she monitored the numbers above the double door. She hated that she was second-guessing her decision to leave the hospital, so she began to rationalize her choices. “Paula was probably already on her way here. She and Bit are close, and she also knows how much he cares for Sylvie. Besides, Graham’s flight arrives before dawn. I’ll have him drive directly to the hospital. Theo and I will alternate assignments and come back here as much as we can. Tomorrow night, one of us will switch out with you.”

“Don’t you worry about me,” Arden instructed as he pulled out the gloves that he’d stowed in the pocket of his coat. “I’ll make sure that Sylvie’s father is updated on her condition and see to it that he’s resting comfortably.”

Brook nodded while rotating her right shoulder. Tension had settled in her

shoulder blades, and the strap of her purse wasn't helping the slight ache. Graham's presence at the hospital was more for her sake, but she wouldn't say such a thing out loud. He had become her support system brick-by-brick over the past couple of years. She had known what they had been slowly developing over time, and she had chosen to allow the construction knowing full well that her brother could destroy it.

As Brook and Arden stepped out of the elevator, the vibration of her cell phone had her looking down at the display. She had expected to see one of three names. When her mind finally registered that someone from the federal prison currently housing her brother was attempting to reach her, she lost the ability to breathe.

"Brook?"

Arden had to pull her to the side to allow someone to enter the elevator.

"Sorry. I...I have to take this call, Arden." Brook had finally managed to speak even though her heart rate had doubled and perspiration coated the palms of her hands. "You go on ahead. Theo should still be at Sylvie's apartment. I'll touch base with you soon."

Arden regarded her closely before he slowly nodded his agreement. It was as if he sensed the bottom of the investigation had the potential to crumble beneath them, but he didn't question her directive.

"Sloane," Brook said quietly in her usual greeting as she monitored Arden's walk across the large entryway of the hospital. She made sure that her voice was steady, just in case it wasn't the warden or one of the guards calling her with an update. She had certainly paid enough of them under the table to keep tabs on Jacob. The slight pause on the other end of the line kept the tension in her shoulders. "Hello?"

"I expected more emotion out of you, dear sister."

It wasn't just the floor that threatened to disintegrate at the sound of her brother's voice. The new life that she had spent years developing now hung by mere threads.

Sylvie's attack had nothing to do with her father.

"Really?" Brook taunted even before the lobby had stopped spinning around her. She used the wall next to the elevator to keep her upright, but she still managed to keep her voice steady. While she had done everything in her power to limit Jacob's ability to contact anyone from the outside, the guards understood that he had access to her. This was the first time since he'd been behind bars that he'd taken advantage of such liberty. "I'll admit to being

caught off guard by your involvement, but I'm surprised you would have used someone so inept to do your dirty work. Sylvie might have been injured this evening, but it's clear to me that you underestimated her. She's resting comfortably in a room."

Brook had taken a rather costly chance in assuming that Jacob had set up such an attack in advance. He was under such close surveillance in the prison that she doubted anything or anyone had slipped through the cracks.

Brook and the team had covered every angle possible with regard to Jacob contacting someone on the outside. When he had walked into FBI headquarters to turn himself in, he hadn't intended for his stay to be long. She had managed to prevent two attempts at escape already, and she didn't doubt that he had many more aces up his sleeve.

"That's a shame. I envisioned you standing over her grave while recalling every word I said to you when we were together in that cornfield. You do remember, don't you, Brook?"

"Tell me something, Jacob," Brook said, purposefully injecting a small dose of satisfaction into her tone. "Is it true that prisoners who had no fear of closed spaces can eventually develop claustrophobia?"

Brook could picture her brother tightening his grip on the receiver in an attempt to control his rage. The only reason she was able to maintain a front was due to his incapacity to know the true outcome of his plan. He had no idea that surgeons were doing everything in their power to keep Sylvie alive.

Brook needed to make sure it stayed that way.

"I'll let Sylvie know that you were thinking of her, Jacob. Enjoy the rest of your evening reading the last few chapters of *The Odyssey*."

The only reason that she had mentioned the classic novel was to make sure Jacob was aware that she was monitoring him every second of the day. She somehow managed to lower her arm and disconnect the call without dropping her phone.

Bile hit the back of her throat, but she was able to constrict her esophagus in time so as not to embarrass herself in front of a couple of hospital employees waiting for the elevator. She pressed the back of her hand to her lips just to be safe.

She was the reason that Sylvie was lying on an operating table.

While Jacob might have been the one to orchestrate such an attack, Brook might as well have been the one plunging the knife into Sylvie's abdomen. Brook had known such a possibility could happen, yet that hadn't stopped her

from going against her sound judgment. She had even warned her team that such an event could take place. She could see now that all of them had gotten too complacent with Jacob behind bars.

The woman posing as Erin Smith had all the information that she needed about the team to use to her advantage. Jacob wouldn't have chosen her if she wasn't cunning, but what had he offered her?

Where had he found a woman who was willing to kill for him?

Brook had a decision to make, but it was rather difficult to concentrate with such an overwhelming sense of guilt. Sylvie's life hung in the balance, a direct consequence of the dangerous game that Brook had been playing with Jacob ever since he had left her in that cornfield. Her side of the conversation on their phone call had been a calculated move to keep him in the dark about Sylvie's fate, and now Brook grappled with the harsh reality of her actions.

The choice before her was a difficult one.

Should she continue with the plan that she had laid out for the team or strike out on her own? The former option would only serve to put the lives of those she cared for in even more danger. The latter option would destroy everything she'd built...especially with Graham.

All the trust that Brook had spent fostering between them would be erased, yet she was at her best when navigating the shadows alone. Her next steps would shape not only the course of the investigation, but the relationships that she had spent years forging with all of them.

Brook turned her attention to her phone, noticing that she only had one percent of its charge left. She blinked away the moisture that had formed in her eyes to type out two, brief sentences...ones that would alter her immediate future.

Her thumb trembled as it hovered over the screen of her phone.

"I'm sorry," Brook whispered in remorse as she pressed the send button. She had still been staring at the display of her cell when it went dark. The battery had finally died, but she wouldn't be using the external charger. "I'm so sorry."

CHAPTER FOUR

Theo Neville

February 2024

Friday — 1:03 am

“WHAT ABOUT THE CAR?”

Theo rubbed the back of his neck in frustration. Anger had taken a back seat after deep-seated fear had settled in, only to then have frustration win out in the end. What the hell had Brook been thinking when she decided to go underground? By disappearing into thin air?

“Can you use the street cameras to follow the driver’s route?” Theo asked, still in complete disbelief that he was even having this conversation with Bit. “What about the driver’s cell phone? Maybe map out the path that was taken when he left the hospital to the time he clocked out at midnight.”

Theo had been on the phone with Bit pretty much the entire time since receiving Brook’s text message. Two concise sentences, to be exact.

Jacob set this in motion. You’re in charge of the team.

Theo had phoned Brook immediately after reading her cryptic message, but

the call had gone straight to voicemail. She had turned off her cell, and she was smart enough to know that Bit would track her movements if she'd left the device on.

“I just spoke with the driver,” Bit said, exhaustion evident in his tone. He'd been working nonstop while waiting for an update on Sylvie. The surgery had finally concluded, and the surgeon had warned him on how critical the next twenty-four hours would be with regard to her condition. The only saving grace was that the unsub's blade hadn't nicked an artery or the liver, but the extreme damage inflicted to her stomach and intestines had required hours to repair. “Boss went out to the car, instructed the driver that she wouldn't need him, and then she walked in the direction of the parking garage. After that, I lose her. I can't find footage that she took any of the exits. I sent my sister to scout each parking level, but there wasn't any sign of Boss. It's like she disappeared into thin air, Big T.”

“Brook found someone to drive her out of the parking garage.” Theo and Brook had forged a close friendship over the past couple of years, and she'd revealed to him one evening how she kept under the radar hunting Jacob all those years. Theo understood how her mind worked...to an extent. “Listen, she wanted us to keep searching for Sylvie's attacker. We know that the woman is somehow connected to Jacob. Is there any way to use that to our advantage?”

The long pause on the other end of the line told Theo that Bit was mulling through his options. Considering that they were keeping such close tabs on Jacob Walsh in his cell, as well as limiting the guards to only four who had been thoroughly vetted by Brook herself, it was doubtful that any contact between him and the unsub would have occurred behind bars.

This entire attack had been coordinated well in advance.

“No, but I don't think we'll need to dig that deep to prove it.”

Theo waited for Bit to continue, but all that came across the line was a muffled voice from what sounded like an overhead speaker. Theo turned away from the window in Sylvie's apartment, finding that Arden was in the kitchen brewing them some coffee. There hadn't been a coffee maker on the counter since Sylvie preferred tea, so Arden must have discovered the appliance in one of the cabinets.

“Bit?” Theo glanced toward the male subject who had been brought in to sit with Nigel Deering. It had taken a couple of hours to garner multiple confirmations that the man's identity was authentic. Carter Dunbar was

indeed Carter Michael Dunbar, born and raised in Fairfax, Virginia. “Why don’t—”

Theo brought himself up short, not bothering to finish his question once he had comprehended Bit’s silent message. He had several facial recognition programs, although only one that could be properly used in the firm’s name. The others had been generated well before the creation of S&E Investigations.

Bit hadn’t always followed the letters of the law, which was why his actions had garnered the attention of the FBI. Brook had somehow taken care of that particular matter, but that didn’t mean Bit still wasn’t on the Bureau’s radar. While the firm might have a signed consulting agreement with the FBI, none of the members were immune to prosecution.

Theo’s gaze was drawn to the stain of blood that Arden had already tried unsuccessfully to scrub out of the area rug in the living room. Sylvie had trusted the woman who had spent close to two months inside her apartment and taking care of her father. There had been a fabricated layer of trust, and he couldn’t imagine the fear that had gone through Sylvie when she realized her mistake.

“Do what needs to be done, Bit.”

Theo had always colored within the lines.

Always.

It was how his parents had raised him, and he had also developed his own moral code throughout his career. It wasn’t until he had switched to the private sector that he understood the bigger picture wasn’t always black and white. There were several shades of grey, and this situation just so happened to be one of those various hues on the spectrum.

“I’ll call you as soon as I have results.”

Bit had disconnected their call before they could discuss Brook. He would no doubt keep searching for her, but Theo comprehended the gravity of her choice.

Brook blamed herself for Sylvie lying in a hospital bed.

Most of all, Brook held herself responsible for bringing them into her life...into Jacob’s line of sight.

“Has Bit located Brook yet?” Arden asked as he set a mug of steaming coffee on the counter. Theo’s initial reaction was to turn down the offer, but he was going to need the caffeine. There would be no rest until they had some lead as to the identity of the unsub. “She received a phone call right as

we were walking out of the hospital. Do you think that had anything to do with why she shut off her phone?”

“Jacob called Brook from the federal prison.” Theo paused long enough to take a sip of the cooled-down coffee. Arden had topped off the coffee with some cold water to make it immediately drinkable. “I don’t know how, but Jacob orchestrated this entire situation. He is the reason that Sylvie was attacked this evening.”

Arden frowned to the point that his thick mustache covered his bottom lip. Neither one of them needed to say a word. They both understood the ramifications of the phone call.

According to the officer whom Detective Beeson had stationed outside in the hallway, Sylvie had been unconscious when the paramedics had arrived on site. Nigel had been able to explain to the detective that he heard his daughter arguing with Erin Smith in the living room. He stated that he had heard a scuffle and a gunshot, which was when he tried to get out of bed.

Unfortunately, Nigel’s deteriorating condition had left him weak enough that he had no strength in his legs. He had ended up on the floor, calling for help until he was able to catch the attention of one of the neighbors who had been walking down the hallway.

Sylvie’s one-bedroom apartment wasn’t large, but it wasn’t small, either.

The living room and kitchen merged seamlessly, and the bedroom was home to three large windows overlooking the city. The overstuffed sofa was covered in colorful throw pillows, and there was even a vintage record player against the far wall with a deep bookcase full of vinyl records. The folded blankets in a wicker basket were evidence that Sylvie had slept on the couch since her father’s arrival. Her own bed had been put into a storage unit until such time as her father’s passing.

Unfortunately, Sylvie’s interior décor had included a cream-colored shag rug.

Theo followed Arden’s gaze to the discolored stain. The man had spent the last thirty minutes scrubbing the blood-soaked fibers with dishwashing detergent and cold water. He hesitantly closed the distance to the couch before turning around and studying the area in which Sylvie would have been facing, which was toward the kitchen.

“To the right of the refrigerator,” Theo guided softly, knowing exactly what Arden was trying to locate across the room. “The bullet lodged in the wall.”

“Sylvie was already stabbed before she drew her firearm.” Arden then gave his reasoning for such an assumption, but Theo had already come to the same conclusion. “A dispute ensued and ended with the fake Erin Smith stabbing Sylvie. If this woman had been in this apartment for two months, learning everything and anything about Sylvie’s life, why attack her tonight?”

Theo lowered his mug to respond to the question, but Arden was already laying out a realistic scenario. One that Theo had already made himself.

“Sylvie would have grabbed the woman’s wrist,” Arden surmised in a soft tone so that Nigel wouldn’t hear them through the cracked doorway of the bedroom. Arden began to methodically act out the scene. “She would have reached out with her dominant hand. Such a decision might have kept the blade inside of her while she reached for her weapon like this.”

Arden followed through the reenactment with his own movements.

“Sylvie pulled the trigger of her firearm, and...”

Theo now understood where Arden was going with his scenario, but there were assumptions by the police that didn’t fit their narrative. Theo had never had the pleasure of working with Arden in the field. The semi-retired private investigator could skillfully read a crime scene, but it tore at Theo’s heart that it had come as a result of Sylvie’s attack.

Upon hearing that she had made it through the surgery, overwhelming relief had crashed over him. Unfortunately, he couldn’t take time to process the events of the evening. He needed to remain focused, and Brook’s absence only added more pressure.

The tension in Theo’s neck returned tenfold.

“The unsub managed to stab Sylvie multiple times, but the firearm was found on the floor.” Theo set his coffee on the countertop before closing the distance to where Arden stood just to the side of the blood stain. “Why not finish the job?”

“The neighbor?” Arden proposed as he once again glanced down at the bloodstain. “Maybe Nigel was yelling loud enough at that point.”

“The door would have been closed,” Theo said as he had already played through several scenarios of what could have taken place between the two women. “Think about it. Sylvie had come home, believing everything was fine. She would have entered the apartment, closed the door behind her, and greeted Erin Smith as if it had been a normal evening. Sylvie would then have checked on her father before joining Erin out in the living room. Look at the distance between the bedroom door and the location where the attack

occurred, Arden.”

The scent of dish detergent was strong as the two of them continued to play out the events. There had already been a sterile odor in the apartment from Nigel’s set up in the bedroom, but now the odor was overpowering.

“I spoke with Nigel,” Theo said as he did his best not to inhale too deeply. Seeing as he had been on the phone with Bit the majority of the time since Arden’s arrival, Theo hadn’t had time to brief Arden on what had already taken place. “Nigel said that he’d been noticing odd comments from the aide. She wasn’t as proficient as the other aides, and he observed that she would look back at the other reports before submitting her own. Nigel’s health has deteriorated to the point that he doesn’t have the strength to get out of bed, and the last couple of days the aides have had to...”

Theo let his voice trail off, not comfortable with describing such a private matter. He couldn’t imagine what it was like to need someone else to tend to such personal matters. To have to rely on others for the most basic needs was unfathomable, but life always seemed to come full circle. A newborn depended on others, and those in their last stages of life needed to do the same.

“Let’s just say that the woman had difficulty with such a task,” Theo surmised before Arden nodded his understanding. “Nigel finally told his suspicions to Sylvie tonight, who no doubt confronted the unsub. I’m assuming that Sylvie threatened to call the agency. If our theory is correct, then the woman would have had time to pick up Sylvie’s weapon and finish the job.”

Theo had already slipped his cell phone into one of the back pockets of his pants, but he retrieved it quickly to place another call to Detective Beeson. The detective was not aware that Brook had gone off the grid, and Theo didn’t intend to reveal that piece of information, either.

“Mr. Neville, I’m rather busy at the moment.”

“I’m calling to lighten the load, Detective Beeson. This will now be a joint investigation.” Theo could have taken over the case completely, but by being down two members of the team, it had benefitted S&E Investigations to have additional resources. He also wasn’t sure of the details that Brook had worked out with the Bureau. The last thing he wanted to do was alert the FBI to the disappearance of their lead consultant. “Given our relationship with the Bureau, they feel it would be in everyone’s best interest to have a finger on the pulse of this case. The reason that I’m calling is that we believe the

suspect might have been injured during the attack. Since your forensics team has already processed the scene, there isn't a reason to bring in another one at this time. I'd like for you to alert them that the blood samples from the area rug might be from two separate individuals. I would also appreciate it if you could notify the hospitals and other similar locations to be on the lookout for our unsub."

Detective Beeson took a moment to process the full meaning behind Theo's announcement. Theo couldn't blame the man for being angry.

"I'd like to speak with Ms. Sloane."

"You'll be dealing directly with me while Brook handles some in-house affairs."

By this time, Arden had made his way back into the kitchen. He'd poured a cup of coffee for Carter, who was still in the bedroom with Nigel. The aide hadn't been comfortable with the events that had transpired inside the apartment, but he seemed to be in his comfort zone taking care of his patient. The amount of morphine Nigel had in his system to keep him comfortable, plus the exhaustion from today's events, had taken a toll on him.

"We should have informed you earlier, Detective Beeson. My apologies," Theo said, knowing full well his words meant nothing to the detective. "A federal agent will be arriving shortly to take the place of the officer standing guard outside Miss Deering's apartment. One of my colleagues will also be on-site per an agreement made with the BOP. A similar setup will be in place at the hospital."

"In that case, you'll want to get over to the Smith residence as soon as possible," Detective Beeson advised without too much resentment. He was a professional through and through, and Theo was grateful for one less concern. His relief was short-lived, though. "We found Smith's body in her garage stuffed inside a deep freezer. Whoever tried to murder your colleague went to extreme lengths to infiltrate her life. Needless to say, I get the sense that you're holding out on me, Mr. Neville. I hope that changes soon."

CHAPTER FIVE

Bobby “Bit” Nowacki

February 2024

Friday — 3:17 am

AN AIR OF UNCERTAINTY had settled over the ICU room. It didn't help that the overpowering antiseptic scents made it difficult to breathe. Each mechanical whir and rhythmic beep from the monitors seemed to reverberate off the walls, and Bit was confident those sounds would haunt him for a very long time.

Sylvie lay motionless on the hospital bed apart from the somewhat even rise and fall of her chest to indicate that she was still breathing on her own. It was as if her usual vibrant presence had been stolen, and all that was left in its place was a vulnerable shell of a stranger.

The faint pallor of her skin even seemed to emphasize her delicate condition.

Bit would have never defined Sylvie as fragile, yet that was the only word to describe her at the moment. He pressed his fingers to his eyes to ease the

burning sensation that had taken up residence hours ago. Only when he lowered his arms did he catch sight of movement outside the glass window. The federal agent who had replaced a local law enforcement officer hours ago was accepting a cup of coffee from one of the nurses.

Agent Jarrett Lynn had not appreciated the fact that Bit had called his supervisory special agent to confirm the man's identity. If only Sylvie had allowed Bit to be as thorough with the home health agency's employees. He recalled making such an offer, but it had more to do with the care her father had been about to receive than it had been about her physical safety.

Every single one of them understood the risks taken with this job, as well as being center stage in Brook's life. None of them would have it any other way. They were a team, and Bit had never been a part of something like what they had built in his entire life. He wasn't saying that the close relationship between him and his sister wasn't special, because he would walk through fire for Paula. If it hadn't been for Brook, he would have ended up behind bars for the decisions he had made for his sister.

Then there was Zoey Collins.

Anyone who met Zoey would assume she was perfect for him, but that was the problem. They had too many things in common, and he found such compatibility difficult to trust. If he were being honest with himself, he definitely did not trust her the way he did those on the team.

Bit was finally coming to understand how Brook had survived over the years, but that meant she had never truly lived life to its fullest. Regardless of his racing thoughts, he hadn't returned Zoey's calls since he had stood her up at the restaurant. There were endless messages on his voicemail, but he couldn't bring himself to call her back when Sylvie was still fighting for her life.

The same nurse who had handed a coffee to the federal agent entered Sylvie's room. Nannette Benning wasn't too pleased with him, either. Bit understood that the nurse had a job to do, but he had adamantly refused to leave Sylvie's room. Nannette had finally relented after being presented with his credentials. Granted, the identification wasn't a federal badge, but the fact that S&E Investigations, Inc. was a consultant with the Bureau had held a lot of sway.

If Nannette only knew that he could recite her likes and dislikes in under a minute, she probably wouldn't have caved so easily. The experienced nurse loved every shade of purple, attended a yoga class every Wednesday

morning, rescued a tabby cat named Oscar two years ago, and loved to read to the point that she currently had one thousand, two hundred, and four unread eBooks on her Kindle. There were a lot of facts that Bit had come to know about Nannette, but what mattered most was that she was the one who had tended to Sylvie's recovery.

Bit had to believe that Sylvie would pull through, because he couldn't fathom his life without her.

"When you have time, would you please provide me with the name of the nurse who will be taking over for you at seven o'clock?" Bit asked Nannette as he moved away from the end of Sylvie's bed. He had held her hand for the first hour after two hospital employees had wheeled her into an assigned ICU room. He had only released his hold on her fingers so that he could continue to monitor his screen. Theo needed assistance in tracking down the unsub. "Along with the other names of those who will be working this floor. I'll need to clear them before they are allowed access to this room."

Nannette frowned as she continued to take Sylvie's vitals, but the nurse eventually relented and agreed to supply the names. Bit could have gotten the information another way, but he would rather not hack into the hospital's servers after he had already crossed lines that could land him in jail.

Bit wasn't worried about the others, because he wouldn't hesitate to cut a deal to satisfy the feds. Bit had familiar knowledge about a Russian racketeer's illegal business model that the FBI would salivate over.

Not that Bit believed it would come to that, because he was very good at covering his digital fingerprints. Had he been at the office, he wouldn't have the restrictions that he was currently facing with one laptop. As it stood, such limitations were wasting precious time, but he wouldn't leave Sylvie's side.

It wasn't lost on him the reason behind Nannette's inability to take him seriously. In no way shape or form did he resemble a private investigator, much less a consultant to the FBI.

Bit was extremely thin, pale from preferring to sit behind a computer instead of out in the sun, and his clothes were simple—jeans and a T-shirt. It didn't help that his blonde hair looked greasy when the strands dried after being washed, which he tried to hide with knitted hats that his sister continuously made him. He had requested multiple grey knitted beanies because that was the color Sylvie had mentioned matched his eyes. Fortunately, Paula had been able to find various shades at a local yarn shop.

"I didn't realize the situation before," Nannette murmured as she slid the

keycard through the slot alongside the monitor.

The plastic keycard was attached to the spiral wrist keychain, but Bit couldn't help but question the security measure. The quick action signed her out of the software system, not that he wouldn't have been able to gain access to the hospital's databases if he had so desired to tonight.

Bit had taken a seat in the corner, but he hadn't bothered to wheel the tray toward him. He was still attempting to figure out the meaning behind the nurse's statement. It had taken him a minute to realize that Nannette thought he and Sylvie were romantically involved, and he blamed his exhaustion on such a delay.

What he really needed was one of his energy drinks, but he didn't want to leave Sylvie's bedside. Besides, Paula had promised that she would bring him some necessities. Energy drinks fell into that category.

"Her vitals are stable," Nannette informed him. "She is showing no signs of infection."

"My sister should be here in around thirty minutes with a change of clothes and some items that I'll need for the next day or two," Bit said, purposefully not addressing the nurse's assumption about his relationship with Sylvie.

While it was true that he loved Sylvie...was *in* love with her...now wasn't the right time. There might never be a right time. All he knew was that she was his best friend, and he didn't want that to change. Ever.

"Special Agent Lynn has photographs to compare to the names on the approved visitor list. I know that visits are limited in the ICU, but I've already explained why there needs to be an exception. I also made sure that there was one posted at the nurse's station."

"Miranda mentioned something about a list. And yes, she posted it on the counter," Nannette said with a small, reassuring smile. "We'll do everything in our power to make sure that Ms. Deering is safe."

Bit was grateful when his phone rang. Nannette meant well, but it was all he could do to keep his emotions in check. Sylvie's life was hanging by a thread, and Theo needed Bit to be at his best to help track down the woman responsible.

Then there was Brook.

Whatever Jacob had said to his sister on the phone had her reverting back to her old ways. The team couldn't allow that to happen. Brook was the reason that Bit wasn't lying six feet underground or spending the rest of his life in jail.

Couldn't she see that the team was stronger together than apart?

Bit's disappointment upon setting his gaze on his phone was crushing, but he answered the caller anyway. Maybe Graham had some ideas as to where Brook could have gone or what she might be planning in terms of Jacob and the woman whom he was able to get to do his dirty work.

"General."

"My plane has landed, though I'm still on the tarmac." Graham's clipped tone told Bit to keep his responses short and to the point. The man had a way of getting his point across without additional instructions. "Has anyone heard from her?"

"No."

"Did Brook stop by her condo? And don't give me the runaround, Bit. I know you've already checked the building's security cameras."

"No, Boss hasn't gone back home."

The pause on the other end of the line told Bit that he should offer up more information before he was barraged with an endless string of questions. It wasn't that Graham didn't trust Bit's abilities, but the man's entire career had been spent in the military. His level of expectancy was set to a completely different dial.

Bit could only assume that Graham had spoken with Theo or Arden at some point to even know that Brook had gone AWOL. Bit was just glad that he hadn't been the one to break the news.

By this time, Nannette had quietly left the room.

Bit's gaze once again landed on Sylvie, and he studied her pale features. Nothing had changed since she'd been brought into the room. He rubbed his chest to ease the tightness that had settled behind his diaphragm. Maybe he was getting an ulcer.

"Boss hasn't gone home, hasn't used her credit cards, and not one of the city's cameras has caught her out in public. She knows what she's doing, and she doesn't want to be found." Bit's laptop began to sound an alert from some parameters that he had programmed earlier this evening. He quickly wheeled the tray toward him. "Hold on a second, General."

Bit hadn't gone into specific detail with the team about some of his applications, but he had spent the past year refining his facial recognition software program. The backdoors that he had plugged into specific social media sites were nowhere near the legal line that the justice system had put into place. He'd been mindful as to when he used the application, and this

was only the second time that he had initiated the program. Well, third. Maybe four if he counted the test sequence, but he wasn't going to allow guilt to weigh him down. Besides, the alphabet agencies already had their foot in those doorways.

"Lorena Dobbs." Bit couldn't believe they had a name. He must have raised his voice when announcing the information. Even Agent Lynn had glanced over his shoulder to make sure nothing was wrong, but Bit waved him away. He stared at the woman's photograph that matched the footage obtained from Sylvie's apartment building. There was no denying that he had been given a match. "Lorena Dobbs."

"Context, Bit."

"Lorena Dobbs is the name of the woman who stabbed Little T." Bit had already plugged the woman's name into several systems. He had to stand from the chair to expend some of his pent-up energy. "Dobbs is a twenty-four-year-old woman from Idaho. She's listed as a missing person from a 2017 investigation involving the deaths of her parents. They were stabbed to death on Dobbs' eighteenth birthday. Police believed at the time that the killer abducted Dobbs, and both the missing persons cases and the murder investigation are ongoing."

"I'll be at the hospital in forty minutes."

Bit would have replied to the statement, but the line had already disconnected to the point of deafening silence. He immediately forwarded the information to Theo and Arden.

There was relief in being able to put a name to their unsub, but to what end? They had no idea where Lorena Dobbs had been for six years, how she had been supporting herself, or how she had come to cross paths with Jacob. They were in complete darkness when it came to the woman's intentions and whereabouts.

Not knowing the woman's objective—Jacob's objective—made it difficult for the team to maneuver through their routine investigative process. Then again, there was nothing routine about this case. Lorena Dobbs had spent the past two months infiltrating Sylvie's life. The woman could have attacked Sylvie well before last night, but Lorena Dobbs had chosen to remain on the sidelines.

Why?

One man had the answer—Jacob Walsh.

CHAPTER SIX

Theo Neville

February 2024

Friday — 7:27 am

THE COFFEE MACHINE SPUTTERED and hissed, testing Theo's patience. The appliance was one of those new machines that was supposed to make one's life easier, but the only one who could get the damned thing to work properly was Arden. The dark droplets fell into the carafe one agonizingly slow drip at a time. If a piece of equipment could be cruel, it was the heap of metal sitting in front of him.

Theo rested the palms of his hands on the counter as he impatiently waited for enough coffee to be poured into the carafe so that he could fill his mug. He wasn't asking for a miracle, because those were being reserved for Sylvie. It was then that he realized what had been missing since he'd walked into the offices of S&E Investigations—the sweet floral scent that usually hung in the air after Sylvie had steeped a cup of her favorite tea.

Both the disinfectant odor left behind by the cleaning crew and the

resounding silence of being alone in the offices clawed at Theo's senses. He had been alone on the fourteenth floor of the building many times over the past couple of years. Never once had he experienced the sense of isolation as he did in this moment. It was as if he were inside a tomb with echoes of past conversations, and he could have sworn that he heard Sylvie's laughter drifting down the hallway.

Twenty-six hours had blurred into an endless stream of dead-end leads.

He had been in constant contact with Bit and Arden for various reasons. Theo would need to catch a few hours of sleep soon, but Graham had wanted an update on the investigation. What Graham truly wanted to know was if Brook had been in contact with Theo.

Unfortunately, the answer to that question was a resounding no.

The weight of anger and fear hung heavy on his shoulders, but he couldn't take the time to process them. Not when the team was splintered, which was exactly what Jacob Walsh had counted on when he had directed Lorena Dobbs to insert herself into one of their lives.

"I'll take one."

Theo's mind had registered the faint beeping sound of the biometric scanner, but exhaustion had prevented him from moving his body until the very last moment. He rubbed his left eye, but it did nothing to ease the gritty sensation behind his eyelid. Without a word, he opened the cupboard and pulled out another mug. Once he had filled them both to the brim, he slid the carafe back onto the burner so the appliance could finish its job.

"I haven't heard from her." Theo turned to find that Graham had taken a seat at the high-top table off to the right of the kitchen. Theo closed the distance and set the second mug down on the table before he claimed the other stool. "All we know is that Brook received a call from Jacob right before she was supposed to leave the hospital to drive to Erin Smith's residence. After the call, Brook went outside, told the driver that she didn't need his services, and then disappeared into the parking garage."

Graham might have requested a cup of coffee, but he made no move to pick up his beverage. For someone who was probably running on less sleep than Theo, there wasn't one shred of exhaustion found in the man's face.

"Bit will let us know if Brook resurfaces," Graham stated in a way that almost rivaled Brook's ability to mask her emotions. The man's clipped tone was a dead giveaway that he was concerned about the turn of events. Brook had never done anything like this in the time that she had opened the doors to

S&E Investigations, and that meant that any future actions were unpredictable. “What can I do to help the investigation? I saw one of Alex DeSilva’s men outside of the ICU, but there is also a federal agent stationed near Sylvie’s room.”

“I’ve already been in contact with Alex,” Theo divulged as he took another drink of his coffee. Lack of sleep tended to cause headaches for him, especially after the loss of his right eye. Now was no exception. “Since Brook was able to label this a federal investigation, Alex is going to stay on the sidelines for now. Two of his men are keeping an eye on Sylvie’s apartment building since there is a federal agent inside with Arden. At this point, it’s all about tracking down Lorena Dobbs.”

“Bit filled me in when I was at the hospital.” Graham finally reached for his coffee. “Walk me through what you have so far.”

Graham had never inserted himself into their cases before, but he had been around the offices enough to know the team’s process. Their briefings were held in such a way that information was constantly reiterated so no detail was overlooked in the mundane tasks of gathering intel. Many things on Theo’s list needed attention, but even he could see the benefit of taking additional minutes to cover the groundwork.

“Lorena Dobbs chose Erin Smith as a mark due to the woman’s disposition. From what we know so far, Erin was an introvert. She didn’t have any immediate family in the area. Her physical description is the opposite of Lorena Dobbs, but I’m getting the sense that Dobbs likes the thrill of pushing the envelope.”

Theo didn’t have to disclose that Brook was the expert at profiling, but he had picked up a few things from her. He had also gotten used to relying on such parameters within an investigation. While he might be angry with Brook over how she was handling the situation, he wouldn’t allow his emotions to hinder his process.

“Smith was in her mid-forties, overweight according to the BMI scale, and a brunette,” Theo shared of the facts so far. “Dobbs is the complete opposite—mid-twenties, thin, and ashen blonde hair. I can only presume that she has been monitoring every single one of us, looking for a way into our lives without us ever truly noticing her. Nigel Deering’s compassionate release offered Dobbs the entry that she had been searching for, but I don’t believe she wanted to be discovered this early. She was waiting for something...or someone. Stabbing Sylvie wasn’t meant to happen. At least, not now.”

“Are you sure about that? How would Jacob know to call Brook otherwise? Either the date was preplanned, or Dobbs was able to get word through to someone working at the federal prison.” Graham rested his forearm on the table. From his pristine suit and starched white dress shirt, one would never know that he had traveled from the West Coast to the East Coast in the past twelve hours. Everything about the man screamed military. “Bit informed me that Erin Smith’s body was discovered in her garage.”

“Smith had been stabbed to death, but the timeframe is in question due to her body being stored in a deep freezer.”

Theo had walked through the residence hours ago, and the place had been a mess. Dirty dishes had been everywhere, clothes had been strewn across the bedroom floor, and garbage had basically been scattered across the main floor of the residence. Forensics had taken what they had needed, and they had left the rest.

“Profile?”

“Lorena Dobbs is impulsive.” Theo turned the mug on the table as he shared his thoughts. “Her behavior is erratic. She also possesses an innate sense of survival instincts that have somehow managed to help her evade authorities.”

“Bit mentioned that Dobbs was previously listed as a missing person, but her status has now been updated to a suspect in her parents’ deaths.” Graham glanced at the coffee machine when a high-pitched sound indicated that the brewing process had been completed. “She clearly has the mental capacity to manipulate a crime scene.”

“We know that Jacob was in Idaho when he attempted to track down Sarah Evanston. The only thing that makes sense is that Jacob somehow stumbled across Dobbs during that time, and he somehow convinced Dobbs to help him.” Theo couldn’t fathom how two killers had stumbled upon one another in Idaho. “I’m guessing that Dobbs was attempting to find out everything she could on Evanston’s status. Once Dobbs had the information in hand, maybe Jacob instructed her to take off the proverbial collar and leash.”

In a long string of murders committed by Jacob Walsh, there had only been one surviving victim—Sarah Evanston.

The team had been standing outside of a small B&B on the day Evanston had been attacked by Jacob. Their presence had been the only reason that Evanston had survived such a brutal assault.

Brook had been the first to suspect that Jacob had retaliated against the

reporter for attempting to compare him to another serial killer. When they had finally reached Sarah's room, she had barely been breathing, and most of the flesh had been sliced off her facial bones. Witness protection had been the only viable option for Sarah Evanston, because Jacob's profile suggested he wouldn't stop until he successfully ended her life.

"I can see such behavior as being the reason Jacob chose Dobbs, especially after crossing paths with her." Graham stood and walked to the counter. He returned with the carafe, and he didn't reclaim his seat or resume the conversation until he had topped off their mugs. "Jacob would have needed someone like Dobbs—cunning and deadly. Someone without a conscience. If we go on those assumptions, the only remaining question is how Jacob knew that Sylvie had been attacked last night."

There were still a lot of discoveries to be made about the investigation. First and foremost, had Dobbs left the city? She could have remained in the area, not finished with her mission of carrying out Jacob's requests.

Did Jacob want each one of them dead to prove a point to his sister?

"Listen, Bit has enough on his plate without worrying about Jacob. Bit is sitting vigil at Sylvie's bedside. He won't leave her side, but he also refuses to sleep. He's too afraid that he'll miss an alert from one of his applications." Graham took a healthy drink of his coffee now that the beverage had time to cool. Theo had a gut feeling that Graham wasn't going to sit on his hands while Brook was out there somewhere alone. "I'll stop by the prison and see what I can find out from Jacob. In the meantime, Bit's sister should be here in about five minutes. He is sending her here to collect some more equipment so that he can keep working from Sylvie's hospital room. The hospital staff isn't too happy about it, but I spoke with the medical director myself. Bit should no longer run into interference."

Theo had reservations about Graham paying Jacob a visit in prison. Brook wouldn't want Graham anywhere near Jacob. While her brother had never veered from his profile, there was no telling what Jacob would do if he were to get even a hint of Brook being in a relationship. As far as Theo was aware, Jacob only knew of their business arrangement.

"I know what I'm doing, Neville."

"I never said you didn't, General."

"We're past titles, and you know it." Graham slammed down the rest of the contents in his mug before he stood from his chair. There was an edge to the man that warned others not to cross him. Theo had no doubt that Graham was

in control of his emotions. Somehow, such restraint made him even more dangerous. “If you have something to say, say it.”

“It’s not you who will pay if you fuck up that kind of meeting.”

Theo hadn’t seen the need not to be brutally honest.

Graham remained silent, but he slowly nodded his understanding of such a warning. He then walked back to the sink, taking the time to rinse out his mug before setting it down in the sink. Theo had monitored the man’s movements closely, and he realized from the pulse in Graham’s temple that he wasn’t as calm as he would prefer Theo to believe.

“Brook took herself out of the equation, and I can only assume she did so under the belief that Dobbs would cease and desist. Doesn’t make sense to me, but I can’t come up with another reason why Brook would up and disappear like she did last night.” Theo had tried his damndest to wrap his head around her reasoning to no avail. Then again, his mind wasn’t working on all cylinders right now. Not even the coffee had helped in that department. “Thoughts?”

“Brook doesn’t do anything without good reason,” Graham said with full conviction as he turned around. His jawline had tightened, and while he was obviously concerned about her wellbeing, there wasn’t a sliver of doubt in his eyes. His trust and faith in her were unmistakable. “If what you’re saying is true about Lorena Dobbs’ character, then maybe Brook went underground to force the woman to make a mistake. We all agree that Dobbs is impulsive, which is why she attacked Sylvie earlier than planned...if that even was the plan. It’s good that DeSilva has men posted at the hospital and Sylvie’s apartment. Those are two less locations that we have to worry about, which is why I think—”

“Don’t go there, Elliott.” Theo caught the twitch of Graham’s lip at the use of his surname. If Graham wanted to drop titles, so be it. “There isn’t a chance in hell that I’m having one of DeSilva’s men shadow me for the unforeseeable future. I’ll watch my own back.”

Theo would have preferred to have Brook by his side, but she had chosen a different path. Her decision had stung, and he would damned well make sure she understood the damage her choice had made to their friendship. He had truly believed that they shared the weight of their emotional baggage, and she tossed his load...and trust...on the first plane out of dodge.

“You are her best friend, Theo. I know that for a fact,” Graham acknowledged with a small shrug. “There are times that emotion gets the best

of Brook, but she trusts you with her life. There are only five people on the face of this planet who have earned that honor, and two of them are in this room.”

Theo had to hand it to Graham, because the man’s conviction in Brook was incredibly unwavering. Theo wanted to believe that Brook would reconsider her recent choices once she had time to think things through, but given her history, he could understand if she ended up pulling farther away from everyone. That didn’t mean he had to agree or even like it.

The sound of the buzzer being pressed alerted them to Paula Nowacki’s presence.

“Bit should have just given me a list,” Theo muttered as he finished the rest of his coffee. “I need to get back to the hospital anyway.”

“You’re no good to Sylvie if you end up in a gurney next to her,” Graham said without moving toward the doorway. “Theo, you need sleep. Even if it’s only three or four hours. If you don’t want one of DeSilva’s men shadowing you, that’s the price. I might be a silent partner, but I’m not going to be the one to tell Brook that she lost her best friend—the health-conscious one—because he wasn’t smart enough to take care of himself.”

Theo grimaced, because three to four hours could mean the difference between apprehending Dobbs and missing that opportunity.

Graham was right, though.

Theo would be of no use to the others if he couldn’t put together a coherent thought. He would limit his rest to two hours, though.

“Sylvie will pull through,” Graham reassured Theo as he finally pushed off the counter. “She’s tough, just like the rest of you. I’ll go and let Paula into the office.”

“Elliott.” Theo waited for Graham to turn around, his hand on the doorframe. “I appreciate the talk.”

Graham tapped the wooden frame before disappearing around the corner.

“Get some sleep, Neville,” Graham called out. “I’ll meet you back here at sixteen hundred hours to regroup.”

Theo resisted voicing his reservations regarding Graham paying Jacob a visit in federal prison. The man was just as good at reading people as his sister, and he shouldn’t be underestimated. Theo had to remind himself that Graham had dealt with worse people during his combat tours.

Theo glanced over his shoulder to the open area that Brook had constructed for the team one Christmas. The black leather couch was one of those soft

ones that Sylvie likened to lying on a soft stick of butter. He sure as hell hoped he got to tell her about his thoughts on the subject. The alternative was unacceptable.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Graham Elliott

February 2024

Friday — 11:47 am

THE COLD METAL OF the table and chairs didn't interest Graham. He'd pulled some strings to have Jacob brought to this particular area, one that had no cameras and no microphones. What he had to say to Jacob shouldn't be on the record. It wasn't that Graham believed that anything he said to a psychopathic serial killer would have any impact or that any ground rules would be followed, but it was important for Jacob to know the ramifications of his behavior.

There had been many times Graham could have picked up the phone and ended Brook's nightmare. It had taken every ounce of his willpower not to act on his impulse, but he had promised her otherwise. He was a man of his word.

Regrettably, those circumstances had changed the second that Brook had decided to disappear into thin air. Jacob possessed the information the team

needed to locate Lorena Dobbs and bring her into custody. By doing so, Brook wouldn't feel the need to stay hidden in the shadows.

Unless Jacob had finally broken his sister.

Graham refused to believe that scenario.

He had the utmost faith in the woman who had come to hold what was left of his heart in her hand. The loss of his wife and daughter had literally brought him to his knees, and Brook had been the one to help him stand after he'd come to terms with such tragedy.

He would not allow her to fall victim due to someone else's sin. Silence wasn't the answer, and he would do whatever was necessary to bring her back home.

The door finally opened, though Graham refused to display any reaction when the guard led Jacob through the doorway. Whereas Brook took after her mother with long black hair and a heart-shaped face, Jacob resembled their father with wavy brown hair and a square jawline.

That was where their similarities ended.

Brook had often posed the question of whether nature or nurture was responsible for her brother's reprehensible conduct. She believed that she had finally found her answer two months ago.

Graham might be able to confirm her suspicions today.

Jacob hadn't uttered a word since he had been escorted into the room. The guard took his time in securing the inmate's handcuffs to the metal eyehook in the table before doing the same to the chain in between the man's ankles.

Jacob hid his irritation well at being subjected to such treatment.

Before too long, the lock of the door latched after the guard's exit.

"It's not like my sister to send in a lackey."

"Your sister is otherwise engaged," Graham replied offhandedly, comfortable in the early stages of their conversation. He was genuinely surprised that Jacob hadn't tried to enter a battle of wills, remaining silent as a test of some sort. "What can you tell me about Lorena Dobbs?"

"Dobbs? Lorena Dobbs?" Jacob gave a slight shrug of his right shoulder before slowly shaking his head. "The name doesn't ring a bell, General Elliott."

Graham casually leaned against the wall and slipped both hands into his pockets. He didn't mind staying awhile, or at least letting Jacob believe in such a state of mind.

"I can understand the desire for a bit of company after being confined to

your cell twenty-three hours a day.”

Graham had read the profile that Brook had spent years honing on her brother. There were several ways this meeting could have begun, and now Graham had his answer. While Jacob liked to boast about his kills and the fact that he was usually three steps ahead of law enforcement, he was opting for another route today.

“If you’d like, I can have a copy of *The Book of Five Rings* by Miyamoto Musashi brought to your cell,” Graham offered with a small smile. “I seem to recall you were quite fascinated with the copy in my private library during your brief visit to my home.”

Graham could sense that his off-the-cuff remark had Jacob reevaluating his strategy. The fact that the offer hadn’t elicited a response was very telling in the grand scheme of things.

It hadn’t been long after Brook had agreed to go into business with Graham that Jacob had sent his sister a nonverbal message. The man had waltzed through Graham’s front door posing as a repairman, misleading the woman who took care of the residence while he was away on business. Jacob had merely wanted his sister to know how easy it was for him to insert himself into the lives of those she chose to associate with on a daily basis. Graham and Brook hadn’t become intimately involved until much later.

Still, Brook had received her brother’s message loud and clear, and so had everyone else on the team. Precautions had been doubled, but Jacob had finally outwitted them by using someone else. What he didn’t seem to realize was that Graham wasn’t leaving this room without information regarding Lorena Dobbs’ whereabouts.

“No? Well, if you change your mind, just have one of the guards reach out to me,” Graham said with a small smile. Not once had he altered his restful posture. He removed his right hand from his pocket to snap his fingers. “It just dawned on me why you wouldn’t feel comfortable fessing up to knowing Lorena Dobbs. I didn’t realize this trip would be a waste of my time. I’ll let your sister know what transpired here, and she’ll change course accordingly. Brook has a talent for being able to draft a profile, doesn’t she?”

“Do you really believe I’m that gullible, General?”

Graham had been hoping that Jacob would respond in such a cynical manner, which caused his smile to widen. He stood to his full height and walked toward the table, not stopping until he was able to rest the palms of his hands on the back of the metal chair.

“Gullible? I wouldn’t use that particular adjective to describe you, Jacob. Presumptuous, maybe. I am curious about one thing, though. Did you truly believe that you could control someone like Lorena Dobbs? According to her profile, the woman is impulsive. What transpired at Ms. Deering’s apartment yesterday proves your protégé has anger management issues.”

For the first time since Graham had been in Jacob’s presence, the man slipped slightly in his stoic posture. It was evident that he hadn’t appreciated Graham’s label of Dobbs. He’d taken a chance at creating a scenario for Jacob to absorb, but Graham could have easily shown his chips too early. He’d been in enough situations to read a room correctly, though.

“I don’t know anyone by the name of Lorena Dobbs, General. You’ve wasted your time coming here.”

Graham merely nodded, as if he had accepted Jacob’s answer. Both were aware of the other’s tactics. It was time to show a few cards.

Graham went for the shock value.

“Did you know that I offered Brook a clean slate?” Graham leaned down so that his forearms rested on the back of the metal chair. He met Jacob’s stare, and it was obvious that the statement had caught the man’s interest. “It would have only taken one call. One call to have two men come into this prison, witness your last breath, and then disappear into the dead of night. Can you imagine the sense of freedom your sister could enjoy with a simple phone call?”

For the first time since Jacob had been brought into the room, his gaze left Graham’s face to study the walls. By the time he had finished searching every corner, it was evident that he understood the significance of such a location.

“You’ve been inside my house, Jacob. I don’t doubt that you know everything about me, which means you also know what I am capable of in situations like this one.” Graham paused, but not for effect. He simply wanted to make certain that Jacob had enough time to soak in the meaning behind his words. “Regrettably, I gave my word to your sister that I would never make such a call. You have her to thank for you still being six feet above ground. I don’t get it, but Brook seems to believe death is too easy of an out for you.”

Graham straightened, though he made no move to exit the room. Not yet. There were still some topics that needed to be covered before Jacob was returned to his cell.

“Your plan to discover information regarding Sarah Evanston’s

whereabouts backfired the moment you believed you could control someone like Lorena Dobbs. I'm guessing that you gave her the go-ahead to do what was necessary if said information couldn't be ascertained, but I would also wager that you instructed her to do so on your terms. You wanted Brook to discover Sylvie the same way you left Sally Pearson and Cara Jordan. Only that didn't happen, because Lorena Dobbs robbed you of that pleasure."

This time, Graham purposefully paused for effect.

"You've come to find out that Sylvie Deering not only didn't succumb to her injuries, but she is also all in one piece. Her face is perfectly intact. Not even a single nick. You're slipping, Jacob. You haven't impeded your sister's life whatsoever. You failed, and instead of owning up to it like an adult, you're sitting there shackled to a metal table like a petulant child being punished to a time-out."

Graham lifted his left arm and then glanced at his watch to let Jacob know their time had come to an end. The informative speech had done as he had intended, and the next twenty seconds would reveal whether or not Jacob would allow an opportunity without being recorded to go to waste.

"Are you so blinded by your emotion for my sister that you would go against your instincts? You disappoint me, General."

"Emotion? No," Graham replied as he lowered his arm. "Respect? Yes."

"Again, you don't strike me as a man who walks around with blinders," Jacob said as he leaned forward, clearly enjoying the freedom that he had not had since strolling into FBI Headquarters. "A petulant child? Is that what you thought of your daughter's killer?"

Jacob began to smile when Graham remained silent.

"We all have breaking points, General. I can practically see your thoughts as they process through your mind." Jacob then waved the fingers on his right hand as if the topic of conversation wasn't important enough to continue. "That's neither here nor there. I appreciate such honesty. You're standing in front of me basically saying that my sister is the only reason that I'm still breathing, and I can actually say the same. I don't think you truly comprehend our connection. You see, I'm the only reason that my sister still draws breath. I'm not talking about my proclivities, either. I'm referring to her sole purpose in life—me."

"Nature versus nurture."

Jacob's smile widened even more at Graham's statement.

It was an argument that had been written on Brook's living room wall for

years. Jacob would have seen it somewhere during his so-called visits to check up on his sister. Only Graham wasn't so sure that was the purpose Jacob had been insinuating, but it was fundamental to the underlying intent.

"I hate to be the one to break it to you, Jacob, but your sister has had the answer to that question for quite a while." Graham might have stretched the truth, because Brook had only recently discovered Jacob's first victim in 1996. She merely assumed that nature had won out due to her brother's age at the time of the murder. "As a matter of fact, your file has already been updated at the Bureau. Stella Bennett has officially been listed as your first victim. You murdered a young girl when you were only eleven years old, and you haven't stopped since. Nature won that round, didn't she? Anyway, Brook has moved on with her life, Jacob. From what I've seen today, *you're* the one who is living in the past."

Graham took the time to observe Jacob from the top of his head to where his wrists were currently shackled to the table. When Graham was finally finished with his inspection, he merely shook his head as if the last fifteen minutes had been a waste of his time.

"No worries. We'll locate Lorena Dobbs on our own, though there is no telling what damage she'll cause now that she can't deliver you anything." Graham wasn't playing on Jacob's sympathy. Instead, Graham wanted to plant some seeds of doubt about what could happen should Jacob continue to remain silent. "The harm wouldn't be to Brook or the team, but we both know that, don't we? You would be the one to pay the price, Jacob. While your sister has moved on, I'm sure she wouldn't mind swinging the hammer down once more in front of the press. The media are suckers for that kind of thing, aren't they?"

Graham turned toward the exit after dropping his last question. He closed the distance to the door before raising a fist to bang on the door to capture the guard's attention. He was prevented from making contact with the hard surface when Jacob finally decided to negotiate.

"I don't know Lorena's exact location, but I can give you some direction should I be given your so-called sacred word that my sister will pay me a visit. Soon."

Graham didn't turn around as the thick sarcasm practically dripped from Jacob's words. The man wasn't pleased with the way their meeting had turned out, but that had been Graham's intention. He would never underestimate a psychopathic killer like Jacob, but the current situation had

forced everyone's hand to take extreme chances that would otherwise be avoided like the plague.

"You have my word."

Graham hadn't bothered to turn around, though he had tilted his head far enough to ensure his voice traveled to the table. Jacob could probably read his sister better than anyone, and he would want verification that Graham had been telling him the truth about Stella Bennett.

Unfortunately, the young girl's body had yet to be found.

What would Jacob's reaction be when he discovered that Graham had gotten the upper hand at their first parley? Such a fallout would have to be dealt with at a later date.

"You'll want to check out the vacant houses that are for sale in the surrounding suburbs, particularly the homes that have been on the market for a while."

Graham used his fist to bang on the door.

Before the guard appeared, Jacob was able to give a parting shot.

"Lorena is certainly a wild card, isn't she?" Jacob's smile came through his voice loud and clear. "I'm disappointed that I'll be missing all the fun, but I wish you the best of luck in finding her, General. You and my sister will certainly need it."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Lorena Dobbs

February 2024

Friday — 1:02pm

THE CHILL OF THE air practically soaked into Lorena's bones as she stood on the opposite side of the street from Brooklyn Sloane's condominium. The disgusting odor from the winter coat that she had taken from one of the shelters had her gag reflex working overtime. Still, Lorena had no choice but to pull the black faux fur forward to cover her face.

She had spent enough time with Sylvie Deering to know all too well how good Bit Nowacki was at his job. Prying technology was everywhere, which meant that he could monitor her movements. Only he would need to see her face for that to happen, and she was smarter than the cameras.

Lorena couldn't prevent the laugh that bubbled over at how easy it had been to fool Sylvie and her father. The sound had captured the attention of an elderly man walking down the sidewalk, but she didn't care. She was past that point in her life. Her parents would have been bothered by such behavior, but

that was one of the reasons why they were dead and she was still free to do as she pleased.

Lorena's smile slipped as a sharp pain radiated up her side. Her hand instinctively moved to press against the bandage covering the wound on her ribs underneath her coat. It was just a graze, but it was still enough to cause her some irritation.

The blonde bitch had gotten a shot off before Lorena could finish her off. She clenched her teeth together as she remembered the smug look on Sylvie's face when she pulled the trigger, so confident that she had the upper hand.

Well, Lorena had shown her.

She vividly recalled the shock and fear in Sylvie's eyes as the blade of the knife plunged into her stomach again and again. Nothing beat that thrilling sensation of slicing into flesh. The only gratifying sound that had been missing was Sylvie's pleas to stop.

The pain flared again, reminding Lorena that there was still work to be done.

Unfortunately, that lucky shot had allowed Sylvie to survive. It was the only reason Lorena had fled the scene instead of staying behind to witness the light fade from the woman's eyes.

Lorena should have been more careful.

She should have disarmed Sylvie faster instead of letting her squeeze the trigger. It had been a mistake, and it was one that she wouldn't repeat next time.

Lorena replayed the conversation she had with an orderly outside the hospital. She had made it seem like she was part of the press, wanting an update on Sylvie Deering. Lorena's question about a dark-haired woman being among those waiting for word on Sylvie's condition hadn't gotten Lorena very far, though. The guy kept saying that he had seen someone matching that description last night, but the woman hadn't been around all day.

How could Brooklyn Sloane have vanished into thin air?

Logic dictated that Brook had somehow slipped out of the hospital without Lorena spotting her. Maybe she had gone home for a change of clothes or even back to the office. A delicious shiver ran down Lorena's back at the prospect of torturing information out of Jacob's sister.

Lorena owed Jacob everything.

He had plucked her from destitution. Some might even say they were

kindred spirits, but she didn't look at him that way. He certainly hadn't shown an interest in fucking her, either.

By happenstance, Jacob had caught Lorena stealing a woman's purse.

One thing had led to another.

Jacob had shown her another way to survive—his way.

Lorena lacked his patience. He could blend in with society without anyone the wiser. She'd been in awe of his ability to do so. She didn't have that gift or the personality. It was the reason that he had helped her come up with other ways, more that matched her style.

Not wanting to stand outside and catch someone's attention—or worse, a specific someone peering at her through one of the security cameras that lined the busy street—she stepped off the curb and approached the building's vestibule. Keeping her hood close to her cheeks, she opened the glass door and came to a stop in front of a chrome speaker. A doorman addressed her from his place behind a large station inside the lobby.

"May I help you?"

"I'm here to see Brook."

Lorena hadn't wanted to appear as if she was a stranger to one of the tenants, so she had stuck with a first name only.

"Is Ms. Sloane expecting you?"

Lorena sneered at the way the question had come across. It was as if she were some underling or something.

"Is she here or not?"

"I don't believe so, but I'll call up to Ms. Sloane's condo to confirm."

Frustration knotted in Lorena's stomach. Her rage began to simmer just below the surface. She wanted to lash out, to shatter the barrier between them.

"I'm sorry, but it doesn't look like Ms. Sloane is in at the moment. Do you have some identification? I will—"

Lorena spun around and walked away, slamming the glass door with her hand. She should have copped a pair of gloves when she had taken the jacket from the shelter. On the other hand, she was able to flip the guy off as she walked away.

CHAPTER NINE

Theo Neville

February 2024

Friday — 4:46 pm

THE SNOW CRUNCHED BENEATH Theo's boots as he approached Erin Smith's residence. The modest two-story house was located in a quiet suburban neighborhood about twenty minutes from downtown D.C. A few of the residents still had their Christmas lights set on timers. Considering the temperatures had been brutally cold this season, no one could blame them for leaving up the small piece of cheer.

He pulled his coat tighter around himself as he made his way up the small path. The snow from last night had added close to six inches, but the continuous foot traffic to and from the street by local law enforcement officers had made it so there was nothing more than a layer of sludge on the thin walkway. That would all change come Sunday afternoon when another stormfront hammered the city. The last weather report had warned the residents to expect anywhere from twelve to sixteen inches of snow.

As Theo kicked his boots against the top step of the porch, he scanned the quiet neighborhood. Last night, Detective Beeson had a few officers go door to door for statements, though nothing had stood out in the paperwork sent over from the department. Theo had spent time reading through as many statements as possible while waiting for Graham to show up at the office. He'd gotten caught in traffic on his return to the office, so they had decided it was best to meet up tomorrow.

It was best that Graham stop by the hospital, anyway. Bit could use a small break. He'd been glued to Sylvie's bedside all night and day. Theo hadn't needed to ask him during their last call if he was still searching for Brook. As a matter of fact, Theo had steered clear of bringing Brook into the conversation at all. Had she reached out to any of them, they would have alerted each other to that fact.

Theo pulled out the key to the front door that had been provided by Detective Beeson. It had been in Lorena Dobbs' purse that she had left at Sylvie's apartment. Other than a wallet with false identification claiming her name was Erin Smith, all that Lorena had kept in her bag was a pack of spearmint gum and a few dental picks. Their assumption over the belief that she had either been shot or grazed by a bullet had not yielded any leads, but Detective Beeson had agreed to have one of his officers pay a visit to each hospital, clinic, and veterinarian office within a forty-mile radius.

As Theo stepped inside, he was greeted with a mixture of eerie silence and a lingering foul odor of garbage. He reached for the light switch, having taken note of where it was when he had canvassed the residence last night. The artificial light had a golden hue, so it didn't take long for his left eye to adjust to the reduced brightness.

Forensics had left the house exactly as they had found it, apart from specific miscellaneous items that had been collected to test for DNA. There were empty takeout cartons and dirty dishes littered across the coffee table. An overflowing ashtray was amid the clutter, giving credence to Lorena's agitated state. There was even a half-eaten sub on top of its wrapper. From the look of the lettuce, it had been there for days.

This setting was Brook's forte. Her expertise in profiling was invaluable, and she would have been able to paint a clearer picture of Lorena Dobbs. While he had been a federal agent long enough to make assumptions about a suspect, he had never met anyone quite like Brooklyn Sloane.

Her insight into the criminal mind was extraordinary.

Unfortunately, Theo was on his own. He fought back the persistent anger that had remained since he had received her text. It would do him no good to fixate on the reasons behind her decision.

Theo shoved the key into his coat pocket before closing the door behind him. His phone chimed right as he was removing his gloves, and he was thankful for the reprieve.

“How is she?” Theo asked, not bothering with a greeting. Bit’s name had been on the lighted display of the phone. Since they had spoken less than thirty minutes ago, he had either discovered more background information on Lorena Dobbs, or he was calling about Sylvie. Theo hoped it was the latter. “Any improvement?”

“No.” The one word contained every emotion Bit was currently undergoing, but there wasn’t a damn thing Theo could do to ease the man’s worries. They were all experiencing the same reactions. “I just got off the phone with one of Little T’s aunts. Joyce can’t get any flights out of Colorado due to the stormfront sweeping the Midwest.”

Joyce Flowers was the sister of Sylvie’s father, not that the two of them were very close. Most of Sylvie’s family had disowned her after she had agreed to take care of her father in the last few months of his life. Joyce had been the only one to remain in contact.

“I’m calling about the real estate listings that we talked about earlier. Big T, there are *thousands* of listings. Thousands. And that doesn’t include a lot of the neighborhoods outside the city limits. Maybe a third of those are empty, but that is still a lot of ground to cover.” Bit didn’t need to point out that it was an endeavor that Theo wouldn’t be able to do himself. “Should I request additional agents from Harden?”

Supervisory Special Agent Matthew Harden had been vital in securing the consulting agreement between S&E Investigations and the Bureau. Unfortunately, he had no idea that Brook had gone off the grid. Theo also didn’t want there to be scrutiny into how they had come by certain information during their investigation. Bit had not exactly waited for the warrants to come through before accessing specific sites.

“No. Send me the list. I’ll contact Beeson, and he can have some officers start the search.” Theo had begun to move methodically through the house. Since the residence had already been searched from top to bottom, Theo wasn’t interested in the insignificant details. He was hoping to create a profile based on Lorena Dobbs’ living arrangements these past two months. “I’m at

Erin Smith's house. When I'm done here, I'm swinging by my place for a change of clothes. I'll be at the hospital in a few hours."

Theo was eventually able to disconnect the call, and he was glad that Graham would be there soon. Bit didn't do well when he had too much time on his hands to go over every scenario that could possibly play out.

Theo slid his phone into the pocket with his keys. Seeing as he already had a good foundation for the profile, he was looking for both confirmation and more insight into Lorena Dobbs. The shattered picture frame near the far wall of the living room validated her temper, but it was a butcher knife sticking up from the coffee table that spoke of the woman's violent streak. Every step drew him into her world, and he was nauseous by the time he had returned to the front door.

The inspection of the house had taken him longer than he had anticipated. The time taken out of his day had been worth it, though. He had picked up a few more things about Lorena's personality that could come into play should they get her cornered somewhere.

Seeing as Lorena had driven Erin Smith's vehicle to Sylvie's apartment building, the small compact sedan had already been towed to the police impound lot. Forensics had already recorded the contents of the car, not that there had been much on the list besides garbage.

Theo made sure to lock up the residence. There hadn't been any signs that Lorena had attempted to return to the house. He hadn't expected there to be, but it was still a place that he could mark off his list.

He put his gloves back on before settling behind the steering wheel of his Jeep Wrangler. While the engine warmed, he kept his gaze trained on the house. The two large red maple trees in the front yard had some very low branches, so it was no wonder that the neighbors hadn't really noticed anything unusual. She would have been smart enough to pull the car into the garage and enter the house through that entrance versus the front door, as well.

Lorena Dobbs was full of contradictions.

Cautious, yet a thrill seeker.

She didn't mind taking chances.

Theo figured the rush of adrenaline she experienced was more like an addiction than anything else. The woman wasn't going to be easy to locate. The one thing that he kept coming back to was trying to understand the lengths that Lorena had gone to for Jacob Walsh.

Would she be willing to leave everything that she had worked for behind?

Not having the answer to that question, Theo reluctantly pulled away from the curb. Rush hour traffic had eaten into the timeframe that he had given Bit, but Theo finally managed to pull into the parking lot designated for his condominium. The owners of the building were currently working on an attached garage for their tenants, but that meant purchasing the building and land behind the large structure. Not an easy feat to do in D.C. Until then, the tenants were stuck parking across the street.

Theo didn't waste time as he opened the driver's side door, though he couldn't help but stare at Brook's empty parking space in the front row. She had been one of the first tenants in the building, thus she had been able to secure a canopy with her lease. A thought occurred to him that he kept in mind as he entered through the glass doors, grateful for the overhead heaters.

"Good evening, Mr. Neville."

"Hi, Lou," Theo greeted as he took the time to wipe the soles of his shoes on the grey entrance mat before closing the distance to the large counter. Lou was in his sixties, and he had been employed at the condominium long enough to know everyone's names and their daily schedules. "You haven't seen Ms. Sloane today, have you?"

"No, but Ms. Sloane is usually arriving before the end of my shift," Lou said as he sat back down in his chair. "Is this about that woman? Was she a client of yours? I don't like to make judgments, but she didn't seem very nice. Flipped me the bird when I told her that Ms. Sloane wasn't home."

"What woman, Lou?" Theo asked as he made sure his voice hadn't changed in tenor. He didn't want Lou to suspect that anything was wrong. "Are you saying that someone stopped by here asking for Ms. Sloane?"

"Yes," Lou replied with a nod as he set down the book that he had been reading for the past week. "A blonde woman came into the vestibule earlier today asking to visit Ms. Sloane. The young lady didn't have any identification with her. Seeing as Ms. Sloane only has a few select names on her guest list, I do my best to screen such visitors. Anyway, I explained that Ms. Sloane wasn't available, and that was that. The woman left in a huff."

Lou understood the importance of their work, just as he was aware of Brook's connection to Jacob. In a rather endearing way, Lou was very protective of all the tenants in the building, especially Brook.

Theo had already removed his gloves, so it was easy for him to quickly reach into his pocket and pull out his phone. A text message had come

through regarding a new gym opening down the block, but he swiped it away so that he could access his photographs. He had stored a picture of Lorena Dobbs in a folder, one that had been used in the media when she had been declared a missing person by the Idaho state police.

Theo turned the phone so that the picture was facing Lou.

“Yes, that’s her,” Lou confirmed as he lifted his gaze from the phone. “Shorter hair, but that’s the woman who was here earlier today. I’d say it was around two o’clock when she stopped by.”

Theo’s previous dilemma on whether Lorena had remained in the area had been answered, but he wasn’t so sure her presence was in their favor.

Lorena was clearly searching for Brook.

What would happen when Jacob’s so-called apprentice couldn’t locate his sister?

“Would you do me a favor, Lou?” Theo asked as he pulled back his phone, keeping it in his hand. There had to have been a reason why Bit’s facial recognition program hadn’t alerted him to the fact that Lorena was still in the city. “Would you please call me the next time this woman stops by to see Ms. Sloane? It’s important. And yes, it has to do with one of our cases.”

“Of course. I’ll notify you both,” Lou confirmed before Theo walked in the direction of the second elevator bank. “Oh, and before I forget, another young lady also stopped by the building. She was looking for you. Said her name was Mia.”

Theo simply nodded his appreciation, but he didn’t address the questioning glint in Lou’s eyes. He always seemed to be on a mission to help the tenants in his building find someone to spend their time with, even Mr. Fernandes on the second floor. The man had to be in his mid-eighties, but that hadn’t stopped Lou from helping the elderly gentleman meet Ms. Wield for coffee every Sunday afternoon. Theo didn’t have the time nor the patience to dive into a meaningful conversation about the pros and cons of a relationship with Lou.

As for Mia, Theo had explained at dinner last night that an emergency at work had taken place, followed up by a text message that he would be unavailable for the foreseeable future. He needed time to reevaluate the people in his life after what had transpired with Sylvie last night.

Sylvie had let someone into her home to take care of her father, and a foundation of trust had been built in those two months. Who was to say that Jacob hadn’t convinced others to do the same to the rest of the team?

For the first time since Theo had met Brook, he was coming to realize just how hard it had been for her to lower her guard. She had spent her entire life on edge, and now those she had let close had to do the same.

For the time being, it was best to trust no one.

CHAPTER TEN

Sylvie Deering

February 2024

Saturday — 1:14 am

THE DISTANT BEEPING BECAME somewhat of a beacon to consciousness. The steady rhythm of mechanical noises was like an out-of-tune song playing in the background, pulling Sylvie to the surface. She wanted it to stop, but the incessant sound kept droning on and on until she tried to lift her hands to cover her ears.

Pain exploded from her core.

Sylvie relaxed her muscles and forced herself to lie still while she tried to organize her thoughts, which proved to be rather difficult. Her limbs were heavy, almost numb. It was as if they were encased in lead. After what seemed like an eternity, she was able to slowly lift her lashes until she found herself staring at a stark white ceiling.

Gaining sight only enhanced the infuriating noise.

While the smallest movements were extremely challenging, Sylvie

managed to turn her head toward the sound. Her vision was blurred without her glasses. Still, the IV bag seemed empty, and it took even longer for her to realize that it didn't belong to her father. It was as if her mind had a persistent itch that she couldn't scratch. Vague fragments floated to the surface, but the memories were never quite within reach.

"Miss Deering?" A nurse suddenly appeared by Sylvie's bedside, her expression calm and reassuring as she changed out the IV bag. "How are you feeling right now?"

Sylvie tried to reply, but she couldn't get her voice to respond. She even found that her eyelids drifted closed several times until she couldn't open them anymore. The nurse had mentioned something about surgery, but nothing registered until Sylvie tried once more to stay on the right side of consciousness.

The nurse was no longer at Sylvie's bedside.

At least the annoying beeps had been silenced, but nothing explained why she was in the hospital. Eventually, the throbbing ache in her stomach seemed to activate a switch in her memory. Maybe it was because she was lying so flat in bed, but she could literally feel her rapid heartbeat thudding against her chest. With every inhalation and exhalation, the tightness around her ribs provided a sharp counterpoint to the pain in her abdomen.

Erin Smith had stabbed Sylvie multiple times in the stomach. Her father had tried to warn her that there was something wrong with the woman. Sylvie had confronted the aide, believing that her father had simply misunderstood something that had taken place earlier that day. He had been so confused lately, but that was to be expected at this late stage of his care.

Sylvie didn't know how long she had been unconscious.

A day?

Two?

A week?

Flashes of Erin Smith's face contorting in anger had numerous questions swirling around Sylvie's mind like leaves caught in a storm. The desire for answers was stronger than her need to sleep. She squeezed her eyes shut in an attempt to bring forth the missing pieces of memory.

"...and my father is simply concerned, that's all," Sylvie said as she stepped into the living room. She wasn't about to have such a discussion in front of her dad, not when he was in such a fragile state. The last thing he needed was to become upset and deteriorate even further. "I'm sure you are

very good at your job. We both know that he has been confused lately, but that level of agitation is just not good for him right now. It's no problem for me to call the agency and request someone else with more experience in hospice care. I'll make sure they know that you've done nothing wrong."

From what Sylvie's father had told her just a few moments ago, there was something more going on than the woman not knowing how to clean a bed sore. According to him, Erin Smith had absolutely no idea how to do anything. Granted, his pain medication kept him sleeping most of the time. It was still better to err on the side of caution.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Erin said, her tone sharp and confrontational.

"Please keep your voice down," Sylvie warned, not appreciating the way Erin had spoken to her. Her resolve to call the agency only strengthened, and she was glad that her father had finally expressed his doubts about the woman's abilities. "My father needs his rest, and he—"

"Your father hasn't the slightest idea what is going on, and I haven't done anything wrong," Erin exclaimed loudly as she stood next to the counter in Sylvie's kitchen. The way she slammed her hand down on the hard surface caused a few of the dirty dishes to rattle in the sink. "He's on enough morphine to knock out an elephant. I see it all the time. There is no reason to call the agency."

Sylvie was done having this conversation. She wasn't sure what had taken place during the day to cause such a dramatic shift in the woman's demeanor, but it was time for her to leave the premises.

"Erin, I appreciate everything that you've done for my father in the past couple of months, but I think it's best that he has someone else stay with him on the days that I can't be here."

Sylvie braced herself when she saw a physical change come over Erin. It would have been hard to describe such a transformation to anyone, but there was literal hatred in the woman's expression.

Sylvie stood her ground.

"You should leave, Erin," Sylvie advised after hearing her father call out her name. "Now."

"Are you really going to believe a drug-addled, dying man over a professional health aide?"

"Erin, I'm not going to ask you again," Sylvie warned, doing her best to remain composed. Her father once again called out her name before asking if

everything was alright. *“Like I said, I’ll call the agency and have someone else come sit with my father. There is no reason to escalate this situation.”*

Sylvie had placed her purse on the coffee table when she had arrived home, so she turned and walked across the area rug to retrieve her phone. Her father’s suspicions had now aroused her own, because there was something obviously wrong with Erin’s mental state. Sylvie found herself somewhat irritated that the agency would employ someone who lacked the experience to care for a terminal patient.

“You had to ruin it, didn’t you? You bitch,” Erin said, her voice a lot closer than Sylvie was comfortable with as she pulled the phone out of her purse. She spun around to confront Erin, not expecting to see a glint of silver in the woman’s hand. Before Sylvie could react, Erin lunged toward her. “You wouldn’t answer my questions, you wouldn’t talk about Jacob Walsh, and now I’ve wasted two months changing shitty adult diapers for nothing.”

Each statement had been punctuated by another violent stab, causing Sylvie to cry out in horror. As the third attack came at her with such blinding speed, Sylvie’s instincts kicked in and she finally managed to grab ahold of Erin’s wrist.

Oddly enough, there was no pain.

In the back of Sylvie’s mind, she knew it was due to shock, but she didn’t care. It gave her the ability to reach for her weapon, which was holstered on her waist. Erin had predicted such a move, and she quickly attempted to stop Sylvie from succeeding in pulling her firearm from its holster.

The two of them were locked in a desperate struggle for control, and Sylvie needed to win. This was life or death, and she wasn’t ready to die. She pushed forward, knowing that Erin wouldn’t expect her to intentionally shove the knife deeper into her stomach. Such an unanticipated movement allowed Sylvie to aim and squeeze the trigger.

Sylvie gasped as the memory slammed into her.

A single tear slid down her temple.

How could she have missed such glaring signs?

Erin Smith had peppered Sylvie with questions regarding S&E Investigations for weeks. And yes, some had even been about Jacob Walsh. She had professed time and again about being a true crime fanatic. Sylvie had fallen for the excuse.

She had done her best to steer the attempts to cover such topics in another direction, though. Force of habit, maybe. She had never once suspected there

was something more going on than just morbid fascination.

Sylvie couldn't remember much after discharging her weapon, so she wasn't sure if Erin Smith was dead or maybe even in another room at the same hospital.

What if the woman hadn't been hurt at all?

Sylvie needed to know that her father was okay. She had come to terms with his terminal diagnosis, but dying from pancreatic cancer was completely different than being murdered by some psychopath. Needing answers to all the burning questions, she attempted to reach for the call button. Surely one of the nurses had put the device within reach.

She managed to turn her head without too much pain now that she had been awake for a few minutes. Her gaze landed on someone sleeping in the corner, and she smiled through the foggy pain. Even without her glasses, she recognized the individual by her bedside.

Bit.

Her best friend.

He was slumped in a chair, his grey hat askew on the top of his head. She squinted to make out the laptop that was precariously balanced on his lap. One sudden move would no doubt have it landing on the tiled floor below.

"Bit," Sylvie managed to whisper, her voice barely audible as she tried to rouse him. It was difficult to get her voice to properly work. There was a soreness in her throat that hadn't been there before, and she recalled the nurse saying something about surgery. She made a feeble attempt at clearing her throat enough to try again. "Bit."

Considering that Bit survived on caffeine drinks and Skittles, it wasn't a shock when he suddenly sat straight up and managed to save his laptop from crashing to the ground all in one motion.

"Little T? You're awake," Bit exclaimed as he quickly stood and slammed the lid to his laptop closed before setting the device on one of those large trays on wheels. "Don't move. I'll get the nurse."

It took Sylvie a couple of times to get Bit's attention, but he finally came to a stop by her side instead of running out the door. She held up her hand, not expecting him to grab ahold of hers so tight.

She didn't have the heart to tell him to ease up.

"Erin Smith," Sylvie said before pausing to lick her dry lips. "Is she alive?"

Bit seemed torn on whether to answer her. That, in and of itself, painted a grim picture. It was her turn to hold on tight to him when he would have tried

to change the subject...or leave.

His blue eyes kept flicking toward the door.

It was then that Sylvie noticed the individual outside her window.

“Bit, is that a federal agent outside my door?”

“I should really go and get a nurse. Do you need more pain medication? What about—”

“Bit, the nurse already knows that I’m awake.” Sylvie had to stop when another sharp pain seemed to pierce straight through to her back. She managed to breathe through the discomfort until only a dull throbbing set up residence. “I spoke to her. Right now, I need you to tell me the truth. Is Erin Smith dead?”

“No.” Bit used his free hand to straighten out his knitted hat. “Erin Smith isn’t even Erin Smith. The real Erin Smith was found dead inside her own deep freezer.”

Sylvie needed time to process what Bit was saying, because she couldn’t wrap her mind around the information. If what he was relaying to her was the truth, that meant she hadn’t done enough due diligence on her father’s care.

Bit’s words implied that she had let a killer into her apartment.

Sylvie’s chest tightened, and it became a lot more difficult to breathe.

“The woman’s name is Lorena Dobbs. Jacob somehow met up with her when he was in Idaho searching for Sarah Evanston.” Bit never once let go of Sylvie’s hand as he continued to fill her in on what had taken place since her attack. It was all she could do to get enough oxygen in her lungs. “We’re not sure how, but Jacob convinced Dobbs to find a way into one of our lives. General Elliott confirmed this from Jacob himself during a meeting at the federal prison. Anyway, we’re still searching for her. Theo has barely slept since everything happened, and I’ve been scouring the city through the street cameras. Lorena Dobbs knows how to avoid them. Oh, and don’t worry about your father. He’s in good hands. Arden is staying at your apartment until you’re released from the hospital, and we triple-checked the health aide’s identity who was sent over to help out. We’ve got everything covered, Little T.”

Something was wrong with the picture that Bit had painted, but it was proving quite difficult to keep her thoughts in order. It was as if her body wanted to shut down again. She recalled her father’s IV having a timer to deliver his pain medication, so maybe the nurses had done the same for her.

“I’m right here, Little T.” Sylvie was almost certain she felt his warm lips

on her forehead, but by the time she had opened her eyes, Bit was in the same position as before. “You’re safe.”

“Brook.” Sylvie had managed to figure out what had been bothering her, and it was the fact that Bit hadn’t mentioned Brook at all. “Where is Brook? Is she okay?”

Bit wasn’t answering her questions.

There was something that he wasn’t telling her. Something important, and she needed to know before her mind and body shut down. Her heart was beating hard against her chest, and she couldn’t get it to stop. Those annoying alarms began to go off once more, and she attempted to hold on tighter to Bit’s hand.

Sadly, she sensed that she was losing his grip.

Sylvie could hear him say her name, but she could no longer respond. The draw of the darkness was much too strong, and she couldn’t stop herself from being pulled into the abyss of safety.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lorena Dobbs

February 2024

Saturday — 5:06 am

A BONE-CHILLING BREEZE SLICED through the alleyway. The only bonus with this type of winter weather was that it was too cold for the dumpsters to give off a rank odor. There were lights overhead the side entrances of the buildings, but they weren't a hindrance. Technically, the dim illumination from both were perfect for what needed to be done.

Lorena's breath formed little clouds, reminding her that she hadn't had a cigarette in days. Maybe she could bum one from the guy she was about to approach. She peered around one of the large metal bins, but the area near the doorway was still unoccupied. She bit back a groan as she leaned against the cold metal side of the dumpster.

The frigid air wasn't helping the pain on her left side.

For some reason, keeping her arm close to her ribs helped stem the sharp sensation from becoming so bad that it sparked her nausea. It would have

been a lot easier had she been able to enter the vestibule like she had the other day. The building had those nice heating vents in the ceiling. Unfortunately, two officers were currently parked out front across the street.

Lorena knew their routines better than they did themselves – when they sipped coffee from steaming cups or when they lazily scrolled through their phones. She had also learned the patterns of those who served on the staff of the building, specifically where and when they took their smoke breaks.

The alleyway between buildings was the employees' usual hangout, even in this weather. A good ten minutes had passed before a man exited the side door. He was running late today, but at least he already had a cigarette in his mouth. All he had to do was take a lighter to the end.

By the time she came around the side of the dumpster, he was already puffing away on his cigarette to the point that plumes of smoke were rising in the air. She made sure the hood of the black jacket that she had chosen to wear today framed her face. At least this jacket didn't reek like the last one.

"Hey there," Lorena called out loud enough to be heard over the hum of the city's traffic. "I stopped by earlier to see Brook Sloane but got turned away."

The man exhaled another cloud of smoke as he squinted at her with tired eyes. He was sizing her up, so she decided to throw him off a bit.

"You wouldn't have an extra one of those, would you?"

The guy put his cigarette in between his lips so that he could search his jacket. He finally found where he had stored the pack, but he was playing her. He was trying to see her face, so she feigned that the cold wind was too much for her. She even made sure to chatter her teeth and stomp her feet while she waited for him to produce the cigarettes.

All the jostling made her left side hurt even worse.

Fortunately, it wasn't long before he was holding it out for her. She used her right hand, shifting with the motion so that the light wouldn't illuminate her face. Since her pain level had ratcheted higher, all he had managed to do was make her angry.

"I was just looking for some clarification," Lorena said sharply as she took the lighter. Keeping her left arm close to her side, she managed to flick the lighter. The first inhalation was like breathing in heaven. "Did the old man in the lobby mean that Brook was home and not taking visitors, or that she wasn't home at all? She has some information for me, and she told me to stop by since she wasn't going into the office today."

Lorena continued to hug her side discreetly as she spoke, pain slicing

through her with every puff of the cigarette. She couldn't go to the hospital for stitches, but the steri strips weren't doing a good enough job of keeping the wound closed. Maybe she should superglue the injury shut. She'd seen that done on television before.

The guy flicked his ashes onto the ground before answering, and she was getting the sense that he didn't believe her story. She fought the urge to put out the ash end of her cigarette using his face.

"Look, lady," he began with a nonapologetic shrug. "I can't be giving out that kind of information. Residents' privacy and all. If you want to go around to the front, my shift starts in around fifteen minutes. I can have Charlie call up to Ms. Sloane and see if she answers."

"Thanks for your help." Lorena didn't care that her voice dripped with sarcasm. "And for the cigarette. I'll get in touch with Brook another way."

Lorena turned away from the guy, making sure that her face couldn't be seen in the light. She walked back down the alley, not going near the front of the building. She had stolen a car, which meant that she had to park a couple of blocks away.

Her options were limited in what she could do next.

Lorena could have hitchhiked her way out of the city, heading west. After all, Jacob had given her strict instructions on how to kill Sylvie Deering if their plan deteriorated, but Lorena had acted on instinct. Nothing had gone as planned, and he would have told her to lay low for a month or two.

Lorena didn't want to go against Jacob's wishes, but it wasn't like she had a choice. It wasn't her fault that Brooklyn Sloane had made this a game of cat and mouse. Lorena sure as hell wasn't the mouse, either.

She couldn't leave.

There were still ways to reach Brook, and Lorena wouldn't stop until Jacob's sister was caught in a death trap.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Theo Neville

February 2024

Saturday — 5:22 am

THE STERILE SCENT OF antiseptic was strong, and the sharp odor brought back unwanted memories that Theo could do without right now. His own time in the hospital after the injury to his right eye had been life-altering. Even though he wouldn't change the course his life had taken afterward, there were times that it was still hard to swallow that his dream of being a federal agent had been cut short.

The ICU nurses' station was positioned in the center of the double hallways. There was an air of quiet efficiency as nurses and doctors conferred over charts and medications. There was even an unspoken rhythm between the staff as they each kept track of their patient's vitals and recorded every detail into computers that were stationed strategically inside the rooms and some even on dull grey trays with wheels.

As Theo approached Sylvie's room, the federal agent stationed at the door

merely nodded his greeting. It was the same man who had been posted Thursday night when Theo had driven back to the hospital. The agent stepped aside without a word, his gaze traveling down the hallway toward the elevator bank.

“I thought you could use a pick me up,” Theo said softly as he walked over to where Bit had set up a small working area. There were now three laptops positioned on the windowsill, along with the one in Bit’s lap. He quickly set it aside for the bag of fast food and a can of his favorite energy drink. “Any change?”

Bit had called Theo around four hours ago with an update. Sylvie had regained consciousness for a while, and she had even had the wherewithal to pepper Bit with numerous questions. Theo closed the distance to her bedside, taking in her pallid features. The numerous tubes and wires didn’t help paint an optimistic picture. He reached out and brushed a strand of hair from her forehead.

“Not really.” Bit dug into the bag as if he hadn’t had food in days. Theo knew that to be false, especially since Bit’s sister had been texting Theo with regular updates. “There was talk about moving Little T out of ICU, but one of the cardiac specialists won’t sign off on the transfer yet. He wants to monitor her for another twenty-four hours.”

They both fell quiet, more so because Bit was practically inhaling the large container of fries. Theo wouldn’t be able to get back to the hospital until sometime later tonight. He and Detective Beeson were in the process of setting up a grid to make the hunt for Lorena Dobbs more efficient.

With several officers from other jurisdictions joining in the search, it would benefit everyone to have a system. Once those arrangements were in place, Theo would join in the search.

“Big T?”

Theo could hear in Bit’s voice what he wanted to discuss. Brook’s actions were a sore subject, and the conversation could be shelved for a later time. Unfortunately, Bit was able to get his question out before Theo could stop him.

“I don’t think Boss has gone far.”

“Why do say that?” Theo asked cautiously as he remained focused on Sylvie.

“I’ve been keeping an eye on all her devices,” Bit said around a large bite of food. Theo glanced over his shoulder to make sure he had heard the

statement correctly, because it wasn't easy for him to distinguish the mumbled words. "They are all offline, but for about ten seconds, her tablet was turned on at the coffee shop across from the condominium. Speaking hypothetically, I most likely would have accessed the café's security camera after such a momentous discovery."

"And what do you think you would have found on the footage?" Theo inquired, keeping in a role that wouldn't give anyone a reason to make a valid threat against Bit's freedom. Theo and Brook had often spoken about the numerous scopes aimed at them from different angles. One of them had come true and landed Sylvie in the hospital fighting for her life. "Hypothetically, of course."

"No trace of her."

Theo had already turned his attention back toward Sylvie. There was no reason to continue the conversation if Bit hadn't been able to locate Brook. Theo would have given anything to remain at Sylvie's side until she was officially released from the ICU, but he didn't have that luxury...not if they all wanted to avoid another attack.

"Graham has been at the office helping comb through Lorena Dobbs' initial case file. He's attempting to piece together anything that might help us understand her motive for helping Jacob." Theo walked over to where the three laptops were lined up on the wide windowsill. Bit didn't have to worry about any of them overheating with the cold seeping through the glass pane. "No sign of Dobbs?"

"No." Bit tossed the empty fry container back in the bag before focusing on what was left of his bacon cheeseburger. Theo didn't miss the way Bit checked on Sylvie every five seconds, though. "It's winter, so it's easy to wear a hood that covers most of her face. I've pinpointed the puffer jacket that Dobbs was wearing after you told me about her stopping by the condominium. It's white and has a matching hood lined with black faux fur. Unfortunately, it's not the same jacket that she had when leaving Sylvie's apartment."

Theo's phone vibrated in his coat pocket. He had to remove his gloves to reach his cell phone. Glancing at the screen, he recognized the number. The call could only mean one thing.

"Bit, pull up the security feeds for the condominium," Theo directed before answering the call. Theo had made certain they had the owner's permission yesterday for just this purpose. Thankfully, there was no hypothetical

scenario to insert in this situation. “Neville.”

“Mr. Neville, it’s Dennis Baranski. Lou told me to give you a call if a blonde woman showed up here looking for Ms. Sloane. Let’s just say that the woman wasn’t too happy to hear that Ms. Sloane wasn’t taking visitors.” Dennis paused to say good morning to someone before returning to their conversation. “Anyway, this lady wanted specifics. You know, was Ms. Sloane home and instructed not to be bothered, or was Ms. Sloane not in the building at all? I explained that I couldn’t give out that information. It wouldn’t surprise me if the woman returns later today. Unfortunately, I couldn’t get a good look at her face.”

She being Lorena Dobbs.

Theo should have gotten a call from the officer stationed in an unmarked vehicle outside the building. After discussing the possibility of Dobbs returning to the condominium, Detective Beeson had agreed that they should have someone monitoring the foot traffic. Dobbs must have spotted the car.

“Dennis, did the woman try and enter the building?”

“Oh, no. Sorry for the confusion. I was taking a smoke break out in the alleyway when she came up from behind. I assumed that she was using the alleyway as a shortcut. It’s a cold one out there, Mr. Neville. Now would probably be a good time for me to stop smoking.”

Theo thought back to Bit’s phone call when he gave in-depth details about his conversation with Sylvie. One of her first questions had been if Erin Smith was still alive, which gave credence to Arden’s theory that Lorena might have been grazed or actually shot. No one matching her description had turned up at the hospitals, clinics, or even the local veterinarians.

“Dennis, did you notice anything odd about her? Did she seem in pain? Have a limp? Have any bandages visible?”

“Come to think of it, the lady was favoring her left side. Kept her left arm close to her body while using her right hand to keep her hood close to her face. She bummed a cigarette from me. I tried to see her face, but it was pretty dark outside, even with the light outside the side entrance. The wind out there is terrible, at least fifteen miles an hour. Maybe even more through the alleyways.”

Dennis was a talker, and he could ramble on for hours if one wasn’t careful. Theo quickly thanked the man for his time, reiterating that he should call if the woman approached him again. Bit hadn’t bothered with the three laptops on the windowsill to gain access to the condominium’s security

cameras. Instead, he had used the one that hadn't left his side since Theo had entered Sylvie's room.

"There," Bit said as he pointed to the small screen. It was too difficult to make out the frame of the person walking in the alleyway let alone have the software pick up her actual identity. "Black jacket this time, and it's one of those long ones that go down to the ankle."

Theo didn't hesitate to place a call to Detective Beeson. He answered on the second ring.

"Beeson, can you send someone to check out the local shelters? I believe Dobbs went to one looking for numerous jackets. She's evading the security cameras that we have access to, and I think she knows we have Brook's building under surveillance. Have an officer show her picture to the volunteers at all the shelters in the city. See if anyone recalls her stopping by for winter coats. Hell, maybe we'll get lucky and find that she is staying at one of them, too."

Theo glanced out the interior window of Sylvie's room to find one of the nurses glaring in his direction. He never understood why a cell phone couldn't be used in a hospital setting. Plus, there were enough computers in the room using more internet access than his phone.

"If they get confirmation, all I need is an address and a time range of when Dobbs was at a shelter," Theo advised the detective. "I'll obtain a warrant and then have our tech specialist confirm her identity."

Such a lead would go a long way in trying to locate Dobbs. She had become so focused on finding Brook that a mistake was likely to happen sooner rather than later.

"Are you friends with a federal judge, Neville? You better be if you want to comb through the footage of a place like that. Those shelters sure as hell won't give it up willingly," Detective Beeson warned, having no idea that Theo and Bit had already crossed those lines. Theo would still attempt to follow protocol, even if it meant using Supervisory Special Agent Harden's contacts. "I guess it's worth a shot, though. Are you headed this way? I have maps of the neighborhoods from those listings you gave me."

"I'll be there in thirty minutes." Theo disconnected the call, still ignoring the pointed look that he was receiving from the nurse. As much as he would have liked to stay, he needed to keep advancing the investigation. "Bit, where is Paula?"

Bit had just shoved the last bite of his bacon cheeseburger into his mouth.

Theo got the sense that Bit wasn't too put out over not being able to answer the question.

"Please tell me that you haven't involved Paula in this case." Theo's gaze fell on Sylvie. His concern for her hadn't been eased in the least. She might have regained consciousness for a time, but her not being cleared after a cardiac incident raised other concerns. "Your sister should be here with you, Bit."

"I'm fine," Bit countered defensively. The way he adjusted his knitted cap told a different story. "And Paula just went out for some coffee."

Theo rubbed his left eye in frustration. He didn't have to ask which coffee shop was the intended destination.

"Fine," Bit relented a little too easily. His ability to do so was the reason that Theo never wanted him taken into federal custody. Bit would go down, and he would do so on his own to protect everyone else. "When I noticed that Boss' tablet connected to the internet, I decided to send Paula to the coffee shop. Boss is too smart to make that kind of mistake if she wants to remain off the grid. It was a message to me, Big T. I know it was."

"I won't lie to you, Bit." Theo lowered his hand as he concentrated on his colleague and friend. He didn't have time to argue with Bit, and doing so wouldn't change the circumstances, anyway. "I'm angry. I'm angry that we allowed Jacob to get the upper hand. I'm angry that Lorena Dobbs was able to infiltrate Sylvie's life as if we haven't taken precautions for the past few years. Most of all, I'm angry with Brook for allowing Jacob to win. She up and disappeared because she felt responsible for what happened to Sylvie. I know that Brook has her reasons for going radio silent, but I don't have to like them. With that said, I still trust her. I don't know what the hell is going through her mind right now, but I have faith that she's working right alongside us. She damn well better be. In the meantime, it's our job to not only track down the woman who put Sylvie in that hospital bed, but to also keep everyone else safe."

"Fine. I'll call Paula and tell her to come back to the hospital." Bit crossed his arms in disappointment. "All she was going to do was go inside, grab a coffee, and see if she spotted Boss at one of the tables. I've also been keeping track of my sister's movements the entire way."

Theo didn't doubt that Bit had made his sister's safety a priority, but Brook wouldn't want them wasting time and effort on locating her. Besides, she would surface when she was damn good and ready.

“I know you don’t want to hear this, but Jacob’s decision to come at us from a different angle has altered the stakes. Sylvie almost lost her life, Brook took herself out of the equation, and we don’t know who we can trust.” Theo settled his gaze on Sylvie. In a perfect world, the entire team would be here by her side. “Between you and me? I can’t even bring myself to call Mia back after I left her sitting at the restaurant on Thursday night.”

“Big T, I am so glad you shared that with me. I thought it was just me. I haven’t been able to return Zoey’s calls or texts, either,” Bit admitted with relief as he walked over to stand beside Sylvie’s bedside. He slipped his hand into hers. “I can’t bring myself to trust anyone else but my sister and the team. I know it’s not fair to Zoey, but no one else understands. This just feels like it’s...”

“A family matter,” Theo finished for him.

“Without its matriarch.”

“Bit?” Theo waited to ensure that he had Bit’s full attention. It was time to get to work, and neither one of them would do so by continuing to wallow in self-pity. “When Brook does decide to return to us, I suggest for your own wellbeing that you not mention you think of her as a matriarch. I think there’s been enough bloodshed, don’t you?”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Arden Hinnish

February 2024

Saturday — 8:28 am

THE APARTMENT WAS QUIET except for the soft ticking of a wall clock in the shape of a sun on the wall above the sofa. The faint noise could be heard in the kitchen as Arden filled the coffee filter with ground beans that he had delivered from the grocery store. He had given his word to Brook that he wouldn't leave Nigel Deering's bedside, and he would keep his promise. She had enough on her plate without adding someone else's fate to that list who was already destined to cross over within weeks.

Arden continued to hold out hope that Nigel wouldn't take his last breath until Sylvie was able to return home and say her goodbyes. The man was very weak, and the toll it had taken on him to hear the sounds of his only daughter being attacked in the other room had been severe. While the heavy doses of morphine for the pain kept Nigel sleeping most of the day and night, he would always ask about Sylvie during those brief moments when he was

alert.

Pressing the brew button on the coffee machine, the gradual hum eventually eclipsed the ticking of the clock. Arden glanced toward the bedroom door where Carter Dunbar was in the middle of giving Nigel Deering a sponge bath. Carter had arrived at seven o'clock this morning. Arden had monitored the health aide's schedule, and he was very prompt and efficient at his job. Carter was also empathetic to Nigel's needs.

Arden's phone buzzed on the counter, and he picked it up to find a text message from Bit. It was quickly followed by another from Theo. Both updates offered Arden little comfort. Sylvie had yet to awaken after the cardiac incident, and Lorena Dobbs was still on the run.

"Brook, I hope you know what you're doing," Arden whispered to himself.

He had started talking to himself after the death of his wife. As a matter of fact, Arden and Sylvie had a previous conversation about adopting cats from the animal shelter. It would be nice to have a kitten to take care of at home. Not that Arden hadn't crowned himself the team's caretaker. They all needed a little TLC in their own way.

Arden set his phone back on the counter before collecting two mugs from the cupboard. Sylvie was a tea lover, so there were many teacups to be had. Arden had discovered heavy mugs on the top shelf that had needed to be washed out from having collected a thin layer of dust. There were so many teacups that he made a mental note to buy one of those shelves that displayed the more precious ones for her birthday. He refused to even consider that she wouldn't pull through this ordeal.

"Sylvie is a tough cookie, that one," Arden murmured right before the bedroom door opened to reveal Carter. The man was smiling, which offered hope that Nigel would have a good day. "Is Nigel up for a small breakfast?"

"Nigel would love a cup of tea," Carter revealed as he walked over to where he had set down his belongings. In one of the bags was a tablet that he recorded his completed tasks for the agency. Arden figured it was similar to the software that Bit had created for the team, though Bit might take offense at such a comparison. "He was adamant that you use milk and not creamer."

"I can see where Sylvie gets her preferences from," Arden said with a matching smile. He motioned for Carter to take a seat on one of the stools at the island. "I'll pour you some fresh coffee after I put on the kettle."

Sylvie had two kettles for the stovetop and an electric one off to the side. Arden wasn't sure why she had so many, but who was he to argue about such

appliances? He had offered to teach her how to use the one at the office, but she didn't seem to have any inclination to take him up on his offer. If he were being honest with himself, he preferred it that way.

"How is everyone doing at the office?" Arden asked as he busied himself with filling the kettle with fresh water. "I know you said that you don't know a lot of your coworkers on a personal level, but surely Erin Smith's death has hit close to home."

"We don't have a workplace like that, Mr. Hinnish."

"Arden, please."

"The agency works as a middleman," Carter explained as he made himself comfortable on the stool. He had his tablet in front of him and was already entering in Nigel's vitals and other information from earlier. "We have monthly meetings, and even then, not everyone goes. It's a terrible thing that happened to Erin, but I don't believe that I even had a one-on-one conversation with her."

Arden was beginning to understand why Lorena Dobbs had chosen Sylvie to insert herself into the lives of the team. Jacob had been in federal prison for quite a while with no contact with anyone from the outside. Everyone was in agreement that the arrangement between Jacob and Lorena had to have been made well in advance.

"Here you go." Arden set down a mug of coffee in front of Carter. "Do you know if the police interviewed everyone at the agency?"

"I spoke to an officer over the phone, but I told him the same thing that I just told you regarding the inner workings of the agency. Everything is pretty much done online. I log in, I record the patient's information throughout the day, and then I log out. I also submit my mileage to and from the patient's residence. I've been to four monthly meetings in the past year, and that was mostly due to conflicts in my schedule. The last time I saw Erin Smith was about five months ago."

An idea came to Arden after hearing Carter describe how the agency ran its business model. Maybe the officer hadn't had enough information regarding the situation. There was also the chance that the officer hadn't felt the need to dig deeper since they were already aware of the suspect's name.

Everyone was well aware that Lorena Dobbs had impersonated Erin Smith to get close to Sylvie Deering. The police wouldn't be focused on the how. They would be fixated on locating Dobbs. Add in that S&E Investigations had jurisdiction over the case and the police were now assisting the team,

then it stood to reason that only so much effort would be put into the interviews.

“Carter, have you ever seen this woman?” Arden had asked the question before he had pulled up Lorena Dobb’s picture from four years ago. Bit had uploaded the photograph to their software program, and to access said program, one needed to have a triple-factor code. Once Arden had finally succeeded in locating the image, he slid his phone across the counter. “Lorena Dobbs is the woman suspected of killing Erin Smith.”

Carter had been holding a stylus in his right hand, and he stilled his motions upon studying Lorena’s features. He slowly set the writing utensil next to his tablet to draw the phone close to him.

“I know her,” Carter muttered in confusion. He finally glanced up from the display on the phone to meet Arden’s gaze and reiterated his statement in disbelief. “I know her. I mean, I met her maybe three or four months ago at a bar. She asked me what I did for a living, and we started talking about the pros and cons of working for certain healthcare agencies. This is my third one, but I like it the most due to the agency dealing with home healthcare instead of nursing facilities.”

Carter seemed to have difficulty believing that he had spoken to a murderer. Either that, or maybe he was now realizing just how close he came to being a victim himself.

“Did Lorena ask you about Erin Smith?”

“Not that I recall.” Carter was still staring at the phone as if the woman could jump out from the lighted display. “It was more about the day-to-day routine. I remember her mentioning something about liking not having to deal with coworkers, and I told her that it was the perfect job for her.”

Carter lost all color in his face. He leaned back on the stool and covered his mouth in shock. It hadn’t taken him long to realize that Lorena had been gathering information, and his answers had basically provided her with the clearance to choose someone who lived a life where no one would notice if they went missing.

Arden had been going to suggest that they call either Detective Beeson or Theo, but the two men were working on grid patterns of the surrounding D.C. neighborhoods. It would be pointless to interrupt them when Arden could take Carter Dunbar’s statement and upload it to their software program.

Working investigations from the field wasn’t something Arden had done since well before his wife had passed away. He wouldn’t say that he didn’t

miss it, but he had been content at the office. There was something very cathartic about taking care of the others. He was sure a shrink would say it was because he and his wife had never had children. There could be some truth to that theory, but there was something very special about the team members of S&E Investigations. Their tenacious fight for justice stemmed from Brook's resolve to help others obtain what she hadn't been able to have until very recently.

"Carter, I'd like for you to do something for me." Arden had spent part of yesterday getting to know where Sylvie kept everything. Her junk drawer on the far side of the island contained discarded pens and pencils, as well as numerous notepads. He took a moment to grab one of each. "Write down everything you can remember from that night. Don't leave out any details, not even the smallest most minuscule gesture that Lorena might have made while you were speaking to her. I'll see to it that Nigel has a cup of tea to settle his stomach."

"Shouldn't we call the police?" Carter said hesitantly, even while reaching for the pen.

"I'm with S&E Investigations, and we have jurisdiction over the investigation," Arden explained with a jolt of pride right as the kettle began to sing. He would contribute to the investigation as best he could until their lives went back to normal. For everything that Brook had given them in her own way, the least they could do was return the favor. "I'll be the one taking your statement. In the meantime, I have a phone call to make."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Graham Elliott

February 2024

Saturday — 9:54 pm

GRAHAM'S HAND LINGERED ON the cold, brass knob of his front door. While the lock had been secured, the alarm system hadn't given its usual thirty-second warning. Instead, a strange silence echoed throughout the main house. There was an unmistakable thickness to the air. Someone was inside his home, and that someone had been able to disable the security system without tripping an alert to his phone.

Without removing his dress coat, he reached under the thick material and quietly palmed the butt of his firearm. He hadn't been quiet while unlocking the front door. He had also flipped on the foyer lights the moment he crossed the threshold. If someone was still inside, they were certainly aware of his presence. Such knowledge didn't stop him from soundlessly closing the door behind him.

It made no sense for someone to turn off the alarm yet lock the front door.

Graham remained still long enough to try and hear if there was noise coming from a specific part of his home. The large structure wouldn't allow him to know if someone was on the other side of the property, but he would be able to clear each room along the way.

He cautiously made his way toward the small hallway that led into a formal living room, but he came to a complete stop at the entrance to his office. The double doors were closed, which he had done himself before departing for his business trip last week.

Seeing as he hadn't bothered to put on his gloves for the short walk from the driveway to the house, he was able to soak in the warmth that radiated from the pewter door lever. Someone had taken the time to create a fire in the hearth. While he wouldn't relax his stance until confirmation was made, some of the tension eased from his shoulders as he guardedly turned the handle.

"You certainly took your time coming home."

Brook stood in front of the blazing fire that she had obviously started a couple of hours ago given the amount of ash underneath the grate. The flickering flames illuminated her face, casting a beautiful glow on her features. Her long black hair cascaded over her left shoulder, and the soft curves of her heart-shaped face were accentuated by the warm orange hues.

Graham's relief was overwhelming as he holstered his weapon and crossed the floor until he reached her. She would have had the knowledge to turn off his security system without having the software alert him to it being offline. She also would have been careful enough not to turn on any lights that could be seen from the front of the house regardless that the entire estate was enclosed with brick walls, pillars, and a wrought iron gate to keep trespassers away from the main house.

"You scared the hell out of me," Graham murmured forcefully as he pulled her into his embrace. He held onto her tight as his mind finally accepted that she was safe and sound inside his home. His previous concerns quickly began to morph into anger. "I'm going to need a minute. Maybe two."

"Take all the time you need," Brook replied softly as she held onto him as tightly as he held her. "I'm sorry it had to be this way, but I had no choice...not if we stand a chance of apprehending Lorena Dobbs."

There were a thousand questions that needed answers, especially with regard to how she even knew Lorena Dobbs' name. Those inquiries would have to wait. He needed to keep Brook close to him a minute longer to give

the gravity of their situation time to settle.

“You couldn’t have used a burner to call me? Anyone else on the team?” Graham did his best to keep his resentment to a minimum, but the tension settling in her back told him that he had been unsuccessful in such an endeavor. “Brooklyn, we thought—”

Graham broke off the statement before clearing his throat.

They pulled away from one another, and he took the time to shrug out of his winter coat. Relief had turned into annoyance, but it would do neither of them any good to rehash her impulsive decision to disappear without a trace.

“You all thought that I’d returned to my old way of life,” Brook said, her voice steady as he turned away to toss his coat onto the couch. He then removed his suit jacket before doing the same to his cuff links, which he then stored in his pocket. There was no disappointment in her voice. He also didn’t detect a hint of remorse. “Graham, please look at me.”

He stood for a minute with his hands on his hips. He needed to contain his emotions so he didn’t say something he would later regret. He had yet to adjust to civilian life. Truthfully, it was so much easier for him to be in that setting. Directives were given, followed, and then executed. The ease with which the military operated was soothing to him.

“I do not doubt that you’ve been helping Theo with the investigation. I’ve been doing the same on my end,” Brook pointed out as she gestured toward the other side of the room.

She had turned the wall behind his desk into a murder board.

Graham found himself struggling to balance his fury at how she had handled the situation with appreciation at the fact that she had chosen his home as a safe haven. Her choice spoke volumes, but her methods of going about her decision didn’t negate the hell that she had put them through these past couple of days.

Brook, on the other hand, seemed to be standing on even ground.

“What is it that stands out about Lorena Dobbs?” Brook asked as if she had been by his side since he had returned home.

“Impulsiveness.”

“What else?”

“Dobbs has trouble containing her anger,” Graham tacked on in a clipped tone, wanting to address her reaction to the situation rather than the situation itself. “Are you not going to ask about Sylvie?”

“Sylvie will be moved out of ICU before dawn,” Brook responded as she

walked across the hand-stitched 18th-century Persian rug. His private office was large enough to have a sitting area in front of a hand-carved cherrywood fireplace with a mantel tucked inside stark white marble tiles. It was hard not to notice the numerous post-it notes stuck to the leatherbound classic novels that lined the built-in bookcases. “Keep going. Lorena Dobbs is reckless, reactive, and...?”

“Obsessive.”

Brook smiled, which was a rarity that he didn’t often get to witness. He couldn’t prevent the slight twitch of his lip in response. She was infuriating, and yet he couldn’t bring himself to express his annoyance at her. At least, not yet.

“Lorena Dobbs is obsessive,” Brook stated matter-of-factly before retracing her steps and taking him by the hand. The way she had avoided discussing Sylvie meant that Brook wasn’t as calm and at peace as she had led him to believe. “With her cover blown and Sylvie no longer a potential funnel of information, Lorena will focus on me. Her main objective is to find out information on Sarah Evanston’s whereabouts. We know that Jacob was confident Evanston would leave the witness protection program after he turned himself into federal custody. If Lorena and Jacob met in Idaho, he has been planning this for a while, which means he believes we know Evanston’s location. Since we’ve made it so that Jacob has no contact with the outside, Lorena wouldn’t know that Evanston went back into the program.”

Graham’s chair had been moved out of the way, and it was obvious that Brook had been using his desk to sit on while studying the murder board. The desk was Thomas Jefferson’s correspondence desk from Monticello. It had been restored with loving care, and she was currently using it as a seat. He rubbed his chin in resignation as reminded himself that she forgot all about the outside world when working a case. Apparently, Thomas Jefferson was included in such exclusion.

“You made it so that Lorena Dobbs has become obsessed with finding you instead of focusing on the other team members,” Graham stated with understanding, though his acceptance of her logic was limited.

The shock of finding her at home was wearing off.

Graham needed her to see the situation from his point of view, as well as the rest of the team’s opinion of her actions.

“Brooklyn, you closed us out. You can see that, right?” Graham inquired as he slipped his hands into his pockets. “You sent a random text to Theo

apologizing for putting him in charge, and then you went silent. Do you understand the strain you put on those relationships?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” Brook took his hand and pulled him in between her legs until her hands could frame his face. “If you had come home Thursday night, you would have found me here. I knew that your mother was on her cruise and that Lacy had the week off. I would never have put them in danger. I didn’t use any electricity that could be seen from outside the walls, and I made sure to send each and every one of you a sign.”

“A sign?” Graham wrapped his fingers around her wrists and brought her hands close to his chest. “What about a phone call? It’s not like—”

Graham brought himself up short.

She turned her hands so that their fingers were laced together. The lengths that Jacob had gone to involve an unhinged young woman who had brutally murdered her parents meant that there was no line he wasn’t willing to cross.

What did Brook know that had escaped the rest of them?

“Bit runs scans on everyone’s phones, tablets, and laptops to make sure there are no viruses or bugs,” Graham reminded her cautiously, knowing from the glint in her eye that he had missed a vital piece of information.

“Not every single day,” Brook countered as she tightened her grip on his hands. “You and the others might believe that my decision to take myself out of the equation was an extreme reaction to the situation, but we have no idea who is watching or listening to us. I’m not talking about our online footprints, either. Look at how easy it was for me to get an orderly to report on a patient. I know every single time that a nurse updates Sylvie’s chart. Jacob might not have access to anyone outside the prison, but we have no idea what kind of network he set up for Lorena before turning himself in.”

“You and I both know that Dobbs is a loner,” Graham said, attempting to poke a hole in Brook’s theory.

“You’re right, but I couldn’t afford to take that chance. Besides, my absence wouldn’t have been drawn out if you had just come home Thursday night. I knew you would probably be at the hospital for a while, but when you didn’t show up by Friday afternoon, I figured that you were staying at the office. That’s about the time that I realized I needed to take some risks. I used one of your vehicles in the garage to drive into the city. I parked in front of the coffee shop, turned on my tablet enough for it to power up completely, and then shut it down before driving away. Bit would have been monitoring all my devices, so he would have seen my location.”

Bit had mentioned that one of Brook's devices had been powered on, but that meant nothing in the grand scheme of things. Graham would have inquired what she had done to reach out to Theo and Arden, but it didn't matter in the long run. Graham had learned long ago that Brook's method of dealing with similar circumstances was to compartmentalize her emotions. She bottled them to use as fuel to move forward. He understood the reason behind such conduct. In her own way, she had attempted to break the cycle.

"Sylvie won't blame you."

Brook's grip loosened on Graham's hands, but he wouldn't allow her to pull away.

"No one blames you for this." Graham paused when she glanced away, zeroing in on the information over his shoulder. He released one of her hands so that he could cup the back of her neck. Only when he had her full attention did he finish his thoughts. "What good does it do if everyone blames themselves in this scenario? Sylvie will believe that she should have known something was wrong with the aide hired to help her father. Bit will take responsibility for ignoring Sylvie's directive to not waste his time when she believed she had done a thorough background on the healthcare agency herself. Theo and Arden will both shoulder some blame for not visiting Sylvie more during a time when her father is mere weeks away from drawing his last breath."

"We could have lost her," Brook whispered hoarsely, blinking furiously to keep her tears at bay. "She could have died."

"According to you and those who appear to owe you countless of favors, it sounds as if Sylvie is in the clear." Graham brushed his thumb across Brook's cheek to capture one of the escaping tears. Given her pallor and the slight tremor in her fingers, he already had an answer about her nourishment. "You've cultivated an amazing group of people, Brooklyn. As I said, the blame for this is solely on Jacob's shoulders. I suppose now is a good time to tell you that I went to see him in person."

Brook closed her eyes upon hearing the latest development.

Graham would have thought that one of her contacts at the prison would have alerted her to such a visit. Such a revelation told him that she had limited her contact with everyone.

Brook had wanted to distance Graham from her brother, but such contact had been inevitable. She had pointed out herself that Jacob had numerous networks and strategies to ensure his release. There would undoubtedly come

a time when one worked in the man's favor.

“Is that where Bit obtained the information about the real estate listings?”

Graham had expected more of a reaction to his announcement.

“Yes.”

Brook parted her lips and slowly exhaled before lifting her lashes. Her blue eyes were filled with concern, but also acceptance. Without a single word, she had welcomed him into a part of her world that was normally reserved for her alone.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Brooklyn Sloane

February 2024

Sunday — 6:48 am

THE DIM LIGHT OF the study cast a faint glow on the murder board. Its intricate web of connections led to photographs, names, and locations. The only aspect that made this investigation different from any other was the fact that they were aware of the suspect's identity. It was strange to have a face and name attached to the person responsible for Sylvie's attack. On one hand, it made crafting a profile of Lorena Dobbs easier with knowledge of her past. The difficulty arose when predicting the woman's future decisions based on a period of time when she had been absent from society.

The room was quiet, save for the tapping of Brook's ring against her empty coffee mug. Graham was in his bedroom getting dressed for the day. She had been up since four o'clock studying the board that she had created days ago based on the limited information that she had been receiving from various sources. She had purchased a burner phone and had been able to snap two

pictures of the software program on her tablet when she had been outside the coffee shop.

Graham had alerted her to the fact that Lorena had been to the condominium twice. If Brook had known that information yesterday, she would have staked out her own home. The fact that Lorena had chosen to track Brook down at home versus the hospital meant that she was aware of Brook's absence.

Obsession was a dangerous preoccupation.

Brook had never witnessed this level of unhinged behavior. It was truly astonishing that Lorena had been able to stay off the radar for so many years. Such conduct must have been very easy for Jacob to recognize, and he must have salivated at such an opportunity.

The disturbance of the stillness around her told of Graham's entrance into the office. She glanced over her shoulder to find him closing the distance between them. He was wearing one of his tailored Italian suits that accentuated his tall, lean frame. He exuded an air of calmness, much like the eye of a storm. His demeanor was a stark contrast to the chaos of Lorena's life that was currently displayed on the wall.

"Any new insights?" Graham asked as he took her empty mug and replaced it with one containing freshly brewed coffee. The warmth of the porcelain was a source of comfort in the face of what was on the day's agenda. "I just got off the phone with Bit, by the way. Sylvie is awake, and she's being transferred to a regular room. It looks as if your contact is providing you with sound information."

Brook lifted the mug in front of her lips to prevent them from betraying her. She had needed to hear that Sylvie's condition had been upgraded this morning. Even though the orderly had relayed what he had overheard from one of the nurses, confirmation meant everything in a situation like this one.

Graham leaned against his desk, the warmth of his body against hers surpassing the heat from her mug by a mile. He had once referred to the worry ring that he had given her as a Christmas gift a couple of years ago as a harness.

He didn't seem to realize that *he* had become her anchor.

"Lorena isn't going to waste time searching for vacant houses in neighborhoods that she hasn't had time to research." Brook paused to take a sip of coffee as she stared at the board. "She's too caught up in looking for me, which means that she not only is keeping a watch on my condominium,

but she's having to split her time in between locations such as our office building and the hospital. What Bit told you the other day about winter being the easiest season to remain anonymous is true. It's too difficult to find her in those locations. Theo was also right to involve Detective Beeson in a grid search of the surrounding neighborhoods, but Theo will be taking the lead in Erin Smith's community. That specific location will be her comfort zone."

"The two of you think alike," Graham replied as he folded his arms to study the information in front of them. He seemed focused on a particular newspaper clipping that gave specific details of the murders of Lorena's parents. "Theo is holding his own, though I don't think he's had more than a couple of hours of sleep here and there."

Brook prevented herself from asking Graham to relay her regrets over what Theo would almost certainly label a betrayal of their friendship. She wouldn't do so, because that would be the cowardly way to ask for forgiveness. She wasn't even sorry for the decisions that she had made over the past few days, only that she hadn't voiced earlier what his friendship had meant to her over these past few years.

"Did I mention that I'm borrowing one of your vehicles again?"

"Which one this time?"

"The Land Rover." Brook had known about Graham's collection of vehicles, and she had even been inside the separate garage that housed the numerous automobiles. It never occurred to her that there had been a purpose behind such purchases. "You have a reason for owning each one, don't you?"

"You should know by now that I have a reason for everything, Brooklyn. The Land Rover is a good choice. We're in for a major storm starting in the middle of the afternoon." Graham turned his head to meet her stare. "Mind telling me your reason for leaving the house this time around? I gave you my word that I would speak with Bit, Sylvie, Theo, and Arden about Lorena's profile."

"There is only so much ground that Theo and Detective Beeson can cover. Beeson doesn't have the officers at his disposal for the search needed to take place, so I'll be focusing on the vacant houses in Theo's grid. I need you to tell him to take the south side of the neighborhood. I'll cover the north. In the coming days, I'll work my way east."

"No one will be on the roads tomorrow, so you'll want to cover as much ground as possible before the storm hits this afternoon," Graham warned her, his tone giving way to his irritation.

She had also noticed the way his jawline tightened after he had finished speaking. He only ever grit his teeth when he was agitated, or someone pushed him a bit too far. His opinion of her leaving the house had been made loud and clear.

“I’ll be careful,” Brook murmured as she bumped his shoulder with hers. “I always am. Besides, you’ll now be able to give everyone a burner phone with a number programmed in it so that the team can reach me. Bit can then trace my location from a clean source.”

Graham shot her a sideways look that expressed his doubts about her theory about their old devices. He was probably right, and their phones, tablets, and laptops were clean, but she wasn’t willing to take that chance. They had no idea if there were others involved, and Bit’s precautionary ways had influenced her way of thinking. Any hint that they were closing in on Lorena would have her miles away before nightfall.

“Bit finally discovered how Jacob knew about Sylvie’s attack.” Graham shifted so that he was facing her with his hip on the desk. “During Jacob’s one-hour reprieve when he’s allowed in the prison yard, he was escorted past a couple of guards. One of those guards happened to make an off-the-cuff remark regarding the stabbing of one of S&E Investigations’ employees. Jacob must have put two and two together. The theory that we’ve come up with is that Jacob gave Lorena the go-ahead to kill in his signature after obtaining information regarding Sarah Evanston’s location. Your brother had no idea that Lorena had acted prematurely.”

The speculation surrounding Jacob’s ability to gain that type of information sounded about right. Unfortunately, there was only so much containment one could count on in that situation. With that thought in mind, Brook was relieved to know that their safeguards regarding Jacob hadn’t been compromised in a different manner.

“I need to ask,” Brook said as she rested her hand over his. “Was Jonah Cary brought up in the discussion?”

“No.”

Brook was able to breathe a little easier.

Jonah Cary was her nephew.

Not that the boy would ever know his connection to the infamous serial killer named Jacob Matthew Walsh. Jonah would always be known as Senator Cary’s son, the one who suffered from Alagille syndrome. The genetic disorder was the reason the little boy needed a liver transplant.

Before Lorena Dobbs had entered the picture, Brook's one goal had been to make sure Jacob wasn't a living donor. She had been successful in the endeavor, and the surgery was scheduled to take place two weeks from Monday. A lot had to happen between now and then, but the top priority was to ensure Jacob didn't find out until after the fact.

"Are you planning on wearing my robe while you canvass the vacant properties?" Graham reached out and ran a hand underneath the grey lapel. "I'm certain that would garner you some unwanted attention."

"I took the time to wash my pantsuit on the delicate cycle of that washer of yours. It's almost as complicated as the office's coffee machine." Brook waited for Graham to say something about his previous offer for her to keep some of her clothes at his place. She hadn't turned him down, but she also hadn't followed through on the suggestion. "Remind me after we apprehend Lorena Dobbs to bring over a couple of my suits to hang in your closet."

Graham's eyes darkened to the color of his favorite whiskey. At any other time, such a reaction would have been a nonverbal invitation. Instead, he leaned forward and gently brushed his warm lips against hers in parting.

"I better go," Graham murmured as he stood to his full height. He still held her empty mug, and she didn't doubt that he would store it inside the dishwasher before he left. He had handled the mess that she had made of his private office really well under the circumstances. While she didn't like clutter either, there was a disorganized method to her process. "Stay safe, Brooklyn."

Brook almost called out to Graham right before he disappeared from view, but she bit her lip to prevent the words from escaping her lips. She longed to see for herself that Sylvie was recovering from her injuries, but the burner phones that she had purchased didn't allow for video calls. The only choice was to trust that Bit would remain by Sylvie's side while everyone else made certain that Lorena Dobbs was forced into a corner that she couldn't escape.

Brook couldn't help but acknowledge the irony that the trust she had struggled to place in others was the very foundation keeping their friendships and lives from falling apart.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sylvie Deering

February 2024

Sunday — 9:02 am

THE PRIVATE HOSPITAL ROOM on the third floor was a far cry from the chaotic intensity of the ICU five floors up. The constant beeping and humming of machines had been replaced with a quiet stillness that was both comforting and aggravating, each for different reasons. Being transferred from the ICU meant that Sylvie would make a full recovery, but every cell in her body wanted to be helping her friends and colleagues track down Lorena Dobbs.

At least, such was the case when those cells were hyped up on pain medication. She had been given the ability to administer such relief through her IV line on an as-needed basis. There was only one problem with such a choice—she couldn't connect more than two thoughts together at a time.

Lorena had spent two months making small talk about her love of true crime, and how fascinated she was with Sylvie's life as a former analyst

turned consultant for the same agency. Brook and her relationship with Jacob Walsh had been brought up several times, though Sylvie had always been inherently cautious on the subject. She couldn't recall saying a thing that could have compromised them in any way.

But what if she had let something slip?

"Don't be stubborn, Little T," Bit said from the chair next to her bed. He never once looked up from his laptop. "Press the button."

"No." Sylvie wouldn't admit that her body ached with each breath. She needed a clear head, and the morphine clouded her thoughts. She would eventually cave, but she didn't want to miss any detail of what Graham had to say regarding the investigation. "Are you finished checking for viruses and spyware?"

"If I say yes, will you press that button?"

Sylvie didn't even want to move her head for fear of initiating what resembled piercing pain a thousand times worse than a paper cut. In response, she lifted her left hand and flipped him off.

"I saw that," Bit muttered as he never took his focus off his screen. "Are everyone's phones off?"

Graham was currently standing at the end of Sylvie's bed, and Theo had stationed himself to the right of her. Both had remained quiet while Bit commenced a program on all four of his laptops to ensure that no one had accessed a backdoor of some sort. The rest of them sometimes tuned him out when he went on and on about technical jargon. That type of language went way above their heads.

"Yes," Graham stated patiently, even though he had already answered the question three times since he had entered Sylvie's room. Upon his arrival, he had pulled Bit to the side after Graham had made it known that he was leaving his cell phone on the rolling tray. Bit hadn't needed to inquire about such a gesture, and he had followed suit before following Graham out of the room. Sylvie had no idea where they had gone, but Theo had kept her company until the two men returned with grim expressions. "All phones are off."

"Phones are easily cloned if someone knows what they're doing," Bit reiterated as he finally seemed content with the results of his latest scan. "Okay. General, the floor is yours."

The upper portion of Sylvie's bed was slightly elevated, so there was no need for her to shift her position. She was staring directly at Graham, and she

motioned with her left hand that Bit should stand so that she didn't have to turn her head. He closed his laptop and used his feet to roll closer to the side.

"Brook is at the estate." Graham seemed at ease giving them the news, and Bit's smile widened upon hearing it. Theo, on the other hand, hadn't conveyed any reaction. "Her reasoning for taking herself out of the equation matches up with Theo's profile of Lorena Dobbs."

It could have been the effect of the previous push of her button an hour ago, but Sylvie was certain that Graham had worded the explanation to diffuse Theo's underlying anger at Brook. Then again, she could just be reading something into the situation that wasn't there.

"First, we know that Lorena Dobbs is not only impulsive and brash, but she's obsessive to the point that nothing else exists around her. She spent months setting up a convenient way into Sylvie's life because Nigel made her the easier target. Nothing more, nothing less."

Graham stared pointedly in Sylvie's direction.

She understood the underlying message, but that didn't mean the guilt over allowing someone such easy access to her home would easily dissipate.

"Brook isn't sure who else Jacob might have convinced to help him in his search for Sarah Evanston. Looking back, Jacob was confident that Evanston would leave the witness protection program after he turned himself in to the FBI. Jacob's one mistake was that he didn't count on Brook convincing the woman to reenter the program. If we believe that scenario, then Lorena has no idea that anyone involved with S&E Investigations has no knowledge of Evanston's whereabouts. The same would go for anyone else Jacob persuaded into helping him."

"Wait," Bit said as he sat straighter in the chair. "Boss doesn't doubt Gumshoe, does she?"

"No, no," Graham said in reassurance. "The background investigations performed on Arden were as thorough as possible. Brook was referring to anyone who might be new in our lives, such as delivery people, servers at our favorite coffee shops or restaurants, hair stylists, or even someone using the locker next to you at the gym."

Both Graham and Bit glanced toward Theo. Sylvie would have smiled if she could have mustered the energy. As it stood, it was taking everything in her just to keep her eyes open.

Theo worked out every single day and jogged however many miles, but he usually lifted weights at the office. Graham had made a valid point, though. It

wasn't like Lorena had been an integral part of Sylvie's life. The woman's involvement had been just enough to siphon morsels of information here and there.

Several health aides had come and gone over the past two months, the same as with the hospice staff who used to check in on her father once a week. Those visits had accelerated with his decline, and now a hospice nurse stopped in every day around three o'clock.

"I checked out everyone else who had previously been assigned to your dad's care, Little T," Bit informed her as he reached for her hand. She managed to tuck the button for her pain medication next to her so that he wouldn't get any ideas, but she was close to pressing the control herself. "I also had Gumshoe ask your father who his favorite hospice nurse was out of those who have stopped in, and I requested that only she be the one from this point forward."

Sylvie squeezed his hand in appreciation. She couldn't speak, because her throat was constricted from too many emotions overwhelming her at once. She usually wasn't this emotional, but her body and mind were betraying her.

"As Bit mentioned, phones can easily be cloned if one knows what he or she is doing." Graham made eye contact with each one of them. "Brook decided not to take the chance to reach out to any of us. Not even me. I didn't think to ask her how, but she did say that she tried to let some of you know that she was alright and still nearby."

"I knew it," Bit exclaimed as he suddenly stood and held his arms up in the air with his fingers pointed toward the ceiling. Theo and Graham didn't appear surprised by Bit's reaction, unlike Sylvie. "I knew it. Boss turned on her tablet for nearly ten seconds near her favorite coffee shop. She wouldn't have done so had she taken herself completely out of the equation."

Sylvie still had the mental fortitude to pick up on the slight change in Theo's demeanor. Maybe it had been how his shoulders had shifted to indicate less tension. It was difficult to pinpoint exactly what had caught her attention when her pain level had raised considerably in the past minute.

"Brook is going to start canvassing the vacant real estate properties, and she'd prefer to take the houses in the northern section of Erin Smith's neighborhood. Theo, she was hoping that you would take the south."

"I'll have Beeson and his officers take the west," Theo said as he nodded in agreement with such a strategy. "Brook is using the grid search we planned out for a previous case, so that means the two of us will eventually meet

somewhere in the east. I'll head out now. The weather is going to turn nasty by this afternoon."

"Take this." Graham had brought a bag with him, but he hadn't set it down upon entering the room. He reached into the opening before handing Theo a cell phone. "It's a burner with one number preprogrammed into it. You can reach Brook that way from here on out. Bit and Sylvie, here are yours."

They all took a moment to make sure they each had the others' numbers loaded into their phones. Bit had not only done so to his, but to Sylvie's, as well. No one made a move to send a message to Brook, though.

"Theo?" Graham called out before Theo could open the door to Sylvie's room. He was eager to get started, and she couldn't blame him. "Brook will be driving my Land Rover."

Theo nodded his appreciation of such information before stepping out into the hallway. Graham waited until the door was fully closed before turning his attention back to Sylvie and Bit.

"Sylvie?"

She had been having a difficult time keeping track of the conversation toward the end, but she had managed to pick up the important details. She slowly inhaled so as not to jostle any portion of her abdomen as she concentrated on the man standing at the end of her bed.

"The only thing we need from you is a full recovery. Press the damn button," Graham directed before turning his attention toward Bit. "I'm driving over to Sylvie's apartment to speak with Arden."

Before Graham could make a request, Bit was already crossing the tiled floor to where his dull grey backpack had been set near the duffel bag that his sister had brought him earlier. Sylvie had heard enough of what was taking place that she didn't mind a little reprieve from the pain. Her fingers finally found the small device, and she eagerly pressed the button right as she closed her eyes.

Graham would ensure that her apartment was free of any listening devices by using the equipment that Bit had just given him, and she trusted them all to keep her father safe. The next time that she was awake and aware of her surroundings, she would have Bit and Arden set up a video call so that she could reassure her father that she was fine. He had been in so much pain prior to her attack that she didn't want him to worry about anything else but his own comfort.

The mind was a very powerful thing, and Sylvie had always believed there

was something to the saying about mind over matter. To that end, she let the darkness close around her to the satisfying vision of Lorena Dobbs being placed in handcuffs and...

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Theo Neville

February 2024

Sunday — 9:31 am

THE ELEVATOR DOORS GLIDED open with a muted hiss, revealing the brightly lit first floor of the hospital. The lobby made it hard to keep one's eyes open as the large windows acted more like mirrors than single panes. They reflected an endless expanse of white snow that was brought short by a long line of parked cars. No one seemed to mind the irritating glare as hospital staff and visitors were too keen on reaching their destinations.

Theo stepped out of the way as a frantic couple rushed to catch the elevator doors from closing shut. Had he caught sight of them earlier, he would have remained inside the doorway until they had made it safely inside. He blamed his slow reaction time on lack of sleep. He would have to grab some coffee on the drive to Erin Smith's neighborhood, but only after he had spoken with Detective Beeson about the slight change of plans.

Brook had the right idea of how to separate the grid, but that didn't mean

he wasn't still irritated by the way she had handled the situation. It hadn't been until Graham had mentioned Brook had attempted to reach out to them that Theo finally understood why he had been receiving random texts regarding a new gym opening a block down from the office.

For one, he had never signed up to receive such messages.

Two, he would bet his last paycheck that there was no new gym.

Many services provided an individual with the means to text people anonymously, but he had never considered such a platform for coded messages. There had even been a date and a time window given for the grand opening of said gym, but he had been too tired and clouded by resentment to receive the intended meaning behind the text.

"Theo?"

He turned at the sound of his name, completely caught off guard by the sight of Mia standing near the information desk. The beads at the end of her long black braids clicked together as she began to close the distance between them. There was a confidence and grace about her that couldn't be denied, and while he admired both qualities, he couldn't help but question her motives for being at the hospital.

"Mia, what are you doing here?" Theo asked after she came to a stop in front of him.

He hadn't meant to come across so cross, but the two of them weren't even in a relationship. Their first dinner together had been interrupted by a phone call stating that Sylvie had been rushed to the hospital. He hadn't talked to Mia since.

"An employee of mine gave birth to a baby boy last night," Mia replied warily as she readjusted her purse strap. She was wearing dark jeans and a red sweater underneath a black puffer jacket, which made an irritating swishing sound when she held up a small teddy bear with a blue bow. Normally, he would have found the gift endearing, but his senses were a little frayed after the past few days. "I was just dropping by to say congratulations before meeting a patient at eleven."

Mia was a chiropractor who owned her practice, which had grown exponentially over the last few years. It was obvious from her expression that Theo angered her with the way he had greeted her. He couldn't blame her. He hadn't handled the situation the way he should have, and he wasn't sure she would—or should—allow him to make amends.

"I'm sorry, Mia," Theo said as he gestured toward a quiet area that

contained plush chairs and sofas arranged in a semi-circle. The space offered some semblance of seclusion amidst the chaos of the lobby. He waited until they had come to a complete stop in front of a large oval coffee table. “I should have responded to your texts. It’s been a long few days, but that’s no excuse.”

“Is there anything that I can do to help?” Mia asked tentatively despite his lack of manners.

“I appreciate the offer,” Theo replied with a small smile. “As you know, a colleague of mine was rushed to the hospital on Thursday night. It’s a long story, and one that I can’t get into at the moment. Just know that I’ve found myself caught up in an investigation. I’m not sure when I’ll have downtime to make up for my leaving in the middle of our dinner. You deserve better, and I didn’t mean to come across as rude a few minutes ago. I was just surprised to see you, that’s all.”

Mia studied his face, and he figured his exhaustion was evident.

“Here. Let’s make this easy.”

Mia clutched the teddy bear between her elbow and side as she reached for her phone inside her purse. She pulled it out, and it wasn’t long after that her fingers were flying across the display.

Seconds later, Theo’s phone vibrated in his pocket.

“I don’t give out my home address often, but given your ties to the FBI, I’d say the odds are in my favor that you’re one of the good guys. Anyway, I just sent you the rest of my contact information. When your case is over, I’ll cook you a nice dinner at home. That way, if you need to leave in the middle of our meal, I’m not sitting at a table getting pitiful glances from the other couples at the restaurant.”

Mia had a beautiful smile, and Theo found himself reaching for his phone. Once the facial recognition opened his screen, a notification was waiting for him with her home address. He swiped up, only to have to close his photo app. He had been studying Lorena Dobbs’ facial features just in case she had opted to dye her hair or alter her appearance in the past few days. He was finally able to see Mia’s text, and he took note of her neighborhood.

“Georgetown,” Theo said with an approving nod. “I can see why we jog the same trails.”

Mia had been staring at his phone, but it wasn’t long before she lifted her inquisitive brown eyes to meet his. At first, he thought she was curious about his comment on the trails. He never expected her to comment on the picture

of the woman responsible for attempting to murder Sylvie.

“Theo, can I ask you a question?” Mia inquired as her gaze drifted back down to the display of his phone. “Why do you have a picture of Belinda Rhodes on your cell?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Bobby “Bit” Nowacki

February 2024

Sunday — 2:56 pm

WITH EVERY STEP ACROSS the vinyl flooring, the rubber soles of Bit’s shoes gave off a high-pitched squeak. Anxiety gnawed at him over the thought of calling Zoey. It wasn’t that he hadn’t sent her messages regarding the emergency at work, but he also hadn’t gone into specifics.

Not about Sylvie, the team, Jacob, or his job.

Given how he had a tendency to blur the lines between legal and illegal activities, it had been best to stick to other topics. Zoey was quite proficient with computers and software, and he was always careful about his choice of words. He had done his best to work within the confines of the law since Brook had brought him on board. Unfortunately, there were times when extreme measures had to be taken when it involved life and death.

Bit wasn’t sure how some of the others couldn’t see the need for such actions, especially in those types of situations. Brook was the only one who

could see his point of view. She had blurred those same lines in her pursuit of Jacob, but she had valid reasons to be concerned regarding the FBI's interest in his extracurricular activities.

He would never allow anyone on the team to take the blame for his decisions. Still, he also wouldn't go around talking about those choices that could ultimately land him behind bars, either. It wouldn't be fair to Zoey to put her in that type of position.

Unfortunately, Zoey might have been brought into the situation without his knowledge. Theo's call regarding how Lorena Dobbs had posed as one of Mia's patients proved that Lorena had not only been looking for ways into their lives, but that she had also spent time monitoring their daily routines.

Living in Washington, D.C. had made it easy for Lorena to blend in with the crowd, but her ability to do so made it evident that they could be just as vulnerable as their very own clients. Awareness like that didn't sit well with Bit.

Theo had only met Mia in November, which was probably around the time that Lorena had decided which team member she could first make contact with through another person. Bit had already questioned his sister, but Paula was the only one he trusted with the truth outside of the team. She claimed to have never seen Lorena before, which meant that there was a good chance Zoey had been a potential target.

"Would you call her already?" Sylvie murmured from her bed. She had barely moved her lips, but he had heard her loud and clear. "My ears can only take so much, and the soles of your shoes are sounding a lot like fingernails on a chalkboard."

"Sorry, Little T," Bit replied as he forced himself to lean against the wall next to the large window. He still had to tap his toes to try and expend some of his angst. "Go back to sleep."

The blinds had been pulled closed even though there was thick cloud coverage outside. The snow from the stormfront was already falling, but he had gone ahead and dimmed the lights so that Sylvie could get her rest.

He regretted that his pacing hadn't helped her in that endeavor.

"I think I'm building up a tolerance to this pain medication." Sylvie peered at him through one eye, her eyebrow arching with the motion. "It's not working like it was earlier today."

"They've already lowered the dosage," Bit responded reluctantly. He hadn't wanted to be the one to tell her about the nurse's plans, but Sylvie was

going to figure it out eventually. “They want you up and walking before dinnertime. I think that’s why they’re going to try to give you some solid food tonight.”

Sylvie groaned, but she didn’t really complain upon hearing the news.

“Would you hand me my glasses, please?”

“Go back to sleep,” Bit urged, not making his way over to the second tray that he had brought in. It had some of her personal items on it, such as her glasses and her favorite Chapstick. “I can wait until later to call Zoey.”

“No, you can’t wait until later.” Sylvie lifted a hand and motioned toward the rolling tray. “Glasses, Bit.”

“Fine, but don’t think that I don’t know what you’re doing.” Bit shifted his weight from the wall to his feet before making his way over to her. “You almost died, Little T. They aren’t going to discharge you. At least, not for a few more days.”

It always amazed Bit at the speed at which doctors discharged their patients. Granted, the body’s ability to heal was an amazing accomplishment in the grand scheme of things. Still, he would rather Sylvie be in the care of professionals rather than at home with a dying father who wouldn’t be of assistance should an emergency arise.

“Patients who have open heart surgery are sent home within days, so me being stabbed a few times is nothing in comparison.” Sylvie took her glasses, but she didn’t adjust her body. Instead, she reached for the remote on the bed and pressed a button. The way she closed her eyes indicated her level of pain at the minuscule deed. “Call Zoey. If she has had any interaction with Lorena Dobbs, then you need to warn Zoey to call the police if she sees her again.”

“There is so much that she doesn’t know,” Bit muttered as he walked over to one of the laptops that he had set on the windowsill. Facing away from the window would allow Zoey to see him better. “I’d like to keep it that way.”

“You’ll figure it out.”

“Here goes nothing.”

Bit clicked the call button to initiate the video call.

Sylvie wasn’t in the frame, so he wouldn’t need to worry about explaining why he was at the hospital. He would merely ask a few simple questions, explain that there were some complications with a case, and then let her know it might be a few weeks before he was free to get together again.

Bit had tried to reach Brook earlier, but the number that she had preprogrammed into their phones had gone straight to an automated message

that the caller could leave a message. She had probably turned the phone off before starting her search of potential locations where Lorena could be staying, but he would keep trying her throughout the day.

First, he needed to get through this particular video call.

“Hey, you!” Zoey’s warm voice had greeted him from the other end of the line right before her familiar face became clear on the screen. She must have recently cut her hair, because the short blonde strands were spikier than usual. “I was getting worried. You haven’t texted much since last Thursday. Is everything okay?”

“Sorry about that,” Bit said after clearing his throat. “The firm that I work for has a rather complicated case, which is actually the reason why I’m calling. I know this is a weird question, but have you seen this woman in the past few months?”

Bit held up his phone in such a position that Zoey could easily see Lorena Dobbs’ picture. His stomach dropped when recognition dawned on her and practically resonated from the display of his laptop.

“I think her name is Stacey. Casey? I’m not sure. She went to my yoga class a few times a while back.” Zoey’s gaze switched from Bit’s phone to his face. He probably wasn’t doing a very good job of covering up his concern. “She introduced herself, but you know me. I don’t really like people all that much. I probably should have been nicer. Why? Is she a friend of yours?”

“No,” Bit replied, doing his best to make sure that she couldn’t pick up on the relief flooding his system. “The woman is a person of interest in an investigation that we’re working on, so if you see her, would you call me? Better yet, call the police. Reference S&E Investigations as to who instructed you to call them.”

“Is Stacey...Casey...whatever her name is dangerous?” Zoey asked warily as she pulled on the strings of her hoodie.

“The woman’s name isn’t Stacey or Casey,” Bit explained, but he wasn’t willing to go into more detail. The less Zoey knew about the situation, the better. “And it’s an ongoing case, so...”

“Right,” Zoey stated wryly as she rolled her eyes. “You can’t say anything else on the subject. I get it, Bit. I do, and I try my best not to ask you any questions about what it is you do for your firm. I just find it odd that you’re asking me about some woman who showed up to my yoga class.”

Bit could hear Sylvie clearing her voice, as if she were pushing him to be a

little more honest. Well, up to a point. They had all heard Brook's warning through Graham's speech this morning. The team really shouldn't trust anyone right now, but he didn't have to be a mind reader to know that Sylvie meant he didn't have to be rude about it.

Before Bit could reply, the door opened to Sylvie's room.

The nurse, whom he had run a background check on to ensure that her identity was in fact one Peg Simone, stepped inside and made her way to Sylvie's bedside. Unfortunately, Zoey had caught sight of Peg, though only as far as the camera's angle would allow.

"Bit, why are you at the hospital?" Zoey asked in confusion. Her gaze was trained to the left of him, as if she were waiting to catch sight of the nurse once more. "Is it your sister? Did something happen to Paula?"

Bit had yet to introduce Zoey to his sister. This situation was causing him to see just how much he had distanced his personal life from his professional one. Eventually, he would have to make a decision one way or the other.

Did he want Zoey in his life on a permanent basis?

He wasn't the type of guy who had a lot of friends. He had always been awkward, and he had gravitated toward family more than anything else until he had met Brook.

"My best friend was hurt, but she's on the mend," Bit explained as he overheard the nurse explaining to Sylvie how it was important that they get her up and moving. First, though, all the nurse wanted Sylvie to do was sit on the edge of the bed for a minute. "I also work with her, which is why we're searching for that woman. I can't get into specific details right now, but would you please just call the police if you see that woman again?"

"Of course," Zoey replied with a quick nod. "Would it be best to skip Tuesday morning's yoga class?"

"It wouldn't be a bad idea," Bit said with a tinge of hope. "Just for this week, maybe. I'll be able to give you more of an explanation after this woman is in custody."

The nurse apparently wasn't about to take no for an answer, and she already had Sylvie sitting with her legs swung over the side of the bed. Paula had purchased Sylvie some cozy socks in a bright pink color that was more comfortable than the ones the hospital provided with their godawful gown that exposed one's backside.

"Zoey, I have to go," Bit said as he switched his focus from Sylvie back to his laptop. Zoey was giving him a smile of understanding, and it hit him that

Zoey and Sylvie would really like one another. “I’ll do my best to call you tonight.”

Bit finally pressed the square mousepad to disconnect their call after they had each said their goodbyes. The call hadn’t gone as badly as he had thought it would, but that was only due to Zoey’s forgiving nature. Not that she couldn’t stand up for herself. He had witnessed firsthand when someone made her angry, and he certainly didn’t want to be on the receiving end of such a lecture.

“You did really well, Sylvie,” Peg praised as she motioned back toward Sylvie’s pillow. “Let’s get you back in bed, and we’ll try to get you out into the hallway for a short walk after dinner. How does that sound?”

“Do you want the truth?” Sylvie said with a groan as she slid her legs and her pink socks back underneath the covers. Bit didn’t like how fast she had lost color, but he wasn’t a medical professional, either. He made his way over to the chair, but he was too antsy to sit down. Instead, he waited patiently for Peg to finish helping make Sylvie comfortable against the pillows. “I want to like you, Peg. I really do, but you’re making it so hard.”

Peg’s laughter could be heard until the door slowly closed behind her.

“Do you want another nurse?” Bit asked in all seriousness as he pulled Sylvie’s pillow up a little more so that her neck wasn’t at an angle. “I’m serious. If you don’t like her, just say the word.”

“Peg is just doing her job,” Sylvie reassured him as she closed her eyes for a brief moment. After what he could only imagine was her pain settling into a deep throbbing sensation, she lifted her lashes and turned her head slightly so that she could monitor his expression. “You need to let the others know that Lorena attempted to make contact with Zoey. It’s obvious that Lorena has made the rounds to see who had vulnerabilities, and I just so happened to be the one who drew the short stick.”

“Lorena claimed to be Stacey this time around,” Bit said with a frown as he finally sat down in the chair. He reached for his phone, which he had set on the second rolling tray next to one of his laptops. “Maybe Casey. Zoey couldn’t quite recall. I don’t like it, Little T. I’m starting to see why Boss closed herself off for all those years.”

“Think about it, Bit.” Sylvie’s eyes were once again closed, and Bit got the sense that she wouldn’t be opening them until someone brought in her dinner. At least this time it would be more than the Jell-O and broth she had been given for lunch. “If I hadn’t been stubborn about handling all the hospice and

other healthcare matters for my dad, maybe I wouldn't be lying in this hospital bed. We're stronger together, and Brook knows it. Why do you think she went to Graham's estate?"

Sylvie had a point, but he didn't bother to reply. Based on the way her head had relaxed into the pillow, the exhaustion from sitting up in bed had already sent her into a deep sleep. He stood and walked across the room, unable to have the upcoming conversation out in the hall where anyone could hear him.

"Big T? I'm about to call Arden, but I wanted you to know that you were right about Lorena Dobbs," Bit said in as low of a voice as he could so as not to disturb Sylvie. "Dobbs attended a yoga class a few months ago and tried to draw Zoey into a conversation. Arden needs to check with his family and friends. We need to make sure Dobbs hasn't infiltrated anyone else's life."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Brooklyn Sloane

February 2024

Sunday — 4:47 pm

THE WHITE BLANKET OF snow softened the edges of Erin Smith's neighborhood. The tree branches sparkled underneath the streetlights as they were weighted down with heavy white powder. There was no one walking the sidewalks or even out in their driveways as most people had hunkered down inside to avoid the storm, although there was an occasional car that drove by slowly in an attempt to reach home.

Smoke curled out of the surrounding chimneys, but there was no movement inside the house for sale on the corner. Brook continued to stare at the vacant home as she carefully monitored each window, both upstairs and downstairs. The house was a two-story colonial with black shutters and white siding. An American flag was hanging from the porch, and the wind had the material moving gracefully in the air. It wouldn't be long until the fabric was barely hanging on from the force of the storm.

Brook rotated the vent so that the warmth hit her face. She had been cold all day, and it hadn't helped that the temperature in the houses that she had searched through had been lowered so the owners wouldn't waste money. No one was living inside of them, and the thermostat only needed to be high enough to avoid being left with frozen pipes.

She would search through one more house before calling it a day.

The snow was already sticking to the roads and visibility was lessening with each passing minute. She didn't want anyone to find it odd that someone was out in this weather. They were liable to call the police.

Brook hadn't given herself time to think about Jacob or the lengths he had gone to in order to locate Sarah Evanston. Brook also tried not to obsess over Sylvie. It was taking every ounce of her willpower not to drive to the hospital right now. Brook had thought about calling Sylvie before leaving the house, but being transferred from the ICU to a regular room would have been exhausting for her. Brook would call each of them later this evening now that they all had burner phones.

For now, she needed to focus on the search.

According to the profile, Dobbs had believed that someone from the team would talk about Jacob and how Sarah Evanston had escaped her so-called fate. Now that Dobbs' cover was blown, she would resort to what she was familiar with—violence. Lorena would also focus on the one person who she now thought of as a rival, and that individual was Brook.

Giving one last scan of the immediate area, Brook finally turned off the Land Rover's engine. She was wearing the same suit as last Thursday, including her long black dress coat. The only fortunate thing about her outfit was the winter boots that she had found in the front closet of Graham's foyer. The boots belonged to either his mother or Lacy. All that mattered was that Brook had something to wear to walk in this weather.

The cold air was like a wall of torment as she stepped out of the Land Rover. Her cheeks stung, her lips immediately became dry, and the sudden burning in her lungs was far from pleasant. She had made sure that she parked with the driver's side door toward the sidewalk, so she didn't have to walk far to the porch. Someone had shoveled a thin path recently, most likely the homeowner on the directive of the real estate agent.

Brook pulled her coat a little tighter as she climbed the three steps to the front door. There were no chairs or benches on the porch, but that wasn't out of place considering the time of year. Some of the vacant homes that she had

searched today had been completely void of furniture and others had been staged beautifully in hopes of a quick sale.

Luck wasn't on her side this evening, though.

The porch light was on, making her easily visible to anyone paying attention.

Brook removed her gloves and shoved them in her pocket before entering the code on the keypad of the lockbox. Graham had given her the list of combinations that he had received from Theo.

The front of the lockbox opened immediately, and she was able to fish out a key without delay. Not wasting any valuable time, she slid the key into the slot and unlocked the deadbolt. It wasn't long before she was inside the house and closing the door quietly behind her.

Brook remained directly in front of the entrance, listening for any signs of disturbance. She gave her vision time to adjust, which didn't take long given the illumination of the porch light through the living room windows. The owners of this home had taken all their furniture, leaving behind vacant rooms.

It wouldn't take long for her to search the premises. She had planned on driving back to Graham's place, but there was a chance she might be able to squeeze in one more house before driving home. The small hallway in front of her was quite dark, so she reached into her left pocket for her penlight. She then unbuttoned her long dress coat, allowing her to unholster her weapon.

She waited a few moments before clicking the button and allowing the penlight to illuminate the small area in front of her. The faint beam was enough to guide her without the light being bright enough for someone outside to notice.

The floors of the home were hardwood, and the walls had been painted in a neutral color to lure in potential buyers. With no furniture in the house, there was a slight echo of the weakest sound. If Lorena Dobbs were inside at the moment, chances were that Brook would have already heard the woman. Such absence didn't mean that Dobbs wasn't using the home as a place to sleep.

Brook advanced cautiously as she raised both arms in unison. She held the penlight in her non-dominant hand, which she had positioned underneath her firearm. She passed by an open archway to her left that led into a kitchen. The homeowners had left behind the standard appliances, but the counters were bare. She didn't come to a stop until she was in front of the refrigerator.

Pulling open the stainless-steel door with her left hand, she winced when the pull of the suction made a sharp popping noise.

The appliance was empty and had been wiped clean.

Closing the refrigerator door, she then canvassed the main level until she had made her way back to the staircase that led upstairs. She debated whether to check the upstairs or the basement first, and the latter won out since the door to the basement was to the left of the kitchen.

She closed the distance to the door and slowly turned the knob with her left hand. If she had been able to take a walk around the outside of the house, she would have known whether or not the basement had windows. She couldn't afford to take the chance of turning on an overhead light.

The basement was pitch black, which indicated no natural light whatsoever.

Still, Brook wasn't willing to take the chance of a neighbor noticing someone inside the Wilkins' residence. She slowly descended the stairs, aiming her penlight on the steps below while positioning her weapon toward the darkness in front of her.

Fortunately, the staircase didn't make a sound underneath her weight.

The air was a bit thick and a little musty, which was a huge indicator that the Wilkins hadn't been fans of using their basement in any living space capacity. Considering that she hadn't seen a washer or dryer on the main level, there was a good chance that she would discover the appliances on the lower level.

By the time Brook reached the floor of the basement, she could already make out the metallic grey washer and dryer. There were empty shelves to the left, while the water heater, furnace, and an air conditioning unit were located to the right. The walls had been painted in a light grey color, and there were no windows to be found.

She still didn't bother to turn on the lights, though.

There was no sign that anyone had been down in the basement. With the way that Lorena had lived inside Erin Smith's residence, Brook wasn't expecting the woman to change her ways.

Theo had almost certainly uploaded his own photographs to the software program, but Brook had managed to view the ones taken through Detective Beeson's police department. Lorena liked to leave her mark.

Brook quietly made her way up the basement stairs before closing the door firmly behind her. It wouldn't take her long to search the upper level, and

then she would drive back to Graham's estate. She shouldn't push her luck with the weather. The gusts were practically making the windows rattle. Besides, she was eager to hear what Theo had discovered in the southern area of the neighborhood. She hadn't turned on the burner phone for fear even the vibrations would make too much noise inside an empty house and give her away.

Considering that she could still hear a pin drop should one fall to the floor, she silently began to make her way up the staircase to the upper level. There was nothing on the hardwood steps to indicate that someone had walked up or down them recently.

As soundlessly as possible, Brook walked through the four bedrooms, two bathrooms, and several closets. There was no sign that Lorena had been inside this particular vacant house.

Another dead end.

Brook would spend the evening creating a new grid pattern for the northern portion of the neighborhood, but she had made progress today. With every property taken out of the equation, the closer they came to locating Lorena Dobbs.

Brook exited the largest bedroom at the end of the hall. She scanned both sides of the hallway, searching for any scuff marks on the wall that might be out of place. The owners had made sure the house was immaculate, so any obvious scratches might indicate someone else had been inside the home. As Brook shifted the penlight in her hand, she noticed a small rope dangling from a squared-off section overhead.

The house had an attic.

Brook studied the small white portion of wood. If the homeowners had removed all the furniture from the house, chances were that they had done the same with the boxes in the attic. She still needed to see for herself that the area was clear before she could leave the premises.

Reaching up on her tiptoes, Brook cautiously took ahold of the rope and pulled on it hard enough so that a wooden ladder slowly descended from the ceiling. She already had the penlight aimed upward, but nothing was visible from her position.

Brook carefully climbed the ladder, using the penlight to scour the dark opening. There was nothing but dust floating in the faint beam. She maneuvered herself so that she could rest her hip against one of the wooden rungs, giving her the ability to raise her weapon and perform a proper sweep

of the attic. That proved somewhat difficult with the scattered boxes on the back end and to the left of the wide space.

It appeared the Wilkins hadn't taken everything with them.

Brook shifted once again so that she was more comfortable on the ladder, slowly bringing the penlight and her weapon around to the front of the house near a window that had short curtains covering the windowpane. The fabric was thick enough not to let in any light from the street lamps. She scanned the floor of the attic with the dim beam until she was brought up short by a crumpled food bag.

Brook's heart rate accelerated at the discovery. Sure enough, the left corner held empty food containers, used napkins, and even empty water bottles.

Lorena Dobbs' current hideout had finally been discovered.

The team would be able to surveil the property from afar and wait for Lorena to return before taking her into custody. An easy apprehension without any casualties.

Brook decided to wait until she reached the Land Rover before using the burner phone to call Theo. He could take the lead on the surveillance, making sure that everything was in place so that nothing went wrong during the arrest.

Just as she was about to descend the ladder, a ripple of movement shifted the air. A chill ran down her spine as she made the split-second decision to swing the penlight and weapon once more in the direction of the boxes, but she was too late.

A sharp blow to the side of her head sent her crashing into the darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Theo Neville

February 2024

Sunday — 9:36 pm

THE DIM GLOW OF the streetlights was becoming harder to make out with each passing hour. Swirling gusts of wind enmeshed the heavy snowflakes, obscuring visibility to the point that it was dangerous to be outside. To make matters worse, the storm hadn't even reached its peak.

It was time to call it a night.

Theo kicked his boots against the running board of his Jeep Wrangler before opening the driver's side door. He had to use more force than usual. By the time he had settled in behind the steering wheel, his phone was vibrating in the pocket of his jacket. He quickly removed his gloves, but retrieving his phone proved to be difficult with cold fingers. He should have taken the time to change into thicker outerwear.

Graham's name was on the lighted display.

"You have good timing," Theo greeted as he switched the phone into his

left hand. With one fluid motion, he brought the engine to life. Once his phone connected to the Bluetooth system, he slid his phone back into his pocket so that he could hold his hands up to the vents. “I’m in between houses. Nothing so far, and Beeson hasn’t come up with anything, either. I’m going to call it for the night.”

“Are you still in the southern part of the neighborhood?”

The tension in Graham’s voice was evident, and Theo released his foot from the brake pedal. He hadn’t shifted the Jeep into drive just yet, anyway.

“Yes.”

Graham recited an address twice before providing more clarity on the subject.

“Brook hasn’t returned to the estate.”

Theo let his gaze fall to the neon green numbers on the dashboard.

“It’s not even ten o’clock. She could be pushing to clear as many properties as possible knowing that the storm is going to delay the rest of the search.”

“The burner phone has been turned off all day long, so I had Bit locate the Land Rover through its GPS,” Graham said over what sounded like a door closing. “It’s been sitting in the same spot for the past three hours. Brook told me that she was going to canvass the vacant real estate properties on the north end. I don’t know why she would have strayed from the plan. Either way, she wouldn’t have left the Land Rover in one place for that long. Too many potential questions from neighbors.”

“I’ll drive over there now.”

Theo reached out and disconnected the call with one press of a button.

He shifted the gear into drive while checking his rearview mirror. No headlights were breaking through the churning snow, so he gradually pulled away from the curb.

Theo had thought about contacting Brook earlier, but he had decided to wait until they could speak face to face. The reasons behind why she had gone into hiding were valid, especially given the rough profile she would have mentally crafted on the Lorena Dobbs. He had taken the day to think over her actions, and she had been right about how her absence would fuel Dobbs’ obsession to the point that it had distracted the woman from doing any more irreparable damage to the team.

Dobbs was running on the assumption that Sarah Evanston had left the witness protection program. It stood to reason that Brook and the team would be the ones to keep tabs on Evanston’s whereabouts if that was still the case.

The second that Dobbs had knowledge of Evanston reentering the program, all bets were off.

The team would likely never see or hear from Dobbs again.

Theo continued to drive slowly through the neighborhood. The plows hadn't made their way into the suburbs from the major highways. It would almost certainly be hours before the side roads were cleared of snow.

He had managed to convince a federal judge earlier in the day to sign off on a warrant to canvass vacant real estate properties in the surrounding areas. The weather had pretty much forced everyone to stay inside, though it was more of a hindrance than anything. The officers who had been assisting in the search had been pulled away for accidents and other emergencies the storm had produced within the past few hours.

A few minutes later, Theo was turning left onto the street of his destination. He had to practically stop in the middle of the road to get a good look at one of the mailboxes. He was at least six homes away.

Considering he was driving at a snail's pace, he was able to pull over immediately upon spotting the Land Rover. He made sure the lights on his dashboard were turned off before reaching for his phone.

The Land Rover was parked in front of one of the addresses on the list, but there was another real estate listing one street over. Brook could have made an attempt to search both homes, but it wouldn't have taken three hours.

Theo sat in the idling Jeep for a solid three minutes before turning off the engine. Nothing appeared out of place, and there was no movement in the swirling shadows of the snow that he could tell from his position. Pulling his zipper down far enough to allow easier access to his weapon, he braced himself against the brutal conditions and opened the driver's side door.

Theo didn't waste time as he crossed the street and accessed the sidewalk near one of the residents' garbage cans. They were both covered with several inches of snow. Most of the homeowners hadn't bothered with the weekly chore, and he couldn't really blame them. It was doubtful that the garbage collectors would be through for another couple of days.

As he approached the Land Rover, there was no sign that Brook was inside. The windshield was covered in snow, but not by as many inches as the garbage cans. Given the thickness of the layer, the vehicle had only been parked in this spot for a couple of hours.

Not wasting time, Theo reached for the door handle. He was surprised to find that the door wasn't locked. Brook never would have left the Land Rover

in such a vulnerable state. Pulling the door all the way open, the overhead light activated and lit up the interior of the vehicle.

A burner phone had been placed in the middle of the seat.

Theo quickly pulled his gloves out of his pocket. Once his right glove was secured on his hand, he picked up the burner phone and accessed its information. The number was the one that had been preprogrammed into the others, proving that it was Brook's device. He then leaned over the seat and found the keys in the ignition. He collected them before searching the rest of the interior.

Nothing else was out of place.

Just as Theo closed the door, the sound of an engine could be heard in the distance. A set of headlights became cut through the falling snow as a car turned onto the street. A black Ford Bronco pulled to a stop right behind the Land Rover.

The engine hadn't even completely shut down before Graham exited the vehicle, slamming the driver's side door shut before he closed the distance between them. The man's gaze was trained on the burner phone in Theo's hand.

There was no need for explanations.

"There are two possible houses within walking distance that Brook would have searched, and one of them is on the street behind these rows of homes. It will be quicker for me to drive over there instead of cutting through the yard. I think one of us needs to check the place out just in case. The other house is there," Theo directed with a nod of his head in the direction of the home across the street.

No porch light had been left on, but he figured that was due to the owners not wanting to spend money when it wasn't necessary. Theo had discovered today that there were two types of sellers—those who still wanted to protect what was theirs and the others who had already washed their hands of the past.

"We'll meet back here," Theo directed as another gust of wind brought with it close to white-out conditions. They both narrowed their eyes for protection until the snow was once again falling steadily around them. "Call me if you find anything."

Graham didn't bother to reply as he walked through a small snowbank, not wasting a minute. Theo tucked the keys to the Land Rover into his pocket before doing the same with the burner phone. He then made his way to his

Jeep, scanning the area for any signs of disturbance. It didn't take him long before he pulled up in front of a home that had solar light fixtures on either side of a thin walkway. They were barely giving off any illumination.

Theo once again exited his vehicle and made his way up the pathway. The freshly fallen snow crunched underneath his boots. As he walked up the porch steps, the front door suddenly opened to reveal an older gentleman around the age of sixty-five.

"Oh," the man exclaimed as he remained in the doorway. The tweed vintage cap and winter coat signified he was leaving the residence. "You startled me. Is there something that I can do for you?"

The older gentleman peered over Theo's shoulder. Considering the weather, it wasn't too far of a stretch to think someone had an accident or their vehicle had gotten stuck in the snow.

"Actually, I was wondering if you've seen someone lately." Theo had already pulled out his phone and accessed Lorena Dobbs' photograph. He then reached into his back pocket for his credentials. "My name is Theo Neville, and I work for S&E Investigations. My firm is consulting with the FBI on a case that involves this woman. Do you recognize her?"

The older man squinted as he peered at the picture, but he eventually shook his head. He pulled the door shut behind him as he stepped onto the porch.

"I'm sorry, but I don't recognize her. Is she missing? In trouble?"

"A person of interest," Theo amended as he pulled back the phone. After putting away his identification, he held out his arm. "I appreciate your time, Mr..."

"Kershaw. David Kershaw."

"Thank you, Mr. Kershaw. I do have one more photograph for you to look at," Theo said as he found a picture of Brook. It was one taken this past Christmas with everyone together, but he purposefully zoomed in until only her face was visible. He then held up his phone once more. "Have you seen her today?"

Kershaw once again narrowed his eyes. It was obvious that he wore reading glasses, but they were probably tucked away underneath his winter jacket.

"She doesn't look familiar, but I've been painting baseboards all day. I haven't really been outside, other than to throw some ice pellets on the sidewalk. Not that they helped any. This storm is a doozy."

Theo would have preferred to have had a look inside the house, but he had

gotten his answer regarding Brook. She hadn't been to this particular residence today, which meant that the other house was almost certainly the point of interest.

"Again, I appreciate you taking the time to speak with me, Mr. Kershaw."

Theo didn't waste any time making his way to the Wrangler. He wouldn't make a decision on notifying the Bureau or Detective Beeson about Brook's disappearance until he spoke with Graham. No one except those on the team knew the reason behind her absence, although Beeson had requested to speak with her a couple of times over the past few days. Revealing that Brook had gone missing while canvassing the neighborhood shouldn't pose a problem, thus allowing more law enforcement to take part in the search.

Theo didn't bother to park a few houses down this time around. He pulled right in front of the house with the sale sign displayed in the yard, though it was no longer prominent. The snow was already at a level where the bottom half of the sign wasn't visible.

Graham was descending the porch steps by the time Theo came to a standstill on the sidewalk. Unlike the other home, there were areas of ice that Graham managed to avoid as he walked toward Theo.

"There's no one inside," Graham stated grimly as he surveyed the neighborhood. "Call Supervisory Special Agent Harden. I don't want some field agent who has no idea what we're dealing with handling the search. While you're making those arrangements, I need to make a few phone calls myself."

Theo wasn't so sure it was a good idea to bring in outside help if they were going to involve the FBI. He kept his opinion to himself as he reached for his phone. While he would eventually place a call to Harden, Theo first needed to touch base with Bit.

The incoming stormfront was going to be a problem, but there might not be a need to conduct a massive search in such severe weather if Bit could access home security systems in the area. If Lorena had forced Brook into another vehicle, there was a chance one of the doorbell cameras had caught the make and model of the car.

"Bit?" Theo hated to be the one to break the news, but Graham had already laid the groundwork. "We have a problem. Brook has gone missing. We've located the Land Rover, but she isn't here."

Theo rattled off the address.

"We need to go on the assumption that Lorena somehow took advantage of

the situation. Needless to say, I need something to go on,” Theo said as he turned his back to protect his face from severe weather. “Do what you need to do, and we’ll worry about the semantics of the situation later.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Brooklyn Sloane

February 2024

Sunday — 11:07 pm

THE SLOW, THROBBING PULSE made it difficult for Brook to open her eyes. Consciousness ebbed and flowed like an incoming tide, but she eventually kept her thoughts on the shore. Each wave of pain originated from the side of her head, but there was also a sharp stinging sensation that crept down her neck and into her shoulder blades.

It took several attempts to finally remain aware of her surroundings.

The floor beneath her was hard and unforgiving, and her cheek was pressed against the rough Berber carpet. She purposefully didn't open her eyes when she realized that her hands were bound tightly behind her back. From the thin pressure, her mind registered that her wrists were fastened with zip ties.

Memories of discovering empty food containers and rolled-up napkins in an attic came flooding back, and Brook suppressed a groan of disappointment that she had allowed Lorena Dobbs to get the best of her. For an individual

whose profile suggested she was impulsive and brash, she had been able to remain still and quiet the entire time that Brook had searched the vacant house.

She had let her guard down.

Brook strained to hear any sign of her captor.

There.

A slight thud came from another room. She forced her eyes to open, which instantly caused the ache in her head to increase. The room was blurred at first, but it finally came into focus.

Brook had assessed her situation correctly.

She was on the floor with her hands and ankles bound by zip ties.

Not wanting to be in such a vulnerable position when Lorena returned, Brook ignored the pain while struggling to shift her weight so that she could sit upright against a couch—one that she recognized from somewhere.

Nausea hit her out of nowhere, and it was all Brook could do not to empty the contents of her stomach. Acid was now at the back of her throat, but she managed to reduce the burning sensation by swallowing multiple times. She attempted to focus on a painting of a lighthouse that was hanging at an angle on the far wall so that the spinning of the room would come to a complete stop.

Why did the lighthouse seem so familiar?

By the time Brook had evened out her breathing and was able to stem the queasiness, she had figured out their exact location—Erin Smith's residence. Who would think to check the one place that was currently sealed off by the police?

Brook berated herself for the carelessness that she had exhibited when searching the vacant homes. While she might have used the penlight to scour the attic, the lack of noise on the upper level had given her a false sense of security.

Lorena must have hidden herself behind the boxes. She had been able to control her impulses and wait for the perfect time when Brook's attention had been focused elsewhere.

The hard ridges of the zip ties were biting into her skin. Had Lorena fastened Brook's arms in front of her, she would have been able to easily break the plastic ties. As it stood, she would need access to something very sharp if she stood a chance of freeing herself.

Lorena chose that moment to materialize from the kitchen, and she was

holding a butcher knife in her right hand. The blade glinted in the dim light coming from a lamp positioned on a side table next to the couch.

“Look who has decided to join the party,” Lorena said with a laugh that could only be described as fanatical. The woman’s tone was enough for Brook to understand the depths of her derangement. Conforming to society for months while pretending to be someone else would have been extremely difficult for her. The freedom that she was experiencing now might very well be her downfall if Brook could find a way to use it to her advantage. “I’ve got to tell you, I haven’t had this much fun in years.”

“I’m glad that I could entertain you,” Brook said over a sharp pain that shot from her temple down to her jawline. To counter it so that Lorena wouldn’t notice, Brook strained against the zip ties so that they dug into her wrists. “No music this time around? I know you’re fond of music when you get into these moods, Lorena.”

Brook’s statement had brought Lorena up short.

There was a wild, manic look to her, making it clear that she was barely hanging on to her sanity. She was tall and thin, just like her photograph from 2017. She had cut her hair herself, the spikes uneven throughout the strands. Her movements were erratic, but the responses weren’t due to drugs. Her cheeks were flushed, yet her skin was pale. She was practically vibrating with energy as she zeroed in on Brook.

“Jacob said you were smart.” Lorena took a seat in the chair, though Brook doubted the woman would remain that way. “I told him that I could beat you at your own game. Profiling, right? You’re a control freak.”

“You got one over on me, Lorena,” Brook admitted as she thought over how to delay the inevitable. Once Lorena discovered that Sarah Evanston had reentered the witness protection program, there would be no need to keep Brook alive. Jacob wouldn’t have given Lorena such an order, but the woman wouldn’t be able to help herself. “Just like you did with your parents. Right? Which one of them wasn’t surprised when you slit their throats?”

Lorena’s grip tightened on the handle of the knife.

“You relished your mother’s reaction, didn’t you?” Brook inquired as if she were inquiring about a weather forecast. She needed to buy as much time as possible for the team to be able to locate her. Bit would be able to access someone’s home security system, which would show a vehicle leaving one of the vacant properties. “You hated your mother so much that she was the first person you fantasized about killing when you were young. Why? Was she

strict? Did she beat you? Did she keep you from hanging out with your friends? Boyfriend? His name was Brad, right?”

“You don’t know anything about—” Lorena had lunged forward, barely keeping herself in the chair before she laughed and pointed the tip of the knife in Brook’s direction. “You’re trying to get me to stop asking about Sarah Evanston, aren’t you? Do you think you’re buying yourself time to be saved? No one is coming. No one.”

“No?” Brook inquired casually as she once again shifted her body to test her restraints. The zip ties were extremely tight around her wrists and less so on her ankles. “And why is that, Lorena?”

“For someone who is supposed to notice almost every detail of a crime scene, I’d say that knock to the head has done some serious damage.” Lorena whistled loud and long, as if she were disappointed in Brook’s lack of awareness. “Before I dragged your ass to the car that I had parked in the garage and stuffed you in the backseat, I took your coat. Good thing that it had a large hood on it, too. I moved that nice SUV of yours and parked it in front of a house that I was considering using before choosing one with an attic. Your team will be busy elsewhere while you tell me all about Sarah Evanston. By the way, Blondie wasn’t much of a talker when it came to Jacob or Sarah Evanston, but she was always praising that tech boy of yours. What’s his name? Bet? Bot? Bit! That’s it. They’ll never think to look for you here. I brought us back home so that we could spend some quality time together.”

“Home?” Brook hadn’t shown any emotion during Lorena’s replay of what had taken place in the past couple of hours. The woman thrived on others’ fear, and Brook wouldn’t give her the satisfaction. “Last I checked, this home belonged to Erin Smith. Tell me something, Lorena. What is it about Jacob that fascinates you?”

Lorena stood up and walked over to the window. The adrenaline that was surging through her body was too much for her to handle. The fact that Brook hadn’t confirmed nor denied Bit’s ability to access footage of the neighborhood was now one of the woman’s numerous focal points.

Lorena peered outside, but Brook couldn’t see just how bad the weather had gotten since she had been knocked unconscious. It was still rather difficult to fight off the nausea, but at least the pain in her head had become somewhat dull.

“Jacob understands me.”

Brook could easily detect the change in Lorena's voice.

"People don't..." Lorena dropped the blind back in place. She turned to face Brook, but Lorena stayed near the window. As far as Brook was concerned, the farther away she was from the living room, the better chance that Brook had to figure out a way out of her restraints. "Jacob and I are the pariahs of society when it's really the other way around. He sees the world through my eyes. He loathes the same kind of people as me, and he goes through life eliminating them."

Lorena narrowed her eyes as her previous anger returned, but that had been Brook's intention. She needed to keep the woman's emotional state unbalanced to buy time. It was why she nodded her understanding and once again brought up Lorena's mother.

"Your mom took issues with your behavior, didn't she? Too bold? Brash? Did you sully the family's name when you decided to have sex with an ex-con? After all, Brad had just served a six-month sentence for selling drugs to some middle school students, right?"

"You don't know anything about my life," Lorena yelled as she closed half the distance between them. "Nothing."

"That's not true," Brook said as she noticed a plastic knife near the edge of her boot. The serrated edge wasn't sharp enough to immediately cut through the zip ties, but it could make enough of a dent to help snap the plastic in two with enough force added to the pressure. "I know a lot about you, Lorena. I know that your mother was concerned enough by your temper tantrums at four years of age that she consulted the town's pastor. When you were eight years old, you cut off the pigtails of a girl on the playground using the teacher's scissors just because she got to be Rudolph in the Christmas play. Then there was the time that you got caught shoplifting lighters at a convenience store. You tried to blame the same poor girl, but surveillance footage showed that she was in the back near the drinks and never even walked down that particular aisle."

"Poor girl? You have no idea what you're talking about," Lorena spat out as she glanced over her shoulder at the blinds. Brook did her best not to tense when Lorena finally advanced and knelt in front of Brook with one knee touching the Berber carpet. Their faces were inches apart. "You remind me of her. Long black hair. Blue eyes. A holier than thou attitude."

Brook couldn't stop the cry of pain from escaping her lips when the blade of the knife abruptly penetrated her upper leg. The fact that Lorena was

already holding up the knife to see if any blood remained on the silver tip told Brook that the cut hadn't been too deep.

Deep or not, the sudden pain had been staggering.

Unfortunately, Brook had gotten Lorena's message loud and clear—the injury had merely been a warning of what was to come.

“How is your attitude now, Brooklyn Sloane?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Theo Neville

February 2024

Monday — 1:08 am

SNOW SWIRLED AROUND THEO as he stood in the center of the cul-de-sac, surrounded by multiple patrol cars. Their red and blue lights lit up the immediate area, but the storm had only gotten worse in the past few hours. Two of the homes still had their Christmas lights strung up from a couple of months ago, but those small bulbs paled in comparison to the bright illumination given off by the light bars.

Theo's breath was visible in the frigid air.

The snowstorm had managed to muffle the surrounding sounds and blur the once-familiar lines of the neighborhood. He had turned so that his patch caught the biting wind instead of his good eye. As it stood, he still needed to squint to see which officers still needed to be given assignments.

"You two take Maple Street," Theo directed as he caught sight of Graham standing off to the side. He had been on the phone for most of the time that

Theo and Beeson had been going back over the grid inside one of the vehicles. “Contact Beeson if you find anything.”

The police officers nodded their understanding before quickly making their way back to their car. The roads were close to impassable, but they would continue to search until they were forced to stop. Theo, Graham, and the two federal agents assigned by Harden wouldn’t stop at all, even if it meant they had to canvass the neighborhood on foot.

“Get your tech guy on the phone,” Harden called out after he had opened the driver’s side door of his unmarked vehicle. The man was the epitome of a federal agent, all the way down to his cropped hairstyle. He had gone grey at the temples a few years back. Brook’s disappearance would no doubt add to that color. “Tell him to contact...”

Harden rattled off a name and number, which Theo immediately memorized as he placed the call. Not sure if Bit would be able to hear him over the wind, Theo opened the door to his Jeep and settled in behind the wheel. While the engine wasn’t running, the brief respite from the wind made the interior seem warmer than it actually was at the moment.

“Big T, I was just about to call you.” An irritating noise came across the line, but Theo recognized the sound of the phone being moved across Bit’s shirt. He must have switched the cell to his other ear to use both hands to type. “Remember when I said that Boss left the vacant property north of you? How she drove to your location and then disappeared from view to the left of that street? Well, it wasn’t her. Lorena Dobbs had to have been wearing Boss’ coat. Little T noticed that the person who walked to the Land Rover wasn’t wearing Boss’ boots. At least, not the ones that she wore inside the house.”

“Are you telling me that Brook is still somewhere inside that house?”

“No,” Bit replied with regret, pausing afterward to say something to Sylvie. The two had a brief conversation before Bit came back to the conversation. “Another vehicle left the same real estate listing that Boss was searching, but I lost sight of the car near Oak Street.”

“Oak Street can be used to leave the area and catch a ramp onto the highway,” Theo said in frustration as he rubbed the back of his neck. The cold leather of his gloves didn’t take away any of the tension in his muscles. “Have you accessed—”

“Some of those cameras are covered in ice. It’s too difficult to know for sure if the vehicle made it to the highway. You might need to send more

officers and agents to the surrounding communities. I've already sent you the listings of houses broken up by districts to make things easier."

There was nothing easy about searching for Brook in the middle of a snowstorm.

"From the doorbell camera that caught sight of the vehicle leaving the house, you're looking for a 2017 Toyota Camry. It's black in color. Unfortunately, there wasn't a good angle to get a license plate."

Theo noticed that Harden was speaking to Graham, bringing an end to the man's phone conversation. The two men then walked over to Harden's vehicle, which was still running given the amount of exhaust being emitted from the tailpipe.

Harden wasn't a man who cut corners, and Graham wasn't likely to show his hand. The two of them were operating from different ends even though they were on the same side. Graham had no doubt contacted one of the teams that worked off the books. One of those teams happened to be run by Alex DeSilva.

"...speakerphone, Bit. I'm not an invalid."

"Put Sylvie on speakerphone," Theo directed Bit after overhearing their argument.

"Theo, we have a basic idea of the profile, right?" Sylvie must have taken the phone from Bit, because her voice was loud and clear. She sounded a lot better than she had this morning when he had been in her room. Sharper, which meant that they had lessened her amount of pain medication. "Let me use some of Brook's old profiles to try and round out what we know about Lorena. We know a lot about her past from the investigation into her parents' murders. There must be some pattern, right? I mean, besides the vacant real estate properties."

"It can't hurt," Theo said as he turned the engine on in his Jeep before closing the door. He wasn't looking for heat so much as he wanted to get a visual of Graham and Harden. Theo made sure the setting was adjusted to defrost in order to clear his windshield. "Bit, what if you were able to use satellite footage? Harden gave me the name of someone for you to contact at the Bureau."

Theo rattled off the information, but Bit hadn't seemed too optimistic given the stormfront. The three of them spoke for a few minutes longer, but nothing came to light that they hadn't already thought of previously.

By the time Theo had disconnected the call, his windshield was clear.

Graham was getting out of Harden's vehicle, and it was evident that the two of them weren't on the same page. Harden immediately accessed his phone while Graham closed the distance to join Theo in the Wrangler. Some of the warmth that had collected in the Jeep escaped, but Graham quickly closed the door before holding his hands up to the vent.

"Want to clue me in on what happened with Harden?"

"We have until morning to find Brook." Graham cleared his throat. "Harden is getting pressure to distance the Bureau from S&E Investigations given the most recent turn of events. The brass wants Harden to take the reins."

Theo had seen the potential of such a decision a mile away.

"It's the right call. Doesn't mean that we have to step back." Theo understood the Bureau's point of view on the subject. Truthfully, he was surprised that Brook had been able to get the Bureau to agree to such a deal in the first place. "You should know that Brook wasn't the one to drive the Land Rover to this location. Someone's doorbell camera caught an individual leaving Brook's last location north of here, and that someone was wearing her coat. Assuming that someone was Lorena, she didn't think the situation all the way through. She wasn't wearing Brook's winter boots."

"Was Bit able to follow Lorena's trail after she walked away from the Land Rover?"

"No, which just tells us what we already know—Lorena had already canvassed the neighborhood and knew which homes to steer clear of," Theo said as he glanced out the side window of the Jeep. The snow was coming down too hard at the moment to see the yards. "A black Toyota Camry left the last address that Brook searched, but the storm had already started by then. The last sighting of the car was on Oak Street, which means Lorena could have been driving toward the highway. Before you ask, the one camera needed for the onramp was too covered in ice to make out anything good enough to give us something to go on."

"I'll drive over there," Graham said as he reached into the pocket of his jacket. He pulled out a pair of leather gloves. "DeSilva's team couldn't charter a flight into D.C. We're on our own. We—"

For the first time since Theo had known Graham, the man let his emotions get the best of him. He broke off his sentence as he focused on securing his gloves over his hands. Theo had been grappling with his own emotions for the past few days. But Graham? The man's daughter had been murdered, and

his wife had taken her life not long after that horrible tragedy. He was now facing the loss of another woman who he clearly loved more than life itself.

“You go to Brook’s last location,” Theo stated quietly as he focused his attention on Harden. The man was still on the phone in his car. “I’ll see if I can’t buy us more time before someone else takes over the investigation.”

Graham shook his head that Theo’s effort wasn’t necessary.

“You said yourself that it’s the right call. Let them satisfy the upper brass if it means keeping the consulting agreement in place.” Graham turned his head to focus on Theo. “Brook wouldn’t want it any other way. In the meantime, I trust that she’ll do what is necessary to come out of this on top.”

Graham reached for the handle and used his shoulder to give additional force to open the door against the biting wind. Had the stormfront been delayed by a few hours, Bit would have been able to ascertain whether or not Lorena had left the neighborhood. Given the new laws and regulations when it came to these types of pursuits, the Bureau couldn’t simply launch a house-by-house search. As it stood, an alert had already been sent out to the residents in the area that they should remain in their homes, be vigilant, and call 911 should they notice or hear anything unusual.

Only Theo didn’t believe that the situation would be resolved with that kind of luck. Brook surviving this situation had more to do with delaying the inevitable, and Graham was well aware of that fact.

Lorena Dobbs wanted Sarah Evanston’s location.

Brook’s life would end the moment it was revealed that she didn’t have that information. One wrong word could be the difference between life and death.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Brooklyn Sloane

February 2024

Monday — 1:49 am

EVERY NERVE IN BROOK'S body screamed with searing pain. Her muscles clenched and sweat formed on her brow as she fought against the involuntary scream. She was unsuccessful, but at least she had diminished the sound enough to upset her tormentor.

“I can do this all night. It's not like we're going anywhere,” Lorena said as she motioned toward the front door with the knife. Each one of her syllables dripped with sadistic delight. Unfortunately, Brook would be signing her own death warrant if she revealed that Sarah Evanston had reentered the witness protection program. “Which means no one is coming to save you, either.”

By the third puncture wound, Brook had noticed Lorena's routine.

She would use words to taunt Brook into answering questions about Sarah Evanston's whereabouts, and then go off on a tangent about how everyone had underestimated her. Those brief departures of the script gave Brook time

to absorb some of the inflicted pain by leveling out her breathing and forcing her leg muscles to relax. The jabs hadn't been too deep, but they had been profound enough to send waves of agony coursing through her body.

"Tell me, Lorena," Brook urged now that she was able to unclench her jaw. "How do you plan to give Jacob information? He's rotting away behind bars in a federal prison. He has no contact with the outside world. I was the one who personally made sure he was cut off from everyone."

Lorena had stood as she had done numerous times since the start of her so-called interrogation to walk over to the window. The question had brought her up short, though. It had prevented her from pulling the blind back to peer outside to toss a sneer in Brook's direction.

"You really think your brother is so helpless behind bars? I don't think so," Lorena said as she shrugged off such an inconvenience. "Jacob has ways out of that prison. It's just a matter of time."

The sharp pains in Brook's thighs had diminished into numerous dull burns. She made sure to remain still enough not to set off the aggravated nerves. As she searched Lorena's brown eyes for any sign of deceit, she displayed only unwavering confidence.

Brook lifted the corner of her lip in satisfaction.

"I do know my brother, Lorena. Very well," Brook stated as she had finally discovered the means to make a dent in the woman's confidence. "I've spent most of my life studying his methodical behavior, his mindful choices, and his calculated actions. I know of his network of loyal followers, and you're naïve if you believe that you're the only one willing to go to such extremes on his behalf. He moves people around like they are pawns on a chessboard, and all of you are disposable. You might believe that Jacob told you of his plans, but you'd be wrong."

Lorena advanced toward Brook so quickly that she couldn't help but tense in anticipation, causing her leg muscles to contract. She purposefully pushed against the zip ties so that her mind would focus on the sharp edges cutting into her flesh instead of the open wounds on her legs. Both were painful, but the redirect had given her a chance to catch her breath.

The plastic knife was still underneath Brook's boot where she had been able to keep it hidden from Lorena's view. There hadn't been a good moment to try and retrieve it.

"Jacob taught me to stay under the radar. He helped me survive, so I will return the favor," Lorena explained as she stood over Brook. For a brief

moment, her facial features softened as she inadvertently provided details of her time with Jacob. “I gave him my word that I wouldn’t stop until I had information on Sarah Evanston. Again, we have all night to—”

A faint thud came from somewhere in the back of the house. Lorena tensed as her gaze darted in that direction. It had been so distant that Brook figured the noise could have only come from the garage.

Had Bit finally managed to follow Lorena’s trail to Erin Smith’s residence?

“You make one sound, and it will be your last,” Lorena whispered forcefully as she began to walk out of the living room.

The second that Lorena disappeared from sight, Brook began to drag her boots over the carpet. The pain was intense, but the alternative was worse. Inch by painful inch, she continued to bring the knife closer until she was able to shift herself forward so that her fingers could grab the plastic utensil. Not knowing how long Lorena would be gone, Brook didn’t want to take the chance that the woman would suddenly appear. It took longer than Brook had wanted to get back into the same position against the couch.

It was difficult to keep ahold of the knife.

Some of the blood that had slid down her hands was still fresh, and the smooth plastic handle wasn’t easy to hold. The synthetic serration was brittle. Too brittle, but Brook was going to have to make the most of it. With somewhat choppy movements, she began to try and slice a large enough chunk out of the zip tie to snap it in half.

Every second that Lorena didn’t materialize from the back of the house felt like an eternity. Brook dared not stop, but it was a struggle to focus on freeing herself when the pain was becoming more intense with every movement. Perspiration beaded down the right side of her cheek, but she didn’t pause to wipe it on the shoulder of her suit jacket. Lorena’s footsteps could finally be heard echoing off the hallway.

“Get up.”

The left zip tie gave way with an inaudible snap.

“Why?” Brook asked as she forced herself to remain still. She needed to buy herself some more time. Her ankles were still bound, and she wouldn’t take any unnecessary risks where she could potentially find herself with the blade of a knife sticking out of her chest. “You can’t think driving in this weather is a good idea. You and I both know the neighborhood, no matter how large, is being searched by police officers and federal agents with a fine-tooth comb.”

“Which is why we’re leaving,” Lorena said as she quickly walked over to the window. She parted the blind, standing there for a while as she monitored the front yard. Brook glanced at the zip ties around her ankle. Lorena had wrapped each ankle tightly, using a third tie to secure Brook’s legs close together. “I don’t believe that they would think to check this place, but now I’m not sure.”

“There it is again.” Brook had managed to chastise Lorena over another round of intense and agonizing pain as she pulled her knees up until her winter boots were flat on the ground. She had been formulating details in her mind on how she could gain the advantage. Such a plan needed to be executed with precision and without hesitation. Her best chance of survival was taking Lorena by surprise, but that meant continuously provoking her into another outburst. “That reckless behavior you exhibit when cornered, Lorena. You don’t think. If one of the officers or agents is in the vicinity, they’ll think it’s odd that a vehicle is out in this weather. Don’t get me wrong. The coast could be clear, but one of them will happen upon the tire tracks. The second you hit a major highway, they’ll zero in on you through the traffic cameras. Considering there won’t be that many vehicles on the road due to the weather advisory and time of night, it won’t be too difficult to—”

“Shut up!” Lorena screamed as she lifted a hand to her head. “Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!”

Brook had hoped that Lorena would turn back around for another look at the front yard, but she didn’t make a move to shift the window blind to the side. She began to chew on her thumbnail as she paced back and forth. Her internal struggle between her need for control and the growing panic of being found was threatening to consume her.

Fortunately, another distant thud made itself known.

Lorena’s somewhat rattled gaze zeroed in on the hallway once more.

“Fuck this,” Lorena muttered as she surged forward.

At first, Brook thought she was going to be dragged to the car parked in the garage. She immediately tensed her body in response, fully prepared to seize the moment should Lorena try such a stunt. Instead, Lorena disappeared from view once more. As the sound of her footsteps faded in the distance, Brook didn’t waste a second of precious time. She brought her hands around the front of her body, unable to give the muscles in her shoulders time to acclimate she reached for the zip ties around her ankles.

Having full knowledge that heavy-duty zip ties used by the police could

only withstand one hundred and twenty pounds, Brook was confident that the ones around her ankles only needed around fifty pounds of pressure before they snapped in half. She hadn't realized just how much blood had seeped from her wrists, but her fingers were coated to the point that she needed to wipe the excess blood onto her pants. Once her skin was dry enough to grasp the zip ties, she pulled with all her might.

The zip ties snapped right before Lorena's voice echoed throughout the house.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Graham Elliott

February 2024

Monday — 2:07 am

THE BRUTAL GUSTS OF winds blowing the falling snow around would have made it difficult for Graham to find the correct address had it not been for the sale sign being so close to the street. Even then, it was only due to his driving at a snail's pace that had allowed his headlights to cut through the whiteout conditions to pick up on the red and blue vibrant colors. His windshield wipers had been pulling double duty, but he turned them off before shutting down the engine.

Graham reached for the ski cap that he had made sure to bring with him before leaving the house. He should have worn a second layer underneath the dark jeans and sweater that he had changed into, but he hadn't wanted to waste precious minutes.

Every second counted in this situation.

In his opinion, too much time had already passed since Brook's

disappearance.

After pocketing his keys and securing his ski cap, he exited his car. His breath immediately turned into mist in the frigid air. The ground was still covered with a soft blanket of snow, and his boots packed it down with each step.

Pulling up the collar of his coat, Graham made his way toward the small path leading up to the porch. Any evidence that police officers or a forensics team had been on the property had been erased with fresh snowfall over the past few hours. The wind continued to howl through the branches as he came to a stop in front of the entrance blocked by yellow crime scene tape. It was barely hanging on, one side already flapping against the siding of the house. He didn't waste time removing it completely, crumbling it into a ball.

The lockbox attached to the door handle was open, exposing the empty compartment within. Brook would have been the one to take the key. Since she was gone, the key was obviously still with her.

Graham wasn't even sure why he was here, other than to occupy himself with something to do until they received a break in the search. The likelihood that Lorena would have remained in an area that she knew so well was high, but there were over a thousand homes in this neighborhood alone. Given that about ten percent were for sale, that was a lot of ground to cover if one didn't factor in homes that were empty due to business travel or vacation. Lorena had months to overhear various conversations that would provide her with such information.

Graham twisted the doorknob and found that no one had bothered to lock the entrance. He stepped inside and quietly closed the door behind him. He reached for a light switch, not worried that a neighbor might notice someone inside the house. Police and federal agents had been in and out of the home since being alerted to Brook's disappearance.

Graham slowly walked through the house, searching each room. He moved from one space to another, his mind attempting to recreate what had been going through Brook's thoughts. She would have kept her footsteps light while listening for any sound that someone else was in the house.

Once he finished going through the main level, he stood still in the small hallway.

Brook would have chosen to go downstairs first. The door was to the left, so Graham continued on the path that he believed she would have taken in clearing the home. While they had surmised that Lorena had been upstairs in

the attic, that didn't mean Brook hadn't discovered something else in her search. Considering the basement had been unoccupied like the main level, it wasn't long before he was walking up the staircase.

Graham turned on the lights as he went, still not concerned about his presence being detected by the neighbors. S&E Investigations was still in charge of the investigation until he received word otherwise. Given that he owned fifty percent of the company, he had every right to be here.

The attic ladder was still unfolded, its wooden feet anchored on the floor near a smear of dried blood. Graham walked around the stain, intentionally not allowing his thoughts to go down a dark path. He continued to canvass the bedrooms and bathrooms, taking time to open every closet. He returned to the hallway before eventually coming to a stop in front of the ladder.

He knelt and studied the crimson stain.

The tinged area was far enough away from the ladder that gave the indication that Brook had fallen off the ladder at some point. Had Lorena immediately attacked Brook the moment she pulled on the small string of rope? Or had Lorena bided her time until Brook's attention had been focused on the pile of garbage the officers had mentioned to Theo?

Graham unfolded his large frame before climbing the ladder.

There was a long string from a single lightbulb hanging from one of the wooden beams. He tugged on the cord, but it must have burnt out. It didn't take him long to retrieve his phone from his jacket. He activated the flashlight and then slowly scanned the attic. There was a stack of boxes to the left. In the far-right corner, there were empty takeout containers, balled-up napkins, and overturned plastic cups.

Brook probably wouldn't have climbed all the way up without first knowing the area, especially in the dark with only a penlight. Graham winced when he came to the supposition that Lorena had heard someone in the house and used the boxes as cover. If the situation had unfolded the way he thought, then the blood below had come from the side of Brook's head.

He pulled out his phone and accessed his speed dial list. By the time that he had pressed Theo's name, Graham was already descending the staircase.

"Anything?" Theo asked, not bothering with a greeting.

"I've searched the place from top to bottom. There's nothing useful here."

"Nothing on this end, either," Theo shared, his frustration and concern evident. "We're down to maybe thirty vacant houses in the south part of the neighborhood. After that, we need to consider the possibility that Lorena left

the area.”

The last part of Theo’s sentence had been interrupted by an extended pause. It was clear that someone else was calling in, so Graham mentioned that he would get started on canvassing the other properties.

“Stay on the line for a minute,” Theo directed before explaining the reason behind his request. “Bit is on the other line.”

Graham came to a stop by the front door, clamping down on his frustration over the delay.

“Big T, we might have something. Have you checked Erin Smith’s residence?”

“I was there twice on Friday,” Theo shared warily. “I didn’t see any evidence that Lorena had returned to Smith’s residence. I’ll contact Beeson to see if he had one of his men over there yesterday or today.”

There was a pause and some muffled noises as Theo must have been sending a message to the detective while keeping everyone else on the line.

“...give me the phone.” Sylvie could be heard in the background. Her tone suggested that she was still in pain, but she sounded a hell of a lot better than she had the past two days. “Listen, I’ve been going over the forensic reports from Erin Smith’s house. This might be nothing, but there was no mention of a garage door opener being found in either Erin’s car or anywhere in the house. Theo, did you see one in the kitchen or maybe even the garage when you were there?”

Theo was silent for a moment, but Graham didn’t wait for a reply. He was already out the door and trudging through the snow, fighting against the biting wind. In the short amount of time that he had been inside the house, mounting drifts had been created in numerous areas.

“No.” Theo’s answer was heavy with motivation now that they finally had something to go on. “I don’t recall seeing a garage door opener.”

By the time that Graham had yanked open the door to his vehicle, he had already disconnected the call. The car fishtailed as he backed out of the driveway. The tires spun on the snow-covered roads, but they eventually gained enough traction to propel him forward after he had shifted the car into drive.

Graham pressed the gas pedal as far as he could without losing control. He focused on the swirling snow illuminated by his headlights, not giving himself time to imagine what they would all find if Sylvie’s prediction regarding Erin Smith’s residence was true.

Brook was a survivor, and she wouldn't bend to anyone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Lorena Dobbs

February 2024

Monday — 2:16 am

THE HOUSE WAS QUIET.

Too quiet.

Lorena's heart pounded as she made her way back through the small hallway to the living room. She had only been gone for a few minutes to find out what had made the noise coming from the back of the house. A raccoon had somehow made its way inside the garage.

Something was wrong.

An unsettling knot twisted her gut.

Maybe someone was outside, though it was doubtful. The brutal temperatures alone would keep people inside. If a federal agent or an officer had come searching for Brook, they certainly wouldn't sneak around in the dark.

She should have forced Brooklyn Sloane out of the house ten minutes ago.

The only reason that Lorena had hesitated was due to the weather, but she would have figured something out. Anything was better than being a sitting duck, which was the first thing that Jacob had taught her.

She came to an abrupt stop when she spotted the empty spot in front of the couch.

Jacob's sister was gone, and the zip ties that had bound her wrists had been discarded on the floor. The only thing that remained was the blood-stained carpet from the damage done by Lorena's blade.

She cursed under her breath.

How could Brook have freed herself so quickly?

Anger and resentment boiled inside of Lorena. She had been so close to finally obtaining Sarah Evanston's location. Brooklyn Sloane would have relented sooner rather than later.

Gripping the handle of the knife, Lorena quickly walked through the first floor, checking every single place where Sloane could have hidden herself. There were no open doors or windows, so she couldn't have gone far.

Just in case, Lorena hurried to the front door and wrenched it open. The cold night air bit into her skin, but the fresh powder of snow was undisturbed on the front porch. There were no footprints and no trail of blood dots marring the perfect white blanket.

Brooklyn Sloane was still in the house.

Lorena couldn't stop the malicious smile that curled her lips as she shut the door. She slowly turned to face the staircase. The hunt wasn't over yet. She just wished that Jacob could be here with her. He would have loved hunting his baby sister.

The worn carpet muffled Lorena's footsteps as she walked up the staircase. Once she reached the landing, she quietly paused and tilted her head to the side. The only sounds that resonated on the upper level were the howl of the winds attempting to gain access to the house. Wanting Brook to know there was no way out, Lorena called out to her in almost a song.

"You couldn't have gone far, Brooklyn Walsh," Lorena taunted as she emphasized the surname. With each step, she allowed the blade in her hand to graze the wall, the sharp tip producing a faint, sinister scrawl on the once immaculate surface. "That name must rankle, huh? It's the echo of who you used to be. Does it remind you of Jacob, perhaps?"

Lorena had turned on the hallway light so she could peer into the first bedroom. It was devoid of life, literally an expanse of emptiness with a thick

layer of dust—a testament to Erin Smith's lackluster housekeeping.

Lorena would have laughed at the fact that the woman's body had been shoved in a deep freezer for the past couple of months, but there were more pressing matters at hand. Lorena even crouched to inspect underneath the bed, finding nothing but those same neglected companions of dust. A quick look inside the closet revealed it was barren, save for a forlorn collection of blankets and pillows, their yellowed stains dark enough to be seen by the hallway light. She made sure to keep an eye on the hallway for any movement, but Brook had stayed hidden.

“You might as well give up,” Lorena called out mockingly. “There are only a few places left for you to be, which means you’re running out of time.”

She moved to the next room, which just so happened to be a bathroom.

“Poor little FBI agent, all alone and bleeding.”

Brook wasn't behind the shower curtain, so Lorena stepped back over the threshold. Seeing as the home contained only two bedrooms, it didn't take a genius to know Brook's location.

Lorena's heart raced with anticipation.

This was it.

No more playing around.

Brook was going to give Lorena the location of Sarah Evanston, even if Lorena had to cut it out of her. With a knowing smile, she turned the knob slowly until the door creaked open.

“Ready or not, here I come...”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Brooklyn Sloane

February 2024

Monday — 2:22 am

"YOU COULDN'T HAVE GONE far, Brooklyn Walsh."

Brook did her best to ignore the taunt as she tightened the arms of her suit jacket around her thigh to stem the bleeding from the wounds. She had to bite her lip to prevent herself from crying out in pain. She had always prided herself on having a high pain threshold, but the blade had sliced through the muscle. Every step up the staircase had been like taking a blow torch to her left leg.

"That name must rankle, huh?" Lorena called out again, this time with a laugh. "It's the echo of who you used to be. Does it remind you of Jacob, perhaps?"

Brook inhaled deeply and as silently as possible as she pressed herself against the wall behind the bedroom door. It wasn't that much of a strain to hear Lorena search the other bedroom. It wasn't like she had been silent about

it.

Unfortunately, Brook had no weapon. Nothing to defend herself with when Lorena found her. The wounds in her leg pulsed with heat, and she could feel her blood seeping through the makeshift bandage of her jacket.

She had gotten the bleeding under control as best she could under the circumstances.

“You might as well give up.” Lorena couldn't help herself when it came to playing with her victims. “There are only a few places left for you to be, which means you're running out of time.”

Brook could hear Lorena as she exited one of the rooms. She must have been taking the tip of the knife and scraping it alongside the wall as she walked down the hallway.

There was only one room between them now.

The small extra stop gave Brook time to think over how to handle the upcoming confrontation with as little bloodshed as possible. She didn't want to have to kill Lorena.

Brook heard the shower curtain being pulled back.

“Poor little FBI agent, all alone and bleeding.”

Lorena's footsteps finally came to a stop just outside the bedroom door. Brook held her breath, and every muscle in her body tensed. The pain in her leg gave her some clarity, heightening her senses. She had hoped that Graham and the team would have been able to piece together the path Lorena had taken to get to Erin Smith's residence, but the storm raging outside must have hindered their search.

She couldn't wait any longer.

She had to be ready to fight for her life.

The doorknob turned slowly. As the door began to gradually swing open, Brook coiled herself, ready to strike. She would aim for the hand that Lorena held the knife in first to try and disarm her.

“Ready or not, here I come...”

Lorena's silhouette appeared in the doorway, backlit by the hall light.

Brook exploded into motion before Lorena had time to react.

Brook launched herself at the woman, leading with her uninjured leg. Lorena stumbled back into the hallway with a grunt of surprise. Brook slammed into her, grabbing her hand that held the knife.

They crashed into the wall across the hall, grappling desperately.

Brook gritted her teeth against the pain that radiated up her leg as she

struggled with Lorena in the narrow hallway. Brook's fingers closed around Lorena's wrist, trying to keep the knife pointed away from her body. Lorena was stronger than she looked, fueled by rage and adrenaline. She slammed Brook against the wall, knocking the air from her lungs.

"You're going to tell me where Sarah is," Lorena managed to say as she bore down on her. "And then I'm going to kill you."

Brook shoved with all her might.

With a scream of frustration, Lorena wrenched her wrist free and slashed wildly at Brook. She barely dodged the swipe, the tip of the blade catching her shoulder. She cried out in surprise, but she managed to seize Lorena's arm before the woman could take advantage of the situation. Brook succeeded in stopping the knife from plunging into her chest just inches from her heart. They strained against each other as they continued to fight for control.

Brook's injured leg threatened to give out.

"Tell me where she is!" Lorena screamed, spit flying from her lips. "Tell me!"

Brooklyn didn't waste her breath responding. She twisted Lorena's wrist, trying to make her drop the knife. She yelled and headbutted Brook hard enough to cause her vision to swim as pain exploded in her skull.

Her grip slackened for a split second.

Lorena wrenched her arm free and slashed wildly again. This time, the knife caught Brook across the ribs, slicing through her shirt and into her side.

Brook stumbled back against the wall.

Lorena advanced, raising the bloody knife over her head for a finishing blow. It was obvious to Brook that the woman had forgotten all about Sarah Evanston in that moment.

Brook reached up with both hands and grabbed Lorena's wrists in a vice-like grip just as she was bringing the knife down for a fatal blow. Using Lorena's own momentum against her, Brook swung the woman's arms hard to the side, twisting her body toward the top of the staircase.

Lorena stumbled and was thrown off balance by the sudden move. Her foot caught the edge of the top step, and she pitched forward with a cry of surprise. Still clinging to her wrists, Brooklyn was pulled along as well.

Together, they tumbled and crashed down the staircase in a tangle of flailing limbs.

Brook's injured leg exploded in white-hot agony as they bounced and rolled down the stairs. She couldn't suppress a scream of pain as the wounds

caused her muscles to spasm. Lorena's shrieks mingled with hers, and it wasn't long before they both slammed into the wall at the bottom landing.

For a brief moment, Brook lay stunned on the floor.

The air in her lungs had been completely knocked out of her. Pain radiated through her body, pulsing in time with her racing heart. With a groan, she rolled onto her side, clutching at her leg as blood began to soak through her makeshift bandage once more.

A few feet away, Lorena was sprawled on her stomach.

The knife was just beyond the reach of her outstretched hand.

Knowing that she only had mere seconds, Brook forced herself to move through the haze of pain. She lunged for the knife, but Lorena's fingers closed around the handle first. As Lorena pushed herself to her knees, Brook's leg gave out. It wasn't long before she was on her back again, giving Lorena the advantage.

Lorena's smile was cruel and triumphant as she raised the knife above her head, fully prepared to drive it into Brook's chest. She watched the blade rise, the light glinting off the bloodied edge.

Time seemed to slow.

In that suspended moment, Brook's training from the academy took over.

As Lorena's arm started its downward arc, Brooklyn moved with a burst of adrenaline. She grabbed Lorena's wrist, stopping the knife from reaching its mark. Before Lorena could react, Brooklyn hooked her leg behind Lorena's knee. In one smooth motion, she rolled them, leveraging her weight and their momentum to flip Lorena onto her back.

Suddenly it was Brook on top, pinning Lorena down.

The knife was still clutched in Lorena's hand, but the tip was now angled up under her ribcage. Lorena's eyes went wide with shock and rage. She struggled beneath Brooklyn, trying to wrench her wrist free.

Brooklyn held firm, doing everything in her power to figure out a way for both of them to come out of this altercation alive. Unfortunately, the decision was taken out of her hands. With a guttural cry, Lorena tried once again to free herself, but all she managed to do was drag Brook's weight down on top of her. The knife in their hands plunged upward, deep into Lorena's chest.

Lorena's eyes bulged in surprise, and her mouth opened in a rattling gasp. Brook sensed the resistance in Lorena's body give way as the knife found its mark. Warm blood spilled over Brook's hand where she still gripped Lorena's wrist. Their faces were within inches of one another.

The woman somehow still managed to summon a smile.

"You're just...like...your brother...after all."

Brook held Lorena's gaze steadily as the life drained from her eyes. The pause between each breath became longer. Eventually, Lorena went limp. Brook remained poised over the woman a moment longer before slowly releasing her and sitting back.

Lorena Dobbs was dead.

Brook didn't have time to consider Lorena's words when the front door slammed open. Graham and Theo appeared right before the cold sucked out what heat remained in the house, both taking a moment to absorb the bloody scene in front of them.

Graham's footsteps were muffled by the thick carpet.

He stepped over Lorena's lifeless form to kneel in front of Brook, removing his gloves in the process. He tossed them aside as he attempted to gently assess her wounds.

Brook grabbed hold of his hands and leaned into him without hesitation. She wrapped her arms around his solid frame, not caring that the leather of his jacket was cold. His tight embrace made up for the lack of warmth. His breath was warm against her cheek as he whispered assurances that seemed to be for the both of them.

She didn't mind in the least.

Over Graham's shoulder, Brook caught Theo's gaze. He stood a few feet away, hands on his knees as if grounding himself in the moment. She had hurt him. Hurt the team with her decisions, but she had to believe that they would eventually come to understand why she had made them.

She mouthed a silent "thank you" to Theo, ensuring that each syllable was heavy with gratitude. Theo's lips twitched into a weary smile, his nod subtle but significant. In their private exchange, there was an understanding that ran deeper than words.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Brooklyn Sloane

February 2024

Thursday — 6:02 pm

THE OFFICES OF S&E Investigations were quiet this time of evening.

Peaceful.

Brook cradled a cup of hot coffee in her hand as she left the kitchen. There was no trace of a limp in her gait, although her thigh remained tender from the stab wounds inflicted by Lorena Dobbs. Brook had no reason to complain, though. None. She had witnessed Sylvie's recovery these past few days, which was proof that Brook's injuries could have been a lot worse.

"I spoke with Harden this afternoon," Brook said to Theo as she leaned a shoulder against the doorframe of his office. Taking the weight off her left leg helped ease the lingering ache. "Apparently, the upper brass has been singing your praises about how you handled the search."

Theo looked up from the file on his desk before leaning back in his chair. To the right of him, the lights of the city shimmered in the dark outside his

expansive office window.

"They are just relieved the residents of Erin Smith's neighborhood aren't creating an uproar about how we almost created a panic amongst them," Theo said with a small smile.

He had been quiet since yesterday, which was when he and Brook had returned to the office to finish up the paperwork required to be completed per their consulting agreement with the Bureau. They hadn't really had a chance to talk, but that had been by design.

"How's the leg?" Theo asked, nodding toward her thigh.

Brook walked over to one of the chairs opposite his desk and used one of the metal arms to help her take a seat without too much effort. She didn't answer until after she had taken a sip of her coffee.

"I'll be on the treadmill by Saturday," Brooklyn said confidently, although she left off that it might be a slow walk at the start. "Just a little tender if I move the wrong way. Nothing I can't handle."

Theo regarded her silently, as if he were trying to ascertain if she was downplaying her pain. She wasn't quite ready to dive into what they needed to discuss, so she stuck with an informal question that would put them both at ease.

"Are you driving over to Sylvie's place tonight?"

"That's the plan," Theo replied before tossing the question back at her. "You?"

"Yes. Graham is meeting me there. Bit and Arden have been tag-teaming since Sylvie's release from the hospital. Her father isn't doing well, and they expect him to pass away any day now." Brook compressed her lips together, wishing there was something they could do to ease Sylvie's pain...both physically and emotionally. Time was the answer to both. "I ordered dinner from her favorite Chinese restaurant, including that godawful tea she likes from there."

"The one that Bit says smells like stiff socks that have been worn for a month?"

Brook placed the back of her hand to her mouth. Truthfully, she'd been nauseous since making such a potentially fatal mistake in her search for Lorena. Brook had let a full day of discovering nothing last Monday lull her into a sense of non-accomplishment. Doing so had almost ended her life.

"Are we okay?"

The question had clearly taken Theo by surprise. He rubbed his chin,

almost as if he didn't know how to answer her question. Brook's chest hurt that she was to blame for such a rift between them.

She observed closely as he took a moment to gather his thoughts.

"I'll admit I couldn't wrap my head around your decision to go silent and isolate yourself the way you did," Theo finally said, dropping his hand so that his forearm rested on the desk in front of him. "I thought that we'd gotten past that part of your life—the part where you keep everyone at arm's length. Truthfully, it seemed reckless and dangerous, even if you meant well. Sylvie was still in surgery, I was doing my best to keep your disappearance from Beeson, and you left me to deal with Bit. Seriously?"

Brook couldn't help but crack a smile. The part about Bit had been Theo's way of taking the sting out of his response. He then let out a long sigh before tapping his fingers on the hard surface of his desk.

"Having time to process what you were thinking at the time, I get it. I do. If Lorena had been able to be in Sylvie's life for two months, who else had we allowed to do the same? Our phones could have been cloned, there could have been listening devices planted in our vehicles and homes, and a host of other security issues that we hadn't even considered." Theo frowned and shook his head in remorse. "Things that could still happen, because we don't know all the plans that Jacob laid out to free himself from federal prison."

Brook wasn't going to interrupt Theo, because he was saying everything that had crossed her mind since she had received the phone call regarding Sylvie's attack.

"You did what you thought you had to do to keep us safe." Theo leaned forward, his expression more curious than anything. "Where did you come up with the idea to use a texting service to reach out to me?"

"The better question is why the coded message went over your head."

"Touché," Theo replied with a laugh. He eventually leaned back in his chair. "To answer your question, yes. We're okay."

Brook closed her eyes briefly from the relief she experienced upon hearing his words. She knew the path she had chosen could have truly damaged the trust between them. Hearing Theo's perspective gave her hope that they could continue to build that foundation, stronger than before.

"I'm glad to hear that," Brook said softly. "And Mia? Do we get to meet her yet?"

"Not yet."

Brook had no doubt that both Theo and Bit had been diving deep into the

lives of those who had crossed paths with them ever since Jacob had turned himself in to the FBI. She would have given anything to tell them that their ability to trust shouldn't be questioned, but she couldn't do that.

"I have to ask," Theo said as he began the process of shutting down his computer. "You haven't mentioned Jacob. I'm assuming that he doesn't know Lorena Dobbs is dead. Are you going to visit him at the prison? Tell him what went down?"

Brook rested her elbows on the arms of the chair as she cradled her coffee cup. She had given a lot of thought about when to visit her brother, and even more consideration to the information that she would disseminate once she was there.

She took a slow sip of her coffee as she considered Theo's question.

"Yes, I do plan on going to see Jacob." Brook glanced down at her thigh. "But not until after I've fully recovered. I don't want him to see any sign of weakness while I'm still healing."

Brook shifted in her chair, stretching out her injured leg.

"I'll let my brother know that his little protégé is dead. Face to face. I want to see his reaction. Given that another plan of his has backfired, he might not be able to keep his anger in check this time. Maybe he'll let something slip."

"You don't believe that."

"No, but Lorena Dobbs' involvement does tell us the depths that Jacob went to in order to cement his freedom before he walked into FBI Headquarters." Brook couldn't help but feel as if she should know what Jacob had planned next, but her mind came up blank. She hadn't realized how long the silence had hung in the air until she caught Theo staring at her in question. "Jacob knows where my vulnerabilities lie, Theo."

"With us," Theo responded matter-of-factly as he stood from his desk. She followed suit, albeit a bit more slowly. "The firm. Graham Elliott."

"There's an escalation pattern in Jacob's plans. I can see it. You can see it," Brook said as they stood facing one another. Eventually, Theo would grab his jacket and she would return to her office. They would meet up at Sylvie's and dive into light conversations to take Sylvie's mind off her injuries and her father's health. It was what friends and family would do for one another. "Jacob underestimated one thing, though."

"And that would be?"

"My vulnerabilities that you just rattled off?" Brook held up her coffee cup in salute as she lifted the corner of her mouth in conviction. "The team, the

firm, and Graham? You are all my strengths, as well."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Jacob Walsh

March 2024

Saturday — 3:54 pm

AN ANNOYING BUZZ CAME from a fluorescent tube directly over the metal table. Every thirty-two seconds, the long bulb would lose its connection and cause an irritating flicker of light across the room.

Jacob pushed down the hatred that twisted his gut over having to wait for his sister. The only time he was ever brought to this room was when Brook came to see him. Security cameras were covering the space, unlike when he met with General Graham Elliott.

Jacob stared at the door, ignoring the concrete walls and steel table in front of him. The room would have been oppressively quiet if it hadn't been for the light fixtures. He had counted to thirty-two another six times before a muffled clang could be heard through the heavy door.

Jacob studied his sister's face as she crossed the threshold. His handcuffs were looped through the eyehook of the table, and he made sure that he kept

his hands relaxed so as not to give away the tension radiating through his body.

Brook appeared to be healthy...happy.

He greeted her with a mocking smile even though he wanted to wrap his hands tightly around her neck.

"Hello, dear sister."

Brook's expression remained neutral as she walked over to the far wall and leaned a shoulder against the concrete. She was dressed in her usual business suit, her black heels shiny. They were new. She had been shopping recently.

"I regret to inform you that your little protégé is dead. I'd hoped to see Lorena Dobbs stand trial for murdering her parents. We don't always get what we want, though."

Jacob figured Lorena had met her maker.

He wasn't surprised at the news given that Lorena had trouble controlling her temper. He had hoped that the time he had spent with her had taught her some restraint, but there had always been the chance that she would be her own worst enemy.

"I'd send flowers, but it's not like anyone is hosting a funeral in her honor."

"Three," Brook murmured as she tilted her head in thought. "No, four times that those plans of yours fell through."

"You might want to take up a math class in your spare time. By the way, how is the search for a living donor match to Jonah Cary coming along?"

"Quite well, actually. Did I forget to mention that Jonah's surgery has already taken place? Your...services...won't be needed."

Jacob caught the way his sister's gaze landed on his hands. Two of his fingers had curled in at the news, and he had to forcibly straighten them until they appeared relaxed in their pose.

"It's getting to you, isn't it?" Brook asked with a small smile, her voice barely above a whisper. "The walls are closing in, and you're starting to panic."

"I see someone has been sharpening her claws."

"Not really," Brook responded casually as she slid her hands into the pockets of her pants. Her shoulder still rested against the concrete wall. "Did I mention that the skeletal remains of a young girl were found near the campsite that we used to attend in the summers? It shouldn't be long before we know her identity. What are the odds that the body belongs to Stella Bennett?"

Jacob continued to stare at his sister as he forced his expression to remain neutral even as rage boiled inside him. The smug look on her face made his fingers twitch once again with the urge to wrap them around her slender neck. He dug his toenails into his shoes under the table, using the bite of pain to keep control.

Stella Bennett.

Jacob remembered the summer of '96 with vivid clarity. He recalled the heady rush of taking the girl's life as if it were yesterday. He could still hear her bubbly laughter...still envision her bright smile at the thought of her perfect life. All she had talked about was how her uncle would buy her anything that she wanted, and how all she had to do was pout to get her way.

The pocketknife that he had carried around with him back then had only ever been used to carve wood. He had fantasized about using it on other things, but it hadn't been until Stella Bennett had told him to go back to the poor kids' camp that he had pushed her to the ground. The euphoria that had embraced him had opened his eyes to what he was truly meant to be in this world.

Killing Stella had unlocked something primal within him.

He hadn't been able to get enough of the helpless plea in her eyes as he used the small knife to carve her face into nothing but slivers of flesh. Her screams had echoed throughout the woods. He relived those delicious moments of power whenever the mundane world pressed in on him.

Currently, that was almost every fucking minute of every fucking day.

Jacob somehow managed to stop himself from screaming every obscenity he could think of at his sister. Stella hadn't been on the list of his victims that he had provided to the Bureau.

Any mistakes found could have him eating his last meal.

"Mistakes are always found with the first victim. But you know that, don't you, Jacob?"

Brook gave what sounded like a sigh of satisfaction as she pushed off the wall. She strolled gracefully across the concrete floor before rapping her knuckles on the metal door.

"I'm curious, sister of mine." Jacob waited until Brook had turned to meet his gaze. He couldn't allow her to leave while having such a sense of accomplishment. "You must keep a tight leash on that General of yours."

The fact that Brook didn't turn when the guard opened the door told Jacob that he had her full attention.

"I mean, all it would have taken was one phone call."

Jacob could see from the narrowing of her eyes that she understood the meaning behind his words. He wondered if General Elliott had told Brook about their brief meeting.

"You're always saying you know me, Jacob. Well, you should know that I would never rob the families of your victims from seeing you take your last breath in the death chamber."

Jacob waited until she had crossed the threshold before calling out a warning—and one she should heed.

"You're starting to sound like you believe your life is perfect." Jacob experienced a shot of adrenaline at the sight of Brook straightening her shoulders. She continued walking until she disappeared from view, but that didn't stop him from getting in the last word. He raised his voice so that it would carry out the room. "That would be a very bad thing, sis. Very bad."

~ The End ~

Revealing the truth could be the key to survival or a catalyst for murder in the next gripping psychological thriller by USA Today Bestselling Author Kennedy Layne...

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In three quiet towns across Michigan, a shared name links three women to a chilling fate. Each victim meets a gruesome end, sparking fear and speculation that goes viral on social media. Mary Jane Reynolds, bearing the same name and residing in the same state as the victims, takes matters into her own hands. She posts an online video pleading for the FBI to take the case and give those with the same name protection.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kennedy Layne is a USA Today bestselling author. She draws inspiration for her romantic thrillers in part from her not-so-secret second life as a wife of a retired Marine Master Sergeant. He doubles as her critique partner, beta reader, and military consultant. Kennedy also has a deep love for cozy mysteries, thrillers, and basically any book that can keep her guessing until the very end. They live in the Midwest with their menagerie of pets. The loyal dogs and mischievous cats appreciate her writing days as much as she does, usually curled up in front of the fireplace.

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