



# Blinded by Sin (Touch of Evil #12)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** Is anyone ever truly prepared to face the sins of their past?

Jordan Miles, revered CEO of Miles Therapeutics, finds himself at the center of a scandal when he is arrested for his wife's murder.

Determined to salvage his reputation and prove his innocence, he turns to the one person he believes can hunt down the real killer.

Enter Brooklyn Sloane, a former FBI profiler who has spent her career tracking serial murderers. While she typically steers clear of ongoing investigations, her personal acquaintance with Jordan compels her to take the case. The police allege that Jordan shot his wife point blank during an argument in their bedroom, but Brook doesn't believe for a moment that he is guilty. What secrets has his wife taken to her grave?

With the clock ticking and the pressure mounting, Brook warns Jordan that their search for the truth could shatter the illusion of his perfect life. As she and the team peel back the layers of Jordan's seemingly ideal existence, they soon realize the cost of redemption may be higher than they ever dared imagine.

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# Page 1

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## Chapter One

Brooklyn Walsh June 2007 Saturday — 10:46 pm

The bright sun spilled over the funeral home, indifferent to the somber mood that consumed those exiting through the ornate wooden doors. Gradually, black-clad figures began to gather in small groups on the sidewalk. They would eventually make their way to a nearby cemetery using the parked vehicles lining the curb. The air surrounding the family members, friends, and neighbors was thick with grief and finality as they prepared to convey their final goodbyes to Sally Pearson.

Brooklyn Walsh stood across the street in isolation.

She was separated from the mourners by more than just a strip of asphalt. The Pearson family had every right to hate her. They had every reason to blame her for their daughter's death. The Pearsons, once like a second family to Brook, were now hostile in the aftermath of her brother's unthinkable actions.

Jacob had murdered Brook's best friend, leaving the teenage girl to bleed to death in the middle of Mr. Herring's cornfield. Jacob had not only taken Sally's life, but he had ensured the mortician couldn't possibly offer Mr. and Mrs. Pearson an open casket. There had been nothing left of Sally's face but mangled pieces of flesh.

The graphic image would forever remain burned into Brook's mind.

Her parents hadn't left the house in a week and a half. The Walsh family had been shunned by the very community that had once embraced them, leaving Brook to

grieve alone. Her mother had holed up in the bedroom, lost in her own mental anguish. Her father just sat in his chair staring at the wall in silence. It was obvious the shock of the horrific actions his son had committed had yet to wear off.

Brook hadn't been able to take the silence in the house for another second.

The morning's warmth did little to alleviate the chill that had settled deep within her. Not even a heating blanket had helped take the edge off last night. When a gentle breeze weaved through the trees behind her, she wrapped her arms around her abdomen to stop the onslaught of shivers.

She was being selfish.

She deserved to be as cold as Sally was inside her casket.

"Did you know?"

The deep, familiar voice cut through Brook's thoughts, and she whipped her head to the side. She hadn't seen or heard Sally's brother cross the street. Ben's usual easy-going demeanor had been replaced with an intensity she had never before witnessed from him. There was a furious storm of emotions in his dark eyes...anger, grief, disbelief.

"Did you know that your brother was a killer?"

Brook flinched at the hatred that seeped from his tone. She tried to swallow, but she couldn't get her throat to accommodate her request. Ben's voice practically vibrated with unrestrained emotion. She quickly swiped at her tears. Her sorrow and anguish didn't matter today.

Brook couldn't bring herself to admit the truth. Even if she had been able to give Ben

an honest answer and reveal her conviction that her brother was a monster, her throat had constricted to the point of pain. She couldn't even swallow her own spit.

"My sister trusted you, Brook." Ben turned away for a brief moment after his voice cracked under the strain. He used the sleeve of his suit jacket to dry his eyes. "Sally was your best friend, and you didn't warn her. You let her..."

Soul-crushing guilt weighed down on Brook. It was all she could do to keep standing in place. Her knees threatened to give out, and it became extremely difficult to breathe.

"Did you keep his secret?" Ben pressed after composing himself. His tone was accusatory, but it was witnessing the revulsion in his eyes that almost crippled her. "How long have you known, Brook? Because now the police think Jacob killed Pamela Murray, too."

Brook clenched her hands into tight fists, her nails digging into her palms, as if physical pain could somehow displace the unbearable weight of her guilt. She was no longer able to meet Ben's accusatory stare. He was right. She had failed her best friend.

How could Brook defend herself when she had known all along that Jacob had murdered Pamela? Brook had even discovered a sketch that her brother had drawn of the crime, but he had destroyed the evidence by the time she had gone back to search for the sketchbook. Her parents never would have believed her, anyway.

Deep down, Brook had questioned her sanity for allowing such appalling thoughts about her own brother to ruminate in her mind. They had been raised by the same parents, in the same household, and in the same town.

She had been blinded by her desire for normalcy.

If her own brother was a killer, then what would that make her?

“Ben, I—” Brook failed to convey how much she had loved Sally. Ben was already shaking his head in warning, but Brook still managed to find the courage to reveal a solitary truth. “I would change places with her if I could, Ben.”

“Trust me, Brook,” Ben muttered bitterly before he walked away. She was still able to hear his last declaration. “I wish you could, too.”

Ben didn’t cross the street, and she was left to stare after him. Sally would want her brother at her gravesite when they lowered her casket into the ground. Brook tried to call out to him, but she was too paralyzed by the horror of what she had let happen. She took a few steps back until she came into contact with an old tree. It kept her upright while she grappled with unspeakable guilt.

There was no escaping the consequences of her choices.

Jacob, on the other, had simply vanished into thin air. The police had questioned her for hours, interviewed her parents, and even suggested that Brook had helped Jacob leave town. The only law enforcement officer who seemed convinced of her innocence was Chief Conway, but she didn’t deserve his faith. While she wasn’t guilty of aiding her brother’s escape, she had known for a very long time that there was something broken inside of him.

Jacob had left her just as broken, and it was all she could do not to scream at the unfairness of it all. Her brother was out there...free to kill again. Free to commit horrific acts on innocent women who were merely living their lives to the fullest.

You don't get to be the normal one, Brook.

The words Jacob had spoken to her in their final moments together would forever

linger in her subconscious. He was right in a way. She would never be able to live a normal life. Not because of his sins, but because of hers.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter Two

Brooklyn Sloane January 2025 Monday — 8:37 am

The overpowering scent of disinfectant filled the courtroom, quelling the hint of lemon from the polish used on the benches in the gallery. The janitorial staff did their best to erase any hint of previous occupants, but there was nothing they could do about the suffocating air that made it a struggle to breathe. Such heavy despair was impossible to eradicate when one waited for the scales of justice to prevail in one's favor.

“Your Honor,” the defense attorney interjected as he abruptly stood from his chair. He waved his pen toward the prosecutor's table. “The chain of custody regarding the physical evidence is questionable at best.”

Brook observed the man's body language, and she noted an arrogant confidence in his stance. Mitch Norona wasn't green behind the ears, but he wasn't the run-of-the-mill public defender, either. The tailored suit he wore was sharp, stylish, and extremely expensive. It was apparent from his mannerisms and the tone of his voice that he wasn't just presenting a case. He was strategizing and planning each move like a skilled chess player, and she had just lost a piece on the board.

How had she not known her brother had hired an experienced defense attorney?

Every single call and visitor to the federal prison where Jacob Walsh was being held was recorded and reported back to her. As far as she was aware, Mitch Norona had never spoken to her brother, let alone made contact of any kind.

Brook was seated in the back row of the gallery. The low murmurs of discussion between the federal prosecuting attorney and his paralegal could be heard over the occasional rustle of papers and the shuffling of feet. They would adamantly maintain their position that everything had been in order before and after Stella Bennett's remains had been discovered at an abandoned campsite located in the state of Illinois.

Stella Bennett—Jacob's first victim back in 1996.

Brook couldn't prevent the tightness in her chest in response to the fear that the judge would deliver in favor of the defense. The absence of Jacob in the courtroom did little to alleviate her tension. It wasn't difficult to imagine him in his cell whistling an upbeat tune while he had others do his bidding for him. She no longer obsessed over the memories of him watching Sunday morning cartoons with her like any other sibling being raised in a functional home.

Jacob had proven himself to be inhuman in her eyes a very long time ago.

The efforts her brother had taken to locate his last victim—who had miraculously survived his attack—had been astonishing to everyone except Brook. Jacob had willingly surrendered to the FBI in hopes of luring Sarah Evanston out of the witness protection program. His strategy had proved effective, too. Fortunately, Brook had seen to it that Sarah understood the repercussions of her actions. Sarah had eventually returned to the program, and the FBI had ultimately discovered Stella Bennett's remains with Brook's assistance.

However, this trial would serve every victim who had died by Jacob's hand.

"Every step has been followed to the letter, Your Honor," the prosecutor countered, his demeanor unwavering and resolute. "There is no reason to doubt the validity of the evidence."



Beside her, Graham Elliott reached out and covered her hands with his, stilling the restless spinning she was achieving on her worry ring. The familiar habit of her subconscious displayed her inner turmoil. It was in moments like this that she became acutely aware of just how much her life had changed over the past few years.

Graham had retired from his position as Commanding General Marine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) years ago, but he remained deeply integrated with the military through government contracts. He had initially sought her out to help solve his daughter's murder, which had subsequently coincided with Brook's decision not to renew her consulting contract with the FBI as a profiler. The result had been the two of them entering a business arrangement as silent partners in S&E Investigations, Inc.

Their partnership went beyond just business, though.

Graham never kept hidden his desire to want more from her, and she found herself taking that step with him. Jacob had done his best to ensure she didn't have a normal life, but she was damn close. So close that she had almost crossed a line last night by declaring three very special words.

Brook pushed the recent memory away as she welcomed the comforting warmth from Graham's hand. She had originally been drawn to his strength, but it was his unshakable faith in her that drew her to him. In his mind, she wasn't just a serial killer's sister.

The gavel hitting the sound block brought Brook's attention back to the proceedings at hand. Both attorneys had gotten rather heated in their arguments, and she braced herself for an unwelcome outcome.

"Having heard the arguments presented by both sides," Judge Colletti stated in an authoritative tone, "I find that the physical evidence may be presented to the jury

during trial.”

The judge’s words registered, but Brook couldn’t bring herself to reduce the tension in her muscles. Mitch Norona didn’t come across as the type of attorney who took losses gracefully. He would continue his pursuit to get this trial thrown out, which meant that she would resume seeking additional evidence for the federal prosecutor to present to the jury.

The terror and pain Stella Bennett must have endured was unfathomable. A twelve-year-old girl did not expect a boy of similar age to viciously attack her with a knife. No one deserved to have their faces carved with a sharp blade until their skin was barely hanging on by a thread before having their throats slit.

How was it possible for such a young boy to harbor so much hatred for the world?

“Defense and prosecution will convene three weeks from today to select the jury pool,” Judge Colletti announced before once again banging his gavel on the sound block in dismissal.

Everyone stood upon the directive of the bailiff.

Graham released her hand to gather their coats, taking his body heat with him. She would have rubbed her fingers together to produce some semblance of warmth, but she stopped herself just in time. Norona had peered over his shoulder, and his intense gaze was aimed at her. She had missed it before, but there wasn’t a hint of curiosity in his expression as he studied her.

“Brooklyn?”

Graham had already made his way to the aisle, pausing when she hadn’t immediately followed his lead. She picked up her purse, taking the time to secure the strap over

her shoulder. What had she missed in piecing together Jacob's movements in the months leading up to his surrender? He had a natural ability to manipulate people, but Norona's firm was out of Baltimore.

When in her brother's travels had the two men crossed paths?

"I can rearrange my flight," Graham offered as they made their way out into the hallway. He set his black coat on the bench against the far wall. Several people were still milling about, but he paid them no mind as he carefully held her scarf under the lapel of her wool coat. Brook set her purse down next to his belongings. "Gus can drive us back to the office, and we can—"

"I'm fine," Brook murmured, cutting off his offer. She turned to face him after slipping her arms inside the sleeves of her coat and fastening the middle button. "I'd rather have you here in three weeks."

"Then I'll do what is necessary to make that happen." Graham reached out and gently brushed his fingers down her cheek. "Walk with me?"

The soft vibration of her phone could be heard from the corner pocket of her purse. One of her team members was no doubt wondering how the court proceeding had gone this morning. In all likelihood, all four of them were gathered in the conference room waiting for an update.

Brook made no move to reach for her phone. Instead, she wrapped her fingers around Graham's left wrist and drew his arm up until she could read the face of his Tag Heuer watch.

"You're already running twenty minutes late for your flight."

"I'm not worried. Gus knows some shortcuts."

“Go,” Brook directed him softly as she rested her hand on his suit jacket. “And...thank you for coming with me today.”

Extending such appreciation didn't come naturally to her. Before Graham could respond, the doors across the hallway suddenly opened and revealed Mitch Norona. He had a cell phone pressed to his ear while holding his briefcase in the other hand. His attention landed directly on her before turning his focus to Graham.

The defense attorney was wise to walk in the other direction.

“If you don't answer your phone, Bit is liable to access the security feeds of the courthouse.” Graham waited for her to tear her gaze away from Norona. The left side of Graham's mouth lifted in dry humor. “Splitting our time between two trials isn't in our best interests.”

Brook hadn't been the only one who had evolved over the past few years. Bobby “Bit” Nowacki had transformed from a distrustful introvert into a confidant colleague whose technical experience rivaled those employed in the FBI's cybersecurity unit. His workspace at S&E Investigations was less of an office and more of a command center with countless monitors, tangled webs of cables, and cutting-edge tech gadgets. While the Bureau's interest in Bit had more to do with his previous interactions with a Russian racketeer, Brook didn't kid herself that they wouldn't attempt to utilize his talents if given a chance.

“I'll call you in the morning.” Graham lifted her hand and pressed a gentle kiss to the back of her fingers. “Be safe, Brooklyn.”

Somalia was seven hours ahead, which meant that he would be calling her at the end of his day. She monitored his progress down the hall after he had collected his coat. Had she asked him to stay, he wouldn't have hesitated to do so. The simple knowledge that he would be sitting next to her during the jury selection spoke

volumes about his underlying commitment to her.

Would there come a time when he would ask for more?

The insistent vibrations of her phone had her reaching into her purse. Oddly enough, the caller wasn't a team member. The name on the display was Jordan Miles, CEO of Miles Therapeutics. He was also someone who owed her a favor. Several, in fact. He repaid her through the use of his private jet when her team worked on investigations in different locations.

As far as Brook was aware, the firm hadn't initiated any such request recently.

"Sloane."

"Brook, I know I have no right to ask this of you, but I need your help." Jordan's voice came through the line, strained and urgent. "I was arrested last night...for murdering my wife."

### Chapter Three

Brooklyn Sloane January 2025 Monday — 10:56 am

The chime of the elevator indicated its arrival on the fourteenth floor of a financial building in downtown D.C. The doors slid silently open to reveal a sign designating which of the two entrances belonged to S&E Investigations, Inc. The other business was a hedge fund that catered to high-net-worth individuals.

Brook had chosen the space based on the additional layer of security for the national bank that occupied the first and second floors. The lease was for five years, with the option to extend that specific timeframe. The firm's CPA was already in negotiations with the building's management.

She began to remove her leather gloves as she approached the double glass doors. The brief conversation that she had with Jordan hadn't gone quite as expected, and she had ended the call with the promise to reach out to him in a few hours. Such respite would give her enough time to discuss whether to take on the investigation or leave it in the hands of local law enforcement. She had worked in tandem with the Montgomery County Police Department during her time with the FBI, and the local police had solid leadership.

The sound of a muted buzzer had her bypassing the biometric scanner to the left of the entrance. Brook opened one of the glass doors and was immediately enveloped with the faint scent of her favorite beverage.

No one made a cup of coffee quite like Arden Hinnish.

“Good morning, Arden. Would you please gather everyone in the conference room? There’s been a new development in our caseload.”

“Of course,” Arden replied from behind the receptionist's desk. His glasses, a recent necessity, made him appear even more distinguished than his salt-and-pepper mustache and burgundy cardigan. “By the way, you’ve had several calls from a criminal attorney based in Bethesda, Maryland. I left his name and number on your desk.”

Brook hadn’t shared with anyone her previous conversation with Jordan Miles. With the upcoming trial, she and the team shouldn’t be taking on anything but cold cases for the foreseeable future. In addition, S&E Investigations preferred to take on serial investigations, not ones with single victims that a local police department could handle.

She continued to cross the foyer to the doorway of her private office. The elegance and functionality of the space were evident in every detail, from the white walls to the minimalist black furniture. A sleek desk was positioned across from a seating area, while the floor-to-ceiling windows offered a sweeping view of downtown D.C.

At the time of signing the original lease, Jacob hadn’t been behind bars in a federal prison. She had opted for a direct line of vision to the elevator bank, and the modern décor of floor-to-ceiling interior glass panes had made that possible.

Brook hung her dress coat on the antique coat rack tucked in the corner before settling into her chair. She set her phone on her desk before reaching for the remote. She pressed the power button, and the fifty-five-inch television screen mounted in the far corner came to life.

Jordan Miles was a figure of affluence and influence. He moved through very high-powered circles, and a few of his peers had labeled him a beacon of innovation in the

pharmaceutical world. His attorney had somehow managed to keep the murder of Mara Miles under wraps for now, but it was only a matter of time before the media caught wind of it and unleashed a frenzy.

Brook glanced down at the pink slip of paper next to her keyboard. The caller had been Jordan's lawyer, Barry Ackles. She had heard of him through reputation only, and it was no surprise that Jordan would have the man and his firm on retainer. She continued to stare at the name while speculating just how wide Mr. Ackles' circle might be in the justice system.

Mitch Norona's involvement with Jacob's case wasn't happenstance.

Maybe, just maybe, there could be an exchange of favors this time around.

"Here you are," Arden announced as he entered her office. He was carrying her designated mug adorned with the word 'BOSS' on the side—a gift from Bit a couple of years ago. "Seeing as you didn't have a to-go cup in hand from your favorite café, I thought you could use a pick-me-up after this morning's court appearance."

"Much needed, too," Brook responded as she wrapped her hands around the warm ceramic. The whipped cream had been decorated with lines of drizzled caramel. She would switch to black coffee later in the day, but she wouldn't pass over her morning ritual. "Thank you, Arden. Were you able to email the last of the reports to the Bureau regarding the case in California?"

As a former private investigator, Arden's retirement had been more of a formality than a finality. After the death of his wife, he discovered sitting at home alone wasn't for him. His decision benefited everyone at S&E Investigations. He might no longer work out in the field, but his numerous connections across the city proved invaluable.

"Yes, and I have already notified the accountants of the hours spent on the



investigation.” Arden caught her sharp glance toward the television. Jacob’s photograph had suddenly appeared in the top right corner. The short segment gave the viewers just enough incentive to want to tune in for future updates on the trial. “I’ll mark the date on your calendar.”

Considering the headline at the bottom of the screen displayed the specific date when jury selection would commence, Brook no longer needed to divulge that piece of information.

Somehow, Jacob had managed to garner the upper hand.

Brook had been able to stay one step ahead of him recently, but it was virtually impossible to predict what plans he had put in place before turning himself into the FBI.

“Would you please set up a video conference with the warden at FCI Cumberland?” Brook requested as she stood from her desk. She tore her gaze from the screen to focus on Arden. “This afternoon, if possible.”

“Yes,” Arden replied as he waited for her to fall into step beside him. He sported the same cologne that her father used to wear, not that she had shared such a personal detail with him. The woodsy fragrance was a reminder of her childhood. Some of those memories were wonderful, while others were utterly horrific. “I’ll join you shortly.”

“No rush.”

While Arden made his way to his desk, Brook continued down the hallway. Graham’s office, not that he used it very often, was right next to hers. She wouldn’t speak with him until morning, which was when she would inform him of her decision to take Jordan’s case. She had initially been leaning heavily against getting involved

with the investigation, but the team would understand her reason behind such a change of heart.

“How was your weekend?”

Brook leaned against the doorway of Theo Neville’s office. She took a moment to observe her friend and trusted colleague. It wasn’t his athletic build that cut an imposing figure absorbed in his work, but the black eyepatch that concealed his right eye. The leather accessory was a defining part of his identity, and he wore it with as much certainty as his unwavering determination in both his personal and professional life.

“The trip home was good,” Theo replied before swiveling his chair until he was facing her. He flashed a smile. “My parents loved Mia. Mom took her shopping on Saturday, and we had a family dinner that night. Dad has been having issues with a pinched nerve in his shoulder blade, and by the time Mia got done with him, he was singing her praises.”

Brook had contemplated a time or two making an appointment with Mia Williams but had never followed through. Theo had met the woman while jogging one morning over a year ago, and the two had hit it off almost immediately. Mia resided in Georgetown and owned a very successful chiropractic clinic in D.C.

“I never doubted it for a second.”

“Is this meeting about Norona?” Theo asked with interest as he signed out of his computer. “Bit is gathering everything he can about the man, both personally and professionally. We should have some information soon.”

“In a manner of speaking.” Brook deliberately kept her response vague. She would rather wait until everyone was seated in the conference room before providing any

specifics. “We actually have a new case. One that could inadvertently help us figure out how Norona was contacted by Jacob.”

Theo’s cell phone rang, and it was obvious from his smile whose name appeared on the display. Brook had spent many years closed off from others. Theo had been the first person not to let her emotional barriers keep him at bay. Maintaining her distance from others had served a purpose, and while it had been a very difficult habit to break, she was very grateful for his friendship. He deserved happiness in his life, and Brook was delighted that he had found it in Mia.

“Tell Mia that I said hi,” Brook said before she continued her way down the hall. She found Sylvie Deering already in the conference room, her black-rimmed glasses perched on her nose as she used the stylus to write something on her tablet. “Good morning.”

“Watch your step,” Sylvie immediately cautioned without glancing up from her work. Brook came to a complete standstill right before a white blur darted in between her high heels. “Coconut needed time with her Uncle Arden.”

Had someone asked Brook three years ago if she would have five people in her life who she trusted implicitly, she would have written them off as mentally insane. Her therapist, on the other, had expressed his deep satisfaction with the strides she had taken in her therapy.

“I thought we agreed that Coco would only be in the office on Fridays.”

Sylvie had been an analyst for the Bureau before Brook had extended an offer for the young woman to work for S&E Investigations, Inc. Considering that Sylvie had as close to a photographic memory as one could get without officially being labeled an eidetic, she added extreme value to the team. She had also been through a very difficult time as of late, hence Coconut being a gift from the team last summer.

Brook adored the white cat, who was now almost a year old. Not that she went around admitting to such a fact. She had a reputation to protect, after all. However, the building's management would almost certainly frown upon the knowledge of a litter box being set up next to the couch in the lounge area off the kitchen.

"Today is an exception," Sylvie declared as she set her stylus down in exchange for the steaming cup of hot tea in front of her. She discreetly glanced toward the doorway to ensure no one was entering the room. "Today would have been Arden and his wife's forty-fifth wedding anniversary."

Brook closed her eyes, angry with herself for not paying more attention to those around her. After a brief moment of giving herself an internal lecture, she made her way over to the chair at the head of the table.

"You have a lot on your plate, Brook. Besides, I think worrying about you this morning has given Arden something else to do," Sylvie said gently before lifting her teacup close to her lips and gently blowing on the contents. As usual, her blonde hair was pulled back into a bun at the base of her neck. She took a tentative sip of her tea before changing the subject. "I'm going to ask you a question, and I want your honest opinion."

"Have I ever not given you my honest opinion?" Brook asked as she used the remote to power up the large 4k monitor that Bit had set up on the back wall. The screen came to life and displayed a murder board template. She would eventually draft a profile based on the information that would ultimately be entered into the software program. Setting the remote on the table, she concentrated on Sylvie. "Yes, you should buy the house."

"How did..." Sylvie's blue eyes widened in surprise before she smirked in amusement. "Never mind. I should know better than to ask you how you know these things."

Brook could have come clean and explained that a realtor had phoned the office last Thursday night, but where was the fun in that? Besides, Sylvie hadn't mentioned wanting to move from her apartment. After being attacked in the middle of her living room and almost losing her life, no one could blame her for seeking a fresh start elsewhere.

"Morning, Boss," Bit exclaimed as he rushed into the conference room. His arrival was just as animated as his personality. Unsurprisingly, he was wearing one of his long-sleeved graphic t-shirts of a video game character, a pair of faded blue jeans, and a knitted grey beanie that had become a staple in his wardrobe. "I went through the logs of the federal prison, and not a single phone call was made to or from Norona's law firm."

Sylvie reached over, mindful of her tea, and pushed out Bit's chair. He didn't even seem to notice the gesture as he sank into the seat. Not once had he taken his gaze off the display of his laptop as he balanced it in one hand. He carried an energy drink in the other, not that he needed the additional caffeine.

The significance of Bit's words wasn't lost on Brook. She was all too aware of Jacob's ability to orchestrate every strategic move well in advance. She could only assume that he had prearranged for Norona to step in if additional charges were filed at a certain point during her brother's incarceration.

"Is there a way for you to use the speculative timeline that we've compiled of Jacob's movements after he attacked Sarah Evanston? Maybe compare them to Norona's travels over the past couple of years. There has to be something connecting them."

"I've already started, but nothing really sticks out that could potentially line up, Boss. I'll keep at it, though." Bit finally shot a smile toward Sylvie. "Hey, Little T. Are we on for tonight?"

“Absolutely.”

Theo and Arden joined them before Bit and Sylvie could finish their discussion about a video game session. Bit’s girlfriend, Zoey, was heavily into the role-playing games. She had somehow convinced Sylvie to give one in particular a try, and she was now completely hooked. Even Brook could see how therapeutic gaming had been for Sylvie in the aftermath of her attack.

Brook sipped her coffee while waiting for everyone to get comfortable. They typically held a meeting every morning to go over case details. If they were between investigations, they used the time to discuss various business-related topics that would improve the company’s future.

Today, however, was going to take them by surprise.

“Jordan Miles was arrested last night for his wife's murder.”

Brook gave the team time to absorb the news. From Theo’s guarded expression, he had already made the connection to Mitch Norona. It was obvious that Sylvie and Arden were slowly comprehending the relevance of such an investigation, but they were mistaken about the reason behind her interest.

“This means no more air transportation, doesn’t it?”

Sylvie leaned over toward Bit to clarify that Jordan was their new client, but Brook didn’t want any misconceptions. They were under the assumption that Brook and Jordan were friends. Their relationship was nothing more than a quid pro quo type of alliance. She had spent many years cultivating favors from those who had the means of collecting information she might need concerning her brother. What she asked for in return sometimes blurred the lines of the justice system, but she would stop at nothing until Jacob was held accountable for every one of his sins.

Jordan Miles didn't technically fall into the list of individuals who she had earmarked over the years, but with money came power. Upon the firm's inception, Brook had petitioned the use of Jordan's private jet from time to time. He hadn't blinked at her request, but the team hadn't been made aware of the particulars of the exchange.

Brook would never betray the man's confidence, either.

"We won't need air transportation for this investigation, Bit." Brook caught sight of a white blur crossing the threshold. Coco had joined them, as if sensing the tension in the room. "It is my hope that we will be working alongside the Montgomery County Police Department."

"If the police have already made an arrest, there won't be an investigation," Theo pointed out, garnering a nod of agreement from Arden. "Their entire focus will be on strengthening their case for the prosecutor."

"I don't know the details of last night's arrest." Brook paused, choosing the rest of her words very carefully. "What I do know is that the attorney who is representing Jordan called our offices this morning. Apparently, Barry Ackles attempted to reach me by cell phone, only I was in the courtroom. When I didn't immediately return his call, Jordan reached out to me the second he made bail. He proclaimed his innocence before asking if we would help him prove it."

Brook had left her phone and tablet in her office, but she had brought with her the pink slip that Arden had left on her desk. She stared at the name and number scrawled in black ink. She could easily return the man's call, engage in a professional discussion about the evidence, and provide advice for his firm's private investigator. Ackles might even be inclined to return the favor at some point, but she was unaware of how well-armed she would need to be against Norona.

"I'd like to take the case."

There were several reasons why the team might disagree with her decision. She could list three right off the top—S&E Investigations usually didn't get involved in murder investigations with a single victim, the firm already had two cold cases on its schedule, and Jacob's trial was about to begin in three weeks.

"What if we discover Jordan Miles is guilty of murdering his wife?" Sylvie asked after Coco had jumped into her lap. She subconsciously stroked a hand down the kitten's back while focusing on Brook. "What if he is using us to divert attention away from the evidence? What then?"

"We say goodbye to the plane, along with those delicious tiny bags of peanuts."

Bit's heartbroken quip had eased some of the tension in the room. Considering that no one had pushed back against her wishes, Brook was able to breathe a little easier. Sylvie's inquiry hadn't been in the literal sense. It was her way of ensuring Brook was emotionally equipped to handle another person in her life being branded a killer.

"Jordan Miles is an acquaintance who owes me a few favors. Nothing more, nothing less." Brook ignored the curiosity stemming from each and every one of their gazes. "If Jordan is guilty of killing his wife, we will see to it that any and all evidence discovered during the investigation is handed over to the prosecutor. And yes, I will make that abundantly clear to Jordan and Ackles during our initial meeting."

"I'm on board," Theo said as he pushed away from the table. "I'll reach out to the Montgomery County Police Department. I worked alongside one of their detectives right out of the academy. With any luck, he is still there."

"See if you can get us authorization to walk through the crime scene," Brook directed, even though she anticipated some pushback despite Theo's potential connection. This wasn't a federal case, and they wouldn't have the backing of the Bureau. "I'm sure their forensics team is still processing evidence. Arden, would you



start the paperwork to officially request their criminal reports?”

Sylvie had already set Coco down on the floor so she could collect her tablet and tea. One of her guilty pleasures was reading the tabloids and gossip magazines. Journalists and photographers frequently covered Jordan and Mara Miles on a weekly basis. There wasn't one event or charity function that the two didn't attend in and around the city. If any rumors needed to be investigated regarding the couples' personal lives, Sylvie would have a full list for the team by this afternoon.

“Sylvie's going to have fun with this one,” Theo said with a touch of amusement as he patted Arden's shoulder. “Listen, when you reach out to...”

Theo's voice trailed away as he and Arden exited the conference room. Sylvie had already disappeared into her office, leaving Brook and Bit behind. She picked up her coffee cup and made her way around the table to observe for herself what had caught his attention. While she had been giving everyone else directives, something of interest had diverted his focus away from the conversation.

“I don't know, Boss,” Bit muttered as he gestured toward the small screen. The news of Mara Miles' death had finally hit the national news alongside the arrest of her husband. The headlines were enough to sway public opinion on his guilt. “Jordan Miles was found kneeling beside his dead wife in their bedroom with the murder weapon in his hand. It sounds to me like we might have taken our last flight on his private jet. I really liked those peanuts, too.”

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### Chapter Four

Brooklyn Sloane January 2025 Monday — 6:01 pm

The last remnants of daylight had long since faded as Brook and Theo pulled up behind a police cruiser parked outside the Miles' residence in Bethesda, Maryland. The imposing estate was an elegant fortress, enclosed with an ornate wrought iron fence. The gated entrance had been left open for their arrival.

An interesting detail to note was the comprehensive security system that almost certainly covered every aspect of the property. Given that the shadows of the January evening had failed to descend over the acreage due to the exterior lighting schematics, one could assume the environment was the same last night.

“Miles was found kneeling beside his wife while holding a firearm, Brook. It doesn't look good.” Theo shifted the gear into park, but he left the engine to his black Jeep Wrangler idling, much to Brook's comfort. Both vents were pointed in her direction, and the heat level of the leather seat was set to high. She had no desire to step out into the cold any time soon. “According to the detective in charge, it's been confirmed that Miles had gun residue on his hands. Tack on the fact that Jordan kept saying it was his fault after the police arrived, and the arrest was technically a slam dunk.”

Brook had spent an hour this afternoon on a video conference with the warden of FCI Cumberland. She wasn't the biggest fan of his demeanor or the way he catered to politics within the judicial system, but he feared her influence over the Bureau.

In actuality, she and the FBI hadn't ended her consulting agreement on the best of

terms. Her current arrangement with the Bureau through S&E Investigations was much more amicable. The end result had been as she and Bit had suspected—no one from Norona or his firm had been to FCI Cumberland since Jacob's incarceration.

After the conference call, Arden had caught her up on the details discovered in Jordan's investigation thus far. Nothing she heard helped his case.

"What we see on the surface doesn't necessarily display what is underneath," Brook countered, knowing full well that Theo agreed with her on that front. He must have spoken with Sylvie, and the two of them wanted her prepared for the worst. "I was being truthful this morning when I said that Jordan and I are merely acquaintances. He asked that we take his case, and doing so can be beneficial to both of us. Barry Ackles' firm is one of the best in Maryland, whereas Mitch Norona's firm falls behind them slightly in the state rankings. Ackles might have information that he will be more inclined to give if we play nice."

"Speaking of Ackles, he wasn't too happy that it was Sylvie who returned his call today." Theo finally shut off the engine, much to her dismay. He didn't reach for the door handle right away. "She was still able to set up a meeting with Miles and Ackles first thing tomorrow morning at his penthouse in D.C."

"Sylvie has already confirmed that Jordan and his wife were at the shooting range yesterday morning. Such an activity would explain the gun residue on his hands, regardless that such a visit makes the crime itself appear premeditated."

From Brook's brief conversation with Arden, it had been confirmed that Jordan and Mara had enjoyed breakfast at their country club yesterday morning, followed by a couple of hours at the shooting range. They parted company right afterward, with Jordan needing to tend to some business matters. Mara ran some errands before returning home.

According to the preliminary report, Jordan didn't arrive at the estate until after eight o'clock last night. The police entered the gates approximately eight minutes afterward, subsequently finding Jordan in the bedroom muttering how his wife's death was all his fault.

"Ackles claims Miles was in shock after discovering Mara's body and that he didn't mean his words literally." Theo opened his door. The comforting warmth instantly vacated the interior of the vehicle. Brook shot him an irritated glance only to find him flashing her a smile in return. "It was the only way I was going to get you out of my Jeep."

Brook was already shivering by the time she stepped out onto the immaculately maintained driveway. There wasn't a flake of snow or a speck of ice to be found even though a good four inches of snow blanketed the grounds. She had brought her winter boots just in case, storing them on the floor behind her seat. By the time she had made her way around the front of the Jeep, she came to a realization.

"Is this driveway heated?" Theo asked before she could utter a word. "Damn. This driveway is at least a quarter of a mile long."

"If you were listed on the Forbes billionaire list, wouldn't you have a heated driveway, too?" Brook asked wryly as they fell into step alongside each other.

"If I was on the Forbes billionaire list, I wouldn't be living in D.C. You would find me living somewhere that didn't need heated pavers," Theo muttered as they passed the unmarked cruiser parked in front of a patrol car. Neither vehicle had its lights activated in the aftermath of the murder. Considering that forensics had finished processing the scene earlier this afternoon, the only reason there was someone on site was due to their scheduled visit. "We're meeting Detective Duane Kitsis. My guy in the department says Kitsis is solid, experienced, and doesn't harbor any resentment toward outside agencies."

The cold air stung Brook's cheeks as they approached the elegant double doors framed by two massive stone columns. There was no porch, but one wasn't needed with this type of grandeur. The soft golden glow of overhead lights illuminated every cream and tan brick.

The heavy doors swung open to reveal an officer standing just inside. He asked for their identifications, his demeanor professional and detached. The nametag pinned to his upper left pocket read Officer Nida. Brook waited until they were inside the foyer to remove her gloves. She then retrieved her credentials from her purse and held it up for verification. Theo did the same before unbuttoning the top portion of his coat.

While Theo exchanged pleasantries with the officer, Brook took the opportunity to scan what could be seen on the main level. The spacious foyer boasted high ceilings and gleaming marble floors, while opulent chandeliers cast a warm, golden hue upon the tasteful furnishings. To the left, a sweeping staircase led to the second floor, its thick railings adorned with intricate carvings. To her right, a formal seating area with plush sofas and armchairs arranged in such a way that each individual had a view of the massive hearth.

Despite the outward appearance of wealth and comfort throughout the home, a palpable sense of loneliness hung in the air.

"You're all set," Officer Nida announced right before muffled footsteps could be heard descending the staircase. "Is there anything else you need, Detective?"

"No, Nida. I appreciate you working overtime today."

A tall, middle-aged man with slightly curly brown hair stepped onto the marble tile. He approached them with an extended arm, shaking Theo's hand first. Brook was still in the process of taking the blue shoe coverings and latex gloves from Officer Nida. The presence of the detective had moved the air around in the foyer, stirring up some

strong scents of chemicals and cinnamon. The odd mixture wasn't pleasant.

"Detective Duane Kitsis." The man waited patiently, using the time to study her. When Brook finally offered her hand, the detective narrowed his gaze with interest. "I have to admit, I've been following your brother's case in the news for a while now."

"You and everyone else in America." Brook presented Kitsis with a tight smile. She really wasn't keen on discussing Jacob's case with a complete stranger. "Thank you for allowing us access to the crime scene. You have our word we won't disturb anything."

"Forensics finished up late this afternoon." Kitsis rubbed the back of his neck in what she could only label as unease. "Listen, my supervisor isn't too pleased with my decision to cooperate with you, but the arrest is solid. Your client also confessed to the murder. Besides, everything we hand over to the prosecutor will eventually reach Miles' defense team."

"The security system is state-of-the-art," Theo said without addressing Kitsis' statements. Theo gestured toward a small white panel by the door. "Hardware and software that technologically advanced should be able to prove whether someone else was on the property at the time of the murder."

"One would believe that to be the case, but the system was completely shut down one hour before the 911 call."

Brook weighed her words carefully before speaking, not wanting to get ahead of herself. Keeping this meeting civil was of utmost importance. It was why she chose not to comment at all on the latest intel.

"Is it alright if I walk around the residence?"

“Of course,” Detective Kitsis replied, stepping forward to close the front door after Officer Nida had taken his leave.

Brook donned the protective gear while Theo engaged the detective in conversation. The diversion allowed her to focus on her task of examining the Miles’ living space. She took her time studying the interior décor. The main level was spacious, not allowing for the usual intimacy associated with a home.

Had Mara chosen the furnishings, or had the couple hired an interior designer?

Jordan and Mara didn’t have children, though Brook wasn’t certain such a decision was in their hands. The tabloids had a lot to say on the subject, but Brook would wait until her meeting with Jordan to collect the facts about his marriage.

The family photos adorning the walls weren’t the typical framed photographs. These pictures were staged, taken either in a studio or at an event with a large attendance. There wasn’t one captured image without either of them smiling, giving the impression of a happy couple. Beneath the surface, Brook detected subtle signs of discord between the husband and wife.

By the time Brook reached the kitchen, there was a chill of isolation that had nothing to do with the cold weather outside. The kitchen was modern and meticulously tidy, almost excessively so, with its white marble countertops reflecting the bright overhead lighting. The silver appliances didn’t have a single smudge on their surfaces. The six-burner gas stove positioned under a sleek stainless-steel exhaust hood appeared as if it hadn’t been used for quite some time.

There was a single white porcelain mug turned upside down in the sink.

“...stopped talking the second the cuffs were placed around his wrists.”

“What was your impression of Jordan Miles’ state of mind when...”

Theo and Detective Kitsis must have moved closer to the kitchen entryway, given the sound of their voices, but Brook had already walked to the other side of the house. A glass door led to the backyard, where a pool lay covered for the winter season, its surface obscured by a thick sheet of snow. Nearby, a hot tub bubbled invitingly beneath a white gazebo. Brook mentally made a note to have someone return during daylight hours for a more thorough inspection of the property.

After spending time scanning the setup of Jordan’s private office, Brook began to make her way up the grand staircase. She was mindful not to touch the railing, even with latex gloves. She could still hear Theo and the detective conversing below, though the topic had changed to her past experience as a profiler.

Brook paused at the top of the stairs facing elegant French doors that no doubt led into the master bedroom. Instead of entering the heart of the crime scene, she focused instead on the other five bedrooms lining both corridors that wrapped around the large foyer. As she moved through each room, she noted the subtle differences in décor, though not by much.

The fourth room captivated Brook’s interest the most.

A small bookcase in the corner was filled with volumes of various genres, from literature to biographies. A single armchair was positioned near a window, its well-worn cushion hinting at countless hours spent lost in thought or absorbed in a good book. This particular room seemed to hold more personal significance than the others, and Brook found herself pausing to consider its implications.

It was then that she found the closet door slightly ajar.

She reached out and slowly pulled on the handle. The small walk-in closet was home



to several business suits, ties, dress shoes, and an assortment of casual clothes. Jordan had been using this bedroom...not sharing the main bedroom with his wife.

Were Jordan and Mara having marital problems?

With a sense of foreboding, Brook retraced her steps down the hallway and finally approached the French doors that guarded the main suite. The sight that greeted her was both chilling and tragic.

The bedroom itself was spacious and luxurious, with tasteful furnishings and an undeniable air of sophistication. Unlike the rest of the residence, this room exuded intimacy and warmth. A king-sized bed adorned with silk sheets was arranged against one wall, seemingly untouched by the carnage that had unfolded nearby. In contrast, the seating area—a collection of plush chairs and a small coffee table—bore the brunt of the crime's brutality. The blood-soaked carpet was a horrific reminder of the violence that had taken place yesterday.

Brook remained standing near the entrance of the bedroom while examining the not-so-little nuances of the décor, such as the fact that there wasn't a single photograph of Jordan and Mara to be found on the wall, nightstand, or shelves. The bed hadn't been turned down, suggesting Mara hadn't been ready to call it a night before she was shot to death.

Considering the core location of the crime scene, she had been...working?

Brook took a step closer to the plush blue chairs. A charging cord for a laptop was tucked in between them and plugged into an outlet. The police must have taken the computer into evidence. Had Mara been checking her email or maybe in the midst of planning an event for one of the various charity boards she had served on this year?

As of this moment, Brook wasn't privy to what Mara had been wearing at the time of

her death. Had she been dressed in the same clothes from earlier in the day? Or had Mara changed into casual and comfortable clothes upon arriving home? Maybe even some nightwear?

After methodically finishing the walk-through, Brook made her way downstairs. There had been antidepressants and sleeping pills prescribed to Mara by a local physician in the medicine cabinet. The large walk-in closet contained both Jordan and Mara's belongings, but it was unmistakable some of his clothes had been moved to the spare bedroom. The power couple depicted in the gossip columns was not the same husband and wife living under this roof.

Brook needed the photographs taken by the crime scene technicians before she could begin creating a profile. Such snapshots would provide invaluable insight into the precise sequence of events. Everything she had observed thus far had her confident in a preliminary draft.

"Detective Kitsis, you mentioned a 911 call." Brook joined the two men near the front entrance, fully prepared to discuss the importance of such a factor. She removed her blue shoe coverings, as well as her latex gloves. "Was that call placed by Jordan Miles?"

"No." From the detective's stance, Brook could sense that his anticipated response wasn't in Jordan's favor. "Mara Miles dialed 911 right before she was killed. She clearly stated to the operator that she was afraid her husband was going to kill her."

### Chapter Five

Brooklyn Sloane January 2025 Tuesday — 7:59 am

The elevator ascended with a gentle hum, its interior adorned with polished bronze and dark wood paneling that spoke of luxury and opulence. The soft lighting from the overhead fixtures cast a warm glow across the small space, and the classical music from the overhead speakers was set to a perfect level.

“You mentioned that Mara’s mother had passed away several years ago,” Brook said as she took a moment to remove her dress coat. Once she had straightened her suit jacket, she rested the coat over her forearm. “No father, no aunts, no uncles. Siblings?”

“One brother,” Sylvie replied, following Brook’s lead. Once she had her cream-colored coat in hand, she adjusted the cowl neck of her pink sweater. “Vaughn Queller. The man has no social media accounts, and Mara was very private about sharing any personal details online. All of her posts were in relation to her charity events. As for Queller, he has had some trouble with the law on and off throughout the years. Mostly regarding possession of drugs. The two of them didn’t have the best upbringing.”

“How did Jordan and Mara meet?”

“The gossip columns state the two of them met at a charity function, though we’ll have to confirm that with Jordan.” Sylvie gave Brook a curious glance, most likely wondering why Brook wasn’t already aware of such details. “Mara went to a

community college and attained a two-year degree. From what we can gather, she was helping out the organizer of the event, and the rest, as they say, is history.”

Once an investigation began to broaden, the team usually split the potential suspects and witnesses into categories. Sylvie would have already uploaded any personal background information into their software program.

Theo’s morning had consisted of numerous background checks on the household staff who rotated in and out of the Miles’ estate on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis. While Jordan and Mara didn’t have full-time employees, a property of such size needed a lot of help to maintain throughout the year. Any one of the staff members could have had the administrative code to shut down the Miles’ security system.

As for Bit, he was still pulling double duty. While he hadn’t been able to figure out how Jacob made contact with Mitch Norona, there was a very good chance that Jacob had done so through a third party. No one besides Jacob’s initial public defender had been to the prison and spoken to him outside of S&E Investigations or the Bureau. Bit was at his best when thinking outside the box. He was vague on how he would go about rerouting his search, but that was probably for the best.

As the elevator doors slid open with a near-silent whisper, an extravagant foyer greeted them. Floor-to-ceiling windows allowed the morning sun to flood the vast room, casting long shadows across the marble tile and the tasteful artwork lining the walls. Jordan Miles stood waiting for them, the exhaustion in his chiseled features impossible to miss. Dark circles marred the skin beneath his dark eyes, and the cuffs of his white dress shirt were rolled up onto his forearms.

“Jordan.” Brook extended her arm in greeting. “I’m truly sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, Brook. Have you been in touch with the Montgomery County Police Department?”

“This is my colleague, Sylvie Deering.”

Brook intentionally didn't respond to his question. She would cover the details of the case after he answered a few of her own injuries. While Sylvie stepped forward and shook the man's hand, Brook casually swept her gaze over the penthouse.

The expansive living area featured sleek, modern furniture arranged around a minimalist fireplace. A commanding view of the city spread beyond the large windows, while the walls bore framed photographs of architectural marvels and abstract art, lending the space a distinctly masculine air. There was no trace of a wife's touch, no softening elements that would hint at a shared life. It was extremely apparent that this penthouse was Jordan's escape.

A male figure stood off to the side near a beverage bar. His short brown hair was meticulously groomed, and his tailored suit spoke of success and professionalism. The man's sharp features gave him an air of precision as he held a familiar white porcelain mug while not hiding the fact that he was studying her from afar.

“Ah, let me introduce you,” Jordan said distractedly, gesturing toward the man. “This is Barry Ackles, my defense attorney. I believe the two of you spoke over the phone.”

“Actually, we didn't have the pleasure,” Barry said as he approached them. His grip was a little too firm. Almost challenging. “That honor was given to Miss Deering.”

“Mr. Ackles,” Brook replied evenly, not intimidated by his presence in the least. It was becoming quite evident that he didn't agree with Jordan's desire to bring in outside consultants. Lawyers like Ackles tended to employ their preferred private investigators for such cases. “I'm sure you're aware that my firm doesn't usually handle investigations like this one. We are only doing so as a personal favor to Mr. Miles. I assure you, speaking with Miss Deering is a privilege.”

“Then let's get down to business, shall we?” Ackles directed after a momentary pause. It was clear that his passive-aggressive mannerisms weren't usually highlighted by others, but Brook would never allow anyone to diminish the value of her team. “Now, as I'm sure you're aware, my client—”

“I'd prefer to hear the recent version of events from Jordan.” Brook kept her tone polite but firm.

“Barry, it's alright. I brought Brook and her team on board for a reason.”

Jordan ignored Ackles' sideways glance of annoyance before motioning for them to follow him into a large living room. Brook and Sylvie chose to make themselves comfortable on the couch, but the distinct fragrance of coffee hanging in the air and the mug in Ackles' hand had piqued Brook's curiosity about something she had observed at the estate last night.

“Coffee?” Brook asked casually as she tucked her coat and purse on the left side of the sofa without taking a seat.

“Make yourself comfortable, Jordan,” Barry instructed as he crossed the marble tile toward a long beverage bar with an assortment of beverages. He waited for them to join him before lowering his voice when Brook reached for a white porcelain mug—the same set purchased for the Miles' residence. “Miss Sloane, I didn't mean for us to get off on the wrong foot here. We appreciate your assistance, but you should know that—”

“You have one responsibility to Jordan, Mr. Ackles.” Brook pressed the black tab of the large carafe while Sylvie silently did the same with the one containing hot water. Someone had seen to it that the beverage bar was set up for this meeting, and it hadn't been Jordan or his lawyer. “Defend him in court. Jordan asked for my firm to investigate his wife's murder, and we are here to do exactly that. No more. No less.

There will be no middleman in this investigation.”

Ackles’ ire at being relegated to the sideline was evident, but she wasn’t in the business of handholding. Had she been aware of his demeanor, she would have suggested to Jordan that the law firm’s private investigator be responsible for proving his innocence. Her reason for deciding to take this case—discovering anything useful regarding Norona and his firm—had basically imploded the moment she had stepped out of the elevator.

Brook hid her disappointment as they each collected their preferred morning beverages in silence. Jordan remained near the gas fireplace, too agitated to take a seat. Sylvie finally led the way toward the couch, though Brook noticed the way she was studying a bookcase full of awards and framed pictures with ingress lighting pointed in such a way as to highlight the meaningful items.

Not one photograph included Mara Miles.

“Jordan, please sit down,” Brook instructed him gently as she made herself comfortable on the couch. Sylvie joined her, leaving Ackles to remain standing. Did he believe he could still control the narrative by asserting some type of control over his client and the conversation? “We’re going to need to hear from you everything that took place on Sunday, starting from when you opened your eyes first thing in the morning. I would advise you to not leave a single detail out of the account.”

“Sunday morning was uneventful,” Jordan began, his voice steady given his lack of sleep. He finally took a seat in one of the chairs facing the couch. “Mara and I woke up, enjoyed a light breakfast, and then drove to the shooting range.”

“You awakened...in separate beds, I assume?”

“Where the hell do you get off—”

“Barry.” Jordan cut off his attorney by raising his hand without ever breaking eye contact with Brook. This was the Jordan who she recognized from their previous encounters. He slowly lowered his hand. “Yes, Brook. In separate beds. We haven’t had a traditional marriage in quite some time.”

“Which leads me to wonder why Mara would go to the shooting range with you.” Brook took a tentative sip of her coffee. She should have expected the beverage to be of the highest quality without the typical bitterness associated with it. “I understand appearances for the sake of the media, but anything else would typically be out of the question. And please don’t waste our time with a spiel about the two of you trying to work things out, Jordan. You’re having an affair. I’d rather you just provide us with her name instead of us wasting time and billing you unnecessary hours.”

Brook’s bluntness had not only taken Ackles by surprise, but Sylvie’s tea had inadvertently gone into her airway. After a brief coughing spell to dispel the liquid, she set her teacup on a sandstone coaster. The one person who Brook’s candor hadn’t fazed was Jordan.

He hadn’t climbed to the peak of the pharmaceutical industry based on his appearance alone. He was ruthless, cunning, and enjoyed being in the limelight. His addiction to wealth and influence was not surprising, considering the legacy his father had established over time. However, those characteristics did not automatically make him a murderer. Beneath his public persona, Jordan displayed generosity towards those in need, placed great importance on loyalty, and would go to extreme lengths for his family and loved ones.

During their previous encounters, Brook had observed Jordan’s propensity for honesty. He loathed when others wasted time, and such a predilection was in her favor. It also helped the discussion in terms of his ability to focus. He was no longer agitated, though nothing could erase the exhaustion except sleep.



“Mara and I had more of a partnership than a marriage,” Jordan revealed over Ackles’ muttered expletives. “It didn’t start out that way, of course. We simply grew apart. Once we both accepted the new dynamic, we kept to our usual routine so those in our social circle wouldn’t talk unnecessarily, as they tend to do on a daily basis. You need to know that there was no animosity between us.”

“How often did the two of you go to the shooting range?”

“Once a month.” Jordan leaned back in the chair and crossed his ankle over his knee. “Afterward, we had lunch at the country club. I left for a business meeting around one o’clock.”

“And nothing unusual occurred? Either at the shooting range or the country club?”

“No.”

“What was the reason for the business meeting? It was a Sunday afternoon. What couldn’t wait until Monday morning?”

“Miles Therapeutics is attempting to acquire a medical device company. It’s part of our expansion strategy, and a potential complication was brought to my attention. I needed to ensure that no other surprises were coming our way.”

“What time did you arrive home?”

“A little after eight.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“Ten after eight.” Jordan shot Ackles a sharp glance when the lawyer muttered something along the lines of this meeting being a waste of their time. “I’m paying

you by the hour, Barry.”

“I’m sure Mr. Ackles has your best interest at heart, Jordan.” Brook paused to meet Ackles’ direct stare. “I take it you already have a list put together of those individuals with access to the estate’s security system? We’re in the process of doing the same, but it would be beneficial to the investigation for us to compare the names on the list.”

“I’ll have my assistant send it over within the hour.”

Brook intended to rewind the conversation to those who attended the business meeting, but Jordan’s wary reaction to the underlying subject diverted the interview.

“I’m missing something,” Jordan stated in confusion as he shifted in his seat. “Barry?”

“The alarm system was completely shut off one hour before you arrived home. Remotely, by the way.” Ackles didn’t appear apologetic in the least for keeping such an important detail from his client. “There is no video to prove that you arrived home after Mara dialed 911. Don’t worry about it, Jordan. We have the situation under control.”

“Jesus Christ, Barry! Why didn’t you tell me this earlier?”

Jordan would have stood had Brook not interrupted the forthcoming argument.

“You didn’t notice the alarm was turned off when you arrived home?”

“I assumed that Mara forgot to set it. I didn’t even think—”

“Does your mistress have the security code?”

“Claudia didn’t kill my wife.”

“I didn’t imply that—”

“Claudia?” Sylvie rarely interjected herself into an interview unless she was overseeing the exchange. For her to do so indicated that the name held meaning, which meant she had come across the name at some point over the past twenty-four hours. “Claudia Hart? You’re having an affair with your personal assistant?”

“Yes, but as I just clarified for you, Claudia isn’t capable of...” Jordan pinched the bridge of his nose. He inhaled deeply before dropping his hand. “Claudia would never hurt Mara.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Miles, that was exactly what was being done every time Claudia Hart crawled in and out of your bed.”

Brook was pleased with how Sylvie had picked up on Jordan’s propensity for directness. He stared at her a moment before slowly nodding his approval. In an odd way, the man used every single conversation as a test of some sort, and Sylvie had passed with flying colors.

“I didn’t bring Miles Therapeutics into the twenty-first century without making my fair share of enemies.” Jordan stood from his seat before making his way over to the beverage bar. “Mara, on the other hand, was adored by everyone.”

“You loved your wife,” Sylvie murmured, though her voice had reached him as he continued to pour himself some coffee. She didn’t continue until he made his way back to them. “You loved her, even though the two of you had grown apart. Even though you were having an affair with another woman.”

“Mara understood me.” Jordan appeared to debate whether to sit or remain standing,

but fatigue got the best of him. “Whoever killed my wife did so to get back at me. Start there.”

Brook switched her attention to Ackles, who was already lifting a hand in acknowledgment. He would ensure that S&E Investigations received everything needed for them to investigate Mara’s death.

“What happened when you arrived home, Jordan?” Brook asked, using the opportunity to get the conversation back on track.

“I parked in the garage around back and entered through the kitchen. The house was quiet, but that wasn’t unusual since Mara preferred to turn in early. She likes to read before bed.” Jordan paused after his voice became thick with emotion. He took a drink of his coffee to cover such vulnerability. “I still had some work to do, but I decided to change into something more comfortable. I made my way upstairs, noticed the doors to the main bedroom were open, and called out Mara’s name.”

Brook and Sylvie had spoken about the timeline on the drive over this morning. Four minutes was the length of time between Mara’s 911 call and Jordan’s arrival at the house.

Four minutes.

If Jordan were depicting the truth, someone shot Mara while her husband was pulling into the garage. The killer had either somehow left through the front entrance or still been inside the residence when Jordan entered the kitchen.

“When Mara didn’t respond, I walked in to find her lying there in...” Jordan cleared his throat. “There was so much blood. Her chest was covered in blood, and my first reaction was to stop the bleeding. I put my hands over her chest and pressed down. I realized then that her eyes were wide open. She was already gone.”

“And the weapon?” Brook asked gently, needing to understand why he had chosen to pick up the firearm. When working on cold cases, those family members who were questioned had become somewhat numb to their past tragedies. It was easier to talk them through the chain of events. With Jordan, his pain was raw and fresh. “Where was the weapon when you first walked into the bedroom?”

“Right next to her.” Jordan’s humorless laugh was short and loud. “I have no idea why I picked up the gun. Reaction, I guess. I recall staring at it while trying to make sense of who would want to hurt me that much.”

Brook sensed Sylvie’s recoiled reaction to such a statement. Jordan had made Mara’s death about him, regardless that it was her life that had been taken. There was a good chance that Jordan was right in his assumption, though.

“Is that why you admitted to killing your wife?”

Silence descended until only the faint sound of fabric rustling together could be heard from Ackles shifting his stance in preparation to come to his client’s defense. It was Sylvie who glared his way with a warning to remain quiet.

“The police entered the bedroom, and the first thing that came to mind was that I was at fault.” Jordan frowned to the point of squinting his eyes in self-reproach. “I was in shock. Truth be told, I still am. But even after thirty-six hours, nothing has changed, Brook. As I said, I’ve made a lot of enemies throughout my life.”

“I’ll handle this so-called confession,” Barry said after he drained what was left of his coffee. “In the meantime, tell me what else you need to start your investigation. We’ll make sure you have everything by this afternoon.”

The next hour was spent discussing Mara’s day-to-day routine, her lack of close friends, and her estranged brother. Jordan described Mara as complex—intensely

private, extremely meticulous, and composed under pressure. Brook took that to mean Mara had obsessive tendencies, yet she handled the spotlight that was constantly on them at all times with grace.

Upon inquiring about each point in depth, Brook discovered that Mara kept an electronic calendar and a physical daily planner. Her laptop had been taken into evidence, but Brook couldn't recall the written planner as being logged into evidence. The topic of Mara's brother had been relatively brief—summarizing Vaughn Queller as unpredictable and volatile, with a deep-seated bitterness aimed at his sister. According to Jordan, the siblings hadn't spoken to each other in well over a year.

“Whoever killed Mara did so to get back at me, and from what you're saying about the security system and the 911 call, someone wants to see me spend the rest of my life behind bars.” Jordan leaned forward and set his empty coffee mug on the coffee table, not bothering with one of the sandstone coasters. “Like I said, Barry will send you a list of names whose business dealings fell short in the past year. Start there.”

Brook made a conscious decision to keep her beliefs to herself for the time being. Jordan had already pointed out that someone had gone to great lengths to set him up as a patsy. The strategic manner in which only four minutes were left to kill Mara, exit the residence, and ensure the police discovered Jordan in the bedroom had taken extreme premeditation on the part of the killer.

Brook found it difficult to believe someone would go to such lengths over a business deal.

“Get some rest, Jordan,” Brook advised before collecting her belongings. Sylvie followed suit, taking the time to slip her arms into the sleeves of her coat. “We'll get started on our end. I'll follow up with you as questions arise. In the meantime, listen to your attorney. Mr. Ackles, would you care to walk us out?”

Brook could sense that she took Ackles by surprise, but he didn't hesitate to escort them to the elevator bank. Jordan remained seated, and he had already leaned his head back and closed his eyes as exhaustion finally took over. He made no move to determine who had been trying to reach him by phone for the past hour and a half. His phone had been set to vibrate, and the device had continually made noise from inside his suit jacket tossed over the arm of his chair.

"Mind if I ask you a question, Miss Sloane?"

"Brook." She reached out to press the button for the elevator. "While I'm sure that you didn't plan on working with an outside agency, I'm reasonably certain we can put aside any misgivings we may have about one another."

"How did you know Jordan was having an affair?" Ackles had cut right to the chase. "I didn't even know about Claudia until this morning."

"You mean besides the fact that Jordan is sleeping in one of the spare bedrooms at the estate?" Brook had listened closely to Jordan's explanation of how he and Mara had grown apart, but people tended to rationalize their decisions to lessen any judgment that may come their way. Jordan was no different. "Mara didn't drink flavored coffee. She preferred to use flavored creamer instead."

It took a moment for Ackles to understand that Brook was referencing the hazelnut coffee pods over on the beverage table. While someone, most likely Claudia, had taken the time to brew several carafes of coffee for Jordan's guests, the single-serve machine was undoubtedly used by those who resided or stayed in the penthouse from time to time. Mara's preferred brand of coffee from the house hadn't been included in the choices kept on hand in the suite.

"Trust me when I say that we could be here for another hour if Brook listed off the other reasons she came to such a conclusion," Sylvie interjected with a small smile.

“She is the best at what she does, Mr. Ackles. You have nothing to worry about if your client is innocent.”

Sylvie had gotten her point across, causing Ackles to emit a dry laugh.

“Call me Barry.” He reached into the interior pocket of his suit jacket. “Here. This is an address where you can find Vaughn Queller. I haven’t revealed to Jordan that Mara was in contact with her brother recently. I don’t work for Miles Therapeutics. Jordan and Mara employ my firm separately, and she asked that I keep certain details from him. Most recently, Mara had me transfer a large sum of money into Vaughn’s checking account last week.”

“Isn’t that a conflict of interest, Barry?” Brook asked pointedly as she took the small business card. Sure enough, Vaughn Queller’s home address had been written on the back of the stock card in blue ink. “I take it you’re going to inform Jordan of this money wire?”

“Later, after he’s had some rest,” Barry said as he rubbed the back of his neck. “Look, Jordan has a lot of people in his life. A lot of selfish people. They only stick around because of his money or influence. One of the two. Does any of it really matter now? Anyway, Jordan wasn’t lying to you about his marriage. They grew apart, but they still cared for one another. She wanted to protect him from Vaughn this time around, that’s all.”

“This time around?”

The faint chime of the elevator pinged before the doors slid quietly open, allowing Brook and Sylvie to step inside. Barry reached out and pressed a hand against the door, allowing them to finish the conversation.

“Vaughn is a drug addict,” Barry stated with a sneer, his opinion of Mara’s brother



evident in his tone. “Mara did her best to keep him out of their lives. To do that, she would pay her brother off from time to time. If anyone should be at the top of your list, it’s Queller.”

“Why do you say that?” Brook inquired warily, not willing to trust anything at face value.

“Queller wanted fifty thousand dollars this time around.” Barry shrugged in a manner that suggested he believed Mara should have paid it. “Mara wasn’t having it, and she capped off the amount at ten thousand dollars. A guy like Queller? Trust me. He wouldn’t take that lying down.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter Six

Sylvie Deering January 2025 Tuesday — 3:46 pm

“Where is Coco?”

“I didn’t bring her in today,” Sylvie responded to Bit without breaking her concentration. The display of the 4k monitor held the answers that she was seeking. Unfortunately, she just couldn’t spot them yet. “Brook and I drove straight back from Jordan Miles’ penthouse. I didn’t have time to stop by the apartment.”

Sylvie had taken a seat in the conference room to study the timeline of Mara Miles’ murder. The software the firm utilized could be viewed anywhere, but the size of the monitor made all the difference when trying to unearth a thin piece of thread that could unravel the entire investigation.

“Was everything made of gold?” Bit pulled out a chair and took a seat next to her. A vivid red hue was being swung back and forth in her peripheral view. She reached into the proffered bag of Skittles without taking her attention away from the screen. “Can you imagine having that much money?”

“Yes. Absolutely. I’d have two of those Litter-Robots, one of those cat exercise wheels, and an endless supply of catnip for Coco. Trust me, you’d be surprised by the cost of premium organic catnip. Anyway, if I buy that house in Georgetown, Coco might be relegated to generic cat food for the rest of her life.”

Bit laughed, but Sylvie was only half-kidding. While she earned an excellent salary,

the value of real estate in Georgetown could be quite steep. The house she had her heart set on was located on the outskirts, yet the mortgage would still be slightly over what she had in mind for her monthly budget.

“With that much space to run around in, Coco would get so much exercise that she might be willing to eat generic cat food.” Bit used his grey loafer to push the chair closer to her so that he could nudge her arm with his elbow. “And if you think Coco would love one of those spinning wheels, Zoey and I can get one for her as a housewarming present.”

Sylvie couldn’t help but smile at how Bit treated Coco like an actual niece.

She reflected on how much their friendship had grown since they had begun working together at S&E Investigations. There was a time when they could have been more than friends, but both of them had ultimately realized that what they needed most in their lives was the unwavering support and trust their friendship provided in the grand scheme of things.

She wouldn’t change their decision for all the money in the world.

“Did Mr. Forbes mention why he owes Boss so many favors?” Bit asked as he settled back in his chair. His moniker for Jordan had emerged from the man’s name being on the magazine’s billionaire list one year. “I mean, we’re bound to find out the reason that he lends us his private jet whenever we need it, right?”

“Neither one of them said a word about it,” Sylvie revealed before placing the small ball of sugar on her tongue. The artificial sweetener was exactly what she needed at the moment. If she continued to sit in the conference room and stare at the screen without any results, there was a chance she could be here all night. “Brook and Jordan didn’t seem overly friendly toward one another, either. The entire interview was professional and civil. The favor Jordan owes her almost certainly has something

to do with when Brook was working as a profiler with the Bureau.”

“Or the favor has to do with Jacob,” Bit proposed before adjusting his knit hat.

Sylvie's gaze finally strayed from the monitor to focus on him. She narrowed her eyes when she caught sight of his discomfort. It was evident he had uncovered some small detail, and she doubted it had anything to do with Jordan Miles.

“Did you find something to connect Mitch Norona to Jacob?”

“Maybe,” Bit hedged, his expression conflicted as he stared at the bag of Skittles. “I don’t know if it means anything, though. I discovered that Norona didn't start out as a trial attorney. He was initially a financial lawyer. He transitioned to criminal law in his second year of passing the bar, and he’s been with the firm in Baltimore ever since.”

“How does that connect to Jacob?” Sylvie asked, adjusting her glasses as she considered the implications. No matter how she tried to draw a line between the dots, no obvious pattern emerged in her mind. “You lost me, Bit.”

“Have you ever wondered how Jacob survived all those years? Being able to subvert the federal authorities with such ease?” Bit shook the bag of Skittles, clearly searching for his favorite flavor. He seemed to have lost interest in the candy when he glanced her way. “Boss’ brother doesn’t have the personality to work in a fast-food restaurant. He wouldn’t clean hotel rooms, either.”

“Brook's profile consistently references that Jacob usually finds places to work that pay cash, like a garage in a small town. He would have stuck with what he knows best, which is vehicles. And considering that he was always on the move, it’s not surprising that his expenses were cheap. Out-of-the-way hotels, buses, maybe hitchhiking...you know the drill for serial killers like him.”

“I don’t know, Little T. That’s the point.” Bit continued to jostle his knee with unease. “Boss foiled a few of Jacob’s elaborate escape plans from federal prison, but setting up such detailed schemes before turning himself into the FBI would have taken a lot of money. A lot. And not your hourly-mechanic-wage-spent-on-food-and-shelter money, either.”

Bit wasn’t able to keep the flicker of uncertainty from crossing his features. She took his reaction to mean that he had discovered something of substance, yet it wasn’t something verifiable.

“I might be reaching here, but it feels as though finances could be the connection between Jacob and Norona.”

Sylvie and Bit fell silent, each in their own thoughts, eating the Skittles until Bit began to move his knee up and down once again, though she guessed this time it was due to boredom. She wasn’t surprised when he finally asked the question as to why she was sitting in the conference room in the first place.

“What exactly are you hoping to gain by staring at the timeline? I’m pretty sure it isn’t going to change anytime soon.”

“You know how Kitsis was able to grant us access to Mara’s online planner?” Sylvie reached into the small red bag and pulled out a yellow Skittle. “Well, as you can see, Mara was pretty obsessive over her schedule. She entered everything down to the minute. She took her vitamins at nine o’clock sharp every morning, applied her hand lotion every three hours, and refreshed her makeup every day at one o’clock in the afternoon. I know you’re working on some of the entries that seem coded, like the ones that have two initials, but what I find even more interesting is that she made a notation that Jordan was arriving home at seven o’clock on Sunday night. Only he didn’t mention to us that he was running late.”

“Could Mara have typed it in her planner as a general entry?” Bit popped a couple more Skittles into his mouth, though doing so didn’t prevent him from finishing his thought. “You know, husband coming home between seven and eight? Does it even matter? Nothing changes the fact that Mara Miles called 911 and told the operator that she believed her husband was trying to kill her.”

“It does matter, though.” Sylvie took another Skittle before pointing it toward the monitor. The implications of her theory could very well change the trajectory of the investigation, and not in a good way. “What if the killer assumed Jordan was going to be home? The security system was shut down exactly at seven o’clock. Mara probably didn’t even notice it at first, if ever.”

“Didn’t the victim keep a physical planner, too?”

“Yes, but it wasn’t in the evidence the police collected from the house.” Sylvie sighed, unhappy that she wasn’t going home to Coco anytime soon. While the automatic feeder would dispense her dinner around six o’clock this evening, Sylvie would prefer Coco not be alone for the entire day. “I guess I can have Kitsis meet me at the Miles’ residence. It has to be there somewhere.”

“Or her car,” Bit suggested as he pushed his chair back. “I can check while I’m there.”

“Where?”

“The Miles’ estate,” Bit said with a frown, as if she was at fault for not keeping up with the conversation. “Big T and I are driving over there in about an hour. I need to take a look at the security system, but Detective Kitsis couldn’t meet us until around five-thirty.”

“Yes, yes, and yes,” Sylvie said with relief as she held out her hand for the rest of the

Skittles. Bit frowned even more, but he eventually gave up the goods. “Coco loves you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bit muttered good-naturedly before turning to walk out the door. “Hey, Boss. Little T has a theory, and it isn’t good. I mean, it’s good, but not for our client. You know what I mean.”

“Hear me out,” Sylvie stated as Brook entered the conference room after Bit headed for his office. It wasn’t like he had given Sylvie any additional time to think through her speculation that the killer had other plans. “We know Mara’s murder was premeditated based on the alarm system being turned off sixty minutes before her death. Seven o’clock is a very specific time, so why would the unsub wait for over an hour before killing Mara Miles? Was the killer hiding in the house? Did the unsub ring the doorbell, posing as a guest?”

Brook settled in Bit’s chair as she listened to Sylvie’s theory.

“There was a lone coffee cup in the sink. The dishwasher was empty, and there were no empty bottles or cans in the garbage bin.” Brook crossed her legs as she studied the timeline displayed on the monitor. “If Mara let someone in the house, she either didn’t offer her guest a beverage or the guest declined the overture. One of the two.”

Sylvie had always admired Brook’s composure and her ability to handle what life threw her way. The woman’s proficiency in dissecting information, to see beyond the obvious, was astounding. She could scan data points and crime scene photographs with unsettling precision. Truthfully, it bordered on the extraordinary.

Being raised in the same childhood home as a serial killer had unfortunately caused Brook to establish emotional barriers upon emotional barriers until she had closed out the world. Working as a criminal profiler for the FBI had honed her ability to immerse herself into the psychology of unsubs. She was able to delve into the dark

corners of human behavior with a fearlessness that Sylvie sometimes found hard to match.

In contrast to Sylvie's petite frame and energetic personality, Brook was tall with long black hair and striking blue eyes. A controlled strength was displayed in every measured movement, and she never spoke without first considering every word. Even her fashion sense reflected her tailored and polished demeanor.

"Mara was in her bedroom, presumably working." Brook rested her elbows on the arms of the chair as she rotated the seat to face Sylvie. "I received the crime scene photos taken by forensics, and Mara was wearing a nightgown with a matching silk robe. There was a single wine glass, half full, still on the table where her laptop sat open."

"So, the killer was hiding for almost an hour," Sylvie murmured, her theory gaining steam. "What if Mara wasn't supposed to be the only victim? If Jordan was supposed to be home at seven o'clock, then the killer had taken that into account."

"Reach out to Alex DeSilva." Brook stood without any hesitation before continuing to lay out the next steps of the investigation. "Request a rotating shift to surveil Jordan's movements, but have them do so from afar. The police believe Mara was the sole target. Therefore, the unsub isn't concerned with the authorities making the connection. This affords us the ability to stay one step ahead. I'll phone Jordan and explain the situation to him. He'll no doubt push back and want his own security team, but they won't have the credentials for the type of surveillance we'll need going forward."

"I'll call Alex now," Sylvie said, pushing away from the table. She folded the top opening of the small Skittles bag so that none of the little candies could escape on the way back to her office. Once she had her phone in hand and the chair pushed back against the table, she decided to clarify one more thing. "Any special instructions?"



“No,” Brook replied as she waited for Sylvie to join her in the hall. “Explain the situation to Alex, request that he keep the details confidential, but leave the particulars to him. Oh, and you’ll want to let him know I’m still drafting the profile. The suspect pool is wide open right now. And Sylvie?”

She stopped short of the doorway to her office.

“Yes?”

“Good work today,” Brook praised with a slight nod of appreciation. “After you speak with Alex, you’ll want to call the real estate agent.”

“Brook, I—”

“The price of that two-story you were looking at just dropped ten thousand dollars in price,” Brook revealed, even though Sylvie hadn’t gotten such an alert on her phone. “If you lower your offer by another ten, I have a feeling the owners will take it.”

Sylvie was left in her doorway to stare after Brook. Had she put in some call to the real estate agent or owner? Sylvie quickly dismissed such a notion. Brook held some sway in certain social circles, but a home on the outskirts of Georgetown probably wasn’t a topic of discussion at those events. She had probably been keeping tabs on the property as a favor.

Sylvie’s phone vibrated in her hand.

A notification appeared on the bottom of the screen from the website that she used to keep tabs on home prices. The alert reiterated what Brook had just divulged, and Sylvie couldn’t stop her excitement from bubbling over.

The pieces in her life were finally falling into place.

As she stared at her phone, another notification appeared above the first one. Another break in the case had emerged, but this lead provided the team with more of a direction. Bit had been able to decode a set of initials in Mara's online planner.

Unfortunately, all signs pointed toward corporate espionage.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter Seven

Brooklyn Sloane January 2025 Wednesday — 8:19 pm

“Why are you making my job harder than it needs to be?”

Brook had spent the majority of the day at the Montgomery County Police Department while Theo had joined Detective Kitsis in interviewing several individuals. Most of them had worked alongside Mara Miles on her numerous charity boards and had been willing to give their statements about her marriage...or lack thereof. Despite Jordan and Mara’s efforts to hide the truth, those within their inner circle had been eager to share their thoughts about the power couple.

The past twelve hours had been a waste of time and resources.

As it stood, the local police were wrapping up their investigation with a large red bow for the prosecutor. Every word spoken had been another check in the win column for the District Attorney’s office. It didn’t help that those close to Jordan and Mara on a more personal level had been advised to seek legal representation. In those instances, Detective Kitsis had provided the defense attorneys with a list of questions that would eventually be returned with scripted responses that wouldn’t aid their investigation in the slightest.

Brook—more so Jordan—didn’t have the time to play legal games. She had driven straight from the police station to Jordan’s penthouse in downtown D.C. The only thing that had gone right for today was the valet parking out front. With the outside temperature dropping below zero, she wasn’t in the mood for any pushback.

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about, Brook,” Jordan stated with a hint of exhaustion before he polished off the rest of his drink. The amber liquid suggested his preferred beverage this evening was whiskey. “I canceled all my offsite meetings and remained inside, both per your suggestions. Do I think it is a bit overkill? Yes. No one is targeting me, Brook.”

“The Montgomery County Police Department and the District Attorney's Office believe this is a slam dunk case, Jordan. I had to fight tooth and nail for them to broaden their interviews.” Brook remained near the elevator bank. She still had the profile to finish, but this meeting with Jordan needed to be face-to-face. “Would you like to know who Detective Kitsis interviewed today? Those on Mara’s charity boards. It was a complete waste of time. My time. You hired me to prove your innocence and find the person responsible for your wife's death, yet you've made that nearly impossible by cutting off any chance of relevant interviews that could result in leads.”

“A man in my position—”

“A man in your position is about to go to prison for murdering his wife,” Brook amended gravely for him as she unfastened the button on her dress coat. “I’m not going to sugarcoat the situation the way Ackles has been doing from the start. It doesn’t look good for you, and your wealth and status aren’t going to help you this time around.”

Jordan tensed upon hearing her last statement, though she refrained from divulging too much since he wasn’t alone. Brook had caught his subtle cue that someone else was present, which was why she had made it possible for her to reach her weapon with ease. She had gotten her point across and was satisfied that her words had the desired effect.

“Would you care to make the introductions, Jordan?” Brook asked as she caught sight

of movement in her peripheral vision. “Maybe this day won’t be such a waste after all.”

Brook was coming across as rather harsh, but she needed to impress upon him the severity of his situation. Barry Ackles believed he could shield his client. The man was wrong on many levels.

“Brooklyn Sloane, this is Claudia Hart.” Jordan gestured his empty glass toward the living room in what could only be taken as apathy. It was obvious from his demeanor that he had been somewhat honest last night about his relationship with the woman. His personal assistant held no significant meaning in his life. “Since you felt it wasn’t in my best interest to go into the office today, all my meetings were switched to video conference calls. Claudia has been here all day to ensure smooth transitions of said meetings, as well as scanning contracts and paperwork for the necessary individuals and corporations. Nothing more, Brook.”

She understood the meaning behind his words.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Miss Sloane,” Claudia greeted as she stood from the couch. Her voice was polished and controlled, which meant the edge of her words had been stated with clear intention. Brook wasn’t in the mood to go toe-to-toe with Jordan’s assistant, but it wasn’t like her day had gone as planned, either. “I spoke to my attorney this morning, and I’ve already turned in my responses to your questions. If you need to hear it directly from me, so be it—I know nothing about Mara Miles’ death.”

Claudia assessed Brook with the clear purpose of unsettling her. She remained silent as she dropped her gaze to the wineglass with a red lipstick stain on the rim. The contents had already been consumed, and Brook got the distinct impression Jordan’s evening wouldn’t have been strictly business for long. Jordan’s lack of decorum in the wake of his wife’s death—regardless of their marriage being over in private—was

disheartening.

“Miss Hart, I need to speak with Jordan in private.”

As Claudia shot a sharp glance of annoyance in Jordan’s direction, Brook took the brief opportunity to study his assistant. From her perfectly tailored navy blue suit that accentuated her figure, it was clear that she was someone who paid great attention to detail. A crisp white blouse and impeccable makeup completed her attire and appearance. The thin auburn highlights in her dark hair were professionally done, and her manicure appeared fresh. Her jewelry, however, expressed her desire for the finer things in life.

“Give us a minute, Claudia.”

“I don’t see why—”

“You can use the library to go over my schedule for tomorrow. I want at least an hour cleared in the afternoon to speak with Paul Teal regarding the acquisition.”

Claudia hesitated, noticeably weighing her options. Her jawline had tightened with annoyance, and she thinned her lips in irritation at being dismissed from the conversation. She finally picked up her phone and disappeared into the adjacent room without uttering another word.

“I know how this looks, Brook,” Jordan uttered with a hollow laugh, walking over to the beverage bar. “My wife is dead, and you find me here with my lover three days later. But I assure you, it’s not what you think. Claudia is the best assistant I have had in years. Our relationship is...casual. No strings. She understands my situation, and I trust her to be discreet.”

“And if you wanted to end things?” Brook inquired, wondering if Claudia leaned in

the same direction. “Would she be discreet then?”

“Claudia understands that what we have is purely physical.” Jordan rubbed his jawline, as if he were contemplating adding more to his statement. He went ahead with his first instinct. “We have a non-disclosure agreement in place, Brook.”

She refrained from giving her opinion, treading lightly now that she had some breathing space. It hadn’t been her intention to stay long, but she also hadn’t counted on Claudia being at the penthouse. Whether Jordan wanted to admit it or not, his lover was a suspect in his wife’s murder. While Brook hadn’t finished the first draft of her profile, no one on her team doubted the killing was personal.

“Do you believe Claudia is capable of murder?”

When Brook's question penetrated his thoughts, Jordan had just taken the topper off the whiskey decanter. He shifted slightly to cast a warning glance her way.

“Asked and answered, but I’ll repeat it—Claudia did not murder Mara, so don’t go there, Brook.”

“The police can’t speak to your employees, can’t interview the estate’s staff, and can’t question your lover.” Brook set her purse on the couch before removing her dress coat. “You’re treating this situation like an everyday business deal, Jordan. It isn’t. I don’t know how else to get that through your head. You’re tying my hands together, and because of that, you will go to prison.”

Jordan rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand before turning and pouring a lot more than two fingers’ worth of whiskey into his glass. He didn’t even bother to put the topper back in place. Instead, he tossed it down next to the decanter before grabbing his drink and approaching her.

The atmosphere in the room had become thick with tension, and she was going to have to choose each word very carefully if she stood a chance at getting him to listen to reason. She bought herself additional time by forcing him to speak first.

“Barry believes that any interviews with the staff could give the police more ammunition,” Jordan revealed as he walked past her to gaze into the blazing fire in the hearth. “We don’t know what they have seen or overheard. Barry is doing his best to protect me in case you fail to find the bastard who killed my wife.”

Brook understood that Jordan was under a lot of stress. She didn’t need to remind him of the reason behind his choice to reach out to her. That subject file was closed and sealed to the outside world. She wouldn’t hold it over him now.

“I apologize. I shouldn’t be taking this out on you.” Jordan stared into the amber hue of his beverage as if it were a lifeline. The alcohol might take the edge off, but it wasn’t a solution. He sighed in resignation before revealing some hidden truths. “Our troubles began last summer. There is a good chance the staff heard some of our...discussions.”

“Over?”

“You would be better off asking me what Mara and I didn’t argue over,” Jordan replied with a dull laugh. He took a swig of his whiskey before slightly wincing over the residual burn. “Our marriage slowly began to disintegrate a long time ago. Last summer just happened to be when we noticed the pile of ash left behind.”

Brook closed the distance between them, joining him in front of the fire. She was grateful that no one was around to stop him from disclosing intimate details of his marriage. She had many more questions, but this was certainly a good start.

“You told me the other day that there was no animosity between the two of you.”



Brook made the statement without judgment. She hadn't taken this case to cast an opinion. "Now you're saying that Barry fears the staff will counter your claim. Where is the disconnect, Jordan?"

"Last summer, we went to couple's therapy. You see, I wanted children. Miles Therapeutics was handed down to me, and I wanted the same for my son or daughter." Jordan crossed his arms, though the gesture wasn't defensive so much as he seemed to be staving off vulnerability. "Mara didn't have the best upbringing, and she refused to even consider bringing a child into this world."

"You didn't know this before the two of you married?"

"I never thought about my legacy back then. Hell, I was partners with a college roommate of mine in a start-up medical device company. It was never my intention to take over Miles Therapeutics, but my father's stroke forced my hand. I stepped up, and the rest is history."

"Why stay married to Mara then?"

Jordan's reluctance to answer was significant. Brook casually checked the bedroom door that Claudia had disappeared through to ensure it was still closed.

"Money." Jordan seemed done sharing pieces of his past, and he dropped one arm while lifting the other to drain the contents of his glass in one fluid movement. "We didn't have a prenup, and I didn't want Mara to have a claim on the firm."

"And what stopped Mara from filing for divorce anyway?"

"Because I threatened to out her past as an escort." Jordan held up a hand in warning, as if Brook had been going to respond to his blackmail scheme. There had been nothing in Mara's background that suggested such a lifestyle. It wasn't a stretch to

believe Jordan had made such decisions disappear. His status and wealth had given him the ability to do so. “Before you judge me, I would never have gone through with it. Mara knew me well enough to know that, too. I was desperate, and I spouted some impulsive ultimatums. I just needed to buy some time to liquidate a few assets. We agreed that after two years, she would receive three hundred million dollars in cash. We would part amicably—she could keep her social circle, and my reputation wouldn’t take a hit.”

“I take it Mara’s past was the reason she had no close friends?” Brook asked, figuring she no longer needed to search for an answer as to why Mara would have turned to Derek Haze.

Derek Haze was the CEO and owner of Haze Innovations Group. The company was a direct competitor to Miles Therapeutics. While Jordan believed Mara wouldn’t have fallen for his false demands, he was completely blind to a woman’s scorn.

“I spoke with Barry earlier today,” Brook shared as she continued to take the reins of the conversation. “He couldn’t provide me with the name of anyone Mara might have confided in. Not one.”

When studying Mara’s online planner, it became quite evident that everything she had undertaken was for the sake of appearances. All lunches, social gatherings, and general meetings had to do with the charity boards of her choosing. Such a lonely life made it easier to distinguish specific entries, such as those with coded initials. Brook had once lived such a life, and it made her wonder why Mara had kept herself so guarded.

Brook now had her answer.

The initials DH had been entered into Mara’s planner twice over the course of the past three months. Bit’s software had discovered the timing of said appointments

aligned with two large deposits into an offshore bank account under Mara's name—an account she had opened personally during a two-week vacation in Switzerland. Though the deposits hadn't come directly from Derek Haze's personal finances, Bit had been able to trace them to an account belonging to his corporation.

Mara had probably planned to take the three hundred million dollars from Jordan, but she had discovered a way to put a stake in his heart at the same time.

What better way than to destroy the one thing he loved most in the world?

Brook weighed the decision on whether to share such information regarding Derek Haze with Jordan. She still needed answers to other questions, and she didn't want him to retaliate in any way that would prohibit her and the team from advancing this investigation.

"For the past six months, we were able to keep everything amicable."

"It's motive, Jordan," Brook stated, thinking through his options. There weren't many. Somehow, such an agreement would eventually leak to either the press or the media. Someone on their staff would eventually succumb to an offer they couldn't refuse, and any and all private conversations that had been overheard would make the national news. No matter that a potential juror would deny any prejudicial bias, the prosecutor would basically have a slam dunk verdict. "Was this agreement between the two of you in writing?"

"No."

Brook fell silent so Jordan could take a moment to breathe. There was still a lot of ground to cover, and she didn't want him to revert to the man who believed his attorneys could make poor decisions disappear on a whim. Once she had decided to keep the corporate espionage to herself for a little while longer, Brook carefully

constructed her forthcoming questions.

“The list you turned in that contained the names of those you’ve had bad dealings with in the past included a competitor named Derek Haze.”

“What about him? He’s a corporate shark who is constantly on the lookout for blood, but that doesn’t make him a killer. Besides, you and I both know that whoever killed Mara is someone close to us.” Jordan leaned a forearm against the black mantel. He focused on her expressions, clearly searching for some hint as to where their conversation might be headed. “Someone was able to disarm a state-of-the-art security system. I’ve got my theories, but I’d like to hear yours first.”

“You mentioned complications in this upcoming acquisition.” Brook wasn’t going to get anywhere with Jordan if he believed he already had the answers to his problems. She reworded her question to garner a direct answer. “Are the problems you’ve encountered due to Derek Haze?”

“No.”

Brook caught the flicker of apprehension in his eyes that betrayed his response.

“Like I said, Derek Haze had nothing to do with Mara’s death. He is as cutthroat as they come. He cares only about profit, and he views the people working for him as nothing more than a waste of money. Men like him make me sick, but I won’t blame him for my current problems. Besides, Derek has never been to my residence.”

Brook wasn’t so certain that was the case, but again, she didn’t want to push Jordan into taking matters into his own hands. There was no telling what his reaction would be when he learned that his wife had struck a deal with Haze.

“Mara’s written planner is still missing.” Brook changed the subject as she made her

way back to the couch. “It wasn’t at the house on the night of her murder. We’ve searched her vehicle, too. Did she happen to leave it in your car? Maybe your office?”

“No, but she does have a gym locker at the country club. It could be there,” Jordan replied as Brook made herself comfortable on the middle cushion. Her position forced him to turn toward her to finish his response. “You’ll almost certainly find it there.”

“What time were you originally due home on Sunday?”

“Seven o’clock, but my meeting ran late.”

Brook made a mental note to have Theo swing by the country club after securing the key from Detective Kitsis. The small key she had noticed in the tagged evidence could very well be the one they needed for such a search.

“Jordan, I need to speak with Claudia.” Brook noticed his expression shift into frustration at the knowledge that she wasn’t going to let some key witnesses remain hidden behind legal representation. “You sought me out to clear your name. I’m doing what I can to keep things amicable between my firm and the detective in charge of your case. While I understand your attorney’s advice on preventing Kitsis from learning too much about your personal life, I still need access.”

“Fine, but before we get to that, Barry told me that Mara was giving her brother money. You should know that Vaughn Queller is more than capable of murder,” Jordan revealed grimly as he closed the distance from the hearth to the chair. He sat directly across from her while filling her in on his brother-in-law. “Vaughn is an addict. As I already told you, he and Mara didn’t have the best upbringing. Mara wanted more for herself. She got it, too. Vaughn, on the other hand, made it his mission to guilt-trip his sister at every turn.”

“I’m aware of Vaughn Queller’s record, and my team is searching for him now. He hasn’t been to his apartment or his place of work in a few days.”

“A few days?” Jordan narrowed his gaze as he weighed her words. “A few days...meaning since Mara’s death?”

“Yes.”

“Are the police even looking for him? Have they issued an APB?”

“Why would Detective Kitsis issue an APB for someone who isn’t a suspect in a murder investigation?” Brook had intentionally posed the question to hit home the fact that the police were confident in their case. “Jordan, you aren’t merely a prime suspect in their eyes. You are the guilty party, and all the prosecutor needs to do at this point is present those facts in court. Can you see why it’s vital for me to speak with Claudia—your personal assistant and lover? Do you think the prosecutor won’t subpoena her to testify in court? Or any other key employees, like your CFO and other board members? Anything said in confidence will be aired for all to hear. The prosecutor will find a way around an NDA, Jordan. If you think the media is having a field day now, you just wait until the first day of trial.”

Jordan didn’t hesitate this time around, and Brook braced herself for some pushback. While her preference would be not to judge others, it came with the territory of being a profiler. Unfortunately, from first impressions, Claudia struck Brook as a woman who put herself first in almost every way.

“Claudia! Would you join us, please?”

Jordan had raised his voice loud enough for Claudia to hear him through the thick door. She emerged from the other room, her gaze locking onto Jordan as she glided towards him with a predatory grace. Not once had she bothered to pay attention to

Brook.

Claudia's dark hair framed her face, and her full lips had been repainted in the same shade of red that marked the wine glass on the coffee table. Either her purse was in the bedroom, or she kept some of her toiletries and makeup in the bathroom.

It was pretty clear from her demeanor that she believed she held sway over Jordan.

“Brook has some questions for you, and I’d like for you to be honest in your responses.” Jordan stood before Claudia reached his chair. He gestured for her to have a seat, and she hid her irritation behind a practiced smile. “This is important to me, Claudia.”

Brook found Jordan’s statement interesting, but she let it slide as she focused on Claudia. The way the woman perched herself on the edge of the chair with her legs folded to the side told of her unease. Her body language suggested she wasn’t going to be in such a position for long.

“I’m not sure how I can help you,” Claudia said, attempting to take control of the conversation. “I didn’t really interact with Mara on a daily basis. The only time we spoke was if she couldn’t get ahold of Jordan.”

Brook maintained a composed expression, her recollection of the brief discussion with Bit in the back of her mind. One of his software programs had meticulously combed through Miles Therapeutics’ website and social media presence, unearthing several instances where Claudia and Stewart Leone, CFO of the company, were seen conversing in the background of various events.

Their interactions seemed innocuous enough, but Bit's software flagged them just the same. Brook found it curious that a personal assistant appeared to have a close relationship with the CFO. If Miles Therapeutics had been a smaller organization,

such a connection wouldn't be surprising in the least. However, considering its size and market value, it raised some questions.

"Have there been any veiled threats made against Jordan or Mara that you're aware of?" Brook asked, her gaze never wavering from Claudia's face.

"None that I can think of," Claudia replied, her voice steady. "There was a clinical trial where a patient died from complications unrelated to the drug in question. The patient's family sought legal representation, but since they signed an agreement waiving Miles Therapeutics from liability, we're not expecting the suit to get very far."

Brook recalled reading the headlines of such a tragedy last month. Brook continued to ask the standard questions, her inquiries carefully crafted to lull Claudia into a false sense of security before broaching the subject she truly wanted to explore.

"Tell me about your relationship with Stewart Leone," Brook finally asked, monitoring Claudia's mask of confidence as it momentarily faltered upon the request.

"Stewart is the CFO of Miles Therapeutics." There was no reason for Claudia to state the man's title nor give such a lengthy pause afterward. She was buying time, and Brook doubted the truth would voluntarily be given. "We have a business relationship, nothing more."

"What does Stewart have to do with this?" Jordan asked warily.

"I'm just trying to establish timelines for those close to you," Brook said without taking her focus from Claudia. The woman had curled her manicured nails into the palm of her left hand. "If you don't allow Detective Kitsis or my team access to everyone in your company, I'll be forced to collect information from those I can question."



“I’ll contact Barry and have him set up interviews at our headquarters then.” Jordan held up a hand to indicate he wasn’t done speaking. “You and your team. Not Kitsis.”

Brook nodded her consent without bothering to caution him that the prosecution could—and, in all likelihood, would—subpoena those employed by S&E Investigations during the trial. Jordan was aware of that fact, so she could only take his directive under the guise of trust. He was wary of the questions Kitsis might pose, but he had faith in Brook and her team.

Jordan’s decision to give her access to those he worked closely with put her in a position where she could continue to push Claudia into revealing information about Stewart Leone or ease off to divert her into believing it was an innocent question. While Brook would have preferred to push the issue, she decided against such a calculated move. What she was about to suggest would give the woman enough to worry about in the meantime.

“Where were you between seven and eight o’clock last Sunday?”

“I was with Jordan until after seven o’clock, so he couldn’t have been the one to disarm the security system,” Claudia stated without blinking once. Brook was astounded at the woman’s ability to lie with ease. “I’ll testify to that in court if necessary.”

“Damn it, Claudia,” Jordan abruptly exclaimed in irritation. Claudia was startled to the point that she released her fist to press her palm against her skirt. “Stop trying to protect me at every turn. Brook, we were together for most of the afternoon working on the acquisition. Claudia left here around six o’clock. I stayed a while longer to make some calls before driving home to find...”

“Why are you giving them ammunition, Jordan?” Claudia demanded as she stood from her chair. “If I say you were with me during the time the security system was

shut off, then it forces the police to look for another suspect.”

“You’re wrong, Miss Hart.” Brook stood, as well. “You see, the estate’s security system was shut off in a specific manner, which means that I still need to know where you were between the hours of seven and eight o’clock last Sunday.”

“With my mother,” Claudia said dismissively with a wave of her hand. She was still glaring at Jordan with disapproval while rattling off her mother’s name and phone number. Brook reached into her phone and typed in the information for Theo or Sylvie to follow up on in the next day or two. “Is there anything else?”

“As a matter of fact, I do have one more question for you, Miss Hart.”

Claudia's shoulders tensed ever so slightly, clearly anticipating another inquiry about Stewart. With a practiced air of nonchalance, Brook posed a simple question that had a roundabout way to include the CFO of Miles Therapeutics.

“Have you ever given anyone the master code to Jordan’s residence?”

“Of course not.”

Claudia narrowed her eyes upon hearing the insinuation in Brook’s tone. The woman’s response was immediate, suggesting she was telling the truth.

“Brook, I’ve already given you a list of who had the master code—Mara, myself, and Claudia.” Jordan hadn’t refilled his glass. As a matter of fact, he hadn’t left the sitting area at all. “And before you go down that particular road, Claudia and I kept our relationship strictly business when we were at the estate.”

“Where you and Claudia have sex is not my concern.” Brook spotted the tilt of Claudia’s chin in defense of their actions. “Our tech expert was at the estate last

night, and he was able to determine which code remotely took down the video cameras all around the property.”

“Brook, why didn’t you say that when you first arrived here?” Jordan asked, quickly reaching into the pocket of his pants for his phone. “Each of the staff members was given guest codes, as well as anyone who has stayed with us for the past few years. I can give you a list of the codes that we—”

“There’s no need for you to do that, Jordan.”

Claudia’s face flushed with anger when she immediately recognized the implication.

“Are you suggesting—”

“Jordan, I’m informing you that the master code was used to turn off the security system. If it wasn’t you...that leaves only Mara and Claudia.”

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*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter Eight

Brooklyn Sloane January 2025 Thursday — 7:48 am

Miles Therapeutics was housed in a monolithic structure located slightly north of Bethesda. Its dark steel and glass exterior were both imposing and alluring, giving off an air of hope and promise of cutting-edge medication and innovative solutions to current healthcare problems around the globe. Most of the floors were used for research labs and clinical trials, but the top three levels were designed for administrative purposes.

“Someone forgot to turn on the heat,” Brook muttered as Arden reached for the coffee carafe set in the middle of the table. She regretted taking off her coat, and she rubbed her hands together in anticipation of holding a hot ceramic mug. “I’m surprised we can’t see our breaths.”

Arden chuckled as he finished pouring them coffee. She had brought him along for the interviews since Sylvie had gone to speak with Derek Haze about the payments made to Mara Miles. Theo was stopping in at the gun range to interview the staff before meeting Detective Kitsis at the country club. He was unaware of their plans to question key witnesses at Miles Therapeutics, and it fell to Theo to ensure the detective was kept busy in the meantime.

Brook hoped the distraction of being in the field would also help Arden through a difficult week. He had adored his wife of forty-five years. One of the reasons he had come out of retirement had been to keep himself busy in her absence. Brook had never met his wife, nor had she witnessed such affection and loyalty in a marriage

firsthand.

Arden was a great storyteller, though.

If Brook were being truthful with herself, she had doubted the existence of such a marriage until recently. She forced her thoughts to go in another direction.

“Any luck tracking down Vaughn Queller?” Brook asked Arden as he slid one of the coffee cups toward her. She murmured her appreciation before wrapping her hands around the ceramic, willing the warmth to quickly seep into the palms of her hands. “Bit has been keeping track of the man’s financials. Mara’s brother used an ATM late Sunday afternoon in Bethesda, which means that he was in the vicinity of the estate hours before the murder.”

Arden had spent his entire career as a private investigator culling confidential informants throughout the East Coast. While the majority of them were no longer viable given their age and lifestyles, there were still some contacts that could prove useful in such a situation.

“Nothing yet,” Arden replied, sitting back in his chair. He took a tentative sip of his coffee before raising his right eyebrow in contemplation. “They use freshly ground beans. Impressive. Anyway, Queller is a monthly regular in buying drugs from my CI. With any luck, we should have more information soon. What about Claudia Hart? Did you believe her when she claimed that she never gave the Miles’ security code to anyone?”

“Unfortunately, I do believe her.” Brook began to turn the cup around in her hands, relishing the heat. A quick scan of the hallway revealed their first interview had yet to arrive. “Jordan suggested that maybe Mara had turned the system off herself, implying she might have committed suicide. It was the first I’ve heard him make such a suggestion.”

“The autopsy ruled out suicide.”

“Yes, but Jordan could still be right about Mara being the one to disengage the system. We know that she met with Derek Haze twice. The two deposits line up with those meetings. Bit mentioned that the security system had some internal cameras. One of those internal cameras was installed in Jordan’s private office. Maybe Mara shut down the system so she wouldn’t be recorded searching Jordan’s desk for pertinent information regarding the acquisition.”

It had been discovered by forensics that Mara had been on her computer working on table settings for an upcoming charity event to raise money for youth organizations in the hours prior to her death. Detective Kitsis had seen to it that Bit was given access to the victim’s laptop. Nothing unusual had been discovered in its browser history, files, or emails.

Several entries in Mara’s planner still couldn’t be deciphered, and Brook would eventually be forced to consult with Jordan. Unfortunately, Bit hadn’t located any type of physical planner at the estate or inside Mara’s vehicle.

Movement in the hallway caught Brook’s attention, and she studied Barry Ackles striding down the hall with his briefcase in hand. Claudia trailed after him with what appeared to be frustration. Sensing an opportunity to approach Barry about Mitch Norona, Brook set her coffee on the table before excusing herself and exiting the conference room.

“...can’t do this. I already paid the retainer.”

Barry didn’t bother to hide his annoyance. He came to a stop beside Brook, rubbing his temples as if he were trying to ward off an impending headache. She got the sense that he was one of those attorneys who popped antacids like Bit consumed his favorite candy.

“I’ll explain this to you again, Miss Hart—conflict of interest. Due to the severity of the charges against Mr. Miles, our firm won’t represent anyone else associated with his case. I assure you that you’ll get your retainer back. I suggest you speak with the firm’s lawyers or seek out another law firm with no ties to this case.” Barry smoothed his tie against his shirt as he turned to face Brook. “Jordan said that I would find you here. Do you mind if we speak in private?”

Brook noted the subtle tightening around Claudia’s eyes. Barry might have assumed that the woman would heed his dismissal, but Jordan’s assistant was clearly used to the situation being the other way around. Despite Brook’s warning that Jordan should continue to remain at the penthouse, he had wanted to be on-site when Brook questioned his staff.

“Stewart will be along shortly,” Claudia informed Brook without so much as a glance in Barry’s direction. Brook had no doubt that if the woman held any sway over Jordan, she would push for him to seek out other representation or somehow convince Barry to allow one of his colleagues to represent her. “Stewart is finishing up a brief meeting with Jordan.”

Brook wasn’t certain if the way Claudia had posed such a statement was meant as an unspoken warning. While Jordan had chosen to bring in S&E Investigations to prove his innocence, such a calculated decision didn’t mean he wasn’t guilty, and she had given her word to Sylvie that this case would be treated like any other.

Why, then, would Jordan want to meet with Stewart before his interview?

Brook could only hope such a topic of discussion had everything to do with the finances of Miles Therapeutics and nothing to do with the investigation. Claudia cast one last glare in Barry’s direction before she turned and retreated down the hallway.

“Please tell me you have something,” Barry muttered in frustration. “The DA is

getting some pressure to plea deal this out. They don't want this to play out in court, and all the police are doing now is drying the ink on his paperwork. We both know Jordan isn't going to take any kind of plea deal, so I'm going to need something solid to try and get this case dismissed."

"Kitsis might surprise you," Brook revealed as she peered over her shoulder. There was a larger conference room beside the one occupied by Arden, and the space was currently vacant. "Let's finish our conversation in there."

Once they were behind a closed door, Brook decided to share a bit more information. Doing so might prompt Barry to be more receptive to her request.

"Kitsis has agreed to meet with Theo out at the country club. Mara keeps a gym locker there, and we're hoping to find her physical planner."

"I thought Kitsis already gave your firm access to Mara's online planner," Barry said with a frown. He lifted his briefcase until it rested on the table. "Look, if the police are withholding—"

"It's nothing like that," Brook reassured him. "Detective Kitsis has gone above and beyond with our requests. I truly think he believes Jordan murdered Mara, and he isn't concerned with finding evidence to the contrary. That works in our favor. We're searching for Mara's physical planner because some online entries were entered with initials only. We're hoping that she was more detailed in her written planner."

"Why not ask Jordan?"

"Why didn't you initially tell Jordan that Mara was paying her brother?"

"I see where you're going with this, but it's my job to protect Jordan," Barry explained defensively before attempting to turn the tables. "Keeping Vaughn Queller



away from the Miles was in everyone's best interest. What you are—"

"Yet you knew Mara and Jordan were going to divorce anyway." Brook caught the exact moment when her words hit a cord. Barry hadn't expected Jordan to come clean with her. "I spoke with Jordan last night, as you well know. Otherwise, you wouldn't have known I would be here today. I'm guessing Jordan left out the fact that he divulged his blackmail scheme to keep Mara from filing for divorce before he could liquidate assets in the sum of three hundred million dollars."

Barry smoothed his silk tie, alerting Brook to the fact that his acid reflux had kicked in once again. Being in his mid-fifties with his profession didn't mix too well.

"If Kitsis gets ahold of that info—"

"You and I both know the DA won't stop digging until he has a solid motive to present in court. The first thing he'll do is establish marital troubles, followed by Jordan not wanting to give up a dime to his ex-escort of a wife. One of the staff members at the estate will fold. It's just a matter of time."

"That's my concern," Barry stated in a hardened tone. "Yours is to prove my client's innocence."

Brook remained silent for a moment as she weighed Barry's response. It should have dawned on her sooner, but she wouldn't have put it past him to have every employee at the estate sign some type of non-disclosure agreement...with a hefty payment on the side in the guise of a yearly bonus. She made the conscious decision to speak with the staff herself in the coming days.

"There's something unrelated to Jordan's case that I'd like to discuss with you." Brook's abrupt switch of topics had Barry's hand dropping to his side. "Do you know an attorney named Mitch Norona? Works for a firm out of Baltimore."

Barry didn't answer her inquiry right away, but she could see the wheels turning in his sharp mind, weighing the implications of her question. He was attempting to figure out the reason for her interest and coming up empty. If he hadn't been so busy with Jordan's case, Barry probably would have caught the news segment that highlighted her brother's trial.

"I don't know Norona personally," Barry admitted, monitoring her closely. "But if I were facing federal murder charges, he wouldn't be the lawyer I'd call."

"Norona is defending Jacob Walsh."

Barry's eyes lit with understanding. Still, she noted a smug expression settling in his features. She almost abandoned her part of the conversation, without any follow-up to her initial question, but his next offer had her reconsidering her options.

"I do have a friend who is a paralegal at Norona's firm. If it would help, I could ask some discreet questions about how Norona came to take on your brother's case."

"I would appreciate that very much," Brook said with a nod of acknowledgment. She then followed up with a repayment. One that wouldn't be a cost to her personally, and one that would imply they were even. "In exchange for such a good-faith gesture, you should know that Mara received two offshore payments from Derek Haze. Sylvie is questioning him now. I thought it prudent to wait until we hear his reasoning for such compensation before revealing the transactions to Jordan. If we were able to make such a connection, it probably won't be too long before the DA does the same."

Barry's shock was evident, but Brook had caught sight of Steward Leone approaching the larger conference room. He wasn't alone, either. She took a step toward the door before Barry's hand touched the upper part of her arm.

"You can't be serious," Barry said as he attempted to come up with a way to excuse

such findings. He was studying her intently before letting his arm drop to his side once more. “What you’re suggesting is...”

“Corporate espionage, Barry.”

Brook almost brought up Mara’s past as an escort, but that was a conversation for another time. Stewart Leone had already entered the smaller conference room. While Arden would see to it that the CFO was offered a beverage, she wanted time to observe the man’s mannerisms. Claudia hadn’t been truthful about their relationship. Brook’s current task was to ensure those lies didn’t interfere with the investigation.

“Mr. Leone, thank you for meeting with us,” Brook said as she entered the room. Arden was in the process of pouring coffee into two more mugs. “I’m sure you have a busy morning, as do we, so I don’t see any reason to keep you any longer than necessary. I’m Brooklyn Sloane, and this is my colleague, Arden Hinnish.”

“Miss Sloane, I’m Rudy Pacer,” the second man greeted before Stewart could speak. “I represent Mr. Leone, though I know this meeting is just a formality. We sympathize with Mr. Miles’ situation, and we’ll do everything we can to help you with your investigation. As a matter of fact, consider me invisible.”

Brook never took her gaze off Stewart, who had lifted the corner of his lip in what could only be termed satisfaction. She was beginning to understand why Jordan had met with Stewart this morning, and it had everything to do with the fact that Rudy Pacer was not part of the law firm employed by Miles Therapeutics.

Stewart had gone and secured himself personal representation.

“Please, have a seat,” Brook instructed the men as she made herself comfortable in her chair.

She turned on her electronic tablet, catching sight of Barry in the hallway. He could have joined them, but her previous claim about Derek Haze had left the lawyer somewhat shellshocked. If Mara had been selling corporate secrets, such a betrayal would have provided Jordan with another motive. While Brook would have preferred to be the one to pass on such information to Jordan, hearing the distressing news might be better off coming from his attorney.

“Mr. Leone, I only have a few questions,” Brook began as she picked up the stylus. “First, though, I’d like to confirm a few things. You’ve worked at Miles Therapeutics for six years, is that correct?”

“Yes.” Stewart Leone was tall, his lithe frame impeccably dressed in a tailored suit. He had unfastened the button on his jacket before taking a seat, and he even sported a tie bar with an onyx inlay. Seeing as how she had almost purchased a similar one for Graham, she was already informed of the staggering price tag. “Five years and eight months to be exact.”

Stewart’s dark hair was slicked back with a tad more gel than necessary, though the style accentuated his sharp features. He put a lot of effort into his appearance. Interestingly enough, he didn’t glance in his lawyer’s direction once. Either he was confident that Rudy Pacer would interrupt when necessary, or Stewart wasn’t concerned that his answers would land him in the middle of a murder investigation.

“Would you consider yourself friends with the Miles?”

Brook immediately sensed that Stewart wasn’t too fond of Jordan. It was evident that he had assumed she would continue verifying his personal and professional details. He hadn’t expected her to veer off course so quickly.

“Not in the sense that we would have drinks after work.” Stewart lowered his gaze to her tablet, which currently displayed a photograph of Stewart and Jordan smiling for

the camera at one of Mara's charity events. "We move around the same social circles, if that's what you're asking. For the most part, our work and personal lives are separate. You should know that Jordan has a good relationship with the employees. They love him."

Brook couldn't help but notice that Stewart didn't include himself in that statement.

"And Mara? Did the employees love her, as well?"

"Of course, though she hasn't been around as much lately." Stewart lifted his gaze from the tablet to meet hers. "I merely assumed Mara was busy with one of her foundations or such. Come to think of it, I did run into her last month at Persimmon Restaurant. We only had time to exchange some pleasantries as it seemed she was late for a meeting."

Brook found it very interesting that Stewart had brought up the restaurant where Mara had supposedly met with Derek Haze. Was Stewart attempting to divulge information without being directly blamed or was the afterthought merely a coincidence?

"Did the Miles entertain at their residence often?" Brook asked, shelving the so-called tip for now. The tightening of Stewart's grip on his coffee cup told of his annoyance. If there was something he wanted to communicate to her, he would find a way to do so. "I'm aware of the holiday dinners for the executives, but what about other times throughout the year?"

Brook used her stylus to slide the screen through multiple photographs until she intentionally landed on one in particular. She turned her attention toward Stewart, who was staring intently at the screen.

"I would say Jordan and Mara hosted a get-together maybe once a quarter."

“And did you notice anything unusual with Mara during those events? Did she seem troubled? Upset?”

“Distant.” Stewart dragged his gaze away from the picture to glance at his watch, but he made no move to end the interview. Brook figured it was his way of letting her know he believed his time was valuable. “Mara used to mingle more. Make small talk. She stopped making an effort at some point last summer.”

“Did Jordan and Mara have a good marriage?”

Stewart’s gaze dropped to the display where he and Claudia had been captured talking privately behind Jordan and Mara, both smiling for the camera with champagne flutes in hand. There was no doubt in Brook’s mind that Stewart was aware of the affair, and she began to suspect that was the reason behind those private discussions between Stewart and Claudia.

“I’m sure their marriage was like any other with its ups and downs.” Stewart gestured toward the lighted display. “They look very happy there, don’t they?”

Jordan and Mara had done well at keeping up appearances, hiding the cracks in their relationship from outsiders. Only they hadn’t fooled everyone.

Brook continued with the standard line of questioning, not expecting to get anything more out of Stewart Leone. It wasn’t until she questioned his alibi for the night in question that she noticed a slight shift in the lines around his eyes.

“I was home.” For the first time since Stewart had taken a seat at the table, he turned his attention toward his attorney. Rudy Pacer didn’t seem concerned with his client’s response. “Is that all, Miss Sloane? I have a busy day ahead of me.”

“Were you home alone?”

“Yes.” Stewart pushed his chair back and stood before fastening the button on his jacket. “My wife is out of town visiting family. Why don’t I answer the question you would really like to ask me—no, I did not kill Mara Miles. Is there anything else?”

Brook weighed her options, but she decided that keeping the meeting civil for the time being was in the team’s best interest. She powered down her table while keeping him waiting for a response. Before too long, the picture on the display faded from sight.

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Leone.”

As Stewart and Rudy began to make their way to the door, Brook gestured for Arden to ask one more question. The two of them had gone over the best strategy to bring up the acquisition. It was best to have the employees assume that Brook wasn’t in any way interested in that line of questioning, but rather to make it appear that her colleagues were just checking off a few boxes.

“Oh, Mr. Leone? One more thing,” Arden called out as he adjusted his wireless glasses. Stewart’s hand was already on the door handle when he turned back around. “The acquisition that Miles Therapeutics is engaged in...is it going smoothly? I can’t tell you the amount of times greed has gotten the best of someone. I once had a case where—”

“I take it you’re referring to Paul Teal’s company,” Stewart replied, releasing the door handle. Brook couldn’t help but wonder why he wouldn’t have opened the door if the subject matter had no substance. “I highly doubt that someone killed Mara over Paul Teal’s company. It’s not worth the money that Jordan wants to dole out, anyway.”

“Are you not in favor of the acquisition, Mr. Leone?”

“No. This acquisition is personal for Jordan. The decision has nothing to do with expanding the company.” Stewart gave a slight shrug of disapproval. “Truthfully, I don’t like Teal. He made quite the scene at the country club last week. Next thing I know, Jordan wants to offer ten percent more than the original offer. I’m sure you know all about it since Paul was the one Jordan was with on Sunday afternoon.”

Brook kept her expression the same, not giving away the fact that Jordan had not shared that information with her. He had mentioned needing to take care of some business that afternoon regarding the acquisition, and she had assumed that he meant with Claudia at the penthouse. Either way, it didn’t change the fact that Jordan arrived home minutes after the shooting. This would be the time when Sylvie would have pointed out that Jordan could very well have pulled the trigger himself.

“I must have misunderstood,” Arden said with a frown, causing the sides of his mustache to turn down. “I thought Jordan had a meeting with someone named Haze. Brook, do you recall who Jordan had meetings with on Sunday?”

She noticed immediately that Stewart’s response was oddly hesitant. Arden had read the interview exactly as she had, picking up on Stewart’s subtle references during his responses. The man’s reaction to the misdirection and outright lie by Arden had confirmed Derek Haze’s involvement.

“We’ve taken enough of Mr. Leone’s time,” Brook finally responded without giving Stewart time to answer Arden’s question. “Mr. Leone, Mr. Pacer...thank you.”

It wasn’t until the two men had exited the conference room that she amended her first impression of Stewart Leone. He hadn’t once spoken on Jordan’s behalf. If anything, she got the sense that Jordan’s CFO would rather work anywhere else but Miles Therapeutics.

“Good work, Arden,” Brook praised as she reached for her phone. “Stewart brought



up the Persimmon Restaurant for a reason. He wants us to know about Mara and Derek Haze. The question I'm curious about is did Stewart know that Mara was accepting payments from Haze?"

Arden reached for the carafe. He topped off both coffees while remaining silent during Brook's phone conversation with Bit. She instructed him to search for any connection between Stewart Leone and Derek Haze. If Stewart were so loyal to Miles Therapeutics, why not come clean to Jordan with the fact that Mara had been witnessed having lunch with a competitor?

"I'm glad to know that I'm not the only one coming to a different conclusion," Arden said after she disconnected the call. "Stewart Leone's comments seemed too...rehearsed."

"Agreed."

Arden's gaze was drawn to the hallway through the large floor-to-ceiling glass pane. Brook had already observed Jordan's arrival and his subsequent conversation with Stewart, and the animosity between the two men was obvious. Animosity might have been a strong designation, but it was evident they weren't on the best of terms.

When Jordan turned his focus on Brook, she quickly came to the conclusion that his anger was directed at her. Barry must have managed to find the time to fill in his client on the possible corporate espionage acts committed by his dead wife.

"Would you please call Sylvie?" Brook asked quietly as she stood from her chair. "Instruct her to go into the interview soft and allow Derek Haze to lead it. Something isn't right."

"I figured that out the moment Stewart Leone stepped into this conference room," Arden muttered as he reached into the pocket of his cardigan sweater. "Miles doesn't

appear too happy with his CFO at the moment.”

“No,” Brook murmured softly in disagreement as she maintained eye contact with Jordan. “His annoyance is with me, which indicates his trust in Mara is unwavering even though he previously threatened to expose her history as an escort. He doesn’t believe for one second that his wife would have sold out to his competitor. Why would he have that much faith in someone he was blackmailing and planning on divorcing within the year?”

### Chapter Nine

Theo Neville January 2025 Thursday — 9:49 am

Theo pushed open the doors of the prestigious country club, grateful for the warmth that greeted him inside. Despite his brown leather jacket and matching gloves, the biting cold had managed to seep into the fabric during the short walk from the parking lot to the entrance. He noticed a valet attendant returning to his station from parking a vehicle, but Theo had opted to park his Jeep himself when he saw an open spot near the front entrance.

The gleaming marble floors reflected the ornate chandeliers suspended above, casting a warm golden glow with its subdued lighting. A low hum of conversation and the clattering of utensils could be heard from the dining room, while a faint scent of chlorine hinted at the presence of an indoor pool somewhere within the lavish one-story structure.

He scanned the large foyer, spotting Detective Kitsis at the coat check-in counter almost immediately. The man was already engaged in conversation with one of the staff members. Theo moved toward them, the soles of his boots almost silent against the white marble. Kitsis excused himself before meeting Theo halfway.

“How did it go at the gun range?” Detective Kitsis asked as he shoved his gloves into the pocket of his coat. There was no reason to check their outerwear with the attendant seeing as they wouldn’t be on the premises for long. “I had an officer take statements from the staff earlier this week. As far as any of them are concerned, Jordan and Mara Miles signed in on Sunday morning at eleven o’clock before

clocking out at one.”

“That’s pretty much what I gathered from the statements, as well.” Theo didn’t take offense to the woman behind the counter. She had taken an interest in his eye patch, but she was far too polite to stare for long. “Look, I know you still believe that Miles murdered his wife, but there are some loose ends that can’t be tied yet.”

“I didn’t say that I was one hundred percent convinced,” Detective Kitsis replied as he reached into the interior pocket of his black coat. He pulled out a piece of paper, along with a key still in an evidence bag. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

Theo understood that they were on site for completely different reasons. Kitsis was cementing the case for the prosecutor. Nothing more, nothing less.

“Oh, and I trust that I’ll receive some type of record from the interviews being conducted at Miles Therapeutics today?”

“I like you, Kitsis,” Theo surmised with a smile. The man didn’t miss a thing. “And yes, Brook intends to hand over the statements.”

“Why don’t you ask where the women’s locker room is while I speak with some servers?” Kitsis suggested as he shifted his stance to gesture toward the dining room. “Miles gave us the waiter’s name who served them breakfast on Sunday morning—Caleb Witt. He’s here today, and he has agreed to give me a more in-depth statement than he gave to my officer.”

Theo removed his leather gloves and folded them in half before tucking them into the pocket of his jacket. He then took the warrant and the key from Kitsis, noticing the number twenty-three engraved on the bow.

“Are you in a hurry or something?” Theo asked skeptically before Kitsis could walk

away. “Shouldn’t you be the one serving this warrant?”

“It’s my wife’s birthday, and I might have put off picking up her gift,” Kitsis revealed, reaching out and slapping Theo on the arm. “Seeing as I’m meeting her for lunch—and you’ve already pointed out that the prosecutor believes this case is a slam dunk—there is no reason why we can’t divide and conquer.”

Kitsis made his way into the dining room, much to the dismay of the woman at the coat check-in counter. She was in the process of reaching for the phone unit on the wall when Theo approached her. She went by Beth according to her nametag.

“Hi, Beth.” Theo held the items in his left hand so that he could pull out his credentials. “My name is Theo Neville. I’m with S&E Investigations, and we are investigating the circumstances surrounding Mara Miles’ death. I take it that you’ve already met Detective Kitsis?”

“Yes, but he really shouldn’t be entering the dining room without first speaking with the manager,” Beth warned as she held the phone away from her face. She wore the club’s uniform, which consisted of black slacks and a crisp white blouse. “Would you please tell him to—”

It was too late for anyone to stop Kitsis from entering the dining room seeing as he had already disappeared from view. Beth quickly lifted the receiver to her mouth.

“Mr. Daulton, two police officers are here with a warrant to access Mara Miles’ locker. One of them just entered the dining room, and—” Beth nodded her understanding at whatever was being said over the phone. Theo didn’t bother to correct her regarding his title. “Yes, sir. Yes. I will. Thank you.”

Beth set the receiver back on the phone base. Her gaze drifted toward the dining room’s entrance before focusing on Theo. She gave him a strained smile, as if she

were afraid of the trouble she might be in for not preventing Kitsis from accessing the club's clientele.

"Mr. Daulton will be with you shortly," Beth responded as she rested both hands on the counter. She laced her fingers together while doing her best not to fixate on his eye patch. "He is very protective of our guests' privacy."

"No worries," Theo replied, returning her smile. "We're simply here to collect a few statements and Mrs. Miles' belongings. It isn't our intention to disturb your guests."

Unlike Theo's quiet stride, the same couldn't be said of Mr. Daulton's agitated steps. Beth couldn't hide her wince when she spotted her supervisor bearing down on them, so Theo immediately stepped in front of Daulton before he could utter a word to his employee.

"Mr. Daulton, I presume." Theo tucked his credentials in his pocket before offering his hand. "You have quite the loyal staff, I must say. Beth was adamant that we remain here in the lobby to meet with you first. However, Detective Kitsis is on a tight schedule. He'll be discreet in taking Caleb Witt's statement. In the meantime, would you mind showing me where the women's locker room is located so that I can collect Mrs. Miles' belongings? We won't take any longer than necessary. You have my word."

Theo offered the warrant to Daulton, who didn't bother taking the piece of paper after the two of them shook hands. Instead, the manager appeared more concerned with Kitsis' disappearance into the main dining room. Making a quick decision, Daulton lifted his arm and snapped his fingers at a young man in uniform crossing through the foyer. The employee stopped in his tracks, giving the manager his full attention.

"Sammy, would you please escort Officer Neville into the women's locker room? Announce your presence before entering, please," Mr. Daulton directed before

stepping back. He had only given the credentials a cursory glance. Once Sammy had agreed to the task, Daulton nodded toward Theo. "Please let Sammy know if you need anything else. I'll go make certain that the other officer has a place in private to speak with Caleb...not that I understand why such a second interview needs to happen. An officer was here already, and he was given full access to the staff."

"I appreciate your cooperation, Mr. Daulton." Theo might as well have been speaking to thin air. The manager had already made several strides toward the dining room, leaving Sammy to shift his weight with unease. Theo held up the key in a small, clear evidence bag. "It looks as if I'll need access to locker twenty-three."

"Right this way, sir."

Theo followed the young man down a corridor attached to the large foyer. The walls were lined with framed photographs of celebrities who had passed through the place and taken the time to play a round of golf. There were also a few Olympic athletes who had used the tennis courts, signing their autographs to the pictures.

"Sammy, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long have you worked here?"

"Eight months," Sammy replied as he nodded toward a woman exiting a restroom. "I started work here last May."

"Do you know the Miles well, then?" Theo asked conversationally, seizing the opportunity to gather more information as they continued down the long hallway. "It's my understanding that they frequently dined here, as well as utilized the golf course and fitness facilities."

“Mr. and Mrs. Miles would come in at least three times a week.” Sammy slowed his pace once he had started to speak. “A lot of us are still in disbelief. We can’t wrap our minds around Mr. Miles being a killer. He goes out of his way to tip us well, and he isn’t like some of the other guests who think we’re nothing more than hired help. Mr. Miles even gave one of my friends an internship at Miles Therapeutics.”

“What about Mrs. Miles?” Theo asked as Sammy finally came to a stop in front of a heavy wooden door. “What was she like?”

“Mrs. Miles...well, I guess you could say she was reserved,” Sammy said without reaching for the door handle. “She kept to herself. I mean, she was nice and everything. But quiet, if you know what I mean.”

“Did you ever notice them fighting?”

“No, not at all,” Sammy replied before reaching for the handle. He pulled the door open, gesturing for Theo to follow him. “You can stay here while I make sure the coast is clear.”

Theo remained in a very exclusive lounge area with plush couches and matching chairs. He didn’t bother to take a seat. Instead, he took the additional time to tuck the warrant into the interior pocket of his jacket. Sammy was currently knocking on another door, presumably one that led to a private changing room. Once he had confirmed that the coast was clear, he called out to Theo.

“We’re not usually busy between nine and noon,” Sammy said before entering the locker room. He held the door open for Theo to pass through. “You said locker twenty-three? That should be the third row over.”

Theo’s idea of a locker room did not include polished mahogany wood structures with matching benches. Each locker had brass fasteners and locks, as well as



nameplates engraved with the names of club members. According to locker number twenty-three, it most certainly belonged to Mara Miles.

He approached, taking note of the names engraved on the lockers on either side. He would make time to contact each individual to see if they had anything to add to Sammy's impression of the Miles, as well as that of Caleb Witt.

Theo removed the small brass key from the evidence bag. He then carefully inserted the key into the slot and turned it until the lock snapped open. Being mindful of anything that might fall out, he opened the locker door slowly.

Taking out his phone, he took a few pictures for Detective Kitsis' files. Theo wasn't going to have this come back on him if something was discovered among Mara's belongings that could exonerate her husband.

"Sammy? Do you mind coming over here?" Theo asked as he switched his camera to video. Once it began recording, he handed his phone over to the young man. "Please keep the video rolling throughout the search. I'll let you know when to stop recording."

Once Sammy was standing in a position that would allow the phone to capture the contents of the locker, Theo took his time to scan the contents. He methodically assessed every item as he retrieved a pair of latex gloves that he had brought with him. He then removed the white gym bag before placing it on the bench. He did the same with a beige towel, a water bottle, and a swim cap. Once everything had been laid out on the bench, he motioned for Sammy to lower the phone's lens to the gym bag.

Theo took hold of the zipper and pulled it until the opening was wide enough for Sammy to get a good scan of the contents—a change of clothes, a makeup case, and a light pink planner that was at least eight by ten. With utmost care, Theo removed it

before setting it on the bench. He slowly opened the cover. The previous tension at the possibility her planner might not be recovered slowly receded from his shoulders.

“Is that good?” Sammy asked as he went to lower the phone. Theo immediately stopped him from turning off the video. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I would just like for you to record some entries.” Theo turned a few pages, realizing the planner had monthly, weekly, and daily passages. He flipped through until he reached last week, not noticing anything out of the ordinary at first. “Zoom in, and then you can stop the recording.”

Once Theo had secured his phone, he switched the screen to still photos. He took additional pictures of the week and daily pages before uploading them to the software program utilized by the team. There was a set of initials that he hadn’t noticed in the online planner, and he took a moment to consider the implications—they had been entered on the same day as Mara’s run-ins with Derek Haze.

AM...scribbled in the hour following said lunches. Theo couldn’t recall anyone in Mara’s contact list with those initials. What he found most interesting was the notation at seven o’clock on the night of Mara’s death.

“You about ready in here?” Detective Kitsis called out as he entered the women’s locker room. “That Witt kid didn’t notice anything unusual while serving the Miles’ breakfast. As a matter of fact, he mentioned several times that they didn’t even seem to be speaking with one another. Maybe the DA’s investigator can dig up some dirt on their marriage. The two of them didn’t have a prenup, you know.”

Theo didn’t like keeping information from the lead detective when working in tandem with local police. Unfortunately, the team had agreed not to share specific details with Kitsis until they either had another suspect or agreed unanimously that Jordan Miles had indeed killed his wife.

Fortunately, Mara's handwritten notation pointed to an entirely different scenario.

"Don't do that," Detective Kitsis said accusingly while pointing toward Theo. "Your eye patch raises a half inch when you're about to tell me something I don't want to hear. And there it goes. Son of a bitch. I'm not having lunch with my wife today, am I? I'll blame you entirely if my ass ends up sleeping on the couch tonight."

"Mara's planner was in her gym bag," Theo replied without answering Kitsis' question. "There are a couple of entries in here that are not in her online planner."

"That's it?" Detective Kitsis put his hand on his chest, but he slowly straightened his shoulders after studying Theo a little longer. "Your eye patch isn't lowering. Damn it, Neville. Spit it out."

Not having the patience to hear Theo's explanation, Kitsis closed the distance and peered down at the planner. He studied the entries, and it wasn't difficult to determine the exact moment his mind registered the words in the seven o'clock slot on the night in question.

"Sammy boy, go wait outside."

Sammy switched his focus between the detective and Theo a few times, as if he wasn't sure which of them should have the last say. It wasn't until Theo nodded his agreement with the directive that Sammy moved toward the exit.

"I'd love to know how you're going to spin this one to the prosecutor," Theo muttered as Kitsis leaned back against the wooden lockers. The man couldn't tear his gaze away from the planner. "Mara Miles wrote herself a reminder to shut off the estate's security system at exactly seven o'clock on the night in question...to meet with her brother."

“That makes no sense, Neville. Jordan Miles had initially been scheduled to be home at seven o’clock. Why would the victim have her brother stop by the estate when she had already gone to such great lengths to cover up the latest payout to him?”

“I don’t know, but Queller was at the house that night, Kitsis. It looks as if we officially have ourselves another suspect.”

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter Ten

Sylvie Deering January 2025 Thursday — 11:16 am

“Mr. Haze will see you now.”

The announcement had been made with polite condescension by a stylish woman who would soon be looking for employment elsewhere. Considering that Sylvie had been kept waiting in the lobby for hours to speak with Derek Haze, she had been able to monitor the interactions of several employees. There was no doubt that the woman would be unemployed before the weekend.

“Sarah, would you please take this to the third floor?” An older woman’s request couldn’t be mistaken for anything other than a directive. She didn’t address Sylvie until Sarah was out of earshot. “I apologize, Miss Deering. It hasn’t been easy finding my replacement. By the way, I’m Derek’s personal assistant, Ruth.”

Sylvie’s irritation faded as she gathered her belongings. It wasn’t Ruth’s fault that Derek had kept Sylvie waiting all morning. She had made the most of the time on her tablet, researching Derek Haze from online articles to local newspapers, gathering as much information as she could that might be useful to her during their interview.

The offices of Derek Haze's pharmaceutical company were a testament to his success—sleek, modern, and bathed in an icy blue light that seemed to emanate from every surface. The sterile environment left Sylvie slightly uneasy, as if she had stepped into some futuristic dystopia.

From her research, Derek Haze was known to be ruthless and cunning, a man who would stop at nothing to achieve his goals. His meteoric rise from humble beginnings spoke volumes about his intelligence and determination. An article regarding his mother's death had been enlightening, and Sylvie got the distinct impression the woman's battle with Epithelioid hemangioendothelioma (EHE) was the reason for his success in the pharmaceutical business. The funding was rather scarce for such a rare form of cancer.

"May I get you another tea? Coffee, perhaps?"

"No, thank you," Sylvie replied softly as she fell into step beside Ruth. There was a maternal quality to the woman, and it had nothing to do with her age. Sylvie surmised Ruth was in her late sixties, but it was the genuine warmth in the woman's eyes that made one feel at ease. "It's nice of you to stay and help train someone. I take it you are retiring?"

Ruth's light laughter bounced off the walls of the long hallway.

"Oh, I doubt that I'll be retiring anytime soon." Ruth cast Sylvie a humorous sideways glance. "It will take a couple of years for Derek to adjust to the change of me not being here. And I figure that is exactly how long it will take him to choose someone, so why not start now?"

Sylvie was taken aback by Ruth's willingness to share personal insights about Derek's personality. The man's strong aversion to change was something Sylvie had discovered in her research. She would have asked more questions since Ruth seemed so open to discussing her boss, but she had come to an abrupt stop in front of an office door, cutting their conversation short.

"I'll make sure your coat and gloves are waiting for you at the front desk after your meeting," Ruth said with a smile as she turned the handle on the door. She hadn't

even bothered to knock to indicate their arrival. “If you need anything in the meantime, feel free to poke your head out and ask.”

Sylvie glanced over her shoulder to find that Ruth had her own private area directly across from Derek’s office. There were several framed photographs on the woman’s desk, though most were facing the opposite way. The only picture at an angle was one with Ruth and another woman who Sylvie recognized to be Derek Haze’s mother from last year’s article regarding her death.

“Thank you, Ruth,” Sylvie replied softly before crossing the threshold.

The stark contrast between the cold, sterile outer offices and Derek’s personal domain was striking. The faint scent of lemon polish hung in the air, obviously belonging to the wooden furniture that seemed to be hand-me-downs from a previous generation. She couldn’t entirely place the style—not quite antique, but definitely not modern. The desk, made of rich mahogany, dominated the room. There was even a matching credenza and complementing bookcases along all four walls.

This was not just an office.

This space reflected the true Derek Haze.

Sylvie had caught sight of the man immediately. He stood at the window with his back turned toward her, speaking in hushed tones on his cell phone. Snowflakes were gently drifting and twirling outside to the ground below. She got the distinct impression that he was having a conversation with his lawyer. He had mentioned something about the case not being federal, and how he didn’t see the harm in answering her questions.

Derek’s suit jacket was draped over the back of his office chair, and his sleeves were rolled, revealing toned forearms. She couldn’t help but notice that he had been in the

sun recently, which suggested he had been away for the holidays. There were even some natural highlights in his dark blond hair to back up her assumption.

“...call you afterward. I appreciate your concern.”

The silence that followed Derek's severance from the call was in no way uncomfortable, but she couldn't put an adjective to the ambiance. She had studied his firm's social media presence, but those photographs didn't do the man justice. He turned, revealing blue eyes darker than hers that locked onto her with a startling intensity.

“Ms. Deering,” Derek said smoothly as he set his cell phone on his desk. “First off, let me apologize for the long wait. I got news first thing this morning about the death of a patient in one of our clinical trials.”

“I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Haze.” Sylvie set her purse on the floor as he walked around his desk. He reached out an arm, and she was surprised at the warmth of his fingers when he shook her hand. “I'm sure you had a lot to do in the aftermath considering the FDA's guidelines on such matters.”

“I have others who deal with the red tape.” Derek's gaze lowered to her holster. She preferred to wear comfortable sweaters when working in the office, but she had donned a cream turtleneck with a brown plaid blazer that covered her firearm. Since she had unbuttoned her jacket to take a seat, her weapon was now somewhat noticeable. “I was more concerned about the family. They understood the risks involved, but losing a loved one is never easy.”

Sylvie sensed his last statement was his way of indicating that he was aware her father had passed away last year. Considering that her name had been in the papers and on the national news regarding the attack in her apartment orchestrated by Jacob Walsh, it wasn't a stretch that Derek would have put two and two together.



She had anticipated him to return to his chair behind his desk. Instead, he took the seat next to her, resting his elbow on the wooden arm. The unexpected proximity gave her a chance to observe him more intently.

There was a certain allure to him that was undeniable.

“Ruth explained that you’re here to ask some questions regarding Mara Miles. Everyone was shocked to hear what happened last weekend. I reached out to Jordan as a courtesy and spoke with his assistant, but he hasn’t returned my call. I’m going to assume your visit has to do with the money deposited in Mara’s account?”

Sylvie blinked, taken aback by Derek’s candidness. Corporate espionage wasn’t something someone usually willfully admitted to so easily. She had received Arden’s text regarding Brook’s advice on how to approach Derek, and she took it to heart, allowing him to lead the interview.

“Now that you mention it...” Sylvie leaned back in the chair, mimicking his stance. “Why did you give Mara money?”

For the first time since Sylvie walked into his office, Derek displayed a bit of hesitation.

“It was a private matter, Ms. Deering.” Derek’s tone was deliberate, yet he didn’t seem to be intentionally dodging her question. “I gave my word to Mara that the reason would remain that way. Unless my hand is forced, I will keep my promise.”

“You must realize how that looks,” Sylvie pointed out, doing her best to keep her misgivings concealed. A part of her had wanted to believe that he wouldn’t commit a crime like corporate espionage, let alone murder. She wasn’t going to question the reason behind such hope. “You gave two large sums of money to the wife of your competitor. The same wife who was shot to death in her home after your company

backed out of acquiring a medical device company that Miles Therapeutics is now on the verge of buying out.”

“Yes, I’m aware of how the situation looks.”

Sylvie waited for Derek to continue, but he merely laced his fingers together and rested his hands in his lap. His body language suggested he wasn’t concerned with the potential scenario she had laid out before him. He was both forthcoming and secretive at the same time.

“Let’s put that topic on hold for now, then.” Sylvie decided to approach the subject in a different manner while continuing to study his composed demeanor. “How well did you know Mara?”

Derek lifted one corner of his lip in levity.

“I’d like to say that I knew her well. Such a response would help solidify your judgment, but I won’t lie. I didn’t know Mara on a personal level. We attended the same social functions, and we were cordial with one another.”

“So cordial that you had lunch with her at Persimmon Restaurant...twice?”

“I have a standing reservation at Persimmon Restaurant on the first Friday of every month to enjoy lunch with my younger sister. Everyone in the city knows where to find me then during that time.”

Derek made it sound as if Mara had sought him out, forcing Sylvie to believe that Mara was the one who had offered to sell Derek information instead of him being the solicitor.

“Let me rephrase my earlier response so there is no confusion,” Derek offered,

though not in a way that would rush the interview to its conclusion. He seemed quite comfortable sitting across from her. “Mara and I did not once discuss Miles Therapeutics.”

“Do you make it a habit of giving people money for personal reasons?”

“If I see someone in need? Yes.”

Sylvie tried to read his expression, but she found herself at a loss. Once again, his willingness to answer her questions contrasted sharply with his caginess regarding Mara. There was something about him that Sylvie could only describe as genuine, and she found herself believing he had nothing to do with Mara’s murder.

In this moment, Sylvie wished Brook had been the one conducting this interview. Her ability to read people was uncanny, and Sylvie mentally chastised herself for allowing her revised assessment to cloud her judgment.

“What can you tell me about your meeting with Mara?”

“Nothing that will help you solve her murder, which I’m assuming is the reason you are here. Jordan was arrested, he hired S&E Investigations to clear his name, and you work for said firm,” Derek pointed out with a wry smile. “Listen, I made a promise to Mara that I would not disclose the reason for the loan, and I always keep my promises. It’s as simple as that.”

“Even after her death?”

“Yes, even after her death.” Derek’s refusal to bend his principles during a murder investigation fueled Sylvie’s curiosity.

“Did you pay Mara to steal from her husband’s company?”

“No.” Derek didn’t even flinch.

“Were you having an affair with Mara Miles?”

“No. I would never consider having an affair with a married woman.”

The sincerity in Derek’s voice was unmistakable, and his body language remained open and relaxed. What was Sylvie missing?

“Do you know Stewart Leone?” Sylvie asked, hoping the mention of someone else’s name might induce a reaction.

“I’ve only met the man a handful of times. He seems competent enough.”

Sylvie took note of Derek’s vague response. His answers revealed nothing more than what was necessary. She pressed on, asking about the acquisition both companies were involved with at the moment.

“I dropped out of that race over a month ago. A lot of other competitors followed suit.” For the first time since they sat down, Derek’s voice betrayed a hint of disdain. “Jordan raised the stakes by upping his bid. In my opinion, the medical device company isn’t worth that much, let alone the initial number bounced around.”

It was clear that there was more to this story than met the eye. Since Sylvie had been left waiting in the lobby for so long, she had read Arden’s notes regarding the interview with Stewart Leone. The CFO had disclosed the same opinion to Brook regarding the acquisition.

“It’s my understanding that Jordan Miles was college roommates with Paul Teal.” Sylvie hadn’t been given those specifics by Jordan. She had read the details of the previous partnership in his background check. While Jordan hadn’t struck her as a

man who let his personal feelings dictate his business decisions, there could be something more to the story. “I take it their friendship has something to do with the buyout?”

“I don’t want to talk out of turn. I’m sure Jordan has his reasons, but I can only assume the man feels guilty over leaving his friend with a mountain of debt.”

“What do you mean?”

Sylvie hadn’t seen anything in her research to indicate Paul Teal or his company were on the verge of bankruptcy.

“Rumor has it that Jordan and Paul started the medical device company when they were in college. At the time, Jordan and his father weren’t on the best of terms. In the end, his father sucked him back in after a health scare and gave him a corner desk without having to work his way up the corporate ladder.” Derek shrugged as if decisions like that were made more often than not. “Paul was left with a lot of debt. In case you haven’t figured it out during your investigations, the Miles’ fortune has altered history many times. I’m sure it makes your job harder than it needs to be. Anyway, I believe Jordan is attempting to make amends by offering ten or twenty percent more than the medical device company is worth on paper.”

Nothing in Derek’s responses answered the one question she came here for today. While she had been given a small lead to follow in the form of Paul Teal, it was imperative for them to discern the reason behind the money transfer.

“Do you believe that Jordan murdered his wife?” Sylvie asked as she kept her focus squarely on Derek. He was being afforded the opportunity to eliminate a competitor, yet she didn’t believe he was a man who would stoop to such levels. “Was there anything in your dealings with Mara Miles that would have you believing she feared her husband?”

“No...to both questions.”

Sylvie leaned forward and reached for her purse. She clearly wasn't going to get anything more out of him. She rose from her chair, prompting Derek to do the same.

“I wish you would reconsider your stance on explaining the two deposits,” Sylvie said, trying once more to sway him into divulging the truth. Derek had already pointed out to his attorney on the phone that this wasn't a federal case. It was up to Detective Kitsis to push the issue, and she wasn't sure that would happen given the prosecutor's involvement. “The truth could make all the difference in this investigation, Mr. Haze.”

“Call me Derek, please.” He glanced down at her left hand, which was wrapped around the strap of her purse. It wasn't until he asked her a question that she realized he had been searching for a wedding ring. “Would you care to join me for dinner?”

Sylvie was so caught off guard by the sudden invitation that she lost her voice for a moment. Her life had been turned upside down since the attack. She had come so close to dying, and that near-death experience had cemented how imperative it was to tend to the relationships in her life.

She had also discovered her belief in fate. Otherwise, why would she have been given the opportunity to work with people she considered her family? Fate had also given her a best friend to stand beside her through every mistake and challenge thrown her way. Bit would have been the first to not-so-subtly nudge her into saying yes to Derek's invitation.

“Unlike you, Mr. Haze, I'm going to be upfront and honest—the last person I trusted stabbed me in the abdomen and left me for dead.” Sylvie hated that she now kept herself protected by alienating herself from others, and she laid that blame solely at Jacob Walsh's feet. Still, she found that she wanted very much to accept Derek's

offer. “I’m investigating the death of Mara Miles, whose offshore bank account received two wire transfers from one of your shell companies. I’m sure you can understand my hesitation. Should you change your mind and want to share the reasons for those transfers, I would gladly reconsider your dinner invitation. Have a good day, Mr. Haze.”

Derek’s voice reached her before she could make it to the door.

“Someone once said that trust is the antidote to fear,” Derek quoted as she wrapped her fingers around the knob. She mulled over his words as she slowly opened the door. “You know where to find me, Miss Deering.”

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter Eleven

Brooklyn Sloane January 2025 Thursday — 11:23 pm

The old-fashioned whiteboard was a grim mural of Jacob Walsh's violent history. Photos of his victims before their fatal attacks stared back at Brook with lifeless eyes.

Afterward?

Their flesh had been mangled to the point of being unrecognizable.

Even though all the information on the whiteboard had been uploaded into the firm's software, Brook couldn't bring herself to dismantle the material she had spent years cultivating. A more in-depth duplication of the murder board was hanging on her dining room wall. She couldn't bring herself to remove those items, either. Having the information in both locations allowed her to study the chronological markers at her leisure, not that doing so tonight was producing anything of relevance.

Sylvie must have added Mitch Norona to the mix earlier this week. The man's picture was off to the side with two question marks next to it—why would the defense attorney take Jacob's case, and how could Jacob afford such a high-profile firm?

Brook leaned against the doorframe of the small conference room. As was her usual routine, she scanned each detail from 1996 to the present. Nothing stood out that could explain Norona's role in Jacob's trial.

The distant sound of the front entrance buzzer pulled her concentration away from the



timeline, and she turned her head just as Theo made his way around the corner of the hallway. He carried a bottle of cheap Moscato wine—her favorite—purchased at the convenience store on the corner. She lifted the corner of her lip in appreciation.

“Thought you could use some of your favorite bubbly,” Theo declared as he brushed past her. He continued to make his way to the kitchen, though he stopped just shy of the threshold. “Is that cat hair all over your pants?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Brook ignored his laugh. “It’s probably just lint from my coat.”

“Uh-huh,” Theo muttered as he disappeared from view, clearly not believing her little white lie in the least. He raised his voice so she could still hear him. “Everyone else go home?”

“Hours ago,” Brook called out as she stepped forward and made her way to the conference room table. She pulled out one of the chairs and took a seat. “Bit left his programs running, so if any hits are made, he’ll be notified at home.”

Brook hadn’t bothered to turn on the overhead fluorescent lights. The recessed lighting cast a softer glow on the murder board, sparing her eyes from the harsh glare. Despite the gentler illumination, Mitch Norona's picture still managed to elicit a nauseated reaction from her.

She swallowed her distaste. Just the thought of her brother and Norona together discussing his case made her sick, yet Norona had never been to the federal prison. Not even to visit another prisoner.

So, what was the relationship between the two of them?

Theo reappeared, a glass of sparkling wine in one hand and a bottle of beer in the

other. He handed the wine to Brook, which she seized gratefully. She immediately took a sip of the carbonated beverage, allowing the sweet flavor to roll over her tongue. Its soothing taste was only a temporary reprieve from the stress of the week's events.

"Thanks," Brook murmured before eyeing him with a sideways glance. "Why aren't you with Mia tonight?"

"Mia has some early morning appointments." Theo uncapped his beer, tossing the cap onto the table. "She was wondering the other day if you are ever going to make an appointment."

"Maybe," Brook replied evasively as she took another sip of her wine. She only ever visited the doctor's office when she was deathly sick. Unless she could be convinced otherwise, a chiropractor was no different, which was why she had never followed through with scheduling an appointment. "By the way, you can tell Graham that I'm holding up just fine."

Theo paused in lifting his bottle before letting out a laugh that reverberated through the small room. He had gotten caught, but he didn't seem to care.

"You think I don't know Graham asked you to keep an eye on me while he's away?"

"I'd ask how you knew, but the entire team has given up that quest."

Brook's gaze lingered on Jacob's picture front and center. Her brother had molded her into who she was now, and nothing she could say or do could ever take away that credit. Again, another round of nausea made itself known.

After a few minutes, the room fell into a comfortable silence as her queasiness waned into oblivion. The tension in her shoulders also began to ease as she sipped

her wine. She eventually turned her thoughts to the case at hand.

“Bit has been searching for the individual whose initials are AM.” Brook used the point of her right heel to turn her chair ever so slightly so she was facing Theo. “He has been through every contact in Mara's phone, every employee who works for Miles Therapeutics, and every social media profile that has ever engaged with her. So far, he has managed to get two hits.”

“Viable hits?” Theo asked, leaning back in his chair.

“Unfortunately, no. One is a woman who owns a catering firm, and the other is an older man on the verge of retirement who currently working for Miles Therapeutics. Arden has already confirmed that neither of them had spoken to Mara in the days, let alone months, leading up to her death.”

“I know that we’re going over the timeline and the profile in tomorrow morning’s briefing, but it seems pretty straightforward for the prosecutor—Mara received payments from Jordan’s competitor, allegedly turned off their home security system to search her husband’s office in return, and she got caught.” Theo took a swig of his beer. “Am I missing anything?”

“I was the one who told Kitsis about the offshore bank account in Mara’s name,” Brook revealed.

“The department’s forensics accountant would have figured it out sooner or later.” Theo rested the bottle of beer on the padded arm of his chair. “The prosecutor’s case is shaping up to be a slam dunk despite Vaughn Queller’s alleged visit the night in question.”

“I figured,” Brook muttered as she tapped her worry ring against the stem of her wine glass. “I should be getting a call from Barry Ackles any minute. He left me a few

messages that I have yet to return. Apparently, there is a court date set for Monday. He was hoping we would find evidence that pointed away from Jordan before then. Mara's notation about her brother is unlikely to move the needle."

Stella Bennett's picture on the murder board caught Brook's attention. The twelve-year-old girl was a reminder that most of the answers lie with the first victim.

"We need to throw out the corporate espionage angle."

"That's a large part of this investigation," Theo countered skeptically before following her line of sight. "First victim."

"Only victim, in this case. Everything about the crime scene feels...premeditated. It's as if someone wanted Mara's life to unravel."

Brook enjoyed her wine while thinking over the new angle.

"We discovered Jordan's affair with Claudia almost immediately," Brook said aloud as she went through the progress of their investigation. "Right after that, we were basically handed the Derek Haze connection on a silver platter. We've been given a road map by someone, and the police have blindly followed...same with us, which is why we need to take a step back."

"Focus on the victim and not the noise."

"Exactly. I have a rough profile, but the gender could go either way. I'm not confident in my assessment yet." Brook paused for a moment, mulling over the facts of the case. "You're right about the prosecutor having everything tied up in a bow, especially since Jordan walked in minutes after his wife placed the 911 call."

"Upon first glance, the handwriting in Mara's planner to shut off the alarm appears to

be hers. Doesn't mean someone else didn't mimic her handwriting."

Brook studied Stella's freckled features in the picture while she nursed her wine. The police had zeroed in on the girl's uncle after her disappearance, giving no thought to anyone else, let alone an eleven-year-old boy in a nearby summer camp.

"Where are we on locating Vaughn Queller?"

"ATM footage proves Queller was in Bethesda hours before Mara was killed, but he hasn't used his card since. He also hasn't shown up for work, and he hasn't been back to his apartment. The landlord has been keeping an eye on the place for us," Theo said before taking a swig of his beer. "Arden has a list of some drug dens where Queller could be holed up, so I was thinking of hitting them tomorrow morning after our meeting."

"You don't need to attend the briefing," Brook advised, deciding it was in their best interests to locate Queller sooner rather than later. "As I said earlier, I'm not focusing on the unsub's gender at this time. The murder was clearly premeditated, indicating that our killer is methodical and patient. The manner in which the victim was killed suggests someone who felt betrayed...not just by Mara, but also by Jordan. We're searching for someone close to them with access to their lives, schedules, and home."

"You might as well point a neon arrow directly at Claudia Hart."

"Speaking of which, before you start searching for Queller, would you verify Claudia's alibi? She left the penthouse around six o'clock on Sunday night to visit her mother, even though she attempted to cover for Jordan."

"How so?"

"Claudia tried to claim that she was with Jordan until seven, attempting to give him

an alibi for when the estate's security system was shut off."

"Foolish move on her part."

"Jordan countered her claim almost immediately. He didn't want her covering for him."

"I'll stop by the mother's house tomorrow morning then."

"I've spoken to Alex DeSilva about the possibility of Claudia's involvement." Brook took time to drain the rest of the contents in her wineglass. "Since he has a team surveilling Jordan from afar, Alex is also having them keep tabs on her. I didn't get the sense that she resented Jordan in any way the other night, but that doesn't mean she isn't good at concealing her emotions. In the meantime, Bit is cultivating a list of everyone who has been at the estate in the past two to three months."

Brook noticed Theo's gaze drifting to Mitch Norona's picture on the murder board.

"You know, I thought Jacob was standing at the defense table when I walked into the courtroom on Monday morning," Brook divulged, even though she had known ahead of time that Jacob hadn't been transferred from federal prison to the courthouse. Still, the way Norona's brown hair curled at the ends was eerily similar to that of her brother's hair. "I don't like it, Theo. I can feel Jacob moving the pieces around on the board. A part of me is expecting him to use the trial as a diversion for some type of escape plan, yet he continues to remain behind in his cell."

"Bit thinks there could be a connection through Norona's earlier law years when he only dealt with finance," Theo said before pulling his gaze from the lawyer's photograph. "Is there a way to convince the federal prosecutor to look into Norona's financial accounts?"

“Doubtful. No federal judge would sign off on that type of warrant without good cause. A hunch isn’t good enough.”

Theo raised his beer bottle and tilted it in the direction of Bit’s office. It was Theo’s way of suggesting that Bit blur the lines of the law. She hated that she had been the one to teach him—and Sylvie—that it was sometimes necessary to rationalize one’s choices rather than follow the letter of the law.

Bit, on the other hand, viewed life differently.

He had performed and executed tasks in Brook’s effort to track Jacob without hesitation. Sometimes, it took stepping outside the lines of justice to bring down the monsters.

Unfortunately, every time a line was blurred or crossed, they ran the risk of corrupting the case against the offender. Along with such risk, there was always a possibility other law enforcement agencies would eventually discover their misdeeds. Bit might have all the talent in the world, but no one was perfect.

“Stop. I know that look,” Theo said as he lifted his boot off the ground and nudged her chair. “I wouldn’t change a thing, you know. I’ve never been happier in my life. I have the best job in the world, I’m dating the woman of my dreams, and I have a best friend who would help me hide a body.”

Brook couldn’t help but laugh. Theo was referring to a conversation between Bit and Sylvie, where the two of them had claimed that true friends didn’t ask questions—they just brought a shovel. It was true that Brook considered Theo her best friend, but laughing and interacting the way they were tonight did not come naturally to her. She chalked it up to the wine, but Theo would undoubtedly take her reaction as a win.

“I’ve done my job, so I’m heading home. I’m leaving the Jeep in the parking garage, though. I’m going to walk. Care to join me?”

Since the two of them lived in the same condo building, they walked the short distance most of the time. Seeing as they didn’t have all the facts surrounding Mitch Norona, it didn’t surprise her that Graham had asked Theo to keep additional tabs on her welfare.

“I’ve got a lot more work to do,” Brook said quietly as she tore her gaze away from Norona’s picture. “You can text Graham that I’m fine.”

“Don’t be mad at him, Brook. He cares for you.”

“He loves me.” Brook glanced down at her empty glass, wishing Theo had brought the bottle with him into the conference room. “I can see it in the way he looks at me. Feel it in his touch. And what scares me most? I can’t say those words back to him, Theo. I’m terrified that if I say them aloud...Jacob will find a way to destroy my life completely.”



### Chapter Twelve

Theo Neville January 2025 Friday — 7:24 am

Theo's breath clouded in the frigid air as he stepped out of his Jeep in front of Janet Hart's modest two-story home. The chill hit his exposed skin, and he quickly adjusted the Burberry scarf that Mia had given him for Christmas. As he pressed the key fob to lock the doors, the sound of the garage door opening caught his attention.

Theo's boots crunched on a few patches of packed snow as he made his way up the driveway. It was relatively early in the morning, and a peaceful silence blanketed the suburban street. He assumed most of the homeowners had already left for work, and it appeared as if he was just in time to ask Janet Hart some questions before she drove to her job.

As Theo approached, Claudia's mother emerged from the shadows as the garage door finally came to a stop on the tracks above. She had already swung open the driver's side door of a modest sedan parked inside the garage. He called out to her so that his presence wouldn't take her by surprise.

"Ms. Hart?" Theo had already secured his credentials and held them up for her inspection. "I'm Theo Neville with S&E Investigations. We're working on the Mara Miles' investigation alongside the Montgomery County Police Department. I was hoping you had a few minutes to answer some of my questions."

As Theo spoke, he observed Janet's initial reaction to his sudden appearance. He detected some slight apprehension in her expression, and he wasn't surprised when

she immediately went on the defensive.

“My daughter had nothing to do with that woman’s murder.” Janet had been holding her purse, but she set it on the driver’s seat before crossing her arms to maintain some body heat. “I don’t know what Jordan Miles is telling you or the police, but Claudia would never hurt another human being.”

“No one made such a claim, Ms. Hart,” Theo assured her, remaining near the back of the vehicle. He was close enough to observe her body language while maintaining enough distance for her comfort level. Unfortunately, he was also still in direct line of the cold wind. “We’re just following up on Claudia’s statement. She mentioned that she visited you on Sunday night. Do you recall what time she arrived here?”

Theo figured Claudia had already phoned her mother. Still, he kept the details vague, just in case Janet replied with different answers. It was natural that a protective instinct would surface. Maybe his perspective on such relationships was the reason he was so surprised by her burst of cynical laughter.

“I knew it was only a matter of time before Claudia got herself into trouble for that man.” Janet’s eyes narrowed, clearly weighing whether she should divulge her opinion of her daughter’s choices. She chose to err on the side of caution. “Yes, Claudia was here on Sunday evening. Is there anything else?”

A frigid gust of wind hit Theo's face, and he once again adjusted his scarf.

“What time did your daughter arrive, Ms. Hart?”

“Around six thirty or so,” Janet revealed as she lifted a hand and waved her fingers toward the door that most likely led to her kitchen. “I warmed her up some lasagna for dinner since she hadn’t eaten yet, and the clock on the microwave read six-forty-one. She was probably here for ten minutes before walking into the kitchen, though.

Is there anything else? I don't want to be late for work."

Theo had performed a quick background check on Janet Hart. She was a nurse at a clinic in Bethesda, and the scrubs underneath her winter jacket were additional proof that she was telling the truth about her destination.

"Do you recall what time your daughter left?"

"Around ten o'clock."

"Ms. Hart," Theo began with a softened tone, aware that he was treading on delicate ground. "It seems you're not fond of your daughter's boss. Would you mind telling me more about him? I give you my word that what you share with me won't get back to either of them."

Janet hesitated before responding with a slow nod of consent.

"I should preface something first—I never thought I would see the day when my own daughter would be involved with a married man." Janet tore her gaze from Theo before scanning the neighborhood, almost certainly believing that her neighbors would judge her for Claudia's choices. The pain of Janet's disappointment was evident. "I didn't raise her like that. If I had known that she would fall in love with that man, I never would have allowed Stewart to recommend her for the position."

"Stewart," Theo reiterated cautiously as he stepped forward to escape the biting cold. "As in...Stewart Leone, the CFO of Miles Therapeutics."

"Yes." Janet tilted her head in confusion. It was obvious she thought Theo had already been informed of such a connection. "Stewart was a good friend of my husband, Rich. Stewart has kept in touch, and when he heard that Claudia was looking for a job, he encouraged her to submit her resume."

The sound of a door opening had both Theo and Janet glancing toward the right side of the garage. He could only assume the entrance led to a kitchen.

“Aunt Janet, is everything alright?”

Theo wouldn't have needed to hear the woman speak to know that she was related to Janet Hart. The two had the same facial features, as well as the same thin lips.

“Yes. Everything is fine,” Janet replied without making introductions. “Go on back inside where it's warm. Oh, and don't forget to lock up before your shift.”

Janet waited until the door closed before she turned her attention back toward Theo. She crossed her arms as best she could given the thickness of her jacket.

“My niece, Andrea. The pipes in her house froze yesterday, and she needed a place to stay until her landlord could get someone out to fix the plumbing.” Janet nodded toward Theo for him to continue. “I really am running late. Is there anything else that I can help you with?”

“When was the last time you spoke with Mr. Leone?”

“I guess it was sometime last year. Like I said, he's kept in touch on and off since my husband's death, but it's not like we run in the same circles.” Janet seemed to hug herself a little tighter as memories from another life began to overwhelm her. “My husband's life insurance policy paid for this house. It gave Claudia a chance to pursue a business degree, and we didn't see the harm in her taking Stewart up on his offer. If I had known about the horrible choices that she—.”

Janet cut off her sentence, as if realizing she was revealing too much. She reached into the pocket of her jacket. Pulling out her car keys, she stared at them for a moment.

“Mr. Neville, is it?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“A mother only wants for her daughter to be happy.” Janet cleared her throat before meeting his gaze. “Claudia believes her happiness lies with Jordan Miles. Whether I agree with her or not isn’t in question. It’s her innocence, and I know with all my heart that my daughter couldn’t hurt another human being. Besides, she was here with me on Sunday night.”

“I appreciate your honesty, Ms. Hart.” Theo stepped back, his breath visible with every word. He would have followed up with more questions regarding Stewart Leone, but he was afraid that she would reach out to Claudia. There was a reason that Claudia and Stewart had kept their connection a secret, and Theo was beginning to suspect that even Jordan Miles had no knowledge of such a link. “I won’t keep you any longer. Have a nice day, ma’am.”

Theo turned as the cold wind rustled the branches of the bare trees in the front yard. He would reach out to Brook immediately, who would then follow up on the lead with Stewart Leone and Claudia Hart. Was there a chance that the two of them were in on the murder? Leone claimed to have been home alone on the night in question, whereas Claudia used her mother as an alibi.

Had Stewart convinced Mara that he needed to speak with her that night? Had she shut down the security system to prevent her husband from having knowledge of said meeting? There were too many questions without answers, but two individuals—Claudia Hart and Stewart Leone—were available to give them.

Theo slid behind the steering wheel, closing the door before starting the engine. While the air from the vents had somewhat cooled, there was enough warmth blowing through the slats to take the edge off the bone-chilling cold. He instructed his

Bluetooth system to call Brook, who then picked up on the first ring.

“Janet Hart just admitted to the fact that Stewart Leone is an old family friend of the family.” Theo shifted the gear into drive. He pulled away from the curb, glancing toward Janet Hart’s garage. Her brake lights gave off a bright red hue as she began to back out of the small driveway. He wasn’t the only one on the phone. “Leone encouraged Claudia to submit her resume for the position as Jordan Miles’ assistant. Why keep that from us? Better yet, why keep the truth from Jordan?”

### Chapter Thirteen

Bobby “Bit” Nowacki January 2025 Friday — 9:04 am

“Tell your mom that I’ll be ready at five o’clock in the morning on Sunday,” Bit advised as he rolled back his chair. He tapped his earbud to turn up the volume. “Not that I get why people open estate sales that early to the public. Weekends are for sleeping in, Zoey.”

“Exactly. I don’t understand why we can’t skip this weekend. We’ve gone to an estate sale two weeks in a row,” Zoey pointed out over the faint sound of a chime. He recognized the peal from her microwave. “I say we skip this one and sleep in until noon. My mom won’t mind, Bit.”

Up until last summer, Bit had never been to a garage sale. He had inadvertently caused Zoey’s mother to believe he was fond of them, and he had found himself unable to confess the truth. The confusion inevitably ended up with him tagging along with Mrs. Collins one weekend to an estate sale in Spring Valley. The outing turned out to be a turning point for him as he discovered a shiny, brand-new hobby.

While the more productive finds occurred during the summer, Mrs. Collins had a talent for discovering the most remote sales even during the dead of winter.

“We’ll just take some energy drinks with us,” Bit said, unable to pass up an estate sale that might have some vintage computer equipment. “We’ll even stop in at the bakery to grab some chocolate-glazed donuts on the way.”

“Double chocolate-glazed, and you have yourself a deal.”

“Done and done.”

As he continued speaking to Zoey, Bit settled in behind one of the monitors and typed a message for Brook. He had discovered something of interest that she would want to know about right away, and he was relatively certain that she was still in her office.

After he tapped the enter key, he rolled back to the monitor with the video footage of the Persimmon Restaurant. He rewound the recording until he made it to where he could simply press play for Brook. The team had mentioned quite often that his space resembled a NASA station with all the screens, cables, and blinking lights. While his area might come across as unorganized to others, everything had its place. He tried his best to make things easier for them.

“...should get to work. I’m due to check in soon.”

Zoey worked as a customer service representative for a major retailer. The position afforded her the ability to work from home, so she often wore sweats and a t-shirt. He smiled, picturing her with tousled hair and her big fluffy slippers.

“Call me at lunchtime.”

Bit tapped his earbud to end the call as Brook entered his office. She held the mug he had given her for Christmas in her left hand while typing something on her cell phone with her right. When she was done, she slipped her phone into a small, square pocket on the front right side of her black suit jacket.

“Did I hear you say you’re going to another estate sale?”

“That you did, Boss.” Bit closed his fingers around the mouse, but he didn’t click the



button just yet. “Last week, I discovered one of the first Apple computers in a box labeled 'junk'. That baby was an Apple-1, hand-built by the Woz himself, Steve Wozniak. Only 200 were ever made, and even fewer have survived. At auction, it could easily fetch over three hundred thousand dollars.”

“Mrs. Collins is turning you into a genuine tech archaeologist. Pretty soon, you’ll be handing in your resignation because you discovered some rare computer chip that is valued at ten million dollars.”

“I’d never leave you, Boss.” Bit meant every word, too. The only reason his life had become so grounded in recent years was her unwavering support of his abilities. She had created an environment—not just for him, but the entire team—where they could all be themselves. “But since we are on the topic of treasure, I might have found something on the victim.”

“Go on,” Brook encouraged, her gaze locked onto the screen that came to life.

“Well, you know that Kitsis issued a warrant for the restaurant on the two dates in question when Mara supposedly met up with Derek Haze. Turns out, Derek wasn't lying about having a standard lunch date with his sister.”

The first part of the video played, allowing them to observe Derek and his sister sitting at a table. Before too long, she stood and leaned down to kiss his cheek. After Derek’s sister exited the restaurant, a waitress appeared with the check holder and presented it to Derek.

One of the things Bit admired about Brook was her patience. True to her nature, she never said a word or asked a question regarding the footage as it played out. She continued to observe while Bit fast-forwarded to the interesting part of the film.

Derek was witnessed following in his sister’s footsteps when it was obvious from his

body language that someone had caught his attention. His hesitation was brief, and he eventually made his way over to a table where a woman was seated by herself.

The woman in question was Mara Miles.

After speaking with her for a short time, Derek pulled out the chair next to her and joined her at the table. After a couple of minutes, when it appeared that Mara did most of the talking, Derek could be seen taking an unused napkin from a nearby table and handing it to her.

“It looks like Mara is crying,” Bit observed, not wanting Brook to miss the most important part. “Derek Haze appears to be comforting her, and this lasts for approximately sixteen minutes. Then? Haze pats the back of Mara’s hand before leaving the restaurant.”

“There is only one setting at Mara’s table,” Brook noted with interest. “I take it she dined alone?”

“Yes.” Bit pulled up the second footage obtained from the warrant. This time, Derek excused himself in the middle of his lunch date with his sister to stroll over to Mara. They spoke for under two minutes before he rejoined his sister. “Now comes the curious part. Watch this.”

Bit quickly and efficiently switched to the appropriate camera view of a small hallway near the restrooms. Once the footage began to play, it became very clear that Mara was speaking with one of the waitresses. The two didn't seem to be arguing so much as engaging in a serious conversation. They spoke for just under three minutes before Mara walked into the restroom. As for the waitress, she went back to work without hesitation.

“It’s as if Mara knows the waitress personally.”

“That’s the conclusion that I came to, as well,” Bit said, rolling his chair to another monitor. Brook followed, her heels softly clicking on the long clear mat specifically designed for his office. With the tap of a few keys, he had the woman’s information on display. “The waitress’s name is Nora Miske. She went to the same high school as Mara, but two grades lower. That puts her in Vaughn Queller's class.”

“Excellent work, Bit,” Brook praised, tilting her head as if something had just occurred to her. “Would you please comb through the security footage of the Miles’ estate? I want to know if Nora Miske has ever been to the residence.”

“I’ve been working backward on that, capturing an image of every single person who drove through the gates over the course of the last twelve months. It took me a couple of hours to write the program, but we should have the results by the end of the day.”

“I thought the footage was erased after three months.”

Bit flashed her a smile, not bothering to go into detail about the security system that the Miles had chosen for their home. While the security company was one of the best, their software system could use a little tweaking here and there.

Bit had already reached out to the owner.

“Don’t ever leave us, Bit,” Brook said before turning to leave. “Sylvie left the office to meet up with Theo. They’ll spend the rest of the day canvassing the drug dens around both cities. I’ll take a drive to speak with Nora Miske. Maybe there was something to that conversation. If we’re lucky, Nora even knows the identity of AM.”

“What about the Steward Leone and Claudia Hart connection?”

“I don’t want to speak with Claudia while she is with Jordan. I’ll wait until later this evening to carry out that conversation. Barry Ackles has a meeting with Jordan at the

penthouse, so I should be able to swing by Claudia's apartment during that time."

"Speaking of Claudia, her cousin's name is Andrea Arlene Crowe. Twenty-six years old, a nurse, and the story about the frozen pipes in her apartment building is true."

"So, no connection with the initials AM," Brook murmured in disappointment. "Okay. Thanks, Bit. Keep me posted with anything new throughout the day"

He debated on waiting to share what he had discovered about Mitch Norona and Jacob, but there was never a good time to bring Brook's brother up in a discussion.

"Boss?" Bit's voice stopped her in her tracks. "There's something else I want to run by you. It's about Mitch Norona."

Brook slowly turned, her gaze somewhat cautious as she waited for him to continue.

"Norona went on an ice fishing expedition in Alaska in the month of February, the same year he switched from finance to criminal law. He went again the following year, same month, but then never returned to the state."

There was no need to highlight the significance of the timeline.

"Jacob was quiet during those winter months back then." Brook cleared her throat, as if trying to eliminate the blame she shouldered for her brother's sin. "Before Jacob turned himself into FBI headquarters, there were many winters where I couldn't pinpoint his location."

"Which brings us back to how Jacob has managed to financially survive all these years."

Bit rolled his chair over to a separate laptop, away from his usual setup. He had gone

to great lengths to keep any potentially questionable activities away from S&E Investigations. He had even implemented measures to destroy the hard drive, if necessary.

He would always protect the company from any potential backlash due to his actions.

“You said that Jacob worked at a garage in his late teens. That he knows engines like the back of his hand. We assumed he was taking part-time gigs that paid cash in out-of-the-way towns. But we also agreed the amount of money needed for his lifestyle when he's actively killing isn't chump change. And Jacob doesn't strike me as someone who would live on the streets.”

“No,” Brook murmured softly as she came to stand behind him. “No, he doesn't.”

Bit already had several occupations displayed on the screen. He pointed toward the area shown on Norona's social media accounts.

“Norona was ice fishing in this area—twice. I have the name of the travel agent and fishing tour guide company that he used at the time. The travel agent is now out of business, but the fishing tour guide company is still operating in and around the region. Is there a possibility that you can get the federal prosecutor to put in for a warrant on Norona's finances? That would help me with a timeline of the man's vacation. If we're right about Norona meeting Jacob somewhere in Alaska, we might be able to pinpoint where Jacob worked when he wasn't...you know.”

Brook was quiet for longer than usual, prompting Bit to glance over his shoulder. Her expression was closed off, but that wasn't uncharacteristic of her. There had been several times that he had crossed lines for her, and he wouldn't hesitate to do so again. Only she had been very cautious in the past year about when and for what cause.

“No federal judge is going to sign off on a warrant of that magnitude, Bit,” Brook said in a measured tone that had him leaning back against his chair. Theo had pretty much said the same thing to Bit over the phone, which tied his hands. There was something in Brook’s expression that gave him hope she would be open to a workaround, and he didn’t want there to be any miscommunication between them. “I’m sure there’s enough information online for you to piece together a timeline. Right?”

Bit understood the assignment—any damning connection that he discovered between Norona and Jacob would be kept in-house. The manner in which he uncovered such information was better left out of the conversation.

### Chapter Fourteen

Brooklyn Sloane January 2025 Friday — 2:19 pm

Brook stepped into the dim, poorly lit hallway of Nora Miske's apartment building. The stale odor of mildew and cigarette smoke hung densely in the air as the cracked plaster on the walls seemed to mirror the fractured lives of its inhabitants. Each step on the worn carpet was muffled, except for the areas where it had been damaged down to the bare floor. A sense of desolation lingered in the air, despite the distant wails of a baby from behind one of the closed doors.

Approaching apartment 3B, Brook made the conscious decision to unfasten the button of her dress coat. She wanted the ability to reach her firearm if necessary. After three rapid knocks, she reached into the side pocket of her purse to retrieve her credentials.

While she waited for Nora to open the door, she took the time to note the exits. There was a stairwell at the end of the hallway, while the elevator bank was to her left. The white paint on the walls had faded, peeled, and been marred by scuff marks. The shoddy interior reminded her of this morning's conversation with Bit.

Jacob had a knack for blending into any environment. Still, she never would have believed he had chosen the state of Alaska. It was for that very reason she believed Bit's theory regarding the connection between Jacob and Norona. How many times had Jacob done the opposite of what she had expected? It had taken her many, many years to get to his level of intelligence. She needed to stay there if she was going to keep him behind bars.

Nora's lack of response at the door forced Brook to snap out of her reverie and return to the present. Bit had provided her with the make and model of Nora's vehicle, which just so happened to be conveniently parked out front.

Brook knocked again, firmer and louder this time around.

"Coming!" Nora's voice filtered through the barrier, tinged with annoyance.

The door finally cracked open. Nora Miske's auburn hair hung loose and tangled around her face. The color was faded, and the thin waves were damaged from lack of care. Such a feature hadn't been noticeable on the security footage since she had the strands secured at the base of her neck for her shift. Her green eyes were bloodshot, but Brook couldn't determine yet if the irritation was from stress, lack of sleep, or drugs.

"You have the wrong apartment."

Nora went to close the door, but Brook immediately reached out and placed her palm on the rough surface. The woman blinked in shock before narrowing her eyes.

"Like I said, lady, you have the wrong apartment," Nora replied with a sneer after raking her gaze over Brook's apparel. "Most likely, the wrong building."

"Nora, my name is Brooklyn Sloane." She flipped open her credentials, holding them up for the woman. "I'm with S&E Investigations, and we're working alongside the Montgomery County Police Department on the investigation into Mara Miles' death."

Nora stared at the identification, and it was apparent she was weighing her odds on the benefit of speaking with Brook. To add incentive, she offered up another reason for her visit.



“I’m also hoping you can help me locate Vaughn Queller. We would like to notify him of his sister’s death, and we have reason to believe that you might be able to provide us with some information on his whereabouts.”

“I was sorry to hear about Mara,” Nora said rather begrudgingly as she glanced over her shoulder before widening the door. “I guess you can come in for a second. The place is a mess, though.”

Brook didn’t comment on the statement as she crossed the threshold. The air inside the apartment wasn’t just tinged with cigarette smoke. The sour odor of weed was predominant, masking the rancid smell of days-old Chinese food littered across the coffee table. To say the place was unkempt was an understatement. Besides the numerous take-out containers, used chopsticks, and empty beer bottles, crumpled clothes were strewn across the furniture.

It didn’t take long for Brook to confirm her suspicions as to why Nora’s wrinkled shirt hung from her thin frame. Drug paraphernalia was among the mess, including a tarnished metal spoon and several lighters.

“I’m sure Vaughn has already heard what happened to his sister,” Nora said as she closed the door. “It’s not like it hasn’t been all over the news.”

“Have you seen Mr. Queller this past week?”

“No.”

The direct response came a little too quickly.

Nora fidgeted with her hands before walking toward the small kitchen. The apartment had an open layout, with the kitchen to the right. There were two closed doors on the opposite side, presumably the bedroom and bathroom.

“Is that the answer you gave Mara when you spoke to her a few weeks ago?” Brook’s question had certainly garnered Nora’s attention, just as intended. By this time, she was on the other side of the small counter. She began to pick up some dirty dishes and place them in the sink. “Miss Miske, we have you on security footage at the Persimmon Restaurant engaging in a conversation with the victim. Is there another reason besides Vaughn that the two of you spoke outside the restroom? Are the two of you close friends?”

Brook was uncomfortable with keeping her back to the other half of the apartment. She crossed to the other side of the living room and turned around, facing the front door. The location allowed her to keep an eye on the other rooms inside the apartment while speaking with Nora.

“Look around you, Agent Sloane.” Nora’s laugh was anything but humorous. “Mara and I didn’t hang out in the same social circles.”

Nora sighed audibly as if Brook couldn’t take a hint.

“You’re right. Mara wanted to know if I’d been hanging out with Vaughn. I told her that I hadn’t seen him for a while.” Nora snagged another dirty glass from the counter. “Like I said, I was sorry to hear that she died, but I’m sure Vaughn has already seen the headlines splashed all over the news. He’ll turn up sooner or later.”

“While the Montgomery County Police Department arrested Jordan Miles, there are some details of the investigation that haven’t been released to the public.” Brook made a calculated decision to push the situation. “I believe that Mr. Queller could be in serious trouble, Nora.”

The woman slowly turned to face the opposite counter, carefully placing the glass in the sink. She didn’t seem inclined to continue the discussion or address Brook’s view of Vaughn Queller’s predicament.

“Are you close with Mara’s brother, Nora?”

“I’ve known Vaughn a long time. We went to school together.” Nora finally turned around and tilted her chin somewhat defiantly. “I wish I could help you, Agent, but I don’t know where he is.”

Brook had surveyed the evidence left littered around the apartment enough to be certain that Nora was lying through her stained teeth. The amount of take-out food wasn’t for one person, and some of the clothes lying around belonged to a man. Considering her guest’s wallet had been left tucked into the cushion of the couch, it was a safe bet he was still inside the apartment.

“Vaughn?” Brook raised her voice so that it would carry through the door of the bedroom while keeping Nora in sight. “Vaughn, I suggest you come out of the bedroom and speak with me. I really don’t want to make this visit into something more than it needs to be.”

Such a declaration was a complete exaggeration, but Brook’s warning had done the trick. The slight click of the bedroom door opening had Brook casually pulling back the right portion of her coat. Her suit jacket wasn’t fastened, either, giving her the ability to draw her weapon without any interference.

A moment passed, heavy with silence and tension, before the bedroom door opened completely. Vaughn slowly emerged, his disheveled appearance speaking volumes about his current state. His sharp features were marred by dark circles under his eyes, and it was obvious that he hadn’t shaved in weeks. He seemed strung out, and Brook quickly surmised that cocaine was the likely culprit behind his erratic demeanor.

“Did you rat me out?” Vaughn accused Nora with a rather hoarse voice.

“Of course not!” Nora shot back with indignation. She quickly made her way around

the counter. “And don’t you dare blame me for this situation, V. I told you to go home, but you wouldn’t listen.”

Brook studied the pair, and she got the sense that they were a couple.

“Vaughn, Nora didn’t rat you out,” Brook confirmed, her voice cool and measured. “But when every take-out container has two servings, it’s hard not to notice that she hasn’t been eating alone. There’s also white powder left on the coffee table—Nora doesn’t dabble in cocaine.”

“How did you...”

Brook wasn’t going to waste time explaining the physical signs of an addict. Nora was one herself, but hers was clearly everything else besides nose candy. Her gaunt figure and slightly decaying teeth were the outward markers of her struggle with substance abuse. It was only a matter of time before she was fired from her job at the restaurant.

The air in the room grew thick with unspoken anticipation as Vaughn regarded Brook warily, his breaths in shallow, rapid gasps. Brook would have to tread carefully if she were to obtain any answers from either of them. He finally took a defiant step forward, his jaw set and eyes narrowing.

“I didn’t hurt my sister.”

“I never said you did,” Brook countered gently, monitoring Nora as she closed the distance to stand beside him. “If you were listening in on our conversation, you already know that I believe you might be in trouble.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Your sister’s murder was premeditated.” Brook didn’t wait for Vaughn or Nora to react to the statement. She had succeeded in forcing them off balance, and such a position meant she might finally learn something. “An ATM puts you within twenty minutes of Mara’s home on the day in question. Were you at the estate that night?”

“No.” Vaughn’s reply was spit out in hurt and anger. He pressed both hands against his eyes, as if willing himself not to cry. She wasn’t sure when he had taken his last hit of cocaine, but his emotional state was evident. “No. I told Mara a few weeks ago that I needed money. My hours were cut back at work, and I couldn’t make this month’s rent. She...”

Something snapped inside Vaughn, and he made his way to the couch. He didn’t even take the time to move the discarded clothes. He began to sob with heavy heaves that wracked his body. Brook gave him time to collect himself before addressing the deal between him and his sister.

“You requested—though some would consider it blackmail—fifty thousand dollars from your sister in exchange for remaining far from the life she had created with Jordan in Bethesda.” Brook caught the slight stillness in Nora’s movements as she came to stand beside the arm of the couch. “Your sister wouldn’t go above ten thousand.”

“I already told you that I was short on money,” Vaughn said as he wiped away his tears. “My sister...she always took care of me.”

“A sister who loved her brother wouldn’t ban him from her life, V.” Nora lifted the corner of her lip in disdain. “Mara’s husband was a billionaire. That is generational money. She—”

“Mara was my sister,” Vaughn yelled as he stood abruptly. “Don’t go there, Nora. You don’t know what it was like for us. She found her way out.”

“You mean as an escort? Let’s call it what it was, V—prostitution.”

“What does it matter now? Huh? Mara is dead, and that son of a bitch killed her.”

“How well do you know your brother-in-law?” Brook asked, inserting the question before Nora could antagonize Vaughn anymore. Nora’s contempt for Mara was obvious, and those types of emotions tended to skew reality. “And do you truly believe that Jordan murdered your sister?”

“Didn’t he get arrested for it? I hope he rots in jail.” Vaughn began to pace in agitation. “I did hear what you said about evidence not being released to the public. What were you talking about? Is Jordan going to walk free?”

“Jordan has been arrested, but he has also been released on bail. There is evidence that suggests someone else may have been in the house that evening.” Brook kept her response vague. “Where did you go after you withdrew money from the ATM?”

Vaughn held up his hand as if he needed a moment. He stared at her longer than necessary, but that was probably due to his growing paranoia.

“You think I killed my sister, don’t you?”

“I didn’t say that, Mr. Queller.” Brook used his surname to inject some formality into the conversation. “I do find it interesting that your sister made a note in her planner that you were scheduled to stop by the estate on Sunday night...the same time that her security system was switched off.”

“Don’t say another word, V,” Nora urged, crossing her arms in agitation. “Seriously. I watch those television shows, and nothing good can come from you talking to the police.”

“I’m not the police, Nora. I’m a consultant working for Jordan Miles, who I truly believe loved his wife. Vaughn, you want answers, too. Help me, please. Help me give your sister closure.”

Vaughn pressed the bottom of his palms to his eyes and released an anguished moan. Nora held herself tighter, though it was obvious she wanted to reach out to him. She was wise to keep her distance. Brook wasn’t so sure Vaughn could take anyone touching him at the moment.

“Mara called me and said not to show up,” Vaughn revealed after lowering his hands to his neck. He began to rub his skin while recounting the details of the phone call. “She said the money was in my account and to stay away for a while. I could tell something was wrong, so I didn’t go home. I thought maybe Jordan found out and was going to pay me a visit. I didn’t want to deal with him if he decided to come and lecture me again.”

“Again?”

“It was a ritual between us, which was why Mara stopped telling him when she gave me cash.” Vaughn’s expression began to break down again. He somehow managed to control his emotions enough to finish his thought. “I did my best not to go to her when I got into a bind, but work...well, they cut my hours.”

Vaughn was only repeating himself.

“We have Mara’s phone records, and there was no call placed to you on the day that she was murdered,” Brook pointed out, needing him to stay on track. “As a matter of fact, we couldn’t find any phone calls between the two of you.”

“Mara gave me a burner phone a few years ago. When I need help, I call it.”

“Look, lady, V couldn’t have killed Mara,” Nora interjected as she faced Brook. “He was with me that night.”

Brook studied the couple. While there was an air of desperation in their tones, she wasn’t so sure that Vaughn had the capacity to lie while keeping all the facts straight. The fear of being implicated in a crime only raised their level of paranoia.

Unfortunately, no one had recovered a burner phone to confirm Vaughn’s account of said call. Why would the killer remove it from the crime scene?

“Did Mara say anything else during the conversation? Did she seem scared? Upset?”

“I...I don’t know.” Vaughn stared at Brook, his bloodshot eyes swimming with emotion. “I don’t know.”

“I might.” Nora swallowed visibly, averting her gaze from Vaughn. “The day that she talked to me at work, she wasn’t looking for Vaughn. She wanted to know if either of us had told anyone about her past.”

“As an escort?” Brook asked cautiously, mindful of how she had worded her question so as not to anger Vaughn.

“Yes.”

“Did Mara go into more depth as to why she would ask you such a question?”

“Someone was blackmailing her, I guess.” Nora shrugged indifferently. “I overheard her talking to some guy at the restaurant. I thought I heard her asking him for money, but why would she do that when her husband was worth billions?”

“Why didn’t you tell me this, Nora?” Vaughn asked, visibly upset.



“Because you would have tried to involve yourself, and we all know how that ends up, don’t we?” Nora exclaimed in disgust. “Your sister wanted nothing to do with you, V. When are you going to realize that?”

“Nora, what did this man look like?” Brook inquired, hoping she could get Nora to focus. “Height. Hair color. Name?”

“Average height. Blond. I don’t know his name, but he’s a regular at the restaurant.”

Brook followed up with additional questions, but it was obvious that Vaughn could no longer stay absorbed in the interview. His gaze kept drifting toward the coffee table. He needed another hit, and she was in the way. She left them her card, advised them that the police might have some follow-up questions, and exited the apartment. Detective Kitsis might seek out Vaughn Queller now that they were aware of his location, but it would only be in the prosecution's interest.

Fortunately, Brook had vacated the premises with two new leads.

Derek Haze had been truthful with Sylvie regarding his involvement with Mara Miles. They hadn’t been engaged in corporate espionage. If Brook were interpreting the chain of events correctly, Mara had requested money that not even Barry Ackles could trace.

The reason?

Someone else other than Jordan had been blackmailing his wife.

### Chapter Fifteen

Brooklyn Sloane January 2025 Friday — 6:03 pm

Brook's footsteps were muffled by the plush carpet as she advanced through the decadent hallway of Claudia Hart's upscale apartment building. Déjà vu was absent from walking a similar path this morning. The elegant sconces on the walls, along with the tasteful oil paintings, were stark in contrast to the chipped and faded paint in Nora Miske's complex.

Gleaming brass numbers marked Claudia's door.

Raising her hand, Brook knocked firmly underneath the peephole. She had checked in with Jordan's surveillance team, and Claudia had left the penthouse over an hour ago, right after Barry Ackles' arrival. The direction she had taken after exiting the parking garage had been opposite that of her mother's residence. Since it was Brook's understanding that Jordan had been keeping Claudia at arm's length since his arrest, with the exception of certain business matters, it stood to reason that she would be home for the rest of the evening.

As the door swung open, Brook noticed immediately the lack of surprise in Claudia's demeanor. Such a non-reaction confirmed Brook's suspicion that Janet had informed her daughter of Theo's visit earlier this morning.

"Ms. Sloane," Claudia greeted somewhat wryly. "Any additional questions can go through my attorney. I'm sorry that you made the trip over here. You can—"

“I had a feeling that it wouldn’t take you long to find new representation,” Brook said, maintaining a civil tone. “What you should be asking yourself is are you prepared for Jordan to view the list of questions I have regarding Stewart Leone?”

Claudia remained just inside the threshold as she weighed her options. It didn’t take her long to come to the conclusion that a short conversation with Brook was better than facing Jordan’s ire.

“We both know you’re going to inform Jordan of my relationship with Stewart anyway.” Claudia closed the door behind Brook with a little more force than necessary. “After all, he’s paying you.”

“You wouldn’t have invited me inside if you thought there wasn’t a chance we could come to some agreement.”

Brook kept to herself that Claudia was absolutely correct in her assumption that every piece of information discovered during the investigation would eventually be presented to her client. Jordan was willing to pay S&E Investigations’ fees, just as he compensated Claudia very well for her duties. Brook took a moment to survey her surroundings.

Modern artwork hung on the walls, their bold lines and abstract shapes drawing the eye to every corner of the room. An oversized crystal chandelier hung above the open-concept living area, casting a shimmering glow over the entirety of the space. The elegant furnishings, meticulously arranged, seemed to be as much of a statement of wealth as they were functional pieces. Brook couldn’t help but note how the impeccable attention to detail mirrored Claudia’s own polished exterior.

Brook had been accurate in her initial assessment of Claudia—material possessions held great importance to this woman.

“I don’t know what else you need to know,” Claudia began as she closed the distance to the dining room table. A single glass of red wine had been set near the edge. She picked it up with practiced ease before gesturing for Brook to take a seat. “My mother called me right after your colleague left the house this morning. You know that Stewart Leone is a family friend. He encouraged me to submit my resume. I did, and the rest is history.”

“If the circumstances were that simple, why keep Jordan in the dark?”

Claudia pulled out one of the chairs and took a seat while Brook removed her coat. She had already done the same with her gloves in the elevator, so it didn’t take her long to join Claudia at the table.

“I wanted the job on my own merits.”

“That statement is plausible, but why not come clean with Jordan after the fact?” Brook inquired, not willing to give the woman an out.

The question hung heavily in the air between them.

“I didn’t see any reason to bring it up.” Claudia took a sip of her wine. She hadn’t offered Brook a beverage, but that was no doubt by design. “Stewart was friends with my father. He stops in from time to time to check on us. It’s not a big deal.”

Brook leaned back in her chair, studying Claudia’s facial features. Her eyes, her nose...the resemblance had been there all along.

“We both know that’s a lie, Claudia.” Another piece fell into place, giving an explanation to a lot of the mystery surrounding Stewart Leone. No wonder the man had a grudge against his employer. “You’re Stewart Leone’s daughter.”

Claudia had been in the process of lifting her wineglass, but the red liquid sloshed in her glass upon hearing Brook's statement. She carefully stilled the contents before setting the wineglass on the table. It was understandable that her thoughts were spinning with ways to deny such a declaration.

"Stewart is married," Claudia finally disclosed, her voice thick with emotion. She released the stem of her glass to rest both hands in her lap. "His wife doesn't know about the affair he had with my mother. My father —the man who raised me—never knew either."

"I take it you learned this news from your mother?"

"No." Claudia gave a hollow laugh. "No. I was going through some boxes in the attic when I discovered a letter tucked in with some of my baby things. My mother had written me a letter to be discovered after her death. How morbid is that?"

"I'm sorry, Claudia. I am. I can only imagine the shock you went through with such a discovery." Brook thought back once again to Stewart's antipathy toward Jordan. Everything began to make a little more sense. "I'm guessing that Stewart somehow figured out you were having an affair with Jordan. He didn't know that Jordan and Mara had technically already separated, did he?"

"No, and I couldn't tell him." Claudia reached out and cupped her wineglass. She drained the contents with one swallow. "I know what you think of me, but I would never betray Jordan like that. My job requires discretion. I'm very good at my job, Ms. Sloane."

Brook nodded slightly in acknowledgment.

"Don't get me wrong. I did confront Stewart when I first found out that I was his daughter. I was the reason he kept checking in on my mother. I never told her that I

found the letter. The hurt in her written passages was enough for me to know that she would have given anything to take back her mistake. The way I figured it...Stewart owed me, so I pushed to get a job at Miles Therapeutics.”

“And with that job came some strings, didn’t it?”

Claudia stood and made her way into the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator before pulling out a bottle of wine. It didn’t take her long to refill her glass. In the meantime, Brook took the reprieve to retrieve her phone and message Theo to meet her at Stewart Leone’s residence.

“Stewart somehow managed to get your name front and center for the position as Jordan’s personal assistant, but he didn’t disclose the connection between you. Is that correct?”

“Sums it up.” Claudia didn’t bother to reclaim her chair. She pointed a finger at Brook before making a reiteration. “I’m good at my job. I’m loyal to Jordan. I would never do anything to hurt him.”

“You love him,” Brook amended softly, mindful of Claudia’s reactions.

Was it possible that Stewart had taken matters into his own hands? He had almost destroyed his own life by having an extramarital affair decades ago. He almost certainly never imagined that his biological daughter would become personally involved with the owner of the company. That begged the question...just what lengths would Stewart Leone go to in order to protect his existing family?

“Stewart disapproved of your relationship with Jordan, didn’t he?” Brook received her answer when Claudia averted her gaze. “It must have brought back memories of his own infidelity. He didn’t want you to make the same mistake he made with your mother.”

“Yes,” Claudia finally admitted before straightening her shoulders. “Stewart can’t seem to recognize the difference between his brief fling with my mother and my relationship with Jordan.”

It appeared that Claudia couldn’t grasp the distinction, either.

“Mara didn’t know that the two of you were having an affair, did she?”

“Does it matter?” Claudia countered before taking a sip of her wine.

“It does if your biological father was the one to share that news with her, Claudia.”

“Stewart didn’t kill Mara.” Claudia became instantly defensive. “I think you’ve overstayed your welcome, Ms. Sloane.”

Brook had gotten what she needed from this encounter. She stood and collected her coat. Slowly sliding her arms through the sleeves, her suggestion began to grow roots.

“Stewart didn’t kill Mara.”

“So, you said,” Brook replied, fastening the middle button on her coat.

“What would be the point?” Claudia asked with irritation before Brook could reach for her purse. “Jordan and Mara were getting a divorce. All you’re doing is muddying the waters. There is no reason for Jordan to—”

“Stewart didn’t know that Jordan and Mara had decided to divorce,” Brook pointed out, not having to explain that secrets had a way of altering someone else’s decisions. “As a matter of fact, all Stewart could see from the outside was how much Jordan still loved his wife.”

Realization hit, and Claudia lost all color on her face. There was a vulnerability in the woman that hadn't been there earlier as the weight of the truth pressed down on her. She struggled to hold on to her composure, but it was slipping away under the pressure.

"I'll give you the rest of the evening to speak with Jordan. To tell him the truth." Brook adjusted the strap of her purse over her shoulder. She didn't envy the woman in the least. "My colleague is already on his way to interview Stewart. I can't prevent you from warning him, but shouldn't your priority be with the man you profess to love?"



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*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter Sixteen

Brooklyn Sloane January 2025 Friday — 8:42 pm

A gust of wind whipped flurries around Brook's car as she pulled into Stewart Leone's driveway. She parked her Volvo next to Theo's Jeep before cutting the engine. Fortunately, the snowflakes hadn't required her to use the wiper blades on the drive over from Claudia's apartment. A quick glance at her dashboard revealed the time to be after eight o'clock at night.

Pulling her coat tighter to stave off the wind, she stepped out into the frigid cold right as Theo climbed out of his vehicle. He, too, buried his hands deep into his pockets for warmth.

"I appreciate you meeting me here," Brook called out as she made her way around the front of her car. "I hope Mia isn't too mad."

"Are you kidding? She's at my condo listening to some light R&B music, making popcorn, and picking out a movie for when I get back."

"I take it a romantic comedy was the price tag for you having work on a Friday night?" Brook asked as they fell into step, their footsteps crunching a few snow-packed areas covering the driveway.

"Actually, I wanted to watch a rom-com, but Mia likes horror flicks. Obsessed with them, really."

Brook arched a brow, but she was prevented from responding when the heel of her boot almost came out from under her. Theo quickly seized her arm so she didn't find herself flat on her back.

"Shit. I should be concerned about that, shouldn't I?"

Brook kept a closer eye on the path lined with sconces, the golden hue illuminating sporadic ice spots on the concrete. Theo switched gears and pointed toward a security camera positioned above the garage. She understood the significance. If they could convince Stewart to give them access to the footage, they could theoretically discard him as a suspect.

"By the way, Kitsis agreed to let Bit access the street cameras in Bethesda." Theo turned his upper body to protect himself against the cold when another gust came from the West. "We should be able to confirm some of Queller's movements after he used the ATM."

"Kitsis agreeing to submit for the warrant doesn't surprise me." Brook noticed movement inside the house through what she assumed to be the living room window. "The prosecution would be thrilled if they find proof of Queller arriving at Nora's apartment, as well as him remaining there throughout the evening. The spotlight remains on Jordan."

Theo was prevented from responding when the front door swung open, revealing Stewart Leone standing in the wide opening with a glass of whiskey held casually in one hand. He immediately stepped back and gestured for them to enter his residence.

"I've been expecting you. Come on in out of the cold."

Claudia appeared to have made the time to warn her biological father of their visit. Brook couldn't help but notice the difference in the man's demeanor from when they

had first met at the offices of Miles Therapeutics. His flippant disposition was gone, and in its place was cautious politeness.

“Good evening, Mr. Leone.” Brook was the first to step over the threshold and into the warmth of the house. “I see you were expecting us.”

The cold night air seemed to dissipate instantly, replaced by a welcoming atmosphere that contrasted sharply with the cold formality of Jordan's estate. Family photographs lined the walls, showcasing Stewart's two grown sons, their smiles frozen in time. Plush pillows and throw blankets adorned the couch in the living room, while the crackling fire in the hearth kept the chill at bay.

“If that is your way of asking if Claudia called to warn me, then you would be correct.” Stewart waited patiently for them to wipe the soles of their shoes on the interior rug before leading them into the living room. The latest Dan Brown novel was on a side table beside a leather recliner, a set of reading glasses tucked next to the spine. “I know this is a professional visit, but my wife would still be upset if I didn’t offer the two of you a beverage.”

“We’re fine, thank you,” Brook said as she placed her purse on the large area rug before removing her gloves. She offered her hand, which he took after stepping forward. “Mr. Leone, this is my colleague—Theo Neville.”

While the two men shook hands, Brook unfastened her coat's middle button. Unsure of how long Stewart would be willing to answer their questions, she made herself comfortable on the couch without removing her winter coat.

“Is your wife home?” Brook’s inquiry was met with a sigh of what she could only describe as relief.

“No. Doris is still visiting our oldest son in Florida.” Stewart claimed his recliner,

resting the glass of whiskey on the arm of the chair as he regarded both of them with scrutiny. As if the glass was an anchor, he never removed his fingers from its edges. “She’ll be back on Wednesday, though I’m hoping you won’t need to speak with her. Doris has no idea that I had a brief affair with Janet Hart over twenty-eight years ago. I’d like to keep it that way.”

“We would like to get your version of events, all the way through to you using your influence to obtain Claudia the position of Jordan Miles’ personal assistant.”

Stewart hesitated for a moment. He picked up his glass and swirled the whiskey inside before taking a sip. Apparently, he needed a little encouragement to share his indiscretions with strangers.

“I made a mistake,” Stewart admitted as he averted his gaze to the roaring fire. The logs shifted, causing a few embers to flutter into the air. “I had a brief affair with Janet Hart, my best friend’s wife. I ended things almost immediately, and I didn’t realize that Claudia was mine until...”

Theo and Brook patiently waited for Stewart to clear his throat and return to the present. He inhaled deeply before continuing as if he were stating facts in some board meeting.

“I realized Claudia was mine when she was around six months old. Her eyes, her face...let’s just say that she resembled my oldest son more than she resembled Rich.”

Rich Hart and Stewart Leone had attended college together. Though they had majored in different degrees, they had roomed together their last two years. They had remained friends up until Rich’s death.

“And Rich Hart never suspected anything? Your wife?”

“No. As a matter of fact, I began to distance myself from the Harts to ensure the health of my marriage. We would get together maybe once or twice a year, and usually without the kids to keep up appearances.” Stewart’s gaze slid to the photographs on the wall. A loving wife and two grown sons stared back at him. “I’m not proud of what I did, and I have spent the past twenty-eight years doing everything in my power to make up for my indiscretions. I have a beautiful wife, a loving family, and a wonderful life.”

“What was your reaction when Claudia reached out to you with the knowledge that you were her biological father?”

“Fear.” Stewart didn’t seem at all embarrassed by admitting the truth. “Fear that I would lose everything I hold dear. Fortunately, Claudia hadn’t shared with her mother that she discovered a letter addressed to her among her baby things. Claudia only wanted to know the truth of what happened all those years ago. In my need to try and make it up to her, I made her a promise that I shouldn’t have—a job at Miles Therapeutics.”

“Just to be clear, no one other than you and Claudia know the truth about her paternity.”

“That is correct.” Stewart finished his drink. He took his time setting the empty glass on a coaster next to his book. “Jordan’s previous assistant moved out of state. He was looking for someone to fill the position, and I did what I could to put Claudia’s resume front and center.”

“It didn’t turn out quite the way you expected it to, did it?” Brook inquired gently, noting that Theo had been casually observing the room. She glanced in the direction he had tilted his head, unable to discern his eyesight since he was sitting to her left. “Some of the photographs taken of you and Claudia at various charity events for the company were when you were attempting to get her to break things off with Jordan.”

“If I had known that Jordan would take advantage of Claudia and violate his marriage vows, I never would have suggested she work for Miles Therapeutics in the first place. Claudia is to blame, as well. She couldn’t see that her actions had the potential to destroy a marriage. Now? Mara is dead, and you probably believe that she and Jordan killed his wife together.” Stewart let out a resonating laugh. “It’s like someone pressed rewind on my life, showing me every mistake that I ever made. The irony is not lost on me.”

Stewart held up a hand when Brook would have continued with her line of questioning. There was a bitterness to his tone that was unmistakable.

“Remember, Ms. Sloane. I made their mistakes. But I could never hurt another human being. And as much as I disapprove of their choices, having lived them myself, I don’t believe they could hurt someone else, either. Certainly not Mara, because even though Claudia is blind to the truth, Jordan loved his wife very much.”

“How did you discover Claudia and Jordan were having an affair?”

“I saw a text on her phone at one of the office gatherings. They were...intimate.”

“Did you think about telling Mara the truth?” Brook asked, acknowledging to herself that it didn’t appear he had any comprehension of the marital discord between Jordan and Mara. “Did you go to the house the night of her murder?”

“God, no,” Stewart instantly replied, shaking his head. “I’d already done enough damage by bringing Claudia into their lives. I had hoped that Jordan would come to his senses and break things off.”

“In your previous statement, you claimed to be here at your residence on the night in question?” Theo nodded toward the obscure interior security camera hidden in the corner of the living room. “Would you be willing to give us access to your security

system?”

“If you have proof that I never left my residence last Sunday, will you agree not to speak with my wife?”

“Proving you have a solid alibi removes you as a suspect in Mara Miles’ murder,” Brook stated, unwilling to make the man any guarantees. “You do realize that Claudia is at Jordan’s penthouse right now, revealing her relationship to you, don’t you? Did she share that with you in her phone call?”

“Yes. But Jordan is a very private man, and I have no concerns whatsoever that my personal life will end up being a topic near the watercolor,” Stewart replied wryly before leveling her and Theo an imploring stare. “I did not murder Mara Miles. There is no need to drag my family into this.”

Brook could have argued that Claudia was part of his family, but one’s biological lineage didn’t automatically make one a father. A person’s actions and behavior towards another held more weight than any shared genetics.

“One of our colleagues will stop by tomorrow to access the system directly.”

Brook didn’t need to explain in detail why she wasn’t requesting a copy of something pieced together. She trusted Bit to obtain the authentic footage.

“That’s fine. I’ll be here, writing up my resignation letter.”

“Is that necessary?” Brook asked as she collected her purse. Both she and Theo stood, prompting Stewart to do the same. “You said yourself that Jordan is a private man. If the details of your personal life stay hidden from your coworkers, then—”

“There’s no good ending to this situation, Ms. Sloane.” Stewart slipped his hands into

the pockets of his pants. “For the sake of my family, I’ll be tendering my resignation first thing on Monday morning.”

Stewart followed them to the front door, his voice stopping Theo from turning the handle. Remaining just inside the foyer, both Brook and Theo turned to hear the man’s parting words.

“I do hope you catch Mara Miles’ killer,” Stewart stated somberly. “She was a very sweet woman who spent her time raising money for several charities. Her kindness and generosity proved that she put others above herself. She didn’t deserve to have her life cut short.”

“I do have one more question for you, Mr. Leone.” Brook fastened the button on her coat as she waited to ensure she had his full attention. “Do you know anyone with the initials AM?”

“AM?” Stewart frowned, but he glanced up and toward the left. He was searching through his memories, but he came up blank. “I think there might be someone in our HR department with those initials.”

“Not someone at the country club? Someone in your social circle? Someone close to Jordan or Claudia?”

“No one off the top of my head. I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help to you.”

“Mr. Leone, if you don’t mind me asking,” Theo said before resting his hand on the handle. “You’re in your early fifties. You don’t strike me as a man to leave one job without having a foot in the door of another. You didn’t decide tonight to hand in your resignation, did you? You’ve been planning this for a while.”

Stewart hesitated very much like he had on the day Brook had spoken to him in the



conference room at Miles Therapeutics. Brook was extremely proud that Theo had analyzed Stewart's character and came to the conclusion the man wasn't spontaneous. There was a lot more to submitting his resignation than his biological connection to Claudia Hart.

"Yes," Stewart replied after a long pause. He lifted his chin in slight defiance, and Brook braced herself for another turn in the investigation. "You see, Jordan Miles hasn't been himself for close to a year. I don't know if it was Claudia entering his life or if the power of being one of the most influential men in the world finally got to his head. Paul Teal and his medical device company are the perfect example...paying almost twenty percent above what the company is worth is simply a waste. I can't—won't—remain at Miles Therapeutics. I'm taking a three-month sabbatical before accepting the position of CFO for Derek Haze's company, Haze Innovations Group."

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter Seventeen

Sylvie Deering January 2025 Saturday — 9:18 am

The quiet stillness of Haze Innovations Group's office greeted Sylvie like an unwelcome guest as she stepped through the glass doors. Even the building itself seemed to want a Saturday off from all the hustle and bustle. The thermostat must have been set for a little lower on the weekends.

Though the hushed atmosphere was quite unsettling, a simple text exchange with Derek had revealed that he would be on site this morning. The heels of her ankle boots clicked slightly against the marble tile as she made her way past the main reception desk in the lobby.

“Good morning, Ms. Deering,” Ruth called out from down the hall. She approached with a smile, wearing a more casual outfit than she had on during the workweek. “It’s a cold one out there today. May I get you some coffee? Tea?”

“Good morning,” Sylvie greeted in return. Ruth had come to a stop and waited for Sylvie to approach. “I’m surprised to see you here on a Saturday. I hope that Derek didn’t call you in just because I needed to follow up with him on some questions.”

Ruth's smile widened even more.

“If Derek is working, I make sure to be here as well.” Ruth turned and began to lead the way back to Derek’s office. “May I take your coat?”

“No, thank you. And I also appreciate the offer of a hot beverage, but I won’t be here for long.”

“If you change your mind, just holler.” Ruth didn’t stop as she passed Derek’s open door. “Go on in, dear. He’s waiting for you.”

Sylvie hesitated slightly, but she eventually crossed the threshold. She had almost asked Theo to take over any dealings with Derek, but then she would have had to explain the reason behind such a request. An invitation to dinner shouldn’t have been a big deal, yet it was all she had been able to think about since leaving the building on Thursday.

Derek was at his desk, a steaming cup of coffee cradled in one hand while the other manipulated the mouse to his computer. He was also dressed a lot more casually than he had been on Thursday, and his blue sweater brought the color out in his eyes. His gaze was locked onto the display, moving back and forth indicating he was reading something of interest. As she took another step, her presence registered, prompting him to shift his chair back.

“Please, don’t get up,” Sylvie said as she closed the rest of the distance. She ignored the warmth of his gaze and the small lift of his lips as she concentrated on loosening the button of her dress coat. She also took the time to settle her purse in the guest chair. “I appreciate you meeting me on such short notice. I don’t want to keep you any longer than necessary, so I’ll get right to the point of my visit—we know why you gave Mara Miles two large sums of money.”

Derek leaned back in his chair. He studied her intently before gesturing toward the seat. She perched on the edge, wanting him to know that she was serious about the amount of time she had to devote to this meeting.

“Mara was being blackmailed,” Sylvie said, taking the lead so everything was out in

the open. “There are two things we don’t understand. The first is why Mara never paid her blackmailer. The second is why you would have been the person she trusted with that information in the first place.”

“I can’t answer the first, but I gave Mara the money because she needed a break.” Derek rested his elbow on the arm of his chair, still holding his coffee mug. He appeared relaxed in response, and Sylvie found no reason to distrust his replies. “She was visibly upset when I walked past her table, and I stopped to ask if she was alright. She was barely keeping it together. Right time, right place. She shared with me the reason someone was trying to extort her, and—”

“Someone discovered that Mara was an escort.” Sylvie figured by her saying aloud the motivation behind the blackmail, Derek would stop keeping information close to his chest. “Why would she ask for money from you? You already stated the two of you weren’t friends. There was technically no relationship at all, yet you didn’t hesitate to transfer large sums of cash into her account.”

“I don’t think Mara meant to tell me anything, but her emotions got the best of her. She was upset, I happened to be there, and I had the means to help her. She didn’t want to transfer any money that might alert Jordan to the fact that something was wrong. The situation was simple, and I gave her my word to keep her situation private due to the sensitivity of the subject matter.” Derek’s voice was steady, denoting that he didn’t regret his choice to help Mara Miles, even though doing so had landed him as a suspect in her murder. “And to answer your next question, I have no idea the identity of her blackmailer.”

Sylvie could have reprimanded him over keeping such valuable information to himself, but Derek would have responded that he believed he was doing right by Mara Miles. The fact that they had lost an entire day in their murder investigation would not have mattered to him.

“You might not know the person’s identity, but maybe Mara mentioned something that you’ve forgotten? Male? Female? Someone from her past? Someone out to get her husband?”

Derek took a moment to mull over her questions, but in the end, he shook his head in response to them all. Fortunately, he did have an explanation as to why Mara hadn’t paid her blackmailer after the first deposit.

“Mara said the initial sum wasn’t enough and that her blackmailer had doubled the price.” Derek leaned forward and set the coffee mug on his desk. “As for why the entire amount was never paid to this blackmailer, I would assume it is because Mara died before the exchange could take place.”

Sylvie had come to the same conclusion. She also had no follow-up questions regarding Mara Miles. If the woman had never revealed one detail about her blackmailer, then Derek’s part in the investigation had just come to an end.

Sylvie eased out of the chair while picking up her purse in the process.

“I appreciate you making time for me this morning, Mr. Haze.”

“I was hoping we were past formalities, Sylvie,” Derek said warmly as he stood in response. “Now that you know I didn’t engage in...what did you insinuate the other day? Oh, that’s right. Corporate espionage. Would you finally have that dinner with me?”

Sylvie once again found herself genuinely wanting to take him up on his invitation. To prevent herself from making a mistake, she avoided giving him an answer by inquiring about another topic altogether.

“I am curious about something,” Sylvie revealed as she stepped out from the guest

chair. She buttoned her coat before withdrawing the leather gloves she had tucked into her pocket. “Do you make it a practice of stealing employees from other firms?”

Derek laughed, the warm sound echoing through the empty office.

“I have never met a woman who seems so intent on believing me to be this cold and calculating CEO,” Derek mused, his eyes sparkling with amusement. She fought back a smile of her own. “I assure you, Sylvie, I am not in the business of poaching employees. Stewart Leone heard from another colleague that my CFO was retiring come summer. He sought me out, not the other way around. My only stipulation was that he make sure there were at least three to six months between when he handed in his resignation at Miles Therapeutics to when he took over the CFO duties here at Haze Innovations Group. I’m sure his contract has some type of competitor clause, anyway. If you don’t believe me, feel free to ask Ruth about my hiring practices.”

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Haze.”

Sylvie stopped in the open doorway, realizing that she never closed it behind her. The reference to Ruth and her position had Sylvie wondering if perhaps Derek didn’t know something more after all.

“Jordan was already aware of Mara’s past. It doesn’t make sense that she would turn to you unless there was more to the story.” Sylvie had shifted her stand to observe his reaction. “Did Mara happen to mention anything to you about where she was going after leaving the restaurant?”

Derek remained behind his desk, but he wore a puzzled expression as he crossed his arms. For a brief moment, she thought that he would once again use his promise to Mara to shield any of her other secrets. Fortunately, he seemed to believe he wasn’t sharing anything out of turn.

“Mara and Jordan wanted a baby, and she was seeing a fertility specialist.”

“A fertility specialist?”

Derek narrowed his eyes in response to her follow-up question.

“Jordan didn’t mention to you that they were trying to have a baby?”

It was Sylvie’s turn not to talk out of turn. She wouldn’t reveal private information about the Miles’ marriage. While the prosecutor was already suggesting marital strife during his interviews, Sylvie wouldn’t confirm nor deny those rumors. It wasn’t her place, especially given that she was still investigating Mara's death.

“I’m struggling with why Mara would share something so intimate with a...let’s be honest...an acquaintance.”

“Like I said, Mara was emotional. I don’t think telling me about her problems was something she set out to do. Once she started to talk, it all spilled out like a knocked-over glass of milk. From my understanding, Mara had her tubes tied years ago, and she was taking steps to reverse the procedure. Hence the need for a fertility specialist. It’s also the reason why the blackmail scheme hit so close to home.”

“Do you know the name of the fertility specialist?” Sylvie asked, wondering if the doctor’s name didn’t have the initials AM. “The clinic’s name, maybe?”

“I honestly don’t know. Mara never mentioned any names in particular,” Derek said as he stepped out from behind his desk. Sylvie had gotten everything she needed from their meeting, though. She nodded her appreciation before turning, but as if déjà vu took hold, he called out to her one more time. “I can respect another individual's work ethic, Sylvie. And I hope that when your investigation concludes, you reach out to me again. I really would enjoy getting to know you.”

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter Eighteen

Brooklyn Sloane January 2025 Saturday — 10:07 am

Snowflakes gently brushed against the glass as they fell outside the floor-to-ceiling windows of Brook's office. S&E Investigation had a privileged vantage point of the delicate flakes as they cascaded from the sky. The warmth provided by her space heater tucked underneath her desk had been too much to resist, and she had slipped off her high heels a few hours ago to embrace as much of the heat as possible.

The recent information gathered by Sylvie from Derek Haze only added to the complexity of the case. Mara had changed her mind and wanted to bring a child into the world—Jordan's child. Such a discovery also simplified the investigation. Mara hadn't wanted to divorce Jordan.

There was only one person inside the investigation who wouldn't have wanted such a reunion. The same individual who fit every aspect of the profile.

Claudia Hart.

Only she had an alibi that was confirmed by her mother.

Brook contemplated the validity of such confirmation, and it was impossible not to think back to her own childhood. Would her parents have given Jacob an alibi if they had been cornered? While Brook had never outright lied to anyone about her brother, she had intentionally kept her opinions to herself. After all, there was always the slimmest of chances that he was innocent. Imaginations of young children tended to



take hold and distort reality. She understood more than most that family loyalty could be blinding, and it certainly wasn't unheard of for a mother to lie for her daughter.

The soft sound of footsteps interrupted her reverie as Bit entered her office without a word. She was surprised to find that he had yet to leave the office. Stewart Leone was expecting him to stop by his residence to access the private security system. The last-minute plans had Bit canceling his morning visit to an estate sale with Zoey's mother. As for Theo and Sylvie, the two of them had decided to spend the morning tracking down two fertility specialists whose offices were within walking distance from the Persimmon Restaurant.

Bit approached her desk with slow, deliberate steps. Such demeanor was uncharacteristic of him, and she inhaled slowly to maintain a steady heartbeat. Whatever he was about to disclose had to do with Jacob.

"You're going to want to take a look at this, Boss," Bit said quietly, her attention drawn to the photograph in his hand. He set the picture on her desk, though she made no effort to reach for it. Three fishermen were smiling for someone, though a fourth could be seen over the shoulder of one. It was clear from the man's expression that he hadn't meant to get caught on camera. "Is that..."

"Yes."

Bit's uncertainty about the fisherman's identity was understandable to Brook. The man in the background had his lower face wrapped in a thick scarf, and he wore a winter hat that covered most of his forehead and ears. Since the picture had been taken on a fishing boat, thick jackets and gloves obscured their bodies.

The photograph seemed to hold an ominous quality, as if it were a glimpse into a secret world she hadn't known existed. For all practical purposes, the captured moment was exactly that. Brook studied every aspect of the picture, noting the

distinctive landscape in the background.

“Alaska.”

“Yes. I found it while going through some social media accounts of commercial fishing companies. Facial recognition failed because of the material covering Jacob's face. I've been manually combing through current and past fishing crew photos.”

The tremendous amount of effort to uncover this picture wasn't lost on Brook. Bit's determination and resourcefulness were evident, and now they had a possible connection between her brother and Mitch Norona.

Possible...because a fishing charter wasn't commercial fishing, and fishing charters were completely different entities.

“See the guy on the right? That is Mekhi Hale, and while he used to work for a commercial fishing company over five years ago, he also used to make extra money on the side by taking tourists to some local fishing spots. It was Hale's boat that Mitch Norona rented when he was on vacation in Alaska.”

“Retired?” Brook guessed as she silently calculated the man's age into the equation.

“Yes, but Hale still lives up there. I have his phone number and home address.”

Brook considered their options, but she wasn't ready to reach out to anyone just yet. She didn't want to chance that her brother hadn't somehow inserted himself into the lives of these fishermen. Jacob's face had been plastered all over the national news, so why wouldn't one of these men have alerted the FBI to his past history?

“Let's keep this in-house for now, Bit. I want to think over our options first.”

Before Bit could respond to her request, they both caught sight of Jordan Miles stepping off the elevator. His tense posture and focused gaze on the sign for S&E Investigations told of his agitated state. It wasn't long before he was striding toward the glass double-door entrance.

"Bit," Brook cautioned as she gauged Jordan's level of anger. "You should run that errand we spoke about earlier."

"Arden is in the kitchen if you need him, Boss."

Jordan paused momentarily as he spotted the biometric scanner. Brook pressed the button underneath her desk, buzzing him into the office. He wisely acknowledged Bit silently as they passed one another in her office.

"Answer me this, Brook," Jordan demanded once they were alone, his voice tight with barely contained annoyance. He hadn't even made it over to her desk. "Is this how you treat all your clients? By not answering their phone calls?"

Brook regarded him coolly, ensuring she betrayed no emotion.

"I did answer your first two calls, Jordan," Brook reminded him, keeping her tone civil. "If you recall, the first one was to berate me for keeping Mara's connection to Derek Haze from you. The second one involved Claudia and Stewart Leone. A third call would have made no difference. I'm not your sounding board. You hired me to prove your innocence, and that is exactly what my team and I are doing."

Jordan appeared to want to push the issue, but he thought better of it. It dawned on her at that moment that despite his wealth and power, he lacked true friends. There was no one still alive who genuinely cared for him and supported him. He had come here to her offices, because she and her team were the ones who were doing everything in their power to prove his innocence. It didn't help that Claudia's

deception had only deepened his mistrust.

Brook would eventually need to reveal to him that Stewart Leone planned to resign first thing Monday morning. That news would only further destabilize Jordan's carefully constructed world, so she would put off informing him until after he reigned in his anger.

“Stewart isn’t answering my calls, and I was too livid to drive over there.” Jordan cleared his throat as he removed his coat. He tossed it over the chair in the sitting area before walking toward the window. “You should have told me about the connection between them.”

“I thought it best you hear that news from Claudia,” Brook replied cautiously as she reached for the photograph on her desk. She could have flipped it over, but she didn’t want it visible on her desk. She pushed back her chair to open the bottom drawer, tucking the picture safely into a folder. She wouldn’t make any hasty decisions about what Bit had discovered in Alaska. “As for Stewart Leone, I don’t believe he killed Mara. Bit is going to drive over to Stewart’s residence to access his security system. He has some interior cameras that will verify his alibi of being home that evening.”

Joran slipped his hands into his pockets while keeping his back to her. The delicate flakes outside the windowpane had turned into larger ones, causing Brook to make a mental note to check the weather. If there was a chance of significant snowfall, that could alter the team’s plans for the day.

“Jordan, where is Claudia?” Brook asked, figuring the men surveilling Jordan would be parked right outside the building. While Sylvie’s theory about Jordan being a target had been sound at the time, they had all agreed the intel gathered during the investigation pointed in another direction. The unsub had wanted the authorities to believe Jordan killed his wife. Nevertheless, maintaining a surveillance team had been the prudent thing to do. “Is she waiting in the car for you? At the penthouse?”

“I’m assuming Claudia is at her apartment.” Jordan didn’t turn around as Brook made her way over to the couch. “I don’t...I don’t understand why Stewart wouldn’t have come to me. I wouldn’t have betrayed his confidence. I also wouldn’t have—”

Brook figured Jordan was about to reveal how he wouldn’t have gotten personally involved with Claudia had he known that she was the biological daughter of his CFO. Nothing could change the past. The damage had already been done.

“You might not have realized it, but your decision to acquire Paul Teal’s medical device company played a large role in Stewart’s decision to remain quiet.”

“Stewart feels I ignored his advice,” Jordan replied before bowing his head in frustration. By this time, Brook had taken a seat on the couch. She didn’t doubt that Bit had informed Arden of their guest’s unexpected arrival. Coffee would be delivered momentarily. Jordan faced her, his annoyance brimming to the surface. “Brook, do you know how many decisions I make on a daily basis? Ones that don’t necessarily garner approval from everyone in management?”

“Arden spent yesterday afternoon with Paul Teal,” Brook revealed, immediately noting Jordan’s impatient reaction. He believed S&E Investigations was wasting valuable time and resources. She had repeatedly warned him that every aspect of his life would be torn apart, and he didn’t get a say in the direction of their investigation. While he might currently be their client, he had understood the contract between them. “It came to our attention during the course of the investigation that you and Mr. Teal exchanged some unpleasant words last Sunday when you and Mara were at the country club. Your server, Caleb Witt, was pressured by the country club’s manager to keep the confrontation under wraps. We’ve also learned that you were with Paul Teal that afternoon.”

“And I was upfront with you, Brook. I disclosed to you and your team that I had a business meeting.” Jordan closed the distance to the sitting area. He claimed the

chair, but he was in no way comfortable. His agitation was still noticeable in the way he clenched and unclenched his right hand. “Paul deserves this buyout. I don’t want the specifics public until we sign the contracts. My business dealings with him have nothing to do with Mara’s death.”

“Jordan, you left your college roommate with a ton of debt,” Brook stated matter-of-factly. “You wanted to carve your own path back then. I get it. You didn’t want to take over your father’s company. You were afraid you wouldn’t have anyone’s respect, and because of that, Paul offered to take out the loans in his name so that your father had no idea what you were doing. Only you didn’t count on your father having a stroke.”

“I offered to—”

“Your offer to help Paul repay the debt came a little too late, and he had already declared bankruptcy. After that, he wouldn’t take your money.” Brook heard the shuffle of Arden’s pants, and she fell silent just as he entered her office. “Thank you, Arden.”

“My pleasure,” Arden replied with a nod of greeting toward Jordan. “Mr. Miles, is there anything else I can get you this morning?”

“No, thank you.”

Jordan had averted his gaze from Brook. He was ashamed of his past decisions, and he never imagined that those poor choices would come back to haunt him. She didn’t believe they had, but the circumstances surrounding his past still had to be investigated to rule Paul Teal out as a suspect.

“Paul Teal was the one who patented the medical devices. The forms had been submitted under his name. When the time came that he wanted to sell, you swooped

in with a higher percentage than the company is actually worth.” Brook stood before walking over to her desk. She collected her mug before returning and pouring herself some coffee. “The argument at the country club was Paul Teal calling you out on your effort to ease your guilt for past mistakes.”

“Did you know Barry wants me to do a sit-down interview?” Jordan’s tone made it clear that he disagreed with the request. “Barry feels that coming clean about the loss of my father, my marriage, the affair, and the stress of running a multi-billion-dollar company might sway the public opinion about my reputation. How do you think that is going to play in the press, Brook?”

“Barry’s intentions are good, but he doesn’t know what I know at the moment.”

Brook’s statement had captured Jordan’s attention. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. He clasped his hands together as his dark gaze bore into hers with desperate hope.

“What did you find out, Brook?”

“We discovered the reason why Mara asked Derek for money—someone else was blackmailing her. Someone else knew of her past.”

The impact of her revelation rippled across Jordan’s face, and a mixture of shock and disbelief contorted his features. It was as if a tidal wave had crashed over him, leaving him struggling to find solid ground.

“No.” Jordan’s response was adamant. He even lowered his forearms in denial. “No. You’re wrong. Mara would have come to me.”

“Would she?” Brook asked, instantly noting the flicker of uncertainty in his gaze. She leaned back, observing him intently, before continuing. “Mara shared something else

with Derek Haze. She had a tubal ligation performed years ago. I assume she had it performed during her time as an escort. Only she had recently made appointments to reverse the procedure.”

“Mara had...” Jordan let his voice trail off, unable to rationalize Brook’s words. “No. I don’t know where you’re getting this—”

“I believe that Mara changed her mind about the divorce, Jordan. Your marriage wasn't over. At least, not in Mara's eyes." Brook paused for emphasis, letting her words sink in. “I believe she wanted to save your marriage, Jordan. She changed her mind about having a baby, only someone was going to great lengths to make sure that didn’t happen.”

It didn’t take long for Jordan to follow alongside Brook’s train of thought.

“You’re implying that Claudia—”

“Who else would be threatened by you and Mara having a child?” Brook understood Jordan’s need to deflect. If Claudia was the unsub, then he was to blame for bringing her into their lives. “Who else would resort to murder?”

“I swear to you, I don’t know,” Jordan whispered in anguish as his face contorted, his usually polished facade crumbling as realization and grief washed over him. His dark brown eyes, once filled with an air of authority, were now glassy and vulnerable. He was lost in the possibilities of what could have been. “A baby? Mara wanted to have our baby?”

Jordan’s body heaved with sobs as he buried his face in his hands. Brook wanted to comfort him, but he wasn’t an individual who displayed such weakness to someone who was basically a colleague. She silently placed her coffee on the table before quietly leaving him to grieve in private.



“Brook?”

She turned to find Arden approaching her from Bit’s office. His forehead held creases of concern as he held out one of the office’s portable phones.

“It’s Detective Kitsis,” Arden advised softly while peering down the hallway to ensure her door was still closed. Once he was certain he wouldn’t be overhead, he disclosed the reason for the call. “Vaughn Queller died of an overdose sometime last night.”

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter Nineteen

Theo Neville January 2025 Saturday — 11:49 am

A pleasant fragrance of lavender hung in the air as Theo and Sylvie entered the dimly lit fertility clinic. The calming scent was a welcome change from the usual sterile odor of such waiting rooms. Soft music played throughout the empty area, filling the tranquil space despite the lack of patients occupying the rows of chairs.

“Good afternoon,” Theo greeted quietly as he approached the receptionist behind an open window.

He reached for his credentials, but the receptionist spoke before he could make any introductions or explain the reason for their visit.

“I am so sorry,” she exclaimed, glancing toward the sign displaying the clinic’s office hours. We don’t take walk-ins. We are also seeing our last patient of the day, but I can go ahead and schedule the two of you for next week. Is there any particular weekday that best suits your schedule?”

Theo caught Sylvie’s smirk at the woman’s misconception that they were a couple. He continued to lift his badge until he could flip open the leather billfold to display his identification.

“We are with S&E Investigations. We’re working a homicide investigation with the Montgomery County Police Department, and we need to ask you a few questions regarding a possible patient of Dr. Natalie Nash.” Theo tucked his credentials back

into the interior pocket of his jacket. "I'm Theo Neville, and this is my colleague, Sylvie Deering. You are..."

"Kate Moore." She hesitated before pushing her chair back slightly. "Do you have a warrant? I think it best that you speak with Dr. Nash. I can't release any information without a warrant."

"We're in the process of obtaining one, and we should have it in hand shortly," Theo explained as he loosened his scarf. "In the meantime, the patient's name is Miles. Mara Miles. If she wasn't a patient here, you could save us both a lot of time."

Kate bit her lower lip thoughtfully.

"I don't recognize the name," Kate finally admitted before pulling her chair close to the desk. She reached for the keyboard and quickly typed in the name. She shook her head when the search results were revealed on the screen. "I'm sorry. Ms. Miles wasn't a patient here."

"Have you been watching the news lately?" Sylvie inquired, curiosity lacing her tone.

Theo understood why she would have asked such a question. Jordan and Mara's picture had been plastered all over the local news. Kate should have recognized the name.

"Between my job here and my two boys who are both involved in school sports, I barely have time to make them dinner," Kate replied with a small smile. It quickly faded when she realized the reason for Sylvie's inquiry. "I take it that this Mara Miles was murdered?"

"Yes." Sylvie reached into her purse for her cell phone. Before too long, she had Mara Miles' picture pulled up on the display. "Do you happen to recognize her?"

Theo monitored Kate's expression as recognition flickered across her features. She frowned in confusion as she continued to stare at the photograph.

"That isn't Mara Miles," Kate insisted as she pushed her chair back once again. This time, she stood from the seat. "That's Mara Queller."

The revelation didn't surprise either Theo or Sylvie, but it confirmed that Mara had chosen not to use her married name during her visits to the fertility clinic. It made sense since she had done her best to keep her decision to have a child from everyone, including her husband.

"Thank you for your help," Theo said sincerely before offering Kate a reassuring smile. "If you don't mind, we'll wait here until we have that warrant in hand."

They stepped away from the front desk. Sylvie took the time to read a text message before tucking her cell phone back into her purse. Theo unzipped his jacket to make himself more comfortable. While the waiting room wasn't too hot or too cold, the difference between the outside temperature and the inside was staggering.

"Brook is on her way to speak with Nora Miske."

"Kitsis said there were no signs of foul play," Theo divulged as he took a seat. There were a ton of magazines spread out on several coffee tables, all having to do with pregnancy and motherhood. "Do you get the sense that Brook is leaning toward a female unsub?"

"I do. Brook mentioned to me that—"

The vibration of Sylvie's phone cut her off, but it was Kate opening a side door that prevented Sylvie from finishing her thought.

“I spoke with Dr. Nash. She is just finishing up with her last patient and would prefer you wait in her office.” Kate held the door open with one hand while stepping back for Theo and Sylvie to cross the threshold. “Can I get the two of you anything? Some water, perhaps?”

“No, thank you,” Theo replied as he nodded toward a nurse sitting at a small desk in the hallway. She didn’t bother to hide her curiosity. Once they were alone in the doctor’s private office, he called Kitsis. “Any word on that warrant? We’re not going to get far if we don’t have one in hand.”

The music drifting in the waiting room and throughout the clinic couldn’t be heard in Dr. Nash’s office. There were no overhead speakers, offering the space its own ability for silence.

The walls were painted in soft hues of blue and cream. There were two guest chairs positioned in front of her desk, and Sylvie had already claimed one. She hadn’t removed her coat, but she had retrieved her cell phone once more to presumably get an update from Brook. Theo figured he was wrong when Sylvie made herself comfortable and began scrolling on her phone.

“I’ve been a bit busy, Neville.”

“I’m aware of that, but if the prosecutor wants another motive, you’ll get us that warrant.” Theo wasn’t under any misconception. Discovering that Mara wanted a child only gave the prosecutor another motive to present in court. In all likelihood, the prosecutor would attempt to paint a picture of Jordan not wanting a child who would ultimately have a claim on the family fortune. “We found the clinic where Mara was being seen by a fertility specialist. We’re in her office, and until we have—”

“I’m busting your balls, Neville.” Kitsis practically barked out a laugh. “The warrant

came through. I'm sending it to you now."

Theo disconnected the call, but he kept ahold of his phone in order to present Dr. Nash with the warrant when it finally came through his email. Sylvie was still absorbed in whatever had captured her attention on her screen.

"What has you so glued to your phone?"

"That house in Georgetown." Sylvie glanced at him as he took the seat beside her. "I made an appointment to see it one more time later today before I put an offer on it, but depending on what Dr. Nash tells us regarding Mara, I might just cancel."

"No. You won't cancel," Theo advised, mentally laying out the route they needed to take so Sylvie wouldn't miss the appointment with her realtor. "We can make time."

Theo understood Sylvie's need for change after all she had been through. After his eye injury, he had craved control over every aspect of his life. Fortunately, his situation had ultimately led him to S&E Investigations. He recognized Sylvie's desire to leave behind the apartment where she had almost lost her life and where her father had taken his dying breath.

"We'll swing by somewhere for lunch and then drive over to Georgetown. I'd love to see the house."

Sylvie couldn't contain her genuine smile, and her excitement was evident.

The door suddenly opened, revealing a middle-aged woman with shoulder-length, ash-blond hair. She had an air of authority, enhanced by her white lab coat and stethoscope. Without hesitation, she closed the door behind her before offering her hand.

“Rebecca Nash,” she introduced herself. Once Theo and Sylvie did the same, Dr. Nash walked around her desk to take a seat. She instinctively removed the stethoscope from around her neck. “Kate explained the situation to me. I’m so sorry to hear about Mrs. Queller.”

“Mara Queller was her maiden name, and she was murdered inside her home last weekend.”

“Awful,” Dr. Nash muttered as she turned on her computer. “Just awful. As Kate already explained, though, we can’t release any information to you without a warrant.”

“Actually, the warrant has come through,” Theo advised her as he leaned over and handed her the phone. “I apologize that we don’t have a hard copy as of yet, but the judge just signed the order.”

Dr. Nash took the phone from Theo, not apologizing for taking a good four to five minutes to read over the small print. Once she was satisfied that she could release private information on one of her patients, she relinquished the phone.

“Everything looks in order. I’ll have Kate print out the records on hand for Mara Queller, but I’m afraid there won’t be much,” Dr. Nash revealed as she leaned back in her chair. “We were supposed to schedule her surgery on her last visit, but she made the decision to postpone it.”

“Did Mara give you a reason?”

“No. She just said that now wasn’t a good time.” Dr. Nash wavered slightly before making a conscious decision to ask her own question. “Was Mara Queller really Jordan Miles’ wife? I met him once at a conference. I had heard on the radio that he had been arrested for his wife’s murder, but I never put two and two together.”

“Yes, Mara was Jordan’s wife.” Theo tucked his phone back into the interior pocket of his jacket. “Dr. Nash, we’re aware that Mara came to you a few months ago seeking a tubal ligation reversal procedure. Did she happen to mention her husband? Did anyone ever accompany her to any of the appointments?”

“There were only two appointments. The first was to discuss the procedure itself and the possible outcomes. It wasn’t as simple as she had hoped, though. You see, the time between when she had her tubes tied and her desire for a reversal was quite significant. We also had no way of knowing the condition of her fallopian tubes without further examination.”

Dr. Nash paused when a soft knock came at the door. She called out for the visitor to enter, but it wasn’t Kate. The nurse who had been sitting at the desk in the corridor handed off a file. She then closed the door behind her, leaving the gravity of Mara’s situation to settle in.

“Taking all factors into consideration,” Dr. Nash continued without handing them the file just yet, “there was only a fifty to eighty percent chance that Mara would be able to conceive after the reversal. Still, she seemed determined to try.”

“Until?” Theo sensed that Dr. Nash had more to say on the subject.

“Until the second appointment. As I said, the first meeting was primarily a consultation. The second appointment went into more detail regarding the procedure, along with the financial aspects involved. She made it clear that money wasn’t an object, but she was adamant that the timing of it all would need to be delayed by a few months. When I asked if there was a particular reason for the delay, she didn’t provide one. And to answer your previous question about her husband, no. She did not bring him into the conversation. She also came to both appointments alone.”

“Dr. Nash, does anyone with the initials 'AM' work at this clinic?” Sylvie inquired



after the fertility specialist handed over Mara's medical records. The thinness of the manila file spoke volumes. "I'm assuming that Mara had blood drawn at some point. Maybe the phlebotomist has the initials 'AM'?"

"My nurses draw my patients' blood here at the clinic, and no—I have no one on staff with those initials. I can have Kate print out a list of employees, if that would benefit you in any way."

"Thank you," Sylvie replied as she lifted the strap of her purse. "We would appreciate that."

"At any point during your interactions with Mara, did she seem upset or mention anything that might indicate she was in trouble?" Theo asked, wanting to ensure they had covered everything before leaving the clinic.

"No." Dr. Nash had considered his question carefully before responding. "Mara came across as determined and focused on her goal. I didn't sense any signs of distress or concern. She had the same attitude when saying she was delaying the surgery for a few months."

"Thank you for your time, Dr. Nash," Theo said as he stood, extending his hand. The doctor's grip was strong and confident. "Would it be alright to call you if we have any other questions?"

"Of course." Dr. Nash leaned forward and retrieved a small piece of paper. She scribbled something in black ink before holding it out for him. "This is my cell phone number should you need to reach me after hours."

Theo and Sylvie proceeded to the door. Sylvie's additional question had him resting his hand on the knob.

“Dr. Nash, one more thing.” Sylvie fastened the middle button of her coat. “Does your staff ever call to confirm appointments? It took some digging for us to even know that Mara had seen you for a consultation. We didn't find any such calls on Mara's phone from your office.”

Sylvie's ability to recall even the smallest details from the vast amount of information they had at their disposal was astounding. He had caught her staring at Dr. Nash's business card in the small holder on her desk.

“Yes, Kate is usually the one who confirms our appointments. We haven't switched over to a texting service yet. We find that a personal touch during such struggles in a woman's life goes a long way.” Dr. Nash motioned at the manila folder in Theo's hand. “Mrs. Queller...I mean, Mrs. Miles' contact information is with her medical records.”

Theo released his hold on the doorknob to open the folder. At the top of the first page was an address and phone number that he didn't recognize. Sylvie held out her hand, and he could sense from her reaction that something on the page had caught her attention.

“Thank you again, Dr. Nash.”

Theo led the way out into the corridor, closing the door behind them.

“The same number Mara used to confirm her appointments is the same burner phone she used to keep in touch with her brother,” Sylvie said in a soft tone. Theo glanced toward the desk where one of the nurses had been earlier, but she was no longer in view. “The same burner phone that still hasn't been recovered.”

### Chapter Twenty

Brooklyn Sloane January 2025 Saturday — 1:51 pm

The silence seemed to swallow every breath and heartbeat within Nora Miske's small apartment. Outside, life went on as usual for the people walking by, completely unaware of the tragedy that had occurred within these walls. Nora sat alone in a chair while staring blankly at the couch. The faded cushions had lost any trace of Vaughn Queller's form now that his body had been taken to the morgue.

Not even the flutter of her eyelashes could snap her out of the stunned trance.

The local police and medical examiner had vacated the premises fifteen minutes ago, and Detective Kitsis had taken his leave shortly thereafter. His intention had been to return to the station, satisfied with his findings, leaving Brook to drive back to S&E Investigations. She found she couldn't bring herself to leave Nora alone quite yet.

Brook had wondered many times over the course of her life if her ability to feel empathy had been swallowed by the violence of her brother's past. But as she studied Nora, a shred of sorrow formed as she witnessed the rawest form of human grief—loss.

The oppressive silence of the apartment seemed to seep into every corner. Brook's gaze lingered on Nora for a moment longer before she quietly rose from her seat and made her way to the kitchen. The dirty dishes piled high in the sink had never made it to the dishwasher, and dried bits of food were still scattered across the countertops. The fact that Nora could function so well in her position at the restaurant left Brook

to believe the woman had dropped everything in the past week to take care of Vaughn.

Blessings were sometimes disguised by loss.

Some might say that Brook's view of the world was appalling, but it was her outlook that allowed her to function on a daily basis. Nora had invested all her emotions and energy into someone incapable of reciprocating love. She wouldn't view her circumstances as such at the moment, but she was being given the opportunity to truly live for herself.

Brook searched beneath the sink and found a pair of yellow dish gloves that had seen better days. She slipped them on and began to scrub away at the grime and debris that cluttered the space. As she worked, the familiar rhythm of cleaning offered a sense of order, allowing some much-needed time to piece together some threads of the investigation.

Over an hour passed, marked only by the steady sound of running water and the faint scrapes of the sponge against the dishes. Not even the powerful dishwasher would have been able to remove all traces of dried food from the plates. The once-dirty kitchen now gleamed with spotless surfaces.

After starting the dishwasher and storing the yellow gloves back underneath the sink, Brook shifted her focus to the standard single-serve coffee machine next to the refrigerator. It only took a few moments to brew two cups of coffee. She carried them into the living room where Nora remained in the chair in the same position as Brook had left her.

"Nora." Brook stated the woman's name, not softening her tone. It was time for Nora to return to the land of the living. "Take this. After you've had a few sips, we'll get you something to eat."

Nora's gaze finally shifted from the couch to the coffee.

“Nora, take the coffee.”

Instinctively, the grieving woman reached out and took the hot beverage. As if her arm hadn't the strength to lift it to her lips, she eventually ended up cradling the mug in both hands as she stared bleakly into its dark contents.

“It's hard to breathe.”

“I know,” Brook replied as she took a seat in the other chair.

“I feel like I'm drowning.”

Raw vulnerability laced Nora's voice.

“Grief comes in waves, Nora. There will be a break in the tide. You'll be able to breathe, function, and take a step forward.”

“And if there isn't a break?”

The fact that Nora could rationalize her thoughts was a positive sign. It wasn't long until she lifted the mug to her lips and took a tentative sip. She grimaced at the bitter aftertaste, but soon, the caffeine would help snap her back to reality.

“There is always a break. If one doesn't come naturally, then you force it yourself. You're strong, Nora.” Brook had read the woman's background, and her childhood had been anything but good. “You've faced worse.”

“Why are you still here?” Nora asked, genuine confusion written across her features. “You've got all the answers you'll ever get from Vaughn. Why stay?”

“Sometimes, people shouldn't be alone.” As Brook spoke those words, she realized asking Graham to cancel his trip wouldn't have been the end of the world. “Nora, is there anyone you can call?”

“No one will understand.” Nora focused on the couch, but this time, she was fully present. “Do you think they're together now?”

“I think Vaughn forgives you.”

Brook's statement had Nora's full attention now.

“That's what you want to know, isn't it?” Brook finally softened her tone as she gave Nora a small smile. “I think it was you who asked Mara for fifty thousand dollars. Vaughn was happy with his usual ten. He was happy with anything his sister gave him.”

“How did you...”

“Vaughn's reaction when I mentioned the large figure.” Brook took a sip of her own coffee. She forced herself to swallow the warm contents, but she wouldn't be having any more. “Vaughn had no idea what I was talking about, but he quickly figured it out. Instead of denying it, he covered for you.”

“He was so mad at me after you left,” Nora revealed with a bitterness directed at herself. “I couldn't believe it when Mara walked into the restaurant. I had only been working there for over a month, so she was surprised to see me, too. I didn't think it would hurt to ask for fifty thousand dollars, but the bitch told me no.”

“You resented Mara.”

“I didn't kill her,” Nora denied defiantly. It was as if her previous words had finally

registered in her head. “Neither did Vaughn. She called to tell him to stay away from the residence. He came here. We were telling you the truth.”

“I know.”

Nora stared at Brook for a moment, weighing if there was any truth to her words. Gradually, the tension in her shoulders began to dissipate. A more comfortable silence settled over the room.

“Do you think they’re together right now?”

Brook caught the slightest of desperation in Nora’s tone. She needed to believe that Vaughn was okay. That he was at peace. That he was finally with his sister.

“I hope so, Nora.”

### Chapter Twenty-One

Brooklyn Sloane January 2025 Saturday — 7:07 pm

The smell of fresh coffee lingered in the air as Brook's heels clicked on the marble tile of the foyer. The offices of S&E Investigations had a hollow awareness about them. Arden must have already left for the evening, but she didn't doubt that he had left her with updates written on a notepad on her desk.

She had spoken to Arden earlier before leaving Nora Miske's apartment, informing him that she would be returning to the office before seven o'clock. He had turned off the overhead fluorescent lights, allowing the recessed lighting and the standing lamp in her office to give off a warmer illumination. He had noticed early on that the artificial brightness at night tended to give her headaches.

Brook made her way across her office to the antique coat rack. She slipped out of her coat, secured it over a worn brass hook, and ensured that the gloves she had stored in the pocket were secure. The low hum of her space heater could be heard as she pulled out her chair to tuck her purse underneath her desk. Arden took care of everyone in the office, and it wouldn't surprise her to find that he had stopped by Sylvie's apartment to spend time with Coco while she put in an offer on the house in Georgetown.

Sure enough, a handwritten note had been placed in the middle of Brook's desk. Arden had not only made a fresh pot of coffee, but he had also followed up with Paul Teal regarding additional questions they had regarding the animosity between him and Jordan Miles. All of Arden's notes had been uploaded into the firm's software



folder for the Miles investigation.

Brook went through the process of turning on her computer, mulling over the numerous conversations she had with Nora throughout the day. There were several comments regarding Vaughn's relationship with his sister that had given Brook insight into Mara's thought process. Specifically, Mara's need to write everything down, which stemmed from her anxiety. It had been something she had done since high school.

Brook made a mental note to go through Mara's written and online planners once more this evening, even though each of them had done so several times this past week. One set of initials—the most important—had yet to be deciphered. Once they decoded the journal entry, they would have the identity of the individual who had been blackmailing Mara Miles.

Needing some coffee to help take the chill away, Brook left her computer to go through its sequence. She hadn't quite made it halfway across her office when she caught the muffled sound of her cell phone. She retraced her steps, leaning down to reach into the side pocket of her purse.

"Bit, you've been gone awhile," Brook greeted as she resumed her path to the kitchen. "Were you able to confirm Stewart Leone's alibi?"

"Yeah." A heavy pause over the line indicated that Bit might have discovered something else of interest while going through Leone's security footage. "Boss, when Mr. Forbes was in the office today, did he happen to mention Miss Prada?"

Bit's question stopped Brook from chastising him on his habit of slapping nicknames on their clients. Instead, she recalled her conversation with Jordan earlier this morning. She had posed an inquiry into Claudia's whereabouts, but Jordan hadn't really taken the time to respond. Brook assumed that the two of them needed some

space from one another after the truth had come to light.

“Claudia went home sometime last night. Given everything that happened, it’s understandable that Jordan would need some time to think things over.” Brook crossed the kitchen to find her mug on the counter next to the coffee machine. She reached for the handle of the glass carafe. “Why? Did she stop by Stewart’s residence while you were there?”

“No, but that’s part of the problem. Stewart can’t reach Claudia.”

The fact that Bit had dropped the monikers had Brook stilling her movements.

“I take it that Stewart tried calling her?”

“Yeah. Claudia’s phone went straight to voicemail.”

“There is a good possibility that Claudia doesn’t want to speak with him after last night.” Brook finished pouring coffee into her mug. She set the carafe back onto the burner. “For what it’s worth, everything she built over the last few years has come crashing down around her.”

Bit’s silence spoke volumes.

“You traced her phone.”

“I might have traced her phone,” Bit stressed, not wanting to admit to anything on an open line. Brook sighed in resignation as she picked up her mug and proceeded back to her office. “And it might have shown that the cell phone is off. And if it did show that, then it could either be by design or the battery died. All I’m saying is that Stewart indicated she had never ignored his calls before.”

“Where are you right now?”

“I’m pulling into the garage,” Bit replied, the sound of the van’s door opening confirming his statement. “I’ll be over in a minute.”

“Bit, when a phone number is traced,” Brook said carefully, more to make him comfortable than for any other reason, “one could potentially discover the tower where the last ping was recorded, correct?”

“Yes,” Bit said over the slamming of the van’s door. Brook heard the beep of the locks engaging shortly thereafter. “If we had a warrant to ping Claudia’s phone, I would assume the last ping would be the closest tower to the building that houses the Miles’ penthouse. I’ll be there shortly, Boss.”

Brook entered her office intending to call Jordan, but her cell phone chimed another incoming call. Barry Ackles’ name appeared on the screen, but she sent him to voicemail. He was no doubt calling to voice his displeasure that she advised Jordan not to give a sit-down interview before his court appearance on Monday morning. Who she really needed to speak with right now was Jordan.

Wanting to leave her cell phone open in case Theo or Sylvie tried to reach her, Brook made herself comfortable in her chair and reached for her desk phone. She couldn’t imagine Jordan not speaking to Claudia for the remainder of the day after he had left the offices of S&E Investigations. While he was angry with her, he had no one else to confide in.

“Brook, is there anything for me to do?” Jordan asked, forgoing any greeting. He seemed more stressed this evening than at the office earlier today. “Vaughn and I didn’t get along, but Mara would want me to...”

Jordan couldn’t seem to bring himself to finish his sentence.

“There will be an autopsy,” Brook explained as she cradled the receiver in between her cheek and shoulder. She typed her password on her keyboard, wanting access to Mara’s planners. Bit had been able to scan her written daily entries into their software program to compare to her online entries. “I’m assuming sometime tomorrow. Once the autopsy is complete, you’ll be able to make arrangements for a proper burial.”

“I better make some calls then.”

“Jordan, what time did Claudia leave the penthouse last night?”

“Around one o’clock in the morning. Why?”

“Stewart has been trying to reach her all day. Her cell phone goes straight to voicemail.” Brook had accessed Mara’s planners, but she sat back in her chair to finish the conversation. “In the years that Claudia has worked for you, has she ever not been reachable?”

As the CEO of a highly successful healthcare company, a billionaire in his own right, and an elevated social status, Jordan’s days were carefully planned and managed by one person—Claudia Hart. She played a crucial role in his life, and not just as his lover. Even though he was upset with her for lying by omission, Brook couldn’t imagine Jordan going an entire day without being in some type of communication with her.

“I tried calling her myself a few hours ago,” Jordan replied rather reluctantly. “I’m not pleased with Claudia and Stewart’s decision to keep their connection from me, but I could have handled the situation with her better. I said some things in the heat of the moment. I’m sure she just needs the day. Hell, I can’t even remember the last time she took time for herself. I’ll call Stewart and—”

“Jordan, Stewart Leone is handing in his resignation first thing Monday morning.”

Brook was done covering for everyone involved in the investigation. It was time for some brutal truths to reveal themselves. “He plans to wait out the non-compete clause in his contract before going to work for Derek Haze. My advice? Let the acquisition of Paul Teal’s company fall through, get your affairs in order, and prepare yourself for the court date first thing Monday morning. No amount of money is going to sweep your problems under the rug. I’ll contact you once I have a patrol unit perform a wellness check on Claudia. Goodnight, Jordan.”

Brook ended the call, her gaze on the display of her monitor. Something was bothering her about the initials of the individual who Mara met with after leaving the restaurant. She had been cautious enough to not write in the fertility appointment, but she had drawn a line through the scheduled hour as a note to herself.

Theo had informed the team via text that no one with the initials AM worked for Dr. Nash. While ruminating over the entries, Brook called Detective Kitsis. The line rang once, twice, three times before he finally answered his phone. Fortunately, he was still at the station.

“Let me first start by saying we appreciate the warrant for Mara Miles’ medical records,” Brook said as she noticed movement by the elevator banks. Bit had dressed for a trip to the Arctic. “I’m assuming that Theo reached out to you with the results of the meeting?”

“I received a copy of the victim’s medical records,” Detective Kitsis replied. “You realize that—”

“It gives the prosecutor more ammunition in court. Yes, I’m well aware of that fact, detective,” Brook replied as she buzzed Bit into the office so he wouldn’t need to stop at the biometric scanner. “You can also pass on to the prosecutor that Jordan Miles has been having an affair with Claudia Hart. She is Stewart Leone’s biological daughter, and Stewart used his influence to hire Claudia at Miles Therapeutics. You

should also know that Stewart will be handing in his resignation first thing Monday morning. He was offered the job of Haze Innovation Group's CFO, and he will be taking the position after his non-compete clause expires in three or six months. I haven't read the fine print, but I'm sure you can ask him yourself when the prosecution adds him to their witness list."

"On one hand, the amount of information you've discovered in the course of a week is astonishing," Detective Kitsis said with an edge of curiosity. "On the other, you wouldn't be telling me this if you truly believed this case would make it to trial. What else do you have, Sloane?"

"I'm not sure, but we're close," Brook replied confidently as she turned her attention from Bit walking across the foyer to her screen. AM. What was she missing? "I do need a favor from you. I need you to send a patrol car to Claudia Hart's apartment for a wellness check. No one has been able to reach her since one o'clock last night. I don't want to call her mother if everything is fine."

"How do you know that Claudia Hart isn't with her mother? Or her cousin, for that matter?"

"Janet Hart doesn't know that Claudia figured out the identity of her biological father. Though you do make a good point, detective," Brook said as she considered the odds of Claudia reaching out to her mother. "Claudia's world is falling apart, and she might just go to the one person she trusts the most."

"I'll send a unit by her apartment and call you back."

"Then I'll wait to reach out to Janet Hart until I hear from you."

Brook set the receiver in its holder as Bit leaned against her office doorway. He pulled down his scarf, revealing flushed cheeks and a rather red nose. The cold had

given his eyes a glassy sheen.

“I’m going to ask you outright, Boss.” Bit adjusted the strap of his backpack. “Female or male unsub?”

“Female.” Brook had been hesitant to confirm certain aspects of the profile. While males were more likely to utilize a firearm in a crime, every other facet of the profile fit a female perpetrator. Mara’s death had been very personal. Brook gestured toward her screen. “And I know what you’re thinking now that Claudia isn’t responding to calls. I have Kitsis sending a unit over to her apartment building. In the meantime, we have decoded almost every set of initials in Mara’s planners. All except AM. Could the initials be—”

Brook’s cell phone vibrated on her desk, cutting off her thoughts. The screen displayed Barry Ackles’ name, and she felt a subtle tension settle in between her shoulder blades. She might as well take his call and somehow contain his irritation.

“I’ll give Big T a call,” Bit advised as he loosened his scarf even more. “He’s still with Sylvie at the house in Georgetown, but I’ll see if they are close to finishing up. They might be able to reach Claudia’s apartment before a patrol unit.”

Brook waited until Bit exited her office to answer Barry’s call. She understood his need to have his client appear as innocent as possible to the public, but nothing could change the fact that Jordan Miles was discovered leaning over his dead wife with the murder weapon.

“Sloane.”

Brook leaned back in her chair and reached for her coffee. She took a sip, allowing Barry to vent his disapproval. The more steam he managed to give off, the calmer the rest of the discussion might function.

“...can’t believe you would do that. I thought we agreed you would handle the investigation while I do my best to defend my client. If this goes to trial, I need as many citizens in the surrounding area to visually see the effect Mara’s death is having on Jordan. We won’t get another chance after—”

“Do you know of anyone in Mara’s life with the initials AM?”

Brook’s question had caused a muffled silence to settle over the line.

“No. What does that have to do with—”

“You asked me once about my process, and I’m confident that we’re dealing with a—”

“Unlike you, I can separate our job responsibilities. Listen, I have to go. I have a meeting, and I also need to deal with Claudia. That woman hasn’t stopped calling me since last night. Oh, and call Jordan tomorrow and tell him to do the damned interview.”

Barry disconnected the call before Brook could touch on her profile. It would have taken thirty seconds to explain to him that while Mara Miles’ murder was a crime of passion, it was still premeditated. The unsub had been aware of Mara’s schedule, had access to her planner, and had knowledge of the Miles’ security code to their alarm system. While all signs pointed to Claudia, the unknown initials in the planner pointed to someone else. What Brook wasn’t comfortable with was Barry meeting with Claudia without having all that information.

Brook attempted to reach Barry several times before standing from her desk in irritation. He was intentionally ignoring her calls. It was then that something else occurred to her. If Claudia hadn’t been using her cell phone since last night, just how had she been reaching out to him?



“Damn it,” Brook muttered under her breath after the fourth call went straight to voicemail. She stood with both her cell phone and coffee in hand, quickly pushing her desk chair back with her legs. It didn’t take her long to reach Bit’s office. “Barry has been in touch with Claudia. Apparently, she has called him several times today.”

“From where?” Bit asked with a frown, having already removed his jacket, scarf, and gloves. His grey knitted hat remained over his shoulder-length blond hair. “It certainly isn’t her cell phone, Boss. And as far as I know, Claudia doesn’t have a landline.”

Bit snapped his fingers several times after an idea hit him.

“What if Claudia has been at the office all day? I know it’s Saturday, but it sounds like those people never stop working.” Bit raised a hand as if to stop Brook from replying to his assertion. “I know, I know. Kind of like us.”

“I’m sorry you didn’t get to go to the estate sale today,” Brook said with a small smile as she closed the distance to one of the computers. Bit had their software program displayed on the monitor. Two of the pages from Mara’s written planner were front and center, and there were several initials highlighted in different colors. “You’re right, though. There is a good chance Claudia went to the office to keep herself busy. Or pack her things. I don’t think her conversation with Jordan went well.”

Brook pointed toward the screen.

“Bit, the initials in blue...TF. Why didn’t Mara jot down the woman’s initials instead of TF? It was the florist, right? Her name was Gina Monreau.”

“Not sure. But TF was definitely for Thanksgiving Florist. Little T confirmed the meetings Mara had before that specific charity event.” Bit peered over at the screen

and gestured toward the bottom of the monitor. “Oh, and TC was for Thanksgiving Caterer. I would say only one percent of the initials didn’t match a specific name.”

AM was highlighted in yellow.

“What if AM isn’t the initials of a name, either?” Brook pondered as she pulled out a chair and took a seat. “What if they stand for something else altogether?”

### Chapter Twenty-Two

Sylvie Deering January 2025 Saturday — 7:34 pm

The warmth of the dining room gave Sylvie a sense of déjà vu. She had been experiencing such a phenomenon quite a lot lately. It wasn't an uncomfortable feeling so much as a warm embrace.

She hadn't realized until this very moment why she had been so drawn to the two-bedroom house tucked on the outskirts of Georgetown. The layout reminded her of a home from her childhood, from the lofty ceilings to the charming open archways between rooms. Her family had only lived there until she was around seven or eight years old, well before her father had grown his financial company into the behemoth monster that he himself had destroyed with his choices.

Every single good memory from her childhood had been wrapped up in that one house. The only memories after were of an isolated mother, a busy father, and eventually loneliness. Sylvie was at the point in her life where she could separate the good memories from the bad. She was finally at peace, and this was her reward.

"This should be the last one, Sylvie," Denise Horvat murmured in concentration as she slid a piece of paper over to Sylvie. "This is to confirm the terms of your offer."

Sylvie sat across from the realtor while signing her name at the bottom of the document. Some forms had needed to be filled out by hand, while others had been completed through an electronic tablet. It wouldn't be long before everything was online, and these types of sit-downs wouldn't be needed at all. She clicked the end of

the pen after giving back the piece of paper.

The sturdy oak table they occupied was surrounded by cream-cushioned chairs that matched the kitchen cabinets. Beyond the open archway that led to the heart of the house, a farmhouse sink with rustic butcher block counters had been combined to give off a blend of refinement and functionality. She let her gaze wander to the second archway, taking in the polished hardwood floors that extended throughout the two-bedroom house. There was a river rock hearth in the corner of the living room, allowing the main wall to display a large entertainment center with bookcases on either side of a large television.

The prospect of owning her first home filled her with a quiet excitement. So much so that she needed to dispel some of her energy.

Sylvie stood from the chair to check on Theo. He had been working silently in the living room for the past hour. They had run down several leads throughout the afternoon, which had pushed back the appointment with the realtor, who had relayed to her that the homeowner was out of town until tomorrow. Denise had assured Sylvie that the late meeting to put together an offer had been no trouble at all.

“...mother’s house? What about the cousin? Andrea Walker.” Theo paused his questioning, and Sylvie couldn’t quite grasp the topic of the conversation. They had already ruled out Andrea as the individual with the initials AM. “Andrea’s middle name is Lynn. I uploaded her information to the software. Yes, a nurse.”

Theo was standing next to one of the two large windows overlooking the quiet street of the neighborhood while talking on his phone. She assumed that Brook or Bit was on the other end of the line. If he needed her, she hoped that he wouldn’t hesitate to pull her away from the endless amount of paperwork. Then again, he probably would do his best to keep anything of substance from her until every last form was signed.

Sylvie refocused her attention on the little details of the living room. The couch and chairs were made of plush material that made one want to cozy up in front of the fireplace with a soft blanket, a good book, and a hot cup of tea. The realtor had mentioned the couple who owned the house were in the military. They had received orders regarding their next station, which was somewhere in Italy. Sylvie wondered about the possibility of buying some of the contents since the current furniture was part of the house's charm.

"She's putting in the offer now," Theo shared, his eyes locking with hers in the reflection of the window. He flashed her a smile. Outside, snow flurries fell gracefully in the golden glow of the streetlamp. "I figure we'll be free to drive over there in about twenty minutes."

Theo had placed his tablet on the coffee table. She thought about retrieving it and reading over the background check on Dr. Nash, but the realtor was calling out to her.

"Congratulations, Sylvie," Denise reiterated with a smile after securing Sylvie's attention. "Your offer has been submitted, and I will call you as soon as I hear from the owners."

"I appreciate that you were so willing to change our appointment time," Sylvie said as she closed the distance to the table. She shook the woman's hand before inquiring about the furniture. "You mentioned that the couple needed to sell their house to move overseas. Do you think that they would be interested in selling any of the contents?"

"I'll ask the sellers if they are willing to part with anything before the move. If you'd like to take one more look around, help yourself. I have a call to make before locking up."

"Thank you again, Denise."

“I’ll be in touch.”

Sylvie collected her purse and coat that she had hung on the back of her chair before returning to the living room. Theo was still on the phone, so she crossed the floor to the coffee table and picked up his tablet. The first section of Dr. Nash’s background check revealed the woman’s past and professional history.

The fertility specialist had graduated from a prestigious university with top honors and specialized in reproductive endocrinology. Her career was marked by a steady rise in prominence, eventually leading to the establishment of her own clinic.

In her personal life, Dr. Nash had been married once but divorced amicably several years ago. Nothing in her history indicated any connection to their case or reason to suspect her involvement in the murders.

Frustrated by the lack of leads, Sylvie exited the background check. Her intention had been to close down the tablet to save Theo some time, but his email application had been open in the background. The top one just happened to be from Dr. Nash with the timestamp indicating it had arrived within the past three minutes.

“Theo,” Sylvie whispered to get Theo's attention. She pointed toward the tablet once he was facing her. He glanced at the screen before nodding his consent for her to open the email.

Sylvie sat on the edge of the couch before setting her purse on the floor. She then draped her coat over her lap to cushion the tablet. With a glance toward the kitchen to make sure that Denise wasn’t about to walk out the door, Sylvie opened the message. She briefly read through its contents before clicking on the attachment.

A list of employees, from nurses to phlebotomists, appeared in alphabetical order. Sylvie’s gaze immediately went to the letter M, but there was no staff member under

that section with a first name beginning with the letter A.

Starting back at the top, Sylvie perused the column of names.

“Theo.” Sylvie stared at one name in particular. The initials AM had never been a name, but an acronym. “Tell—”

“Too late.” Theo crossed the distance between them, reaching for his jacket. Sylvie hadn’t realized he had ended the call. “I guess Stewart Leone has tried to reach Claudia all day. She isn’t answering, and Miles is too pissed off at her to care. Brook is having Kitsis send a patrol unit to perform a wellness check. I told her we could drive over to Miles Therapeutics in the meantime. There is a chance Claudia is there. Anyway, I read through Nash’s history. I didn’t find anything that—”

“You need to call Brook,” Sylvie directed as she swiftly stood and all but shoved his tablet toward him. She tapped the screen to garner his attention. It didn’t take her but a moment to slip her arms into the sleeves of her coat. As she adjusted her scarf, she waited for the name to register. “Call Brook and tell her we know who killed Mara Miles.”

### Chapter Twenty-Three

Brooklyn Sloane January 2025 Saturday — 7:48 pm

Brook shifted her legs until they were close to the space heater. The warm air was physically comforting, but it did nothing to stem her frustration. She had attempted to reach Barry Ackles several times since they had spoken on the phone, but every single call had gone straight to voicemail. Kitsis hadn't touched base with her, either. It was the reason she had reached out to Theo, who had fortunately offered to drive to Miles Therapeutics with Sylvie. If the patrol unit couldn't locate Claudia at her apartment, there was a good chance she was at work.

"Any luck?" Bit asked as he appeared in the doorway of her office. He didn't have an energy drink in his hand. That omission alone accounted for his focus on locating Claudia. "I think we should attempt to get a warrant for all phone numbers involved, Boss."

"Go ahead and call Kitsis. Include Barry Ackles' number in the warrant." Brook set her phone on the desk. "Once the request is in, go ahead and do your thing."

Bit adjusted his knit hat while studying her expression. She didn't blink. He slowly nodded his understanding of what she was requesting from him.

"I can't reach Barry or Jordan, so I'm going to touch base with the surveillance team. Theo and Sylvie are getting ready to drive over to Miles Therapeutics. If Claudia is there, we can move on to other important tasks."



Brook focused on her screen as Bit returned to his office. The initials AM practically taunted her from their place on her monitor. Allowing frustration to take hold wouldn't do her any good, so she concentrated on reaching out to someone from the surveillance team. Since she had already programmed the number Alex had supplied them, she pressed the appropriate button and lifted the phone to her ear.

The first ring hadn't even concluded before the line was answered, and Brook didn't waste any time introducing herself. A man greeted her with his name, Reed Corley.

"Are you inside the building?"

"Yes, ma'am. There is a sitting area with newspapers and coffee in the foyer. Another agent and I have a varied schedule, so neither one of us is in the vicinity often enough to garner attention from residents or guests."

"Has anyone visited Jordan since he returned to the penthouse?" Brook inquired as she heard the interruption of another call. She pulled the phone away from her cheek. Theo was calling, probably to inform her that he and Sylvie were leaving Georgetown to drive back to Bethesda. "Or any movement from Jordan himself?"

"No, ma'am," Reed replied.

"Would you please keep me informed if anyone does pay Mr. Miles a visit this evening?" Brook requested, fully intending to express her appreciation before ending the call. But staring at the initials had her inquiring about someone else altogether. "Corley, when did you come on duty?"

"We have twelve-hour rotations, ma'am. I arrived at eighteen hundred hours."

"Does that mean you were working last night when Miss Hart dropped in to visit Mr. Miles?"

“Yes, I was inside the lobby when Miss Hart arrived, which was the reason I switched positions with my partner, Dungi, right afterward. I exited the building and headed across the street to the café, where I monitored the front entrance until Miss Hart left for the night.”

“And what time was that, Mr. Corley?”

“Zero one hundred.”

“Did you notice anything unusual about her departure?”

“No, ma’am. Miss Hart walked the short distance to the parking lot on the south side of the building, entered her vehicle, and pulled out in the direction of her apartment.”

“Thank you, Corley. I appreciate the update.” Brook couldn’t bring herself to end the call. If no one had paid a visit to Jordan, there should be no reason he wasn’t answering his phone. “I do have one more favor. Would you or someone from the lobby confirm Mr. Miles is in his penthouse? I realize that you and the other members of the team are supposed to keep your distance, but I can’t reach Mr. Miles on his phone.”

“I’ll take care of it, ma’am, and report back to you.”

The silence in her office after she disconnected the call amplified her agitation. Theo hadn’t left her a voicemail, so she assumed he and Sylvie were on their way to Bethesda. Brook slipped her phone into the small pocket of her suit jacket. Grabbing her coffee cup, she stood and made her way out of her office, toward the kitchen.

“Boss, I spoke with Kitsis,” Bit informed her from his doorway. “No word from the patrol unit yet. He also wasn’t too keen on the phone warrants, but he agreed to reach out to a judge anyway. If he were to get one of the esteemed Honors to sign off, I’m

sure the phone we would be most interested in would be turned off.”

Before Brook could comment, Bit’s cell phone chimed from somewhere deep in his office. She motioned for him to answer it before thinking through their options. It wasn’t as if she noticed Barry shutting off his phone during meetings, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything. The bottom line was that too many people involved were unreachable.

Brook needed a moment to clear her mind.

She crossed to the counter and reached for the carafe, silently thanking Arden for his thoughtfulness. There was even a hint of his cologne in the air, once again bringing to mind a distant memory of her father. No one on the team thought of Arden as an assistant, because he was so much more than that.

The title triggered Brook to stop pouring her coffee. She slowly set the glass pot on the burner as the connection finally made itself known.

The letter A in the set of initials stood for assistant.

“Assistant’s mother,” Brook murmured as she quickly turned away from the counter, leaving her coffee behind. “Bit, get Theo—

Bit was already standing in the doorway, holding his cell phone up in the air.

“Janet Hart works at Dr. Nash’s fertility clinic. Little T and Big T are driving to her house now.”

Brook’s phone vibrated, notifying her of an incoming call before the melodic ring reached her ears. Barry was about to get his wish regarding Jordan’s court hearing on Monday, but she wasn’t so sure the attorney had hoped for this specific ending.

“Sloane.” Brook didn’t break her stare with Bit as she listened to Corley explain that Jordan wasn’t in his penthouse. There hadn’t been concern Jordan would want to slip past his own surveillance team, giving the members no reason to station someone on a stairwell only used by residents with a special keycard. “It’s alright, Corley. I was the one to give instructions to keep a soft surveillance. We’ll take it from here.”

Brook advanced toward the doorway. This case reminded her of why she loathed active investigations. If she was wrong in the directives she was about to give, then Jordan Miles was as good as dead.

“Bit, contact Kitsis. Tell him there is a good possibility that Janet Hart just took three people hostages at Miles Therapeutics’ headquarters.”

“What about Big T and Little T?” Bit called out as he went to grab his jacket.

“Divert them to the Miles’ estate,” Brook instructed loudly as she crossed into her office. “We need to cover as much ground as possible. Janet Hart was able to convince her daughter, Jordan, and Barry to meet her at one of the two sites.”

By the time Brook had collected her coat and purse, Bit was waiting for her in front of the glass doors. His phone was pressed to his ear as he pushed on the handle, allowing her to cross the threshold first. She had also grabbed her winter boots. She would change out of her high heels when she got into the van.

“Bit?” Brook practically slapped the down arrow on the panel in between the two elevators. “Make sure they know that Janet doesn’t intend to let Jordan walk out alive.”

### Chapter Twenty-Four

Brooklyn Sloane January 2025 Saturday — 8:43 pm

The dashboard hummed beneath Brook's palm as she used the hard surface to brace herself, not that such an effort would help prevent an accident. Bit, on the other hand, didn't seem bothered by his erratic driving in the least. She smothered an expletive as he passed another vehicle a little too close for her liking.

“Have you checked with the lab technicians?” Brook asked in response to Kitsis' call regarding Janet Hart. “Did they happen to see Claudia today?”

“No, on all counts,” Detective Kitsis replied, his frustration evident. “You sent Neville and Deering to the estate?”

Bit had already taken the exit needed to reach the Miles' estate. He had done so after she had gestured to him that Kitsis had struck out at the corporation's headquarters. Given that his officers had someone from Claudia's building management enter her front door and discover the place empty, they were left to assume she had been with her mother since late last night.

“Yes.” Passing headlights cast a harsh glare across Bit's features, which were currently lit up with satisfaction. She switched her focus in front of them to find the reason why—Theo's black Jeep Wrangler. “We're two minutes away, so we'll meet you there.”

“Don't do anything that—”

Brook disconnected the call, slipping her phone into the pocket of her coat. She had already changed out of her heels, and there was no reason for gloves. There was no telling what situation they were walking into at the estate.

Theo probably realized instantly that Bit was behind him given how close the van was to the spare tire fastened to the back. She closed her eyes and prayed an animal wouldn't run out in front of Theo. If he were to slam on his brakes, it would be impossible for Bit to stop before plowing into the back of the Jeep. Not even the warm air from the vents could relax Brook as she peered through her lashes.

"Bit, we're coming up on the driveway," Brook warned as she involuntarily pressed the sole of her right boot against the floor. "Maybe you should—"

"I got it, Boss. I'm a great driver. You aren't worried, are you?"

"Just a little," Brook replied truthfully as she forced herself to sit back in her seat. Theo had slowed down, causing Bit to do the same. Before Theo completed the turn into the long driveway, he wisely cut his headlights. Bit mirrored the action, and it took a few seconds for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. "The entry gate is wide open."

Bit continued to trail behind Theo until he slowed the Jeep to a complete stop. They were maybe fifty yards from the house. Fortunately, a few slivers of moonlight had slipped through the thin cloud coverage. Three vehicles were parked in front of the house.

"Touch base with Kitsis." Brook reached for the door handle. "Tell him to step on it."

Brook didn't want her team to have to defuse the situation. Kitsis had the manpower to cover all exits, as well as access to a hostage negotiator if the situation warranted one. With any luck, a police presence would be enough to force Janet Hart's

surrender. Besides, it was Kitsis' investigation.

The frigid air stung Brook's exposed cheeks and hands.

"Bit is touching base with Kitsis," Brook explained to Theo and Sylvie as they joined her next to the driver's side door of the Jeep. Despite the exterior lighting around the estate, there didn't seem to be any lights on inside the residence. "He should be here soon."

"Janet must have Mara's burner phone," Sylvie said as she shoved her hands into the pockets of her coat. She had a cream hat pulled down over her ears, and the matching scarf was around her neck and tucked inside the lapel. Should she need access to her weapon, all she needed to do was unfasten the middle button. "Mara would have instructed Janet to buy a burner phone. I'm assuming Janet realized that was how Mara was in contact with her brother to avoid any questions from Jordan."

"I don't think Janet initially intended to blackmail Mara," Theo said as he shifted to have a full view of the house. "I believe Janet used the blackmail as an excuse to get Mara to delay her decision to have a child."

"People go to extreme lengths to protect those they love," Brook said as she heard Bit exit the van. "Janet must have figured out that Mara wasn't going to leave her husband. Jordan would have eventually dismissed Claudia from her position, and she would not only lose her job...but him, as well."

"Janet had every number Mara programmed into that burner," Sylvie tacked on with a shake of her head. "By using her own, she was able to reach out to Jordan and Barry without any suspicion."

"The woman had access to everything through Claudia—the main code for the alarm system, private phone conversations, calendars, medical records. Janet had everything

at her disposal to plan Mara's murder and shift the blame to Jordan."

"Eight minutes out," Bit advised them as he jostled from side to side to stay warm. "Boss, I can access the security system to locate their position inside. There are cameras in several rooms, which could—"

A muffled gunshot pierced through the stillness of the night.

Waiting for Kitsis and his officers was no longer an option.

"Theo, Sylvie, enter through the back. I'll take the front," Brook directed, wishing it wasn't too late to take Bit up on his offer. "Bit, go ahead and access the security system. Make sure Kitsis knows everyone's position before entering the house. We can't afford any miscommunications or crossfire."

Theo and Sylvie had already begun to jog the distance to the house.

The icy wind whipped at Brook's face as she sprinted across the heated driveway behind them. As expected, they veered off around either side of the house to regroup in the back. Their instincts and training had taken over. Brook had hoped Kitsis and his officers could take over the scene, but circumstances had forced their hands.

Brook cautiously approached the front door, giving herself some time to even out her breathing. She instinctively reached underneath the right side of her coat. Her fingers closed around the grip of her firearm. Drawing her weapon from its holster, she wrapped her other hand around the cold door handle.

With the softest of pressure, the latch gave way.

A knot tightened in her stomach. If the front entrance was unlocked, Theo and Sylvie might have trouble gaining access through the back.



There was no time to second guess their strategy.

Brook quietly slipped inside the house, the faint sound of Claudia's pleas immediately greeting her. Janet's voice cut through her daughter's sobs seemingly without regret. Using the distraction, Brook made sure the door silently closed behind her.

“Don’t make another move toward me. I told you that I wasn’t bluffing.”

“Alright,” Barry replied in a strained voice. “Alright. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have tried to—”

“Mom, you can’t do this,” Claudia cried out in a panic. Brook had no trouble discerning that the four of them were in the kitchen. Their position inside the home was the reason the interior light couldn’t be seen from the front of the house. “No one is going to believe that Jordan—”

“The police believe Jordan killed his wife, Claudia. Do you really think they won’t believe he got upset with his lawyer? Overreacted?”

“And then what?” Claudia asked desperately, seemingly not understanding the scenario that her mother was laying out in front of her. Brook slowly continued forward as silently as possible. “How do you plan to—”

“Your mother wants you to shoot me, Claudia.” Jordan’s tone was void of emotion. Brook had never heard his voice so flat. No anger. No contempt. No outrage. “Isn’t that right, Janet? I take it you have a second firearm? You’ll plant the one you’re holding in my hand after Claudia shoots me in the chest?”

“Mom, this is crazy! You have to stop!”

“If y-you stop this, I-I can represent you. I’ll...” Barry was speaking, but it was

obvious he was in pain. Brook came to a stop at the corner, where she lowered her weapon in an attempt to determine everyone's location. It became quickly apparent why Jordan's attorney was having difficulty speaking. He must have been the one who tried to take control of the situation. Janet had fired her weapon at him in warning, though Brook wasn't sure the woman had intended to miss the man's center mass. The bullet appeared to have grazed his arm. "You can plead t-temporary insanity. I'll make sure—"

Barry stumbled backward as Janet raised her firearm. Claudia frantically stepped in front of him, spreading her arms out protectively as she attempted to shield both men. As for Jordan, he continued to stare at Janet without a single emotion written on his features.

Barry held tight to the wound on his arm. He was bleeding profusely, the sticky red substance covering his fingers as droplets fell to the floor. The situation had escalated to the point that there was no time to wait for Kitsis' arrival.

"Claudia, don't you understand?" Janet's frustration with her daughter was visceral. "Mara wasn't going to leave Jordan. She wanted to have his child. You would have been discarded like garbage. You told me yourself that she was a whore. She should have taken the three hundred million dollars and left."

Brook didn't have a view of the French doors. Assuming that Janet had everyone come through the front entrance, Theo and Sylvie would have no access from the back. Brook weighed her options but was limited given the proximity between Janet and the others.

"Why blackmail Mara for money then?" Jordan reached out and put his hand on Claudia's arm, as if to signal there was no need to defend him. Brook couldn't decipher if he was trying to get her out of harm's way or if he wanted a chance to disarm Janet. "Why not blackmail my wife by demanding she follow through with the

divorce?”

“A woman like her only cares about money. She was about to ruin my daughter’s life. You almost ruined my daughter’s life, but I won’t allow it to happen.” Janet switched her focus to Claudia. “I didn’t let the woman suffer, sweetheart. I’m not a monster. I shot her directly in the heart after I forced her to call 911 that night. She bled out almost immediately.”

“Mom, how could you have done something like—”

“For you, Claudia. For you. I had everything planned down to the tiniest detail. Mara turned off the alarm for me, not her brother. I forced her to change into her nightgown, pour herself a glass of wine, and make it seem like any other ordinary night. I left it up to fate after that. If Jordan went to jail, he would be out of your life for good. If he didn’t, then the two of you would have been free to continue your relationship.”

“I love him, Mom.” Claudia ignored Jordan’s attempt to move her. She did her best to stand in front of both men, her body tense and protective. She was a living barrier between him and her mother's wrath, even as tears streamed down her face. “We need to listen to Barry. He can help you. He can convince the prosecutor to cut a deal.”

“No.” The finality of Janet’s response was obvious. “I won’t go to prison, Claudia.”

“Do you think I don’t know why you did this, Mom? Guilt! You did this out of guilt, Mom! You had an affair with Stewart Leone. You let Dad believe that I was his daughter! I found the letter you stored in the attic. You didn’t want me to find it until after you were gone, because you knew that I would hate you for what you did to Dad. How could you do that to him, Mom?”

The situation had become a tipping point. Emotions had gotten to an all-time high,

and it was only a matter of time before Janet brought it to an end. Unfortunately, any move Brook made now could provoke Janet into a thoughtless, lethal reaction.

Brook scanned her surroundings for any possible advantage. Movement out the large kitchen window caught her attention. Theo's face was obscured by the darkness, but there was enough illumination on his hand to recognize his gesture of urgency. He was trying to communicate something crucial, and it wasn't until a loud knock shattered the tense silence that she understood the signal.

Sylvie had deliberately drawn Janet's attention away from the others.

The distraction achieved its intended effect, but not in the way it was planned. Janet reacted with a surge of adrenaline, spinning around on pure instinct. She squeezed the trigger of her weapon, firing aimlessly in the direction of the noise.

In a split second, one of the French doors exploded into a hail of shattered glass.

### Chapter Twenty-Five

Brooklyn Sloane January 2025 Saturday — 9:02 pm

The burst of crystalline shards created by the shattered French door finally settled on the floor. The stillness that followed was only amplified by the echoes of the explosion, and it was as if the silence had its own heartbeat. The minuscule debris and sudden drop in temperature were the only reminders of the destructive event.

With Janet's attention focused on the fallout of her impulsive reaction, Brook took the opportunity to slip around the corner and into the kitchen. Rather than positioning herself in front of Claudia, Jordan, and Barry, she strategically stood so that the three individuals were out of harm's way. The risk of Janet responding unpredictably to her surroundings was significant.

"Janet, drop your weapon. Now!" Brook braced herself both mentally and physically to make a snap decision based on a single twitch of Janet's trigger finger. Fortunately, the explosion of glass had revealed nothing but darkness. Janet's mind was struggling to piece together the fallout. "Sylvie? Theo?"

"We're fine," Sylvie called out as she and Theo finally stepped out of the shadows with their weapons drawn and aimed at their target.

Janet wasn't sure where to aim her weapon. Panic was beginning to set in, and it was only a matter of time before she chose to do something rash.

"Janet, it's over. The police are right outside," Brook informed her, not knowing

anything of the kind. “No one else needs to get hurt. I need you to think of your daughter right now.”

“Everything I have done has been for my daughter!” Janet screamed, her features contorted with fear and anguish. “Everything!”

“We were both wrong, Mom,” Claudia whispered, tears streaming down her cheeks. “You were wrong for betraying your husband, and I was wrong for wanting another woman’s life. Mara was a good person. She didn’t deserve to die.”

The air in the kitchen grew colder as Brook continued to hold her weapon steady, monitoring Janet's panicked behavior. Soon, she would direct her anger toward the one man who she believed had ruined her daughter’s life. While Jordan played a huge role in the events leading up to this moment, Claudia wasn’t innocent in her choices, either. Her sobs of anguish and regret kept Janet’s attention away from Theo’s approach as he did his best to navigate the broken glass with as little sound as possible.

“Please,” Claudia begged her mother, not oblivious to Theo’s intention. “I need you to listen to me, Mom. Put down the gun.”

The raw emotion in Claudia's plea had Janet’s grip on her gun faltering ever so slightly. It was in that moment of hesitation that Theo took swift action. With the precision of a federal agent’s training, he disarmed Janet and forced her to the ground in one motion.

“Target is down!” Kitsis suddenly bellowed as he and his officers burst through the back and front entrances. “I repeat, target is down!”

“We need a paramedic,” Brook shouted as she lowered her weapon. Barry was now leaning against the double oven next to the counter, his pale features the result of

shock more than blood loss. “Barry, let’s get you over to the table. You can sit down and—”

“I’ve got him,” Sylvie said as she appeared on the other side of Barry, giving Brook time to holster her weapon.

Sylvie gently took Barry’s good arm and began to lead him across the room with assurances that he would be fine. One of the officers who had entered through the shattered French door was in the process of cuffing Janet’s hands behind her back. Theo aided the officer in getting the woman to her feet, who wasn’t saying a word as she stared at Claudia with what seemed to be disbelief.

Throughout the chaos, Jordan remained motionless, rooted to the spot like a deer standing in headlights. The evening’s events had rendered him a hollow, empty version of himself. The bitter realization that his carefully curated world had come crashing down around him had yet to set in...or maybe it had.

“You realize that the prosecutor is going to spin this to his advantage, right?” Detective Kitsis said as he came to stand beside her. “I don’t know how, but tomorrow morning’s news will somehow give the press the impression that he was well aware Jordan Miles wasn’t a suspect in his wife’s murder.”

“I know how the system works, Detective Kitsis,” Brook acknowledged, her focus still on Jordan. He had taken two steps back so that he could lean against the counter. She suspected that it was out of necessity more than comfort. “S&E Investigations didn’t take this case for press coverage.”

“Doesn’t mean you shouldn’t get it,” Detective Kitsis muttered as an officer escorted Claudia from the room. The signs of shock had finally become apparent. “Simpson, make Miss Hart comfortable in the living room. I’ll be in shortly to get her statement.”

“Detective?” Brook waited to speak further until she had his undivided attention. “Thank you for being open to our assistance. We both know the prosecutor gave you a hard time, though you covered for him to the best of your ability.”

“Shit, are you kidding me?” Detective Kitsis asked wryly, even waving his hand in dismissal. “I’m open to S&E Investigations solving all my cases.”

Brook smiled slightly, acknowledging the compliment. With a subtle gesture, she signaled her desire to speak with Jordan in private. The detective didn’t even notice due to two paramedics entering the kitchen. Brook waited for him to approach them and Barry, who Sylvie had already planted in a chair at the table.

Pulling both sides of her coat together so she could fasten the middle button, she closed the distance to where Jordan leaned against the counter. The bitter gusts of wind were snaking their way through the windowless door, not that he seemed to notice.

“Jordan?”

“Everything...is gone.” Jordan stared ahead, but his gaze wasn’t fixated on anything in particular. “Mara. Our future. The choices that I made—”

Brook remained silent, allowing him to work through his thoughts. There was no erasing his guilt. He would have to live with the fallout of his choices for the rest of his life.

He didn’t speak again until the paramedics led Barry out of the kitchen. Brook had picked up enough of the conversation to know that while the wound was superficial, it would require stitches. They wanted to transport Barry to the hospital for further treatment.



“My choices regarding Claudia were selfish. I...needed someone. Or, at least, I thought I did. I have never been good at being alone. I had no idea that Mara wanted to reconcile. None. She was so adamant about not having children. If she had come to me...”

Brook refrained from passing judgment. He was trying to assign blame, and there was plenty of that to go around. People often overlooked signs from others because doing so would disrupt their own lives. She wasn't innocent in that regard, either.

“I was so caught up in my obsession with Paul Teal and making amends that I had tunnel vision.”

“We often choose to blind ourselves to the truth, Jordan.” Brook didn't sugarcoat her response. “You wanted, maybe even needed, the distractions to help you cope with what you thought was the end of your marriage. There are always consequences to our decisions.”

It would take him a while to come to terms with the repercussions of his actions.

Theo stood between the rooms, deep in conversation with one of the officers. Sylvie remained at the kitchen table speaking on the phone to someone, maybe Bit or Arden to give them an update. She would alert Brook if she were needed elsewhere.

“This is the second time you've helped me,” Jordan said, his voice low and tinged with regret. He had used the time he had been given to gather his composure. While he would never be the same, closure for Mara's murder was a step in the right direction. “Does your team know about—”

“No. I gave you my word, Jordan.” Brook observed Sylvie pull the phone away from her ear. “All they know is that you owe me a favor, and I collect by using your private jet for investigations that need our immediate attention.”

“I guess I shouldn't push my luck a third time,” Jordan muttered as their attention switched to Detective Kitsis. He stood near Theo, but the detective's focus was solely on Jordan. “That's my cue.”

“Mr. Miles? Would you please join me in the living room?” Detective Kitsis' question wasn't a request. “I'd like to get your statement.”

Jordan straightened, the action pulling him away from the counter. He hadn't taken three steps before coming to an abrupt stop. He peered down and buttoned his jacket, using the time to formulate his thoughts. Turning slightly, he ensured that he had her full attention.

“Thank you. For all of it,” Jordan added softly, his gaze drawn to Sylvie as she made her way over from the table. “Once again, I'm in your debt.”

Jordan followed Detective Kitsis into the other room, leaving Sylvie to join Brook at the counter. Most all the heat had been sucked out of the kitchen through the shattered window. Forensics would be on site soon to take pictures and collect evidence, though the officer Theo was wrapping up his conversation with had already bagged one of the firearms in question.

“He seems...different.”

“All the money in the world can't erase the mistakes we make.” Brook took ahold of her scarf and pulled it from underneath the lapel. She then lifted her hair and rested the soft material underneath before tying the two ends together to protect the front of her neck. She slipped her hands into her pockets in hopes of maintaining some body heat. “Jordan has no one. No wife, no lover, and no individuals who he can trust. Mortality is setting in, and he isn't happy with the direction of his life.”

Brook didn't reveal that she had undergone the same realization a few years ago.

Sylvie had been given a front-row seat to the dramatic change in Brook's life. Yet she still found herself holding back at times, and she was solely to blame for the hesitation.

Sylvie's silence garnered Brook's interest, though.

"You're lost in thought," Brook pointed out as she observed Theo bring his conversation to a close. "The house?"

"No," Sylvie reluctantly admitted as she pulled out a pair of gloves from her coat pocket. "I was thinking of Derek Haze. He lives relatively the same life as Jordan, yet Derek has people who he cares about and vice versa. He never allowed his success or money to interfere with his everyday choices. I guess...I don't know. I respect him for that, is all."

There was something in Sylvie's voice when she spoke of Derek Haze that had Brook believing something more than a basic interview had taken place between them. Sylvie would share specific details when the time was right.

"Boss?"

Theo had just come to stand before Brook and Sylvie when Bit made himself known. Instead of walking through the house, he had chosen the route around the side. Brook parted her lips to tell him to come inside, though it wasn't any warmer in the kitchen than it was outside, but her words became stuck at the sight of him shifting his weight from side to side.

"Bit?" Sylvie waved him closer, her gaze drawn to the two officers who had just entered the kitchen. "Did we miss something in the investigation?"

"No." Bit adjusted his hat as he came to a stop near them. "Boss, the federal

prosecutor from Jacob's trial has been trying to reach you for the past half hour."

Brook had expected Jacob to try something long before this, though she had still held out hope that she could prevent such a daring effort. Had he managed to escape federal prison? Even with all the safeguards that she had put into place? It was fitting that she be informed of such a feat while shivering from the bitter cold.

"Jacob had his lawyer bring a plea deal to the table."

"I'm sorry?" Brook needed Bit to reiterate his statement. "A plea deal? There is nothing to..."

"The deal is life in prison for murdering Stella Bennett in exchange for the location of another victim. The death penalty would be off the table."

Sylvie was the first to break the heavy silence.

"The other victim? We need details, Bit."

"Lusa Kalluk. She went missing in 2014."

Recognition struck, and Brook curled her fingers into the palms of her hands. She had to swallow back the bile hitting the back of her throat. Fortunately, she didn't have to speak quite yet.

"Lusa Kalluk?" Theo diverted his shocked stare from Bit to Brook. "Wasn't she the daughter of Alaska's governor?"

"It's been Alaska all along, hasn't it?" Sylvie asked in kind.

Brook had been studying Bit throughout the exchange, and the way he kept adjusting

his knit gloves indicated there was more to the proposed deal. She managed to inhale deeply and force her question out in the open.

“What are you withholding, Bit?”

“Jacob won’t give the prosecutor the location.” Bit shifted his weight in unease. “His request includes that he be taken there in person...by you.”

The dark, ominous truth settled over Brook until she could barely breathe.

Somehow, some way, her brother still controlled the narrative. He was pulling their strings, and the former Alaskan governor would allow it with open arms. The man would cave to Jacob’s demands. The former governor would use every ounce of political power he had access to in order to give his family closure.

There was no doubt in Brook’s mind that Jacob had orchestrated the perfect excursion to implement some type of escape. Her brother was a master manipulator. The cruel pleasure he took in tormenting his victims before ending their lives went beyond sadistic. He would seize this opportunity to inflict similar torture on her...of that, she had no doubt.

Unfortunately, the federal prosecutor would agree to such a plea deal. If not, maybe she should step in and make certain an agreement could be reached. An idea began to slowly form, and the possibility of turning the tables on her brother grew long thick roots.

Brook would allow the abhorrent events to unfold. She might fear the horrors that awaited them in the Alaskan wilderness...but this time, she wouldn’t be alone.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

Jacob Walsh January 2025 Monday — 10:12 am

The maintenance staff at the federal prison had yet to replace the fluorescent light bulb overhead. The faint buzzing was a constant, irritable sound that, in all likelihood, was meant to irritate the prisoner sitting at the table. A subtle reminder that one couldn't simply exit through the sole door to escape the confines of torment.

Jacob did his best to tune out the antagonizing noise by inhaling slowly. He continued to steady himself with rhythmic breathing that successfully subdued any doubts that his time enduring this hellish misery was coming to an end.

The abrupt click of the door latch echoed throughout the small room.

After slowly opening his eyes, Jacob found a familiar face belonging to the individual who crossed the threshold. It had been eleven long years since Jacob had last laid eyes on the man, yet the resemblance between them still remained despite the aging process—the same color of hair, texture of hair. The same square jaw couldn't be overlooked, either. While there was no biological connection between them, he couldn't help but wonder if his dear sister had noticed such similarities.

Jacob deliberately lifted his gaze to the security camera tucked not-so-discreetly in the top lefthand corner of the room. He didn't doubt that Brook monitored every single twitch of his finger on a daily basis. There was no need to give her any confirmation regarding his previous connection to Norona.

“The federal prosecutor finally agreed to the plea deal.”

“Finally?” Jacob would have thought the prosecutor would have jumped at the idea of giving another family closure. “What were his reservations?”

“The Bennett trial is a slam-dunk with the DNA evidence found at the campsite. He wasn’t eager to give that up, and Kalluk used up a lot of political capital back in 2014. More than we had banked on.” Norona remained standing, never once making a move to pull out the chair across from Jacob. “Surprisingly, it was your sister who got him to see reason.”

Jacob refrained from speaking while mulling over such a misstep on his part. A frisson of agitation rippled underneath his skin. His sister had grown bold to accelerate the timeline this way. A part of him relished the challenge she presented. The other? Well, it was sometimes difficult for him to stem the visions of her beautiful face mangled by the sharp blade of his knife.

If Brook had convinced the prosecutor to give the Kalluk family closure, then maybe her heart still bled with compassion. She had always been the sympathetic one. A childhood memory of such an instance sent a flicker of amusement through him.

“The Alaskan trip is scheduled for next month,” Norona continued as he slipped his hands into his pockets. “Arrangements will be made to—”

“No.”

Norona blinked, clearly taken aback by the abrupt refusal. He opened his mouth as if to protest, but he was a smart enough man to stop himself. He glanced away, the muscle alongside his jawline twitching in response.

“The trip will take place in June.”

“I should warn you that such a lengthy continuance might not go over well with the prosecutor or the judge.”

“And I trust you’ll come up with a good reason for them to agree to my terms.” Jacob needed to change the landscape. The game between him and his sister had gone on long enough. “You’re a clever man, Mitch. That’s why I chose you.”

The unspoken implication hung heavy in the air between them. Norona knew he was trapped, ensnared by the web of secrets and favors that bound him to Jacob.

“I’ll make it happen.” Norona dipped his head and turned toward the heavy door, his footsteps echoing in the confined space. His hand hovered inches from the flat surface of the steel door before he turned back around. “After this...after Alaska, are we even?”

The question was more a plea for mercy than anything else.

Jacob slowly smiled.

“What do you think, Mr. Norona?”

The defense attorney’s lips tightened in anger, but Jacob figured that his ire was really self-loathing. After all, it was his own choices that had landed him at Jacob’s mercy. Without another word, Norona faced the exit. He used the side of his fist to bang on the hard surface. Before too long, the guard opened the door and Norona slipped across the threshold without a backward glance.

Jacob could visualize everything so clearly.

Brook would insist on keeping him close. She would no doubt be within feet of his presence at all times. The mere thought of such close proximity to her filled him with a perverse sense of anticipation.

“I’ll have to remember to pack my toothbrush,” Jacob muttered, amusing himself with the thought. “I do so look forward to our family reunion, dear sister.”



~ The End ~

A buried truth resurfaces, unleashing a chilling reality in the next gripping thriller by USA Today Bestselling Author Kennedy Layne...

Brooklyn Sloane, a former FBI profiler, has spent her career overshadowed by her brother's heinous legacy. For years, she has searched for a way to bring Jacob Walsh to justice, haunted by the faces of his victims and the devastation he has left behind. Now, a sliver of hope is in sight, and she fully intends to deliver closure to the shattered families left behind.

When a federal prosecutor strikes a plea deal with Jacob, Brook unwillingly finds herself part of the agreement. She reluctantly agrees to accompany him to the remote Alaskan wilderness. Jacob claims he'll reveal the burial site of one of his victims, a young woman whose disappearance has plagued her family for years.

Upon landing, however, the team is greeted with a shocking new horror. On the tarmac of the isolated airstrip lies the freshly mutilated body of an unidentified woman. The gruesome scene bears eerie similarities to Jacob's signature style, yet he's been under tight federal custody for years. With no witnesses and a killer potentially hiding in plain sight, Brook and her team must navigate the unforgiving Alaskan frontier. Even worse, she must balance her distrust of her brother against the urgent need to unmask a potentially new killer.